A California Legacy Book

Santa Clara University and Heyday Books are pleased to publish the California Legacy series, vibrant and relevant writings drawn from California's past and present.

Santa Clara University—founded in 1851 on the site of the eighth of California's original 21 missions—is the oldest institution of higher learning in the state. A Jesuit institution, it is particularly aware of its contribution to California's cultural heritage and its responsibility to preserve and celebrate that heritage.

Heyday Books, founded in 1974, specializes in critically acclaimed books on California literature, history, natural history, and ethnic studies.

Books in the California Legacy series appear as anthologies, single author collections, reprints of important books, and original works. Taken together, these volumes bring readers a new perspective on California's cultural life, a perspective that honors diversity and finds great pleasure in the eloquence of human expression.

Thanks to the English Department at Santa Clara University and to Regis McKenna for their support of the California Legacy series.

UNDER THE FIFTH SUN

LATINO LITERATURE FROM CALIFORNIA

EDITED BY RICK HEIDE

FOREWORD BY JUAN VELASCO

to tear off the head of the turkey or chicken. Once again the whole town would be lined up to see the riders and to decide the winner.

After all this the young men with their spirits still demanding excitement would head out for the dance halls and gambling houses in the Santa Monica Canyon area where so many knifings, shootings, and murders took place. The day that began with Mass and singing in the house of God often would end in a wild melee. It was all part of the times; it was the way the Californianos lived.

The Freeman boys, Archie and Fred, along with the Machados and the Lugos, became good friends of our family. They taught my brothers and me many tricks of riding. We had known how to ride after a fashion, as I've said, ever since we were babies, but these caballero-vaqueros were among the most skillful horsemen in the world and they imparted to us many little secrets which helped us in our endeavors to become true vaqueros ourselves.

We, too, learned to "ski" in the mud with our horses, to ride "colgando" to the consternation of our mother, who thought for sure we were going to be killed as we swept along with our heads down, hanging on to the horse's mane. It taught us self-reliance, fearlessness, and the other qualities which any good horseman must have.

During our time by the sea we learned horsemanship as well as fishing. We learned the code of the vaquero, the fact that a California caballero never showed fear under any circumstances, and that he was always ready to defend his honor, or that of any member of his family. It was a transplanting of the spirit of old Spain to the shores of the Pacific at Santa Monica.

Perhaps never again can there be such an era. We were living in the twilight of a great age. Sunset was coming for the pastoral era in California. But just as at sunset there are sudden brilliant illuminations lighting up the skies, so it was with us. We were fortunate to know the last vestiges of a magnificent time which can never return.

It was a time of horses, of quick anger, quick remorse, comradeship, and the knowledge that with the coming of civilization and progress we were to see the end of something grand on the stage of the Western world.

from

Barrio Boy

Ernesto Galarza

1971

Ernesto Galarza was born in 1905 in Mexico and as a child moved to Sacramento to work in the fields alongside his family. He held leadership positions in the Pan American Union (now the Organization of American States) and the National Farm Labor Union (now the National Agricultural Workers Union). Galarza's long list of fiction and nonfiction publications includes scores of articles and more than a dozen books, many of which, like *Barrio Boy* (1971), were inspired by his early experiences as a farmworker. In 1976 he became the first U.S. Latino to be nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature. He died in 1984.

IT WAS LATE IN THE AFTERNOON AFTER COUNTLESS HOURS from Tucson that the conductor stopped by our seat, picked up our stubs and, pointing to us, said "Sacramento." With the greatest of ease I said "tanks yoo" and felt again the excitement of arriving somewhere. We looked out at the countryside to be sure we didn't miss the first sights of the city with the Mexican name where we were going to live. As far as I could see there were rows on rows of bushes, some standing by themselves, some leaning on wires and posts, all of them without leaves. "Vineyards," my mother said. I always wanted to know the number or quantity of things. "How many?" I asked. "A heap," she answered, not just *un montón,* but *un montonal,* which meant more than you could count, nobody really knows, sky-high, infinity, millions.

We left the vineyards behind, passing by orchards and pastures with cattle. At the crossroads, our locomotive hooted a salute to droves

of cattle, automobiles, and horse-drawn buggies with school children waiting to cross.

Our train began to make a great circle, slowing down. The roadbed carried the train higher than the rooftops, giving us a panorama of the city. Track crews standing by with the familiar brown faces of Mexicans waved to us. I looked hard for Gustavo and José, for the last we had heard they were working on the Southern Pacific, making tracks or locomotives. Through the window we could see long buildings with stacks belching smoke like a dozen Casas Redondas, boxcars, flatcars, coaches, gondolas, cabooses, and locomotives dismantled or waiting for repairs.

A brakeman opened the door at the front of the coach and called, "Sack-men-ah," by which we knew he meant Sa-cra-men-to, for we had passed a large sign with the name in black and white at the entrance to the corporation yard.

Unlike the Mexicans, the Americans were not in a great hurry to leave the coach. We were the last, carrying our luggage.

We stepped down into a frightening scene, a huge barn filled with smoke and noise and the smell of burnt oil. This was the station, nearly as long as the train and with a sooty roof twice as high as the *mercado* in Mazatlán. Our locomotive was still belching black clouds from the stack. Men were hurrying along, pulling four-wheeled carts loaded with baggage, jerking hoses close to the train and thrusting the nozzles into holes here and there, washing windows with brushes on long sticks, opening the axle boxes with hammers and banging them shut.

We dashed through the confusion over the tracks and into the waiting room, myself dragging one of the shopping bags. The depot was a gloomy, dangerous place. We sat watching the crowd thin out. Our train departed, headed in the same direction, and I felt that we were being left behind.

Out of the bag my mother pulled the small envelope with the address of the Hotel Español. She handed me the paper. Holding it I watched the men in uniforms and green visors who passed by us and the clerks behind the ticket counters. Taking a chance I stopped one and thrust the paper at him. I said "plees" and waited, pinching one corner of the envelope while he read it. Like the conductor, the man guessed our problem. He smiled and held up a forefinger, crooking and straightening it while he looked at us. I had no idea what he meant, for in Mexico you signaled people to follow you by holding up your hand and closing all the fingers over the palm with a snap a few times. But Doña Henriqueta knew instantly, and he guided us under an arch and out of the station. Handing back the envelope, he pointed down the street and smiled us on.

One more stop to ask our way with another "plees" and we were at the Hotel Español. [...]

Once the routine of the family was well started, my mother and I began to take short walks to get our bearings. It was half a block in one direction to the lumberyard and the grocery store; half a block in the other to the saloon and the Japanese motion picture theater. In between were the tent and awning shop, a Chinese restaurant, a secondhand store, and several houses like our own. We noted by the numbers on the posts at the corners that we lived between 4th and 5th Streets on L.

Once we could fix a course from these signs up and down and across town we explored farther. On 6th near K there was the Lyric Theater with a sign that we easily translated into Lírico. It was next to a handsome red stone house with high turrets, like a castle. Navigating by these key points and following the rows of towering elms along L Street, one by one we found the post office on 7th and K; the cathedral, four blocks farther east; and the state capitol with its golden dome.

It wasn't long before we ventured on walks around Capitol Park, which reminded me of the charm and the serenity of the Alameda in Tepic. In some fashion Mrs. Dodson had got over to us that the capitol was the house of the government. To us it became El Capitolio or, more formally, the Palacio de Gobierno. Through the park we walked into the building itself, staring spellbound at the marble statue of Queen Isabel and Christopher Columbus. It was awesome, standing in the presence of that gigantic admiral, the one who had discovered America and Mexico and Jalcocotán, as Doña Henriqueta assured me.

After we had thoroughly learned our way around in the daytime, we found signs that did not fail us at night. From the window of the projection room of the Lyric Theater a brilliant purple light shone after dark. A snake of electric lights kept whipping round and round a sign over the Albert Elkus store. K Street on both sides was a double row of bright show windows that led up to the Land Hotel and back to Breuner's, thence down one block to the lumberyard, the grocery store, and our house. We had no fear of getting lost.

These were the boundaries of the lower part of town, for that was what everyone called the section of the city between 5th Street and the river and from the railway yards to the Y-Street levee. Nobody ever

mentioned an upper part of town; at least, no one could see the difference because the whole city was built on level land. We were not lower topographically, but in other ways that distinguished between Them, the uppers, and Us, the lowers. Lower Sacramento was the quarter that people who made money moved away from. Those of us who lived in it stayed there because our problem was to make a living and not to make money. A long while back, Mr. Howard, the business agent of the union, told me there had been stores and shops, fancy residences, and smart hotels in this neighborhood. The crippled old gentleman who lived in the next room down the hall from us explained to me that our house, like the others in the neighborhood, had been the home of rich people who had stables in the backyards, with back entrances by way of the alleys. Mr. Hansen, the Dutch carpenter, had helped build such residences. When the owners moved uptown, the backyards had been fenced off and subdivided, and small rental cottages had been built in the alleys in place of the stables. Handsome private homes were turned into flophouses for men who stayed one night, hotels for working people, and rooming houses, like ours.

Among the saloons, pool halls, lunch counters, pawnshops, and poker parlors was skid row, where drunk men with black eyes and unshaven faces lay down in the alleys to sleep.

The lower quarter was not exclusively a Mexican barrio but a mix of many nationalities. Between L and N Streets two blocks from us, the Japanese had taken over. Their homes were in the alleys behind shops, which they advertised with signs covered with black scribbles. The women walked on the street in kimonos, wooden sandals, and white stockings, carrying neat black bundles on their backs and wearing their hair in puffs with long ivory needles stuck through them. When they met they bowed, walked a couple of steps, and turned and bowed again, repeating this several times. They carried babies on their backs, not in their arms, never laughed or went into the saloons. On Sundays the men sat in front of their shops, dressed in gowns, like priests.

Chinatown was on the other side of K Street, toward the Southern Pacific shops. Our houses were old, but those in which the Chinese kept stores, laundries, and restaurants were older still. In black jackets and skullcaps the older merchants smoked long pipes with a tiny brass cup on the end. In their dusty store windows there was always the same assortment of tea packages, rice bowls, saucers, and pots decorated with blue temples and dragons.

In the hotels and rooming houses scattered about the barrio the Filipino farmworkers, riverboat stewards, and houseboys made their homes. Like the Mexicans, they had their own pool halls, which they called clubs. Hindus from the rice and fruit country north of the city stayed in the rooming houses when they were in town, keeping to themselves. The Portuguese and Italian families gathered in their own neighborhoods along 4th and 5th Streets southward toward the Y-Street levee. The Poles, Yugo-Slavs, and Koreans, too few to take over any particular part of it, were scattered throughout the barrio. Black men drifted in and out of town, working the waterfront. It was a kaleidoscope of colors and languages and customs that surprised and absorbed me at every turn.

Although we, the foreigners, made up the majority of the population of that quarter of Sacramento, the Americans had by no means given it up to us. Not all of them had moved above 5th Street as the barrio became more crowded. The bartenders, the rent collectors, the insurance salesmen, the mates on the riverboats, the landladies, and most importantly, the police—these were all gringos. So were the craftsmen, like the barbers and printers, who did not move their shops uptown as the city grew. The teachers of our one public school were all Americans. On skid row we rarely saw a drunk wino who was not a gringo. The operators of the pawnshops and secondhand stores were white and mostly Jewish.

For the Mexicans the barrio was a colony of refugees. We came to know families from Chihuahua, Sonora, Jalisco, and Durango. Some had come to the United States even before the revolution, living in Texas before migrating to California. Like ourselves, our Mexican neighbors had come this far moving step by step, working and waiting, as if they were feeling their way up a ladder. They talked of relatives who had been left behind in Mexico, or in some far-off city like Los Angeles or San Diego. From whatever place they had come, and however short or long the time they had lived in the United States, together they formed the *colonia mexicana*. In the years between our arrival and the First World War, the *colonia* grew and spilled out from the lower part of town. Some families moved into the alley shacks east of the Southern Pacific tracks, close to the canneries and warehouses, and across the river among the orchards and rice mills.

The *colonia* was like a sponge that was beginning to leak along the edges, squeezed between the levee, the railroad tracks, and the riverfront. But it wasn't squeezed dry, because it kept filling with newcomers who found families who took in boarders, in basements, alleys, shanties, run-down rooming houses, and flop joints where they could live.

Crowded as it was, the *colonia* found a place for these *chicanos,* the name by which we called an unskilled worker born in Mexico and just

arrived in the United States. The *chicanos* were fond of identifying themselves by saying they had just arrived from *el macizo,* by which they meant the solid Mexican homeland, the good native earth. Although they spoke of *el macizo* like homesick persons, they didn't go back. They remained, as they said of themselves, *pura raza.* So it happened that José and Gustavo would bring home for a meal and for conversation workingmen who were *chicanos* fresh from *el macizo* and like ourselves, *pura raza.* Like us, they had come straight to the barrio where they could order a meal, buy a pair of overalls, and look for work in Spanish. They brought us vague news about the revolution, in which many of them had fought as *villistas, huertistas, maderistas,* or *zapatistas.* As an old *maderista,* I imagined our *chicano* guests as battle-tested revolutionaries, like myself.

As poor refugees, their first concern was to find a place to sleep, then to eat and find work. In the barrio they were most likely to find all three, for not knowing English they needed something that was even more urgent than a room, a meal, or a job, and that was information in a language they could understand. This information had to be picked up in bits and pieces—from families like ours, from the conversation groups in the poolrooms and the saloons.

Beds and meals, if the newcomers had no money at all, were provided—in one way or another—on trust, until the new *chicano* found a job. On trust and not on credit, for trust was something between people who had plenty of nothing, and credit was between people who had something of plenty. It was not charity or social welfare but something my mother called *asistencia,* a helping given and received on trust, to be repaid because those who had given it were themselves in need of what they had given. *Chicanos* who had found work on farms or in railroad camps came back to pay us a few dollars for *asistencia* we had provided weeks or months before.

Because the barrio was a grapevine of job information, the transient *chicanos* were able to find work and repay their obligations. The password of the barrio was *trabajo* and the community was divided in two—the many who were looking for it and the few who had it to offer. Pickers, foremen, contractors, drivers, field hands, pick and shovel men on the railroad and in construction came back to the barrio when work was slack, to tell one another of the places they had been, the kind of *patrón* they had, the wages paid, the food, the living quarters, and other important details. Along 2nd Street, labor recruiters hung blackboards on their shop fronts, scrawling in chalk offers of work. The grapevine was a mesh of rumors and gossip, and men often walked long distances or paid bus fares or a contractor's fee only to find that the work was over or all the jobs were filled. Even the chalked signs could not always be relied on. Yet the search for *trabajo,* or the *chanza,* as we also called it, went on because it had to.

We in the barrio considered that there were two kinds of *trabajo.* There were the seasonal jobs, some of them a hundred miles or more from Sacramento. And there were the closer *chanzas* to which you could walk or ride on a bicycle. These were the best ones, in the railway shops, the canneries, the waterfront warehouses, the lumberyards, the produce markets, the brick kilns, and the rice mills. To be able to move from the seasonal jobs to the close-in work was a step up the ladder. Men who had made it passed the word along to their relatives or their friends when there was a *chanza* of this kind.

It was all done by word of mouth, this delicate wiring of the grapevine. The exchange points of the network were the places where men gathered in small groups, apparently to loaf and chat to no purpose. One of these points was our kitchen, where my uncles and their friends sat and talked of *el macizo* and of the revolution but above all of the *chanzas* they had heard of.

There was not only the everlasting talk about *trabajo,* but also the never-ending action of the barrio itself. If work was action the barrio was where the action was. Every morning a parade of men in oily work clothes and carrying lunch buckets went up Fourth Street toward the railroad shops, and every evening they walked back, grimy and silent. Horse-drawn drays with low platforms rumbled up and down our street carrying the goods the city traded in, from kegs of beer to sacks of grain. Within a few blocks of our house there were smithies, hand laundries, a macaroni factory, and all manner of places where wagons and buggies were repaired, horses stabled, bicycles fixed, chickens dressed, clothes washed and ironed, furniture repaired, candy mixed, tents sewed, wine grapes pressed, bottles washed, lumber sawed, suits fitted and tailored, watches and clocks taken apart and put together again, vegetables sorted, railroad cars unloaded, boxcars iced, barges freighted, ice cream cones molded, soda pop bottled, fish scaled, salami stuffed, corn ground for *masa,* and bread ovened. To those who knew where these were located in the alleys, as I did, the whole barrio was an open workshop. The people who worked there came to know you, let you look in at the door, made jokes, and occasionally gave you an odd job.

This was the business district of the barrio. Around it and through it moved a constant traffic of drays, carts, bicycles, pushcarts, trucks, and high-wheeled automobiles with black canvas tops and honking horns.

On the tailgates of drays and wagons, I nipped rides when I was going home with a gunnysack full of empty beer bottles or my gleanings around the packing sheds.

Once we had work, the next most important thing was to find a place to live we could afford. Ours was a neighborhood of leftover houses. The cheapest rents were in the back quarters of the rooming houses, the basements, and the run-down clapboard rentals in the alleys. Clammy and dank as they were, they were nevertheless one level up from the barns and tents where many of our *chicano* friends lived, or the shanties and lean-tos of the migrants who squatted in the "jungles" along the levees of the Sacramento and American Rivers.

Barrio people, when they first came to town, had no furniture of their own. They rented it with their quarters or bought a piece at a time from the secondhand stores, the *segundas,* where we traded. We cut out the ends of tin cans to make collars and plates for the pipes and floor moldings where the rats had gnawed holes. Stoops and porches that sagged we propped with bricks and fat stones. To plug the drafts around the windows in winter, we cut strips of corrugated cardboard and wedged them into the frames. With squares of cheesecloth neatly cut and sewed to screen doors, holes were covered and rents in the wire mesh mended. Such repairs, which landlords never paid any attention to, were made *por mientras,* for the time being or temporarily. It would have been a word equally suitable for the house itself, or for the barrio. We lived in run-down places furnished with seconds in a hand-me-down neighborhood, all of which were *por mientras*.

We found the Americans as strange in their customs as they probably found us. Immediately we discovered that there were no *mercados* and that when shopping you did not put the groceries in a *chiquihuite.* Instead everything was in cans or in cardboard boxes or each item was put in a brown paper bag. There were neighborhood grocery stores at the corners and some big ones uptown, but no *mercado.* The grocers did not give children a *pilón,* they did not stand at the door and coax you to come in and buy, as they did in Mazatlán. The fruits and vegetables were displayed on counters instead of being piled up on the floor. The stores smelled of fly spray and oiled floors, not of fresh pineapple and limes.

Neither was there a plaza, only parks which had no bandstands, no concerts every Thursday, no Judases exploding on Holy Week, and no promenades of boys going one way and girls the other. There were no parks in the barrio, and the ones uptown were cold and rainy in winter, and in summer there was no place to sit except on the grass. When there were celebrations nobody set off rockets in the parks, much less on the street in front of your house to announce to the neighborhood that a wedding or a baptism was taking place. Sacramento did not have a *mercado* and a plaza with the cathedral to one side and the Palacio de Gobierno on another to make it obvious that there and nowhere else was the center of the town.

It was just as puzzling that the Americans did not live in *vecindades,* like our block on Leandro Valle. Even in the alleys, where people knew one another better, the houses were fenced apart, without central courts to wash clothes, talk, and play with the other children. Like the city, the Sacramento barrio did not have a place which was the middle of things for everyone.

In more personal ways we had to get used to the Americans. They did not listen if you did not speak loudly, as they always did. In the Mexican style, people would know that you were enjoying their jokes tremendously if you merely smiled and shook a little, as if you were trying to swallow your mirth. In the American style there was little difference between a laugh and a roar, and until you got used to them you could hardly tell whether the boisterous Americans were roaring mad or roaring happy.

It was Doña Henriqueta more than Gustavo or José who talked of these oddities and classified them as agreeable or deplorable. It was she also who pointed out the pleasant surprises of the American way. When a box of rolled oats with a picture of red carnations on the side was emptied, there was a plate or a bowl or a cup with blue designs. We ate the strange stuff regularly for breakfast and we soon had a set of the beautiful dishes. Rice and beans we bought in cotton bags of colored prints. The bags were unsewed, washed, ironed, and made into gaily designed towels, napkins, and handkerchiefs. The American stores also gave small green stamps which were pasted in a book to exchange for prizes. We didn't have to run to the corner with the garbage; a collector came for it.

With remarkable fairness and never-ending wonder we kept adding to our list the pleasant and the repulsive in the ways of the Americans. It was my second acculturation.

The older people of the barrio, except in those things which they had to do like the Americans because they had no choice, remained Mexican. Their language at home was Spanish. They were continuously taking up collections to pay somebody's funeral expenses or to help someone who had had a serious accident. Cards were sent to you to attend a

burial where you would throw a handful of dirt on top of the coffin and listen to tearful speeches at the graveside. At every baptism a new *compadre* and a new *comadre* joined the family circle. New Year greeting cards were exchanged, showing angels and cherubs in bright colors sprinkled with grains of mica so that they glistened like gold dust. At the family parties the huge pot of steaming tamales was still the center of attention, the *atole* served on the side with chunks of brown sugar for sucking and crunching. If the party lasted long enough, someone produced a guitar, the men took over, and the singing of *corridos* began.

In the barrio there were no individuals who had official titles or who were otherwise recognized by everybody as important people. The reason must have been that there was no place in the public business of the city of Sacramento for the Mexican immigrants. We only rented a corner of the city and as long as we paid the rent on time everything else was decided at City Hall or the county courthouse, where Mexicans went only when they were in trouble. Nobody from the barrio ever ran for mayor or city councilman. For us the most important public officials were the policemen who walked their beats, stopped fights, and hauled drunks to jail in a paddy wagon we called La Julia.

The one institution we had that gave the *colonia* some kind of image was the Comisión Honorífica, a committee picked by the Mexican consul in San Francisco to organize the celebration of the Cinco de Mayo and the Sixteenth of September, the anniversaries of the battle of Puebla and the beginning of our War of Independence. These were the two events which stirred everyone in the barrio, for what we were celebrating was not only the heroes of Mexico but also the feeling that we were still Mexicans ourselves. On these occasions there was a dance preceded by speeches and a concert. For both the Cinco and the Sixteenth, queens were elected to preside over the ceremonies.

Between celebrations neither the politicians uptown nor the Comisión Honorífica attended to the daily needs of the barrio. This was done by volunteers—the ones who knew enough English to interpret in court, on a visit to the doctor, on a call at the county hospital, and who could help make out a postal money order. By the time I had finished the third grade at the Lincoln School I was one of these volunteers. My services were not professional but they were free, except for the IOUs I accumulated from families who always thanked me with "God will pay you for it."

My clients were not *pochos*—Mexicans who had grown up in California, who probably had even been born in the United States. They had learned to speak English of sorts and could still speak Spanish, also of sorts. They knew much more about the Americans than we did, and much less about us. The *chicanos* and the *pochos* had certain feelings about one another. Concerning the *pochos,* the *chicanos* suspected that they considered themselves too good for the barrio but were not, for some reason, good enough for the Americans. Toward the *chicanos,* the *pochos* acted superior, amused at our confusions but not especially interested in explaining them to us. In our family when I forgot my manners, my mother would ask me if I was turning *pochito.*

Turning *pocho* was a half step toward turning American. And America was all around us, in and out of the barrio. Abruptly we had to forget the ways of shopping in a *mercado* and learn those of shopping in a corner grocery or in a department store. The Americans paid no attention to the Sixteenth of September, but they made a great commotion about the Fourth of July. In Mazatlán Don Salvador had told us, saluting and marching as he talked to our class, that the Cinco de Mayo was the most glorious date in human history. The Americans had not even heard about it.