

La Presidenta, a biography

The Lopez family tree was planted September 15, 1896, when my great-grandmother Porferia Reyes Aguirre was born on *El Rancho Escondido* in Lagos de Moreno, Jalisco, Mexico. She lived 99 years until February 26, 1996. At the very deepest roots of my family is where she rests, as our Tita.

Tita's childhood was in a period of relative peace under Porfirio Díaz. She and her two brothers were orphaned quite young and taken in by her grandmother and aunts. Around 1906, when Tita was 8, her godmother, the daughter of the *El Patrón*, Señor Gonzalez (owner of the land), brought Tita from the ranch to their house. There, she assisted in caring for *El Patrón* who was by then partly blind. When she first met the old man, he asked if she could read. Tita had never gone to school. He asked for her name, which she said was PORFIRIA. *El Patrón* told his daughter to have "*La PRESIDENTA*" (Díaz was still president at the time) learn to read. And she did.

Díaz fled to France when the Mexican Revolution of 1910 broke out in Jalisco. A new Constitution of 1917 was ratified. Around that time, Tita went to live and work as a nanny for the family of one of her godmother's sisters in Mexico City. After several years, she was not content and wished to go elsewhere.

The new Constitution placed political and economic restriction on the Roman Catholic Church and in its Article 24, forbade public worship. In the 1920s, enforcement and augmentation of persecution heightened friction between the church and government. Tita was very passionate about her Catholicism. She would pray on her knees for an hour every day and had bibles, religious books and various statues and items in her house once she moved to the States.

Tita had come to know that Mr. Negrete was moving to New York City as head of the Bank of Mexico office there. She asked her godmother to inquire whether they needed a maid/nanny. It happened that the Negrete family needed domestic help. So Tita, who had always had fantasies of travel, boarded a steamer in Vera Cruz. She loved the trip and in the early evening, when alone on the deck, she would sing. Tita's voice, although untrained, was wondrous and she sang to NYC where she arrived on January 27, 1926.

In July of that year, Catholic bishops suspended all public worship. Further protest lead to violent outbreaks and a year after Tita left, the Cristero War erupted. But Tita would not return for many years to come. She had nothing and arrived in the United States with only knowledge, faith, love, and cooking.

Tita made a commitment to stay a minimum of five years with the Negrete family. After a few, she went to a local school to learn English. There she met my great-grandfather Pop, Tomas Camba Lopez. When the five years were up, Tita married Pop. Señora Negrete had taken in Tita as her daughter and set up their wedding. She invited a renowned Mexican singer, Maria Grivas. They married in *La Esperanza* church on 158th Street between Broadway and Riverside Drive. Señora also furnished the newly-weds apartment.

Pop was small in stature but big in heart. He was a *mucho macho* man. At least Tita let him think so. Tita would say that the Lopez women were strong and independent. We came from a long line of strong women because we have Basque blood in us. She said women are the backbone to the family.

The Basque people were from a region that straddles north-central Spain and southwestern France. The Basque home is synonymous with family roots. Basque women enjoyed

more freedom than other traditional societies. They uphold a matriarchal family structure. They traditionally have mostly been Roman Catholics.

Tita and Pop had three sons, Thomas, Ramon and Alfred. They brought them up in a home with warmth and love. Tita's life was her children. She was determined that they achieve what she did not have the opportunity to. She enrolled "the three stooges" in the Catholic parochial school system. She provided her sons with guitar, piano and violin teachers. But most of all, she provided an example of integrity, love and tenacity.

In 1966, Pop had a stroke at 55. With her sons still in school, Tita took control. She worked very hard, took care of her husband and managed three teenagers who though they were ten times smarter than she was. But Tita was a very positive person. She always saw the good side of things. Her favorite sayings were "magnificent" and "you look beautiful." She called little children "teeny-weenies."

When they had an empty nest, Tita and Pop moved to Florida where her teeny-weeny grandchildren visited them. My grandpa Fred would drive with my grandma, my father Ray and his siblings twenty-six hours straight. When they arrived, Tita would have their bedroom ready. Four cots would be arranged on both sides of the queen-size bed centered in the room. On each cot would be a small present for each grandchild. The first time Ray heard Tita sing was when the family drove down for the holidays. After dinner, the entire family sat down: the three stooges, cousins, Pop and Tita. Tom played guitar and Tita burst out in her soprano.

Mealtime was also a stage for Tita. Cooking was just another way for her to show her love and support. With an occasional teeny-weeny on the counter, she would cook enchiladas, tortillas, tamales, fried chicken and pastries like fried dough with powdered sugar.

Tita was always smiling. She created *meemo* in our family, "the act of giving hugs and love." She never lost her *meemo*. After Pop passed in 1987, Tita moved back to New York and lived with my grandpa. Slowly, she got lost in *dimensia*. In the end, *La Presidenta* returned to her childhood Chiapas mountains.