

ARTIST'S STATEMENT

Unearthing and Recovering Memories in a Company Town: Litchfield Park, Arizona

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I became involved with a community oral history project when I happened to mention to a Chicano administrator for the Maricopa Community Colleges that I had participated in the Oral History Summer Institute at Columbia University. Before I knew it, he had scheduled me to meet with a group of individuals whom he understood were attempting to collect the stories of former residents from los campos—the camps.

Socially Invested Research and Community of Memory

My colleague had a personal interest in the project; he had spent the first seven years of his childhood in Camp 52, one of the many that made up the camp communities of Litchfield Park. Ever the researcher, given that my campus was located nearby, in the west valley, I saw this as an opportunity to merge my interests in oral history and Chicana/o Studies research in a community-based project. Little did I know that my social embeddedness would consume the next six years of my life—where I would intimately come to know the life course of a town and those who lived in it.

The story of Litchfield Park began around 1916, when the Goodyear Tire & Rubber Corporation, in need of long-staple cotton for its mass production of cord tires, established it as a company town. An embargo of cotton from Egypt and a boll weevil infestation in the South resulted in the company's

foray into the cotton-producing market, which was when they turned to Arizona. Goodyear's entry into the Salt River Valley made the state one of the major producers of cotton for national and international markets (Hill 2007; Meeks 2007).

From 1916 through 1986, Goodyear Farms—originally Southwest Cotton Company—a subsidiary of the Goodyear Tire & Rubber Corporation, built five major labor camps to attract and maintain a steady workforce for the large-scale production of cotton (Rodengen 1997; Schetter 1976; Smith 1948). Los campos housed hundreds of workers from a predominantly Mexican labor force and their families, some of who claimed a legacy of three generations of employment with the company.

In 1986, when Goodyear Farms permanently closed its operations, the last of the camps were retired and the remaining elderly residents were moved to a subsidized location (Reynolds 1986). Many of the families relocated into neighboring towns of Avondale, Tolleson, and other cities of Maricopa County, taking with them their collective memory about their lives in the camps. Any physical evidence of the camps themselves is gone. Their existence is now symbolized by two remaining sites: the Goodyear Farms Historic Cemetery and St. Thomas of Aquinas, a small adobe Catholic church that was closed decades ago, now serving another purpose for the local elementary school.

Litchfield Park is vastly different from the town that began with the emergence of the Southwest Cotton Company. Today, the city of Litchfield Park is a predominantly white, middle-class, planned residential community of approximately 4,000 people. If one were to drive into the suburban community today, there is little evidence that a community of people of Mexican descent once thrived in the area. Billboards direct one to the

latest housing development or gated community. National chain stores and restaurants line the main thoroughfare of Litchfield Road.

The historic artifacts—photographs, maps, and other documents—opened a treasure trove of knowledge. It all began with photographs, when the four of us, members of the Oral History Group, crouched over the pictures, as we sat around a table in the Community Room of the Litchfield Park Public Library. There was a black and white photograph of a young girl, standing, obviously posing for the photographer. She wore overalls, a kind of pañoleta—kerchief—over her hair, and held a cotton ball in her hands. In pencil, at the bottom of the image was inscribed, “A Typical Mexican Girl,” and the year, “1933.” We turned it over but there was nothing written on the back. We did not know who had taken the photograph nor could we identify her. I was both intrigued and disturbed. Who was she? Why did she not deserve to be identified? What did the photographer mean by “typical?” To me, the characterization said more about the photographer and the ideology of the times in which her childhood unfolded than about her. I imagined she was not typical to her parents, her friends, or those with whom she lived in the camps. As we did with her photograph, we scanned and digitized hundreds of images that had been entrusted to us.

In an exhibit we held a year later, “*Gente, Lugares, y Comunidad: People, Places, and Community: Images from the Camps of Litchfield Park,*” we decided to feature her. We were determined to situate her amidst the photos of the camp communities, amongst those who had once belonged, and had a clear identity. With my opening remarks, I called upon the collective memory of those in the audience and asked them to help us identify her. We labeled the photograph, “Young girl holding cotton.” The caption describing the photo read:

An unidentified girl holds several balls of cotton. The phrase “a typical Mexican girl” was inscribed in the original 1933 photo.
 Author unknown. *Courtesy of Litchfield Park Historical Society.*

Collective memory was on our side. By the end of the event, someone approached me, with the young girl's name and the camp to which she belonged. Her name is Petra Gem, from Camp 50, of Litchfield Park. Collective memory, according to French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1992), is “not a metaphor but a social reality, transmitted and sustained through the conscious efforts and institutions of groups” (cited in Yerushlmi 1982, xv). Indeed, our efforts to collect and document the stories of former residents of the Goodyear Farms camp communities involved cataloguing documents and artifacts and engaging numerous groups that span the generations and cross the borders of former and new communities. The acts of remembering are alive, active, and transformative. As Monica Perales (2010) noted in *Smelertown*,

The act of remembering and the process of creating a collective memory are inherently political, and collective memory serves as a way “in which groups, peoples, or nations construct versions of the past and employ them for self-understanding and to win power in an ever-changing present.” (276)

While I am in agreement with her conclusion, in this project, I am exploring what is involved with unearthing and recovering such memories. To address these questions I provide a brief overview of the various achievements of the project, the programs, curricular innovations, and the array of stakeholders that enabled the recovery of memories to take place.

Community Studies and Recovery of Memories

The first year of the project was an astounding success. We completed eighteen videotaped oral histories and organized a community event in the form of a camp reunion. Twenty years had passed since the last of the camps had closed, and what better way to celebrate the project's efforts but to bring former residents of Litchfield Park together? In our excitement over the invaluable rich stories we were documenting, we decided to produce a film based on the first set of interviews, *Voices from the Camps of Litchfield Park* (dir. Gloria Holguín Cuádras 2006), to further reciprocate and mirror back to the community their individual and collective memories.

The event was scheduled to begin at 10 a.m. at the local Litchfield Elementary School, located in the center of town and where many of the camp residents or their children would have attended public school. We spent the previous evening setting up a photo exhibit and chairs for approximately three hundred people. We did not anticipate even that many would attend. By 9:30 a.m. people started arriving. By 10 a.m., the parking lot was full and families came in droves.

In all, over five hundred people attended the reunion. As organizers, we were astonished and amazed at the turnout. Later, we learned individuals came from as far away as Rhode Island, New York, California, and Georgia to reunite with members of their former camp communities. By the end of the Founder's Day Event it was clear we had brought together a "community of memory"—what Robert Bellah (1985) defines as

One that does not forget its past...[and] which is involved in retelling its story, its constitutive narrative...and [it] offers examples of the men and women who have embodied and exemplified the meaning of community, (cited in Climo and Catrell 2002, 3–4).

The end result of our efforts yielded much community wealth, along with a compilation of funds and support for the documentation of the town's history. For example, the following have been gathered or produced as a result of this study:

Oral Histories, Films, and Photograph Collections

- 50 videotaped oral histories, deeded to Arizona State University's Chicano Research Collection; copies at Litchfield Park Historical Society, and copies to all participants
- Film, *Voices from the Camps of Litchfield Park* (DVD)
- Photo exhibit, features 90 museum-ready black & white enlarged photos
- Digitization and archiving of hundreds of photographs
- Film, *Historic Sites and Sacred Places of Litchfield Park*
- Oral History Project featured in L. Mercier and M. Buckendorf. (2007). *Using Oral History in Community History Projects* (Pamphlet). Oral History Association.
- "Negotiating Career and Family in Arizona: Belen Soto Moreno," Source note. (2009). In *Speaking History: Oral Histories of the American Past, 1865-Present*, S. Armitage and L. Mercier, 142–146. Palgrave MacMillan Publishers.

From "typical" to "special"

This narrative brings me full circle to the story of the anonymous Mexican girl I previously mentioned. The image depicted on the cover of this journal is an oil painting of that photograph. Initially, it was not clear to me why I was so fascinated with the picture of this young girl. Much later I realized that the image of the girl holding the cotton ball reminded me of the times my father would drive us to the cotton fields of the Imperial Valley, to pick cotton from the plants, so that we could use it to make furniture for our muñecas—dolls.

The way he saw it, it was as far as I would ever venture into a cotton field, or any field, for that matter. My father was adamant that none of us would ever work in the fields, and, so long as we lived under his roof, none of us ever did. He wanted better things for us, one of those being not to work in the sun, even when his labor was good enough to provide for us.

Through the course of collecting memories from the people about their childhoods and growing up in the camps, numerous stories surfaced about children working in the fields. The women, in particular, remembered having to work all day, only to return home and have “to cook and clean” for the others. Some of them reported liking the work, but most had vivid memories of the difficulties and harsh conditions of working under the sweltering heat. The photograph became a sort of testimonio of what could have been for me and my siblings had our parents not stressed the importance of an education.

For many Chicanas/Latinas in the professoriate, juggling our careers, community work, and families often proves to be daunting and challenging. In an effort to carve out a space for my own interests, about halfway through the project—in between interviews, traveling to Litchfield Park (which is twenty-six miles away from my home), organizing events, grant-writing and fundraising, teaching, and writing—I took up oil painting to offset the pressures. It was that young “Typical Mexican girl” who inspired me to document the work that we do in a creative way.

I painted Petra Gem to recover her from the anonymity of that *typical* stereotype and to mark her humanity. The painting was made to create a space of belonging—to place her on a wall so as to encourage and inspire conversations about her life and times. Moreover, I aimed to tell her story with her presence so that others may recognize that her humanity may have made a

difference. When we honor the history of an individual, of a people, whether through the art of painting or the art of research, we rewrite the narrative and the history of its past. Her life and mine were intertwined across time and place. She unearthed, not only my creativity, but also the possibilities of creating knowledge.

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