The International Bridge that connects both sides of the border, El Paso and Juárez (Courtesy Skip Clark)

The El Paso-Juárez International Streetcar (Courtesy Skip Clark)
My mother was born in Camargo, Chihuahua, a scant ten years after the turn of the twentieth century. She was only a few months old when the Mexican Revolution erupted and pushed her family north to Ciudad Juárez in 1910. The Rio Grande flowed furiously in those days, following the course it had carved out for itself. When her father, Jesús Lara Rey, felt the Revolution’s violence come too close for comfort, he would move the family north of the river temporarily into El Paso, at one time smuggling some of the younger children in trunks to get them across the border. Family history relates that my grandfather died of a botched appendicitis operation at the hands of a drunken doctor. Antonia Lara Rey Mendoza, who bore twelve children for him, was left with the five survivors who ranged in age from one in the womb to the eldest who was nineteen. Lucina, my mother, was twelve. By the time she was fourteen, she had her first teaching job and was one of the teachers who inaugurated the Centro Escolar Revolución in the Colonia Chaveña several miles southeast of where she lived in Juárez.

In 1946, a German blue-eyed sailor came to the border, remembering that a psychic in Shanghai had told him he would have to go to a Latin American country to find the woman who would become his wife. He took the streetcar across the Stanton Street bridge and wound up at the Plaza Alberto Balderas. There, he found a Lion’s Club dance instead of the bullfight he went
looking for. As foretold, he also found the love of his life: my raven-haired, spirited mother. They danced into the wee hours, and on their date the following night, ate supper at The Oasis next to the Plaza Theater. Within days he proposed, gave her a ring, and she accepted. He left shortly thereafter to finish his tour of duty with the Merchant Marines, and for two years she received love letters with postmarks from all over the world. In 1948, she stopped teaching, married Martin Frank Fischer and the year after went across the country with him to New York State where they moved into a makeshift tarpaper shack in the woods. I was born in the Catskill Mountains. In the fall of the same year, culture shock and the cold drove my mother back to the border, where she and I settled in with my grandmother in Juárez until my father retrieved us in February of the following year.

All of her adult life my mother had been terrified of living on the north side of the Rio Grande. During her lifetime on the border, her excursions north extended only as far as downtown El Paso, especially to the Popular Dry Goods Store where she shopped for shoes to fit her narrow feet and took knitting lessons in English, although she didn’t speak the language. To get to the Popular, she’d walk up El Paso Street, eyeing the tenements in the Segundo Barrio. She was convinced that all Mexicans who ventured across the border wound up living in those tenements, a belief which then wasn’t far from the truth. About the time of my third birthday, we moved to the Barrio del Diablo, reputedly one of the worst neighborhoods in town. My father had purchased a three-room adobe house for $3800 from a Mr. Brown. It sat in the middle of the 3300 block of San Antonio Street. Across the empty lot out the front door we saw the traffic on Paisano Avenue, the last street before the chain link fence that separated El Paso and Juárez. Beyond that was the Chihuahuan Desert with its bounty of chamizos and nopales. Behind us flowed the Franklin Canal which carried water down from the north.

Our block was one which in today’s language we would call culturally diverse. Llewellyn Thompson, a jazz pianist, lived across
the street with his wife. The Greens—she Mexican, he African-American—lived next door with their two girls. Melvin White, who worked for the Southern Pacific, and his wife Estelle, a nurse, lived two doors down. My family’s German-Mexican mix was unique to the neighborhood; the rest of the families on our block were Mexican. Judging from the state of our houses, in my perception at least, we must’ve all been about equally poor; practically every yard was part junkyard, part farmyard. My father brought home every conceivable scrap of anything even remotely usable, and it mostly sat there and rotted or rusted, much to my mother’s chagrin. We raised chickens and rabbits, and kept the customary Easter gift chicks and ducklings until they grew to become Sunday dinners. Living that close to the border was an everyday adventure, and while the neighborhood had a reputation for being one of the worst in terms of gangs, I don’t recall anyone voicing any apprehension. Nor did anyone seem to mind the steady stream of people coming from across the border through holes in the chain link fence looking for work. In the hobo tradition of the Depression Era, many a man was fed by my mother. These men repaid her kindness by helping her in the garden or by doing odd fix-it jobs around the house. She built a room onto the house entirely with the help of sporadic, itinerant workers. It was her favorite room, with large, light-giving windows and a room-length brick planter which in time was overflowing with jasmines, bougainvilleas, and shrimp plants, most of which she smuggled across the border. The sounds of children playing in front yards went well past dark in the summers, under the watchful eyes of parents sitting on porches to escape the inside heat since none of our houses were air-conditioned. If the teens who gathered under the corner streetlight were doing anything other than playing their instruments and singing, I certainly didn’t know it.

My father worked for the McKee Construction Company during my early childhood, sometimes no more than three days per week; he lied about his age and found steadier work at Falstaff Brewery in 1956, at the age of 65. Somehow managing a home
with very little money, my mother divided her time between house and garden, always with a song on her lips. She’d tell me that the reason we had no furniture was because it gave us more room to play. What we did have were books and a piano, which she played every morning after she came in from the garden.

When it came time for me to go to school, my mother decided I should go to school in Juárez. Some of the children on my block went to Zavala Elementary, others to Beall. The Greens were bussed to Douglass, in the days before integration. It was my mother’s wish that I do at least kindergarten through the sixth grade in Juárez. It was her intent to take me to school and just wait for me, but the principal talked her into teaching fourth grade. The school was the Escuela Primaria Agustín Melgar, behind the first Escuela Secundaria on 16 de septiembre, and in front of El Parque Borunda, then carpeted with grass and shaded by weeping willows. Every morning my mother and I would get on the #10 Paisano bus going downtown, get off and board the green, white, and yellow streetcar to go across the border, get off on 16 de septiembre and get on the eastbound Parque Borunda bus to reach the school. The whole process took over two hours each way, each and every day; she felt that strongly about the value of the Mexican education, which she’d been a part of for nearly a quarter of a century.

My time at Escuela Agustín Melgar was a wonder that I shall never cease being grateful for. The first year there, I spent the morning in kindergarten, and the afternoon sitting on the windowsill outside first grade while my mother got through with her teaching day. When winter came, Srita. Luz Armendariz, the principal, decided that I might as well go into first grade, since I already knew how to read. We went to school ten months out of the year, and sat two and three in desks intended for one. Learning to print was not in the curriculum; script taught with the Palmer Method was. The classrooms were covered with maps for a solid foundation in geography, both Mexican and worldwide. We learned multiplication tables aloud, and the sounds of classroom voices wafted far into the park. Our physical education took place
under the weeping willows. Music was a vital part of every day’s activities, as was poetry. At the beginning of the year, the focus was patriotic, in preparation for Las Fiestas Patrias on Independence Day. I can still sing the Mexican National Anthem when the occasion calls for it. But the best times by far were the preparations for Día de las Madres on the 10th of May. We were all part of the school choir, which paid tribute to motherhood in song, and we were coached in the fine art of reciting heartfelt poetry complete with appropriate gestures. The following comes to mind:

Pañuelito perfumado, que me dio mi mamacita,  
bien lavado y bien planchado, me lo pongo en mi bolsita.  
Cuando llora mi muñeca, cuando juego a la momita,  
yo saco mi pañuelo, que me dió mi mamacita.

Little hanky, perfumed hanky, that my mommy gave to me.  
Nicely washed and nicely pressed, I keep it in my pocket.  
When my little dolly cries, when I play like I’m a mommy,  
I take out my little hanky that my mommy gave to me.

No mother went home without flowers: red carnations for those whose mothers were still alive, white for those whose mothers had passed away. No mother went home without gluey, glittery gifts made by small hands. No mother went home without echoes of melodies and poetry ringing in her ears. There was an abundance of pictures taken, not by parents because cameras were scarce, but by street photographers who went from school to school capturing special moments.

My time at Escuela Agustín Melgar was short-lived. El Paso school authorities didn’t think too kindly of my mother transporting me across the border to get an education. The summer after second grade, the powers that be insisted I go to Zavala School. Not surprisingly, since I was raised in a bilingual home and had two years of solid schooling by age seven, I could read and write in
both languages equally well, and knew how to add, subtract, multiply, and divide. The principal thought I should be in third or fourth grade, but my mother was adamant that I should be in a classroom with children my own age, and so I did second grade again, learned—very poorly—to print, and became the teacher’s errand runner because she didn’t know quite what to do with me. The transition to this side of the border became easier with time and excellent teachers: Miss Ross, Mrs. Wiseman, Mrs. Harrison, Mr. Yturralde.

One teacher who stayed with me throughout the time I was at Zavala was Mrs. Josephine Nagel. She was tall and slender, wore glasses, and kept her long blonde hair pulled back in a bun. Almost year round, she wore a bright red hibiscus from her garden tucked behind an ear. Mrs. Nagel traveled through the school’s two floors pushing a cart replete with sheet music, musical instruments, a portable record player, and an autoharp. At least two times a week, we had music in the classroom, and after school twice a week there was choir. My musical debut took place in the cavernous Magoffin Auditorium at Texas Western College during a Trans-Pecos Teacher’s Conference. From the uppermost center spot on the choir stand, dressed in a pale blue chiffon dress made by my mother, with confidence I gave voice to the cat’s “meow” from the Brementown Musicians’ song. It was Mrs. Nagel who took me back to the campus for my first experience at the opera to see a performance of Tosca. It was she who introduced me to traditional American folk music, spirituals, and musical theater, as well as the European classics. Perhaps because music had played such a vital role in my Mexican schooling, her dedication gave me a sense of security in a new environment while it enriched my knowledge of the universal language of music.

Because my grandmother lived in Juárez, the connection to the city continued to be a strong one. At least once a week, my mother and I would take the bus downtown, then the streetcar to downtown Juárez, and finally get on a bus going east to the Colonia Bella Vista to see her. My mother had several rent houses in the...
Lucy Fischer (West) with her family in a 1956 photo taken by a Juárez street photographer

Lucy Fischer (West) doing a math problem at the board in the second grade at Escuela Primaria Agustín Melgar, Ciudad Juárez
same neighborhood and every time anyone moved out of one of them, she and I refurbished the place and readied it for the next tenant. We did most of our grocery shopping in Juárez—bought beef, sugar, and canned goods from La Florida, a Chinese-owned downtown store, fruits and vegetables at the Mercado Cuauhtémoc. On Día de Los Muertos, All Soul’s Day, we cut the zinnias and marigolds from our garden, bought more zempasúchil and crisan- temas along the way and joined the throngs of people who made the yearly pilgrimage to clean and decorate family grave sites. Afterwards, we lined up to eat corn on the cob boiled in #10 washtubs, served with an ample amount of butter, sprinkled with salt and chili powder, and peppered with cemetery dust. We satisfied our sweet teeth with chunks of sugar cane that we chewed all the juice out of. Year after year, the ritual trip connected me to those relatives who had died long before I was born, and most especially to the grandfather who had brought his family to the Rio Grande border.

My mother’s and grandmother’s speech was amply sprinkled with proverbs in the tradition of Sancho Panza. When I tried to do two things at once, they admonished, “No se puede chiflar y comer pinole” (You can’t eat ground toasted corn and whistle at the same time.). If a dress my mother made fit perfectly on the first try, it was “Te cayó como anillo al dedo” (It fit like a ring.). And if a hand-me-down fit well: “Tu tienes cuerpo de limosnera” (You have the body of a street urchin.). Of one of the Juárez neighbors who talked far too much, they said, “Habla hasta con los codos” (She speaks even with her elbows.). When going out to play, they’d warn, “No te vayas a meter en la boca del lobo” (Don’t go into the head of a wolf.). And to keep me from getting caught up in others’ mischief, they sent me out with “Acuérdate que tanto peca el que mata la vaca, como el que le ata la pata” (Equally sinful is he who ties the cow’s feet as he who kills her.). These proverbs and far more than I can cite here became part of my folk speech and have remained with me.

I also became well versed in folk medicine because my mother, whether for lack of money, or because she had more faith
in traditional cures than modern ones, always tried home remedies first. A precocious and gregarious child, I attracted attention and when I came down with an unexplained fever, she was sure it was *mal ojo*—evil eye. She proceeded accordingly, sweeping me with an egg and then breaking it into a bowl and putting it under the bed where I slept. Sure enough, an eye formed in the yolk and my mother decided that a favorite cousin had looked admiringly but not touched me, as is the Mexican custom. So she sought him out to break the curse by passing three mouthfuls of water to me.

To cut down the chances of a sore throat, she’d put warm saliva on her hands and spread it on my bare feet. If I still got a sore throat, it was lime juice combined with honey she poured down me. If I’d gotten my feet wet, she made sure that I also moistened the top of my head to keep me from getting blisters on the roof of my mouth or catching cold. When I got sick and she didn’t know what to do, she’d call for my grandmother’s wisdom. On one occasion, after several days of a fever that wouldn’t break, my grandmother took a handful of Snow Cap lard from the kitchen, stripped me and rubbed me from head to toe with it. The fever broke as the chicken pox sprung. Less dramatic cures in my house included *yerba buena* for stomach upsets, chamomile for calm sleep, cinnamon tea made with *canela entera* for a cough, oregano tea for a croupy cough. Aloe vera gel squeezed out from a leaf spread on a wound served for most of my childhood injuries. A sliced wedge of garlic brought a splinter to the surface and drew out any toxins left by thorns. Like my mother, and my grandmother before her, I use and trust *remedios caseros*, home remedies passed down to me.

Besides the close bond with my grandmother in Juárez, the most important linking thread in my upbringing in El Paso was the ongoing contact to my mother’s teaching community. Walking to or from the *Mercado Cuauhtémoc* beside the *Catedral de Guadalupe* to the *Mercado Juárez*, in a city whose population was then almost a quarter of a million people, we regularly encountered several of my mother’s ex-colleagues, and the conversation
would span decades. Most had spent longer than my mother’s twenty-four years teaching, some at the Escuela Revolución where they had started their careers together. Rarely speaking to each other by phone because the cost was prohibitive, they came together only on each other’s birthdays.

They called these occasions “convivios”—from the Latin “to share life.” Whoever had the birthday prepared whatever meals they could afford, got dressed to the nines, and waited. About sundown, teachers would start trickling in, bringing simple gifts and sometimes food and drink to add to the repast. Raul López would make fun of Otilia Rombach, his former principal, because all she ever had was “Pan Bimbo” sandwiches sparsely filled with meat; only ample amounts of beer would make them palatable, he said. Her specialty was “rompope con pique”—spiked eggnog. It was amusing to see all five-foot-two of her taking those tiny steps on the worn, bare hardwood floor back and forth to the sparse kitchen to get something for someone. At Margarita Ibañez de Salgado’s house there was always loud dance music and lots of food. She’d been quite a tango dancer in her youth, and in her late fifties, she still had a figure she could brag about, especially in the bright dresses she loved to wear.

Most of these teachers were women. Some had married, but most had not, dedicating their lives to hundreds of children over the decades. When they got together, these women spoke not of their achaques, their maladies, but of how in their youth the Mexican government had treated them to free hotels in Mexico City and passes on the railroad from Juárez to anywhere the railroad went. My mother’s favorite tale was of the regularly derailing trains in Chihuahua. “Las Muchachas”—the girls—were so well known as a group that the engineer would send them to the nearest town on a hand car to bring back food for the passengers; if they were stuck somewhere for a night, no town, however small, lacked enough musicians to put together a dance in their honor. These women spoke of the thrill of teaching with a zeal that lasted their
whole lives. They broke into song as easily as they broke into laughter.

By the time I was ten, it was understood that I would be baking the cakes for the occasions. How my mother and I transported sheet cakes across the border on the streetcar, I don’t remember, but we did. On October 21st we’d take one to Srita. Otilia, whom everyone respected for her integrity as a principal. On November 4th, it was for Srita. Carolina, whose specialty was scolding children and boxing ears, but whose garden was bountiful with violets with which she’d make nosegays for her table. As they grew older and it was more difficult to get around, the crowd got smaller and smaller but no less lively. When I got old enough to drive, I’d do the rounds in Juárez picking them up. I think that one of the things my mother missed most about not living south of the river was the freedom to go anywhere she wanted on the bus, to see her friends, to minister to them as they got older. Many of them couldn’t come to El Paso to sing my mother the traditional “Las Mañanitas” on the Feast of Candlemas Day, February 2nd, when her birthday came. Some had never acquired passports. There was one gathering that I do remember, after my mother had bought a Magnavox console at the Union Furniture Store on South Stanton Street. Margarita led a conga line, weaving it in and out throughout the rooms in our house and then outside, filling the barrio’s winter night air with laughter and music.

On the summer night that my mother lay peacefully still at the age of eighty-one, those women who were still alive came to pay their last respects, gathered around her casket, and sang the songs of their youth to wish her a joyous farewell.

When I go to Juárez now, following much the same shopping route as I did with my mother so long ago, I sing her praises for the rich cultural border background that was her inestimable and enduring gift to me. Outside the Mercado Juárez, I buy meat from a butcher who was her student, and inside I get spices, chilies, nuts, and vanilla from another, who reminds me every time I see
him that Srita. Lucina was his favorite teacher. Traveling north, I drive over the nearly buried streetcar rails on Avenida Juárez, and once over the border, I eye the tenements that are still there. The house on San Antonio Street, long since sold, is nearly unrecognizable and no longer has my mother’s well-kept garden around it. Red-bricked Zavala School sits beneath the freeway connecting to the Bridge of the Americas. My memories of the Barrio del Diablo and of growing up with one foot on either bank of the Rio Grande flow as freely as the river did in its wildest days.

[“Growing up on Both Sides of the Rio Grande” will be included in Lucy Fischer West’s book Child of Many Rivers: Journeys to and from the Rio Grande, forthcoming from Texas Tech University Press.]
Lucy with her mother (right) and her second grade teacher at Escuela Primaria Augustín Melgar