

An
AMERICAN
FAMILY

Story

LOST AMID THE HEATED IMMIGRATION DEBATE, IN WHICH LATINOS
PAINTED AS NEWCOMERS AND ALIENS, ARE SIMPLE, UNDENIABLE FACTS:
WE HAVE BEEN HERE SINCE BEFORE THE PILGRIMS SET FOOT ON
PLYMOUTH ROCK. LATINO HISTORY IS AMERICAN HISTORY. MEET ONE
TEXAS FAMILY THAT EMBODIES THOSE TRUTHS.



BY MONICA RHOR PHOTOGRAPHY BY RICARDO MERENDONI

Christina Um
with a childhood
portrait of
her great-aunt
Helen Cevallos.

Christina Um's family story is strewn across the rustic wood dining room table of her Houston home. Sepia-tinted faces peer out from faded photographs labeled with names and dates going back more than a century. Binders bulge with copies of tattered

records documenting births, deaths and everything in between. In files on Um's silver MacBook, the tendrils of her family tree unfurl hundreds of years into the past—spanning her birth in 1984, her great-grandfather's military service during World War II, the *antepasados* who helped found the Texas towns of Victoria, Laredo and Padre Island and the conquistadores who colonized New Spain in the 1600s.

Her bloodlines—Ruiz, on her father's side, and De La Cruz, on her mother's—weave together the powerful and the impoverished, the noteworthy and the historical footnotes. There are ties to a Spanish king, Saint Ferdinand III of Castile, and to explorers Francisco Coronado and Álvaro Núñez Cabeza de Vaca. There are links to Tejano pioneers who were buried with only a brick to mark the gravesite and to sharecroppers who picked cotton for pennies a day. There is a cousin whose murder led to a landmark civil rights case and a *cuñado* whose name remains a mystery.

The documents, photographs and historical research, meticulously compiled by Um's father, David Ruiz, over the past two decades, trace the sprawl of a Mexican American clan firmly planted not just in Texas territory but in the history of the country—their American pedigree places them alongside descendants of the Mayflower: founders whose American story stretches back hundreds of years.

"These treasures shouldn't be cooped up in a box. They should be shared with the next generation," says Ruiz, who belongs to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, which encourages members to conduct genealogical research. "They tell the story of these people, of who they were, of the trials they went through. It is inspiration for us."

But this story is not one family's alone. Often lost amid the heated national debate over immigration, in which anti-immigration forces have painted Latinos as "aliens" or "other," is the fact that Latino presence, history and culture are deeply ingrained in that of the United States. Names like Colorado and Florida and words that form part of the idiom of the American West, such as *barbecue* and *rodeo*, are just a small part of it. Latinos have been a part of the fabric of the land now called the United States as far back as the 16th century, when Spaniards founded St. Augustine, Fla. In New Mexico and Colorado, where the Spanish settled in the 1500s, their descendants still refer to



themselves as “Hispanos,” while in Louisiana, *Isleños* claim ancestry in the Canary Islands and first arrived in the late 1770s.

And in Texas, Tejanos like Um’s family hail from Spanish *criollos* born in a region that changed hands from Spain to Mexico to the Texas Republic before becoming part of the U.S. “We have been here since before there was a Texas,” Um says. “I belong here.”

AS A CHILD, Um thought the trips to the cemeteries were fun, exhausting—and just the tiniest bit creepy. But they were a Ruiz family ritual. In Corpus Christi and other Texas towns, her father would send his brood to search for names among the timeworn tombstones and overgrown weeds.

At the time, Um was too young to know the significance of the names—or why her father was so determined to track down the ancient markers. “We’d find people and we had no idea who they were. We just thought it was crazy to make us look at these graves,” says Um, a 28-year-old married mother of four. “It wasn’t until after I had my own kids that I really appreciated it. I think it’s amazing. I love all the stories. I love seeing where our family came from.”

For Um, the third of six children, the unfolding family tree has also become a path back to her own identity, which at times seem to elude her as a young girl who didn’t feel like she belonged anywhere. In Corpus Christi, where Um lived until second grade, most of her friends were white or Latinos like herself, the descendants of Tejano settlers. No one spoke Spanish and no one was thought the less for it. But after moving to Houston, Um found herself surrounded by Spanish-speaking class-

mates whose families were recent immigrants. And she stood out.

“What are you?” she was constantly asked by classmates who didn’t understand how a Mexican American couldn’t speak Spanish. “It was very difficult. They would constantly make fun of me. They would say ‘Oh, let me repeat it for Christina, she didn’t understand that.’ I kept wondering, where do I fit in?” She was denigrated as “whitewashed,” slurred for being a “coconut,” bullied so much that she took to skipping classes and hiding in school restrooms—and eventually dropped out, got her GED and moved on to college.

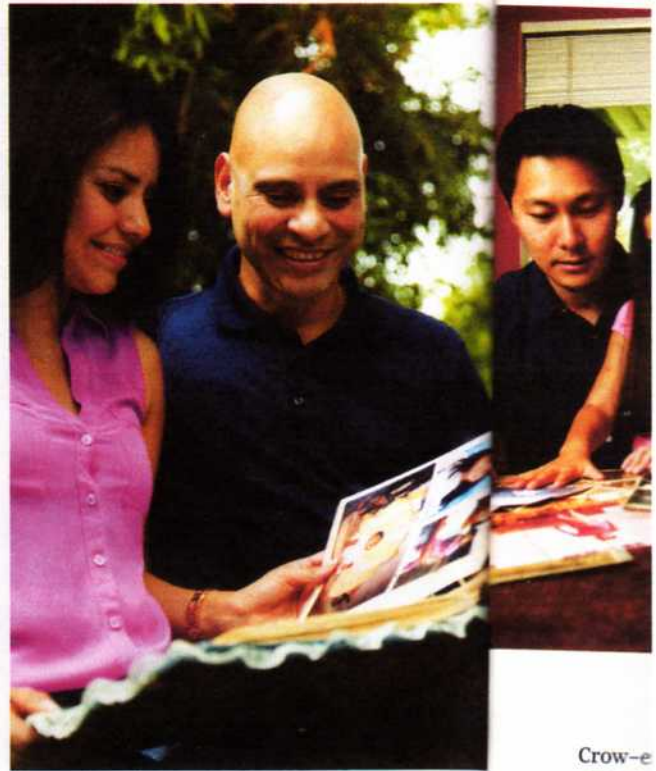
Armed with her father’s research and bolstered by the knowledge of her ancestry, Um now has a resolute answer for her own question of identity, and those of her children (“They have asked me, ‘Mom, what am I?’ They ask why I don’t speak Spanish”)—and it encompasses both her Latin heritage and her family’s long history in Texas. “All I’ve ever been is American.”

THE RECONSTRUCTION of a family’s story falls into place like the solving of a jigsaw puzzle. One piece leads to another, a sudden breakthrough fills a stubborn gap, and bit by bit, a sweeping narrative emerges.

It is part serendipity, part sweat and, for David Ruiz, part spiritual.

He believes the voices of ancestors have helped guide him through the tangle of long-forgotten history. They led him, as a young U.S. Army soldier stationed in Panama, to a chance meeting with another soldier who turned out to be a first cousin he had never met. That meeting, in turn, led to his interest in tracking down his family origins.

The ancestral voices whispered to



him as he searched through archives in Corpus Christi for scraps of information about the final resting place of Alfonso Rodriguez, his wife’s great-great-grandmother and little more than a family legend at the time, rumored to have lived beyond age 100. After a librarian helped guide Ruiz to computerized death records, he found her grave under a lonely brick marker etched only with the initials “AAR.” Born in Monterrey, Mexico, she worked as a servant on one of the great ranchos and crossed into Texas around 1898.

“In genealogy, everyone leaves a paper trail. No matter how young or insignificant you were, there’s some kind of trail,” says Ruiz, who grew up poor in the Texas town of Glen Flora, the child of sharecroppers during Jim

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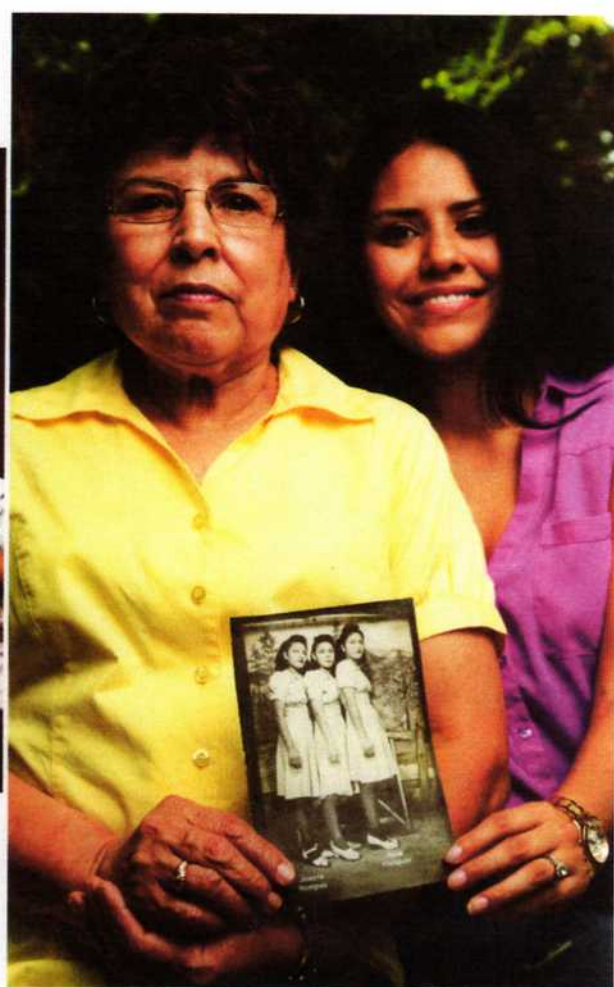
CONQUISTADORES, PIONEERS, SOLDIERS

Christina Um’s ancestors have stood at the forefront of American history

	1536		1755		1835	
1535	Spanish explorer Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca lands in Florida.	1620	The Mayflower arrives in New England.	1818	José Antonio De La Garza is the first person to coin money in Texas; his first coin features a lone star believed to have inspired Texas’s flag.	Texas Revolution begins.
Spanish conquistador Francisco Coronado visits New Mexico, Arizona, Texas, Oklahoma and Kansas.			Tomás Sánchez founds Laredo, Texas.			1836
						José Francisco Ruiz signs Texas Declaration of Independence. Carlos and Tomasita De La Garza found Victoria County, Texas.



FROM LEFT:
Christina with her father,
David Ruiz; Christina
with her husband,
Kwan, and children
Brooke, 5, and Jonas, 6;
Christina with her
great-aunt Helen
Cevallos displaying a
photo of Helen's mother
and aunt and a friend.



Crow-era segregation. "Sometimes you get help from beyond the veil."

Slowly, painstakingly, Ruiz is resurrecting names and stories obscured by the passing years and often overlooked in history books written from an Anglo perspective. There is Porfirio Díaz, Um's great-grandfather and a World War II veteran awarded a Bronze Star for risking his life to repair a critical communication line on a German battlefield. Díaz, a young and cocksure soldier in old photos, was commended for "courage and devotion to duty" for braving minefields and artillery fire. There is Francisco Antonio Ruiz, Ruiz's ancestor on his maternal grandparents' side and the mayor of San Antonio who identified the bodies of Davy Crockett and others killed at the Alamo. "The men burned numbered 182. I was an eye-witness, for as Alcalde of

San Antonio, I was with some of the neighbors collecting the dead bodies and placing them on the funeral pyre," Francisco Antonio Ruiz recounted in an account published in the Texas Almanac of 1860.

And there is Joe Espinosa, a cousin of Ruiz's grandfather, whose 1951 murder led to a Supreme Court ruling guaranteeing equal protection under the 14th Amendment for all racial groups, including Mexican Americans. In the case, *Hernandez v. Texas*, Pete Hernandez was charged with shooting Espinosa in the heart after an argument. Hernandez's lawyers were determined to prove that he could not get an

impartial trial from a jury that did not include Mexican Americans. That led to the landmark high court decision.

"I feel grateful that my family has been so devoted to the military, to serving this country," Um said. "It makes me very proud of my roots. We're part of the history of the United States."

Each name adds a new portrait to the family gallery, a new branch to Um's family tree, a new story for her to pass on to her children. And a new reason for Um to boast of her family's deep Texas roots. "People need to realize that it is not just Caucasians who are American," said Um. "I'm as American as anybody else—maybe more so."

1835

Texas Revolution begins.

1836

1836
José Francisco Ruiz signs Texas Declaration of Independence.
Carlos and Tomasita De La Garza found Victoria County, Texas.

Battle of the Alamo erupts. San Antonio mayor Francisco Antonio Ruiz identifies the body of fallen folk hero Davy Crockett.

1917

U.S. enters World War I.

1861

The Civil War begins. Joseph Rafael De La Garza fights on the Confederate side.

1939

World War II begins. Army soldier Porfirio Díaz fights in Europe and receives a Bronze Star.

1929

The Great Depression begins. Pedro and Eloisa Espinosa work as sharecroppers from the 1920s to the 1960s.

1963

Martin Luther King Jr. delivers his "I have a dream" speech.

1951
The murder of Joe Espinosa leads to a landmark Supreme Court case (*Hernandez v. Texas*) guaranteeing equal protection for all racial groups.