



Seeing the trees and being grateful

By Alma Rosa Alvarez, May 03, 2021

I remember my family and I driving to California to see family. It was 2018, and we were passing through the ravages of the Klamathon and Carr fires.

As we drove through those burned-out areas, we saw a proliferation of signs thanking firefighters for saving lives, property. As we drove, we also saw trucks filled with haggard, dirty firefighters. Passing through Shasta County, we thought of the irony that people were so grateful to firefighters, many of whom were Mexican immigrant men, yet earlier that year, Shasta County supervisors had authorized a resolution claiming Shasta County as a “non-sanctuary” county, which in the Latino immigrant community translated to “immigrants, you are not welcome.”

Many of those firefighters, when they are not fighting wildfires, year after year, plant up to 40 million seedlings in Oregon as part of reforestation projects. But how many people know of their contributions?

I identify as a Chicana/Mexican American woman. I was born in Compton, California, and for many years, I thought of myself as a first-generation American, the daughter of immigrants. While this in some ways is true, I didn't realize how far back my family's history in the United States stretched. In speaking to my mother as a young adult, for example, I came to realize that my mother did not grow up with her father, because in 1952 he moved to the United States looking for opportunity. My Grandfather Pilar did an assortment of jobs, but eventually became a gardener at a Beverley Hills estate. He would send money back home to support his family.

Once, my father reminisced about reading one of his mother's letters to his father, my Grandpa Rafael. In that letter, Grandma Trine shared that my father, a then 1-year old, had learned to walk. The year was 1944. Grandpa Rafael was in Idaho, doing what he did best — farming. He, like many other Mexican men, helped farms keep running while many U.S. men went off to war.

A few years ago I was visiting family in Chicago. The uncles who lived there had worked in meat-packing plants. Some of the oldest uncles and great uncles had done foundry work.

As a child I had heard Grandma Trine say that work in “la fundacion” was such heavy, dirty work. Later, through a labor history class, I learned how essential foundry work was to the U.S. economy and the building of our nation.

When I inquired how those older uncles ended up doing foundry work, I learned that my Great-Grandfather Pablo had introduced them to Chicago, and into this type of labor. I came to realize that our family has had a long relationship with the United States. It made me think of all the contributions my family has made to this country.

How many other Mexican families have contributed to the United States too? Here in the Southern Oregon agricultural, hospitality and caretaking industries, many of these “invisible industries” are shaped by Latino labor. When forest seedlings mature into trees, and we are in awe of their splendor, will we, our children, and our grandchildren know Mexican men planted them, and will we be grateful?

Alma Rosa Alvarez is a professor of English at Southern Oregon University. In her spare time she enjoys reading and writing poetry.