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Latina Education and Life in Rural Southern Colorado, 1920-1945

This chapter explores how women of mestiza ancestry experienced the education system in Huerfano County, Colorado, between the years 1920 and 1945.¹ In addition to gaining an understanding of education, other goals of the study were to document the existence of people in the area and to challenge generalized stereotypes about mestiza/o peoples by exploring layers of identity. Documenting the participants' voices is significant, as I learned during research efforts when I discovered that the communities in question are largely absent from the state's published history and from legal documentation in the state archives.

Huerfano County is an area of approximately 1,592 square miles in the south-central region of the state.² Three towns/areas in particular are discussed in this chapter: Turkey Creek, Farisita, and Gardner.³

It is widely known that since the earliest documentation of peoples in the Southwest, travelers and "settlers" in the Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and Colorado areas viewed the people they encountered as lazy, unmotivated, and backward (Getz 1997). These assumptions about the peoples of the area may have led to the idea that their histories were not worth recording. It is also the practice of colonization to erase the histories of the colonized as a way to

assert power over those people, to erase that which came before to rewrite the history of the area for the benefit of the people in power.⁴

It is apparent from the numbers of students enrolled (see Table 12.1) that the majority of students with Spanish surnames attended schools in outlying areas and not in the area's largest settlement, Gardner.⁵ The reasons for this are unclear, as there are no complete pupil census records to compare with the enrollment data. What is clear is that the number of school-age children with Spanish surnames who lived in the area was much larger than the number of students with Spanish surnames who attended school.⁶ We can see this by comparing the enrollment records for most years with the pupil census records from the two years that were available (see Table 12.2).

Table 12.1. Huerfano County Enrollment Statistics

	1924	1926	1927	1929	1931	1934	1935	1936	1937	1938	1939	1940	1941
<i>Gardner</i>													
Total pupils	25	30	30	36	32	51	45	45	51	54	67	13	47
Pupils with Spanish surname	2	0	0	5	0	4	3	5	7	12	20	3	16
<i>Talpa / Farisita</i>													
Total pupils	—	—	50	—	40	34	30	37	15	39	28	—	16
Pupils with Spanish surname	—	—	49	—	38	34	28	36	14	37	28	—	16
<i>Turkey Creek / Birmingham</i>													
Total pupils	—	37	—	—	—	48	42	35	37	15	29	—	31
Pupils with Spanish surname	—	32	—	—	—	39	36	29	30	15	23	—	28

Source: Huerfano County Enrollment Lists

Table 12.2. Census of School-Age Youth

<i>Gardner</i>		1932	1933
Youth		112	131
Spanish surname		59	60
<i>Talpa / Farisita</i>		1932	1933
Youth		—	—
Spanish surname		—	—
<i>Turkey Creek / Birmingham</i>		1932	1933
Youth		98	87
Spanish surname		75	70

Source: Huerfano County Enrollment Lists

THE WOMEN

Miquela Salazar (nee Valdez), born in 1928 in Talpa.⁷ One of three sisters and three brothers from her father's second marriage, Miquela was the youngest girl in the family. She started school in Farisita at the two-room schoolhouse that taught primary through eighth grades and was there through fourth grade. When her eldest sister started high school, she and her siblings were moved to the Catholic school in Gardner, where Miquela went to school until eighth grade. She was sent to an all-girl Catholic boarding high school in Yankton, South Dakota, called Mount Marty. Miquela remained at Mount Marty until her junior year, when she dropped out to go back home and help her family.

Jewel "Jay" Musso (nee Medina), born in 1938 in Turkey Creek, the eleventh of twelve siblings. Jay's family moved from Huerfano County to Pueblo following the harvesting season seeking work in beet, onion, and other fields in the area. Jay began school in Pueblo. She started third grade in the one-room schoolhouse in Turkey Creek, which taught primary through eighth grades. She went to school there through fifth grade. Her family continued to move from Turkey Creek to Pueblo throughout her years at school. Jay graduated from high school in Pueblo and then went to work at the Colorado State Hospital. A supervisor offered her a scholarship to attend college, and she earned a bachelor's degree in mental health from the University of Southern Colorado in Pueblo.

Marilyn Hostetler (nee Medina), born in 1930 in the mining town of Sunnyside. She is Jay's sister and was the ninth of twelve siblings. Marilyn started school at Sunnyside. She moved to the Farisita School for first through third grades and finished fourth through eighth grades at the Sunnyside School. Marilyn's family had moved to Turkey Creek and Farisita, but she was sent to live with her grandmother in Sunnyside. Marilyn went to high school in Walsenburg at Huerfano High School, the nearest high school to Sunnyside, but she quit after her sophomore year to begin working. Marilyn earned her GED years later and was successful in the one semester of college she attended.

Pabla Lovato (nee Cruz), born in 1928 in Pass Creek. Pabla went to school in a one-room schoolhouse called Rand School from primary through eighth grades. The school changed locations several times, moving in the area between Gardner and Pass Creek. Pabla went to Gardner High School. She graduated as valedictorian and was awarded a scholarship. She attended the University of Northern Colorado in Greeley, where she earned a bachelor's degree in chemistry.

Cora Coca (nee Martinez), born in 1932 in Turkey Creek. Cora started school in Clover, a settlement west of Turkey Creek. Cora attended primary school in Clover. After her father died, she and her mother and siblings moved in with her grandmother. She began attending school in Maes Creek. Her eldest brother began high school in Gardner, so her mother moved the family to Gardner where she attended school for one year. Her family then moved back to Turkey Creek, and she attended Paloma School in Turkey Creek. Between school years, her family moved to Avondale to follow the harvest seasons; during those times she attended school in Pueblo. Cora left school in the fifth grade.

Natividad Aguirre (nee Vallejos), born in 1910 in Gardner as one of twelve children. Her brothers attended public school in Gardner, but her father insisted that his girls be educated in a Catholic school. There was initially no Catholic school in Gardner when they were of school age, so her mother and the girls moved to Walsenburg during the school months so the girls could attend St. Mary's School. Natividad went to St. Mary's until she was thirteen, then she was sent to Atchison, Kansas, to attend a convent school. Natividad spent one term in Atchison. By that time there was a Catholic school in Gardner, St. George's, so she finished school there. She graduated from eighth grade when she was eighteen. There was no Catholic high school in Gardner, so Natividad did not have the opportunity to attend high school.

Magdalena Valdez (nee Valdez), born in 1923 in Gardner. Magdalena is the sister of Miquela Salazar and was the eldest child in their family. She went to school in Farisita until eighth grade. Magdalena began high school in Gardner. After she had successfully completed ninth grade at Gardner High School, Magdalena's mother became ill. Magdalena quit school to take care of her mother and to help run the family farm.

Ruth Mondragon (nee Martinez), born in 1930 in Turkey Creek. Ruth began school in Maes Creek. Her family moved from Turkey Creek to Gardner and then to Avondale during her years in school. She attended five schools in the seven years she was in school—Maes Creek, St. George's, Paloma, Pueblo, and Farisita—often more than one school in a given school year. Ruth quit school in seventh grade to take care of her mother and to work to make money for the family.

LAYERS OF IDENTITY

Education, as the women in the study experienced it, was much more than their interactions with teachers and peers in the classroom. Their stories reveal that family and community played an active part in the way they experienced

education. Their class status and gender affected the ways they were regarded by teachers, the expectations placed on them in the classroom, and whether they were allowed to continue to go to school. This is apparent through statements like one from Ruth, who explains that "because we didn't have a dad, everybody mistreated us" (Mondragon 2003). She is aware of the way a family that was not traditional was regarded in her community and how that regard crossed over into the classroom. Through her stories, we learn that her family was also very poor. In addition, her native language, Spanish, also played a significant role in her experiences. From the perspective of Ruth's interactions in the classroom, it may seem that she was simply an unruly child—she admits to getting in trouble and being stubborn. However, when one considers her class and family status, a different perspective comes to light. It is impossible to isolate race⁸ or ethnicity or even class or gender as single reasons for the ways these women were treated and for their experiences both in school and in the greater community.

Each of the women in the study had expectations placed on her based on her class, gender, and ethnicity. In Natividad's case, her gender affected where she went to school. Her father would only allow his girls to be educated in Catholic schools. Since there was no Catholic high school in the area, Natividad did not have the chance to attend high school. Natividad's family was less poverty stricken than many families in the Talpa/Gardner area. They owned land on which they grew alfalfa to feed their livestock and to sell, as well as acreage for orchards and gardens for their own sustenance. They made enough income so they could hire ranch hands. This meant the women of the family were not required to help run the family ranch, so they could be gone for long intervals. Also, her father earned enough money to be able to rent a house in Walsenburg for them to live in during the school term. If her family had not had the resources to enable her and her sisters to attend St. Mary's in Walsenburg, Natividad would not have been able to attend school until she was thirteen, the year a Catholic school opened in Gardner.

Likewise, Pabla came from a family that had land and livestock: "My dad sold apple trees around the area and he had three orchards himself. We even had meat when they butchered once in awhile" (Lovato 2003). Since her family had sufficient land and resources, Pabla was not required to contribute to running the farm or earning income for her family.

In contrast to Natividad's and Pabla's experiences, most of the women in the study were from families that relied on the children to help either run the household/farm or earn income to support the family. Responsibilities at home constituted a leading reason the women left school. For instance,

Magdalena and Ruth were required to quit school when their mothers became ill: "I quit school to take care of my mom. I had to feed the stock and milk the cows and we had pigs and chickens" (Valdez 2003). This was expected of them because they were girls, but it was also dependent on their birth order. Each was the eldest girl still at home.⁹ While family responsibility depended on the child's gender, class also played a large part in the necessity to quit school. If the family had possessed sufficient financial resources to hire a nurse, it would not have been the eldest girl's responsibility to become caretaker. Ruth and Magdalena not only cared for their mothers, but they also took their mothers' places in earning money for the family and running the household.

Race and ethnicity combined with gender and class in determining how the women were treated in and out of the classroom. Natividad remembers, "[It] was like the English-speaking people had more. Of course, they had the right of way to everything. We were always put aside. They were first in everything. They called us Mexicans, treated us differently" (Aguirre 2003). Natividad is reluctant to acknowledge that the mistreatment they received from the community was based on race; as she talks about it, she uses language references.

Racism in the classroom was sometimes manifested by students being singled out because of particular physical characteristics. Ruth and Cora relate instances in which a particular teacher mistreated Ruth. They agree that the teacher did not like Ruth because of her hair. Ruth was petite and dark, and her hair had a tight curl. As Ruth relates: "One of the teachers didn't like my hair. That Miss Rodriguez. She used to write *monos* [cartoon characters] on the blackboard and say they were me, and everybody used to laugh at me" (Mondragon 2003). Her sister Cora confirmed the story:

Ruth had curly hair, and when she was small her hair would dry and wheet [makes a motion as if all the hair flew up around her head]. Mrs. Rodriguez wanted to get mad at Ruth because she wanted her to go neat to school. She grabbed Ruth by the hair and banged her head against the desk over and over! She was so mad. When her hair was wet it was all nice and straight. I guess mom didn't have nothing or the time to make sure to put oil or something [on it] to make it [straight] . . . I don't know. (Coca 2003)

The internalization of the racism they experienced is clear in the fact that neither Ruth nor Cora blames Mrs. Rodriguez. Cora goes as far as to suggest that their mother did not groom Ruth well enough—as if their physical characteristics should be hidden or manipulated so as not to incite anger.

It seems as though the women's relatives were aware of the dangers their daughters faced because of their gender, ethnicity, and class. Several of the

women remembered stories they were told by aunts and grandmothers that emphasized the need to remain vigilant:

My grandmother was a great storyteller. She told us about this one time she was home alone and this man came. She was sweeping the yard and this guy walked up to her and said, is your husband home? When she said it, she knew she oughtn't have: no, he's away. Well, will he be back pretty soon? No, not 'til tomorrow. And he said, okay, I'll be back. She watched and he left [and] he went as far as the creek, but he never came out on the other side. She knew he was going to come back when it got dark. So she waited for my mother to come from school, and they left for the neighbors to spend the night there. In the morning, when they got back to the house, he had broken in. He had taken apples and other stuff from the house, but he would have raped her. I'm sure he would've. She would get scared when she told the story, and we'd get scared [hearing it]. (Lovato 2003)

Several of the women told accounts of their own physical and sexual attacks and the need to learn how to fight, take care of each other, and remain vigilant.

We had to fight like that all our lives because everybody was always after us. Even those old men that lived up there that thought they were so good. So we learned how to fight. And we helped each other. We had to fight. They were mean to us, those people. One time we had to walk down to Farisita to get the mail. There were three or four men in a car and they tried to put us in a car. We got away. (Mondragon 2003)

He [her mother's second husband] was way older than my mom. And there was a lot of pressure from her mom after her first husband, Alfredo, died. So she remarried this Sanchez, but he was worse than my dad. My mom's mom had Mother, Aunt Lupita, and Aunt Rose. Mother said he was always touching them inappropriately. I guess my Grandma didn't believe the girls or something. That was the reason they all got married so young and left the house. (Musso 2003)

These stories bring to light some of the realities girls were experiencing. Ruth mentioned earlier that she and her sisters were mistreated because they did not have a father. Ruth was a target for attack by community members and even her teacher, not only because she was a girl but also because her family was one of the poorest in the area. They were dark people, and their family was not traditional in the eyes of the community. In reading her stories, we learn that there were layers of her identity that contributed to the way people in the community and teachers and peers at school treated her. This is a similar trend with all the women in this study.

It is important to examine these layers of discrimination to better understand each woman's experiences throughout her education. We cannot under-

stand scholastic achievement simply by looking at the curriculum taught or by blindly considering a student's performance in class and on exams. The realm of the classroom is not immune from being swayed by the currents of the community in which it operates. It is clear from these women's stories that their experiences with teachers, peers, administrators, and the wider community were affected by the social roles they were born into, which further contributed to their achievements in the school setting. When the reality of the situations the women in this study faced is taken into consideration, it is easier to recognize that it is inaccurate to generalize about their experiences or reactions just because they were the same gender or categorized by official records and history texts as being of the same race. Likewise, we learn that there were layers of each woman's identity that affected her everyday life, the choices she made, and whether she had choices in the first place.

THE ROLE OF FAMILY

Story after story in response to pointed questions about schooling segued into stories about family or community life. It was often necessary to attempt to bring the focus back on education, as the women's stories also explored family and community. One example was the interview with Natividad Aguirre. Natividad was asked where she went to school. She explained that her brothers went to public schools, but she never did. Natividad segued into a description of how she initially began to learn English—which was not in a classroom: "I remember when we came to school here in Walsenburg. We didn't know one word in English. I used to run from my house to the drugstore just to listen to people speak English. I would go on and on saying those words they would say. That's how I started learning English, just talking like they did" (Aguirre 2003). It is clear that Natividad's education was happening in her daily interactions with the community in which she lived. She was well aware that to function in the community she would need to learn English, and she did not wait to be in a classroom to begin to learn it.

Sometimes the women's discussions about family took another direction. Some of the women answered very reservedly when asked pointed questions about school, yet they became excited when talking about their siblings or their community. Marilyn Hostetler is a good example of this tendency. Her conversation was animated and plentiful throughout; however, she continually changed the subject to her siblings—mostly referring to the brothers she grew up with. She answered questions about school succinctly, yet as she talked about her brothers and her mother, her conversation grew more dynamic and detailed.

The movement away from talking about school could have happened for several reasons. One may be that school was not significant in the women's lives. It is apparent that survival took precedence over getting an education—not out of a lack of motivation or interest but out of necessity. Distance also played a large part in whether children went to school. "My sister Manuela, she never, ever went to school. I think because the school, you know where the Farisita school was? Well, that was the only school there. We lived way, way on the other side [of town]. There was no transportation" (Aguirre 2003). Families often intervened when they were unable to send their children to school, with literate family members sharing their skills with others. According to Natividad, "[Manuela] definitely knew how to read and write Spanish, but my father taught her. I remember in the wintertime he used to put us all together at a table and teach us in Spanish. I knew the A-B-Cs and a few words when I started school. He taught my mother how to read and write. My mother only went to school one year for about three months up in Chama" (Aguirre 2003).

When thinking about school and revisiting their time in the classroom, the women often allowed their school-day memories to blur into memories of their family, both past and present. Whether they unconsciously segued into talking about family members or purposefully changed the subject, family clearly played, and continues to play, an important role in their education and experiences in the classroom and in the community.

LANGUAGE

All the women interviewed spoke Spanish as their first language. There were similarities and differences in the way teachers treated them as a result. The most frequently discussed reaction from teachers was the punishing and ridicule of students who did not speak English. All of the women talked about their native language, and most included Spanish words in their conversations.

Based on the women's stories, the reactions by teachers and administrators to students' use of Spanish were most often negative:

[I] didn't know a word of English, and they didn't want us to speak Spanish even on the playground. We had a teacher that she didn't know Spanish and I didn't know English, and she wanted me to read something. It was a fiasco. . . . She'd get mad at me and she'd slam a ruler on the desk! And she'd hit me and I couldn't make out the word *but*, B-U-T. (Valdez 2003)

Oh, they [the teachers] were mean. If they heard you speaking Spanish they would wash your mouth out with soap. And we didn't know nothing about English growing up. We never went noplacé. We went to visit neighbors or

relatives . . . they were all talking Spanish. When the kids started going to public school, my kids, they told me, why didn't I talk to them in Spanish? They didn't know how to speak it. Whoever it was from the high school [who asked why they didn't speak Spanish], I told him, first, you brainwash a person to speak English and not Spanish, and now you want for me to turn around and do it for the kids? Forget it! If they want to talk English they can do it or Spanish or whatever they want. They are on their own. I'm not gonna talk it. Well, you should, you're their parent. I'm the parent, and that's what I'm doing. And it was up to the kids to learn it. By the time we finished school, we were talking English. But another thing that was to make you break the habit of [speaking] Spanish, they [the teachers] got mean. I guess I got mad more when they came out and tell me that I should talk Spanish to my kids now. And really, we don't even talk the right Spanish. Some teacher in high school for Renee [one of her children], he said, it's better you don't try to help Renee with her Spanish 'cause it's way different. You'll just get her confused. We came up with a raw deal. They tell me to talk in Spanish . . . ha! Forget it! Talk in English. Forget it! I'll talk what I want to talk. (Coca 2003)

In every instance, Cora is being judged for her use of her first language. In all cases, the people doing the blaming do not necessarily speak the language; nor do they have the cultural capital to understand the social and educational implications of being bilingual or experiencing an educational setting when you cannot understand what the teachers are saying.

On a few occasions, the women in the study spoke about teachers who had taught them English without being cruel or belittling them. Several of the women spoke about a particular teacher:

Jeanette wasn't Spanish, she was Arabian, but her mother and dad knew Spanish. They learned it because they were among the Spanish people. So she knew Spanish and never gave us hell about it. She would say, we have to speak English today. And this is the way you [learn it]. . . . And we picked it up fast because everyone was saying what they could, and before we knew it we wanted to. (Hostetler 2003)

Miquela remembered the same teacher and how different she was in her approach to teaching the children to speak English: "We'd get punished if we spoke in Spanish while we were in school. Not Jeanette Faris though. She would tell us how to say words in English if she'd hear us say them in Spanish. She wouldn't punish us" (Salazar 2003).

Women who had older siblings who attended school well before they did had different experiences with English: "I spoke English and Spanish because I was one of the younger ones, so by the time I came along the other kids

had gone to school already" (Lovato 2003). Pabla had a chance to practice her English skills with her siblings before going to school. As such, she did not have to contend with feelings of isolation or punishment when she initially entered formal education.

All the women seemed to have accepted early on that they had to learn English: "They never said why, just that we couldn't speak in Spanish. And I think now that maybe it was so we could learn the English language. 'Cause the country was run by white people, so if you didn't learn to speak English, you couldn't survive" (Salazar 2003). In most cases, they learned English at school or from older cousins and siblings. They did not appear to resent having to learn English, but they did seem frustrated at being expected not to speak their native language: "My mom didn't like that we were punished for speaking Spanish. She didn't like it. She spoke Spanish to us at home. She never spoke English" (Salazar 2003). Cora was particularly vehement when she talked about her daughter's high school teacher telling her she did not speak Spanish correctly. What is clear from these interviews is that as a result of being punished and berated because of their use of the Spanish language, these women were reluctant to teach their children to speak Spanish and in some cases purposefully did not do so: "In most southwestern school systems, educators believed that Mexican American children needed to be segregated until they learned English and became Americanized" (Donato 1999). This was far from the reality for the women in this study. Since the schools in Talpa, Gardner, and Turkey Creek were one- or two-room schoolhouses, there was neither the space nor the teacher resources to separate students. Students were expected to learn English by being immersed in it and by being punished for speaking Spanish. Several of the women reported that when they could not understand the assignments, they were held back until they could complete the coursework for a particular grade level. As a result, some native Spanish speakers were older than many of their peers at the same grade level:

We didn't know one word in English. I was eighteen years old when I finished the eighth grade. That's how behind we were because of that [not knowing English]. I must have been about eight or nine years old when I started at St. Mary's. They would try to give us some work, but what could we do? . . . The children that were already like in the second grade we were starting in kindergarten, just learning to draw or learning A-B-Cs. (Aguirre 2003)

Natividad explains that pupils who did not speak English were given simpler work regardless of their age, so when she was nine years old she spent much of her school time drawing pictures or tracing the alphabet. The stories

the women shared about language made it clear that language had a significant impact on how each of them experienced school. The effects of the punishment the women experienced as girls affected not only their progress in school but also the way they viewed themselves and their positions in the classroom and the community.

THE IMPORTANCE OF EDUCATION

After reading these women's stories, it might appear that no importance was placed on education. Historically, many have assumed that Latinas/os are "dull, devoid of reason, incapable of self government, and unwilling to improve themselves" (Getz 1997:2). As one reads deeper into the women's experiences, however, it is easy to recognize the significance placed on education: "Once we learned English it was easier for us. I liked school. I liked arithmetic and spelling" (Valdez 2003). Regardless of the level they achieved, most of the women said they enjoyed school: "I was a pesty student. I thought that when I went [to] the first [grade] I would come back home and know how to read. The teacher had all the letters across [the blackboard] and she had a yardstick. And she'd point and you had to make the sound for months and months. Come on, I want to learn to read" (Lovato 2003).

Even those who did not love going to school talked about their love of learning new things and having new experiences. It is apparent that all the women shared a love of learning, whether through formal or informal education.

Three of the eight women in this study attended college, and two of the three graduated. Many of the women did not make it past grade school, however, and only half went to high school. The reasons for not finishing school included having to quit to care for family members, moving as the family moved, and quitting because school was a bad place to be. Nevertheless, all of the women in the study remarked about the importance of education as a means to improve one's opportunities in life. Not only did they talk about it, but I saw that importance reflected in many ways. During the interview with Ruth, she was taking care of her great-grandson because her granddaughter was at the library doing research for her master's degree. She talked with great pride about her granddaughter. Most of the women had pictures of their children, grandchildren, nieces, and nephews in caps and gowns on their walls and shelves. Many spoke of their children and how they made sure to provide the opportunities they could for them with the resources they had. Jay talked about her success in school and how she was able to provide for her children: "College was fun in a way. And it was hard because I had the kids and I was

working. And a house to take care of and a husband to put up with. But you know that I graduated with a 3.7 [grade point average]. When my children were born, each one had a bank account, and I always let them know that it was for their college. And they both used it after they got out of high school" (Musso 2003).

The acknowledgment of the importance of education was clear throughout all the interviews. Pabla talked about how well her grandsons were doing in high school. Miquela spoke with pride about how she had taught herself to read and write Spanish since they could not learn it at school: "I [learned] to read and write in Spanish because I had to write to my mother. And she would write to me too, so I had to read her letters. When she had business in Walsenburg, I had to go with her and translate for her. So I learned to read and write in Spanish" (Salazar 2003). Natividad was proud that her father was self-educated and reflected on how important education was to her and her husband: "My husband wanted everybody to be educated. And he only went up to the eighth grade, but he was a very smart man, my husband was. And when our nephew graduated my husband told him, I'll pay for your college" (Aguirre 2003). Regardless of the level each woman reached in her educational career, there is a clear regard for the significance of education throughout the stories.

To fully understand education in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s in Huerfano County, it is imperative to understand how the community and the students viewed education. The prevalent stereotype in historical accounts of *mestiza/o* peoples in this region is that they are unmotivated and uninterested. The stories of these women, however, refute those stereotypes. An understanding that education was held in esteem by both students and their families forces us to look at possible alternatives to explain school performance, aside from assuming that people either succeeded or failed in school because of hereditary predisposition.

CULTURAL SURVIVAL

While I feel it is necessary to discuss challenges these women faced as they lived and were educated in Huerfano County, I do not intend to present them as victims. The stories are predominantly stories of survival. As we hear the stories, especially as the women talk about their parents and grandparents, we learn that the tradition of survival is strong in their families. We learn from Ruth, Cora, and Pabla about how their families worked together to survive abject poverty and hunger. We learn that Ruth and Cora's mother was able to successfully keep her children after her husband died and the family threatened

to take them from her: "My dad passed away when I was about six, so Mom had to raise six kids. She didn't have no education, so she did farm work. My aunt wanted her to put us in an orphanage. They brought some people that were going to take us. She put up a fight for us. She fought for us" (Coca 2003). Her strength was passed on to her children, as they all did what they could to remain together. In this way, their mother was able to keep her children and raise them in their community, maintaining their culture and heritage. Pabla tells us that school was not unbearable because all the children were native Spanish speakers, and they helped each other survive: "The ethnic problem was a problem. Very bad. When I was little, in school it wasn't so bad because we were mostly Spanish in the grammar school. We could be with each other and help one another get through" (Lovato 2003). In these stories, we learn how family and community contributed to everyday survival.

Amid the difficulties of survival, we learn of joy. All the women interviewed talked about the importance of community. Miquela shared a story about community socials and picnics:

In the basket social, all the women that went had to take a basket with a lunch in it and then the men had to buy the baskets. The man that would buy the lunch would get to eat with whoever the basket belonged to. I always remember I was only about ten or eleven years old, and my mother made a basket for her three girls. Carl Gomez bought mine and he was old already compared to me, and I wouldn't eat with him. (Salazar 2003)

Many talked about communities sometimes gathering just to gather. The strength these women received and passed on is apparent by their participation in the study. Most of the women initially expressed trepidation at participating because they could not believe their lives were worth recording into history. The fact that the women showed courage in sharing their stories is in itself a success. They were often candid about things that were uncomfortable to talk about, especially sexual exploitation or sex in general.

THE IMPORTANCE OF DOCUMENTING A POPULATION RENDERED INVISIBLE BY HISTORY

It is important to understand the experiences of the generation of the women in this study to gain a better understanding of why the educational system and the social structure of the area as a whole are the way they are today. While some argue that history should remain in the past, I believe we need to understand the history of a region to gain better insight as to why things are the way they are in the present. According to Howard Zinn, "What we learn about the past does not give us absolute truth about the present, but

it may cause us to look deeper than the glib statements made by political leaders and the 'experts' quoted in the press" (Zinn 2000:658). This is important especially in the realm of school reform. The people who create legislation that affects the education of students in the United States would do well to understand the historical context of different regions of the state. We could learn from the experiences of native Spanish speakers from our grandmothers' generation about their struggles in English-only schools. We could learn that *mestiza/o* people were far from lazy or unmotivated but instead had obstacles placed before them by their communities and the social structures of the area that affected their success in school. We could learn about historical practices of discrimination and how they carry on into the present to ensure success for some and failure for others.

By examining official historical documentation as it exists in the Colorado State Archives and the office of the Huerfano County School District Administration, it is impossible to obtain a complete picture of what education was like for the entire population of the county. Therefore, it is impossible to learn how the history of the region contributes to the present successes and failures of school-age children without including the voices of those who experienced the education system.

NOTES

1. For the purposes of this chapter, I refer to the ethnicity of the women involved as *mestiza*. I understand *mestiza* to be the mixture of Spanish, indigenous, and Mexican ancestries. However, none of the women referred to themselves this way. I use this word interchangeably with *Latina*, understanding that it carries the same connotation. My use of the terms "*Latina*" and "*mestiza*" to describe the women is in no way meant to imply that they embody exact ethnic or ancestral backgrounds. These women are from various, mixed ancestries.

2. Specific regions of the county are included in most histories published about southern Colorado. The largest town, Walsenburg, is the best known. West/northwest of Walsenburg are small towns spread across the valleys and mountains. It is an area of Huerfano County that consists of scattered houses and small, irrigated plots of land, on which today mostly alfalfa is grown and small herds of cattle are raised. There are settlements such as Gardner, where small homes, trailers, and community buildings create a larger town. Other "towns," such as Farisita, consist of scattered ranches, often separated by several miles.

3. Turkey Creek was known as Trujillo Creek in the earliest memories of some of the people in the area. Farisita was known as Talpa. Turkey Creek eventually became known as Birmingham. The names of locations in Huerfano County have changed to reflect the people who moved in after the United States took the land from Mexico. The Spanish names for places were likely given by the Mexicans and Spaniards who moved into the land while it was still inhabited by indigenous peoples.

4. While I do not discuss colonization in detail in this chapter, a good reference for discussion of this issue is *Europe and the People without History* by Eric Wolf. Prejudice and colonization may not completely explain the lack of documentation about rural populations, however. Poor record keeping and losses during the storage of records are problems with documenting the history of many rural locations in both Colorado and the United States. The consolidation of the numerous school districts in the county into one school district began in the late 1940s. Also, prior to consolidation, each of the schools in Huerfano County was, for the most part, considered its own district within the county. Once consolidation took place, documentation may have been lost while transporting the records to the central administration building in Walsenburg.

5. The only pupil census records located in the Colorado State Archives for Huerfano County were for Walsenburg. Similarly, there were teacher registers and yearbooks for Walsenburg only. Superintendents' annual reports were available for the entire county, although the majority of the pages were incomplete or empty. From the reports it appears that each school was considered its own district, and there were as many as fifty-two districts in Huerfano County before consolidation. Each district could have more than one school. The only information given about pupils in these reports is their grade levels. I was able to find limited information about Huerfano County, specifically focusing mostly on Walsenburg, at the Colorado State Archives in Denver and the Huerfano County Re-1 School District offices in Walsenburg. This information was gathered from superintendents' annual reports. Much of the published information available about Huerfano County focuses solely on the larger towns. Information about the small surrounding towns is sparse and often inaccurate. Finding written documentation about the school districts in western Huerfano County in the time period of this study proved difficult. At the Colorado State Archives in Denver, the only town that included census information was Walsenburg. Superintendent reports from Huerfano County dating from 1911-1945 were incomplete. The numbers of students reported were drastically different than the numbers reported in the enrollment lists at the Huerfano County School District Administration offices (see Table 12.3). Information found in the archives supported the information shared by the women in this study, including the names of schools, their locations, and the names of teachers.

Table 12.3. Data from the Superintendent's Annual Reports vs. Enrollment Records (SAR data not recorded for Turkey Creek)

	1924		1926		1927		1929		1934		1935	
	ER	SAR	ER	SAR	ER	SAR	ER	SAR	ER	SAR	ER	SAR
Gardner	—	25	107	30	97	30	112	36	102	51	111	45
Talpa/Farisa	—	—	131	37	116	50	126	—	110	34	115	30

Source: Huerfano County Superintendent Annual Reports

6. The Spanish surname does not give complete insight into the pupils' race and ethnicity. It does, however, give an idea of possible numbers of students with European ancestry and those with Mexican and/or indigenous ancestry.

7. All eight women interviewed for this study were born in the area and completed at least part of their schooling in Huerfano County school districts. Several criteria went into the selection of the women. They had to have been born in Huerfano County. The women's families also had to be from Huerfano County at least one generation past. The women had to have attended school in Huerfano County for at least part of their lives.

8. Race had little to do with the way they labeled themselves, as they all referred to themselves as "Spanish" regardless of their ancestry. The labeling of oneself as Spanish—or, more precisely, aligning one's ancestry with European blood as opposed to indigenous or Mexican blood—is a practice that has been explored by many Latino intellectuals, such as F. Arturo Rosales (1996). The debate over the development of and the reasons behind the creation of a "fantasy heritage" is not discussed in this chapter. What is apparent, however, is that all the women were aware of how Mexicans and Indians were considered in their communities and in their travels.

9. Ruth was not the eldest, but the eldest was married and gone from the house when their mother became ill.

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