

Why Maria crossed over: One family's binational life

by [John Fanestil](#) in the [August 8, 2006](#) issue

Last summer I was invited by a hospice chaplain to accompany him on a visit to the family of Maria Durand de Perez, a Mexican woman who had died a few weeks earlier in the border town of San Ysidro, California, at the astonishing age of 111. Knowing that I had once worked as the pastor of a Spanish-language church, the chaplain, whose name is Andy, thought that my presence might prove helpful to Angela, Maria's 78-year-old daughter, who was mourning the loss of her mother deeply.

In his previous visits, Andy, who spoke only English, and Angela, who spoke only Spanish, had depended for translation on Yrma, Angela's bilingual daughter and the owner of the San Ysidro home. Andy suspected (rightly, it turned out) that Angela was longing to have a more in-depth conversation about her mother's remarkable life.

At first it seemed absurd that Angela's grief was so pronounced. It was not as if she had had insufficient time to prepare for her mother's death. Maria Durand de Perez had been one of the oldest people alive on the face of the earth, recognized officially by the Gerontology Research Group as a "supercentenarian" for having lived past the age of 110. The more Angela talked, however, the more I came to understand her sense of loss and dislocation. She had lived her entire life under the same roof as her mother. Her days would never again be the same.

As Angela described the many twists and turns of her mother's life, it dawned on me that Maria's life reflected the social and political transformations that defined life along the U.S.-Mexico border in the 20th century. Spanish-speakers living along the border call it *la linea*, "the line." I began to wonder: How did Maria Durand de Perez come to die on this side of the line?

Maria Durand was born in 1893 in Fresnillos, a small town in the central Mexican state of Aguascalientes. Her paternal grandfather was a Frenchman who married an indigenous Mexican woman, giving rise to what his great-granddaughter Angela would describe a century and a half later as a typical Mexican family—*de sangre*

*muy mezclada*, “of very mixed blood.”

In 1911, at the age of 18, Maria married Raul Perez, a man three years her senior, and soon after their wedding the couple came to California. By this time the pattern of Mexican migration to the Southwest U.S. was well established. In the second half of the 19th century tens of thousands of Mexicans—called *braceros*, a term deriving from *brazo*, the Spanish word for “arm”—had moved to the U.S. to work in agriculture, mining and light industry. This migratory flow had increased dramatically around the turn of the century, with the construction of the transcontinental railroads and the All-American Canal.

Not until the 1940s would the U.S. attempt to regulate this movement of laborers. From 1942 to 1964, under the *bracero* program, the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service issued over 4 million temporary work visas to Mexicans. For all the current controversy about Mexican immigration, this much is a matter of historical record: the U.S. has always needed hard-working arms, and large numbers of Mexicans have always been ready to provide them.

Raul Perez worked in the Los Angeles public works department for almost 20 years, but he lost his job when the Depression hit in 1929. The next year Raul and Maria decided to return to Aguascalientes. The decision was not an easy one. They had started a family in Los Angeles, and their two children were U.S. citizens by virtue of birth. The elder, a son named Francisco (“Frankie”), was already well into his teens and didn’t want to leave the only country he had ever known.

Frankie Perez never felt at home in Mexico, so immediately after finishing his secondary education in Aguascalientes he returned to the U.S. Without any particular intent or design, Raul and Maria had given birth to a profoundly binational family—a family, like millions of others, with relationships stretched irreversibly across the line.

Back in southern California, Frankie Perez married a Tijuana woman, Sofia Vergara, and together they raised a family in San Diego. Their four children attended high school and college in California, married and had children of their own—an all-American story.

But Frankie’s younger sister, Angela, followed a different course. She was a small child when her parents returned to Aguascalientes, and though she retained her U.S. citizenship she never learned to speak English. She married a Mexican national,

Jorge Vazquez, and gave birth to three children in Aguascalientes. In the 1950s, when Raul and Maria decided to move to Tijuana to be closer to Frankie and his family, Angela and Jorge and their youngest daughter, Yrma, moved with them.

For the last 50 years of her life, Maria Durand de Perez was the matriarch of an extended family that straddled the international boundary. Frankie and his extended family lived in San Diego; Angela and her extended family lived in Tijuana. Members of the family's many households visited each other frequently, crossing the line as a matter of course. Angela did so as a U.S. citizen, having been born in Los Angeles. Maria crossed the line using a "local passport," the document issued by the INS to Mexican citizens who could prove their permanent residence in Mexico.

Local passports, valid for ten years, allowed their bearers an unlimited number of entrances into the United States, provided that they remained within 25 miles of the border and stayed for no more than 72 hours at a time. When, in 2004, the Department of Homeland Security replaced the local passport with a high-tech "laser visa"—and at the same time extended the period of stay to 30 days in the border area—an estimated 7 million Mexicans were rightful owners of these documents, also called "border-crossing cards."

Like millions of Mexicans, Maria Durand de Perez used her border-crossing card to conduct an entirely binational way of life. (In 2004 DHS recorded 104 million laser-visa admissions to the U.S.) Her residence was still very much in Tijuana, where she shared a house with Angela and Jorge, but often she would spend several days at a time with members of Frankie's family in the U.S. Crossing the line became for Maria as ordinary as crossing the street.

The binational character of the Durand-Perez family took an American turn in 1984 when Angela's daughter Yrma, who had been widowed two years earlier while living in Tijuana, married a U.S. citizen, John Valles, and moved with her two children to San Ysidro. Together Yrma and John added another child, a daughter, to their family. By a process spanning not just years or decades but generations, the Durand-Perez family was becoming more and more American.

Their Americanization notwithstanding, the Durand-Perez family retained a number of features typical of every border family I know: pride in the Mexican culture and heritage; a deep and abiding religious faith; a love for both the Spanish and English languages (with family members having different degrees of competence in each);

and a special esteem for the family's youngest and oldest members.

As Andy and I visited with Angela and Yrma that day in San Ysidro, the respect the family had for Maria was palpable. Angela took great pride in describing how Maria had remained *muy pendiente* ("very much on top of things") until just a few months before her death. As far as her daughter was concerned, the fact that Maria had lived to such a remarkable age was a sign of God's abundant blessing on the family.

As Angela began to reach the later chapters in the story of her mother's life, Yrma began to interject in both English and Spanish, determined that Andy and I should understand how it came to pass that Maria died not in Tijuana, but in Yrma's San Ysidro home. When Angela's husband died in 1998, Angela and Maria found themselves living all alone. Angela was getting older herself, and the strain of caring for Maria—growing ever more feeble in her old, old age—was becoming too much for her to handle. Years earlier Yrma and John had purchased a modest three-bedroom house in San Ysidro, and now, with their children grown and gone, the extra rooms seemed to just be sitting there. There was no reason for the family to incur the continued expense of maintaining both homes. So Maria and Angela moved in with Yrma and John in San Ysidro, Maria continuing to make occasional day trips to Tijuana until her local passport expired in 2002. From that point on she stayed exclusively in the U.S.

The decision to have Maria stay in the U.S. illegally after years of crossing the border legally made life easier and happier for the entire Durand-Perez family. With Maria's home base now clearly established in San Ysidro, Angela and Yrma were able to share the work of caring for her. Yrma had been paying for years to include her mother and grandmother in her company's medical plan, and now Maria's medical services—like the services provided by Andy's hospice company—were more readily accessible.

This, then, is how Maria Durand de Perez became an "illegal alien." She did not wade through California's putrid border waterway, the New River; she did not hop the fence that separates Tijuana from San Ysidro; and she did not cross the desert east of San Diego. Rather, she simply violated the terms of the local visa she had been using legally for decades. In the vernacular of the U.S. Border Patrol, Maria was neither a "wetback" nor a "border jumper" but a "visa overstayer." In this she was like millions of others—the INS estimates that between 30 and 40 percent of the 11 to 14 million illegal immigrants living in the U.S. established permanent residence

here by this kind of “visa abuse.”

Families like that of Maria Durand de Perez almost never figure in the contemporary conversation about immigration. Rather than consider how people actually cross the border, anti-immigrant politicians prefer to offer manly sounding talk about building walls and moralizing talk about “closing the back door to the United States” and sending illegal aliens “to the back of the line.”

I doubt that any manner of legislative reform will dramatically alter the flow of Mexican immigration to the U.S. The forces spurring immigration are more demographic and cultural than political or legal. These forces are the stuff of everyday life: rates of birth higher for Mexicans and Mexican-Americans than for most other ethnic groups; a chain of entirely legal immigration, as Mexican-Americans bestow residency and citizenship on their spouses, children and parents; and a practice of illegal immigration that is, in the vast majority of instances, born from ordinary people exercising common sense.

This is the moral of the story of Maria’s death. As she continued to live into her incredible old age, Maria’s family was faced with a series of crucial decisions. Making the best that they could of difficult circumstances, they based their decisions on logic and on their love and concern for their family’s oldest member. For the word *oldest* in this last sentence you can substitute any of a number of other words—*youngest* or *sickest* or *poorest* or *hungriest* or *most disabled* or *most pregnant* or *most employable*—and there you have in stark terms the inexorable logic of Mexican immigration, both legal and illegal, to the U.S.

Near the end of our visit, Yrma showed me a photograph of her grandmother, taken the year before, when Maria was 110 years old. In my mind’s eye I can still see that picture, and as I do I cannot help thinking of the members of Congress now debating competing pieces of immigration reform legislation. Perhaps a visit with the family of Maria Durand de Perez would convince the politicians that their task is not that of “closing the back door” on people who they feel have rudely intruded on our homes, nor that of “sending people to the back” of some imaginary, single-file line at U.S. ports of entry.

The task facing Congress is that of deciding how much to expand the legal and physical barriers that stretch across land that millions of Mexicans have been traveling for generations. There may be valid political reasons for seeking to expand

these barriers, but it strikes me as futile (if not shameful) to expect that people whose families naturally span the international boundary should refrain from crossing it when logic, compassion and common decency—and dare I say, family values—cry out that they should.

As we left the house in San Ysidro, I said to Yrma, “What a binational family you have!” Her reply was matter-of-fact. “Oh, yes,” she said, “just like all the families around here.” She then counted her way around her neighborhood, concluding that all the families except one on her street were of Mexican ancestry.

“There’s just one gringo family,” Yrma said, pointing to the house on the corner. “They’re very nice. They wave and say ‘*Buenos días!*’ when we see them in the morning.”