The Life and Legacy of Cipriano Ortega: Ferocious Mexican Outlaw or Entrepreneurial Genius?

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The purpose of this paper is to share my attempt at piecing together some of my family history, to share the process by which I found information about my forefathers, to share information about Cipriano Ortega, and to share some thoughts about doing genealogical and historical research. For many years, I knew very little about my mother's side of the family, the Ortega and Rascon sides, but over time, I've gathered evidence that leads me to believe that I am related in some way to Cipriano Ortega, who, before his death in 1904, had acquired a reputation as a "border outlaw turned entrepreneur" who had amassed a great deal of wealth in mining, and who had built a large hacienda, (some would say community) called Santo Domingo near present day Sonoyta, Sonora, Mexico.

My reading of the book, A Beautiful, Cruel Country by Eva Antonia Wilbur-Cruce, was the starting point for this journey of discovery. The setting for the book is southern Arizona, on the outskirts of Arivaca, a small community northwest of present day Nogales. Wilbur-Cruce's grandfather, R.A. Wilbur, was a Harvard-educated physician who was hired in the 1860s by Charles Poston, owner of the Arivaca ranch, to work for the Cerro Colorado Mining company as the company physician. For a while he also served as the Indian agent of the region for the federal government. He ended up homesteading in Arivaca. where he built what was to become known as the Wilbur ranch. Eva Antonia Wilbur-Cruce was born and raised there at the dawn of the 20th century, and in the book she shares her vivid recollections about life on the ranch and the people who inhabited the region.

The little town of Arivaca has always intrigued me, since my grandmother and her mother were both born there. The drive there from Tucson takes over an hour, and it feels like it is in the middle of nowhere. It's about 11 miles north of the Mexican border and 35 miles northwest of Nogales. Today, it is known for being home to lots of "hippie" types, and for its proximity to the Buenos Aires nature preserve, but historically, the area was first a Tohono O'odham village, and when the Spanish arrived, they attempted mining there in the 1700s. An early description of Arivaca by J. Ross Browne notes that he observed "rich meadow land bordering on a never failing stream…well wooded, with oak, walnut, ash, cottonwood, and mesquite… capable of sustaining a population of 5 to 6000 souls". (Wagoner, 212-213). Apaches routinely raided the area and the Pima revolt also contributed to there being very few settlers in the region. However, by the early 1800s the area, rich with mineral wealth and with abundant grassland, was granted to the Ortiz family, who petitioned the Spanish government for the land. Over the course of the 19th century, as southern Arizona became part of Mexico and then the U.S., the Arivaca grant was sold to American investors, who formed mining companies, including the Sonora Exploring and Mining Company and later the Arizona Land and Mining Company. The deed to the land would next pass on to Charles Poston, who eventually lost his fight with the federal government to prove that the land was rightfully his, due primarily to uncertainty about the boundaries of the land grant and difficulties finding official documentation to prove them. (see Wagoner, Early Arizona , pp. 210-214).

It was likely ranch work or mining that led my great grandparents-- Demencia Villa and Trinidad Cruz-- to Arivaca sometime in the 1880's. According to the 1900 census, Trinidad Cruz was born in Mexico in 1835 and Demencia Villa was born in 1840, also in Mexico. (Arizona was part of Mexico at this time, so it may very well the case that they were born north of the present U.S. Mexico line). The census notes that they had four children living in their household with them, Francisca Cruz (b. 1866), Juan Cruz (b.1870), my great-grandmother Carmen Cruz, (1880-1953) and Mariana Cruz (1886-1977), and that they had immigrated to the U.S. in 1886. (There is a discrepancy in the records, however. The same census notes that Demencia Villa had 15 children, of which only 3 were living, so it's likely that one of the aforementioned members of the household was a relative, but not their child).

A marriage record that I found notes that my great-grandmother, Carmen (also called Carmelita) Cruz, married Juan Ortega on July 1, 1896. It states that she was 16 and he 24. While Carmen's obituary notes that she was 83 at the time of her death in 1953, which means she would have been born in 1870, the later birth date of 1880 seems to me to be more accurate as she bore several children from the late 1890s up through the early 1920s. If she had been born in 1870, that would have meant that she had most of her children in her late 30s and into her 50's, which while possible, doesn't seem plausible. She married three times, first to Juan Ortega, then to Rafael Cruz and finally to Francisco Rivera. Her children's names were Trinidad, nicknamed Nacho,(Ortega), Rafael (Ortega), Juana (Ortega), Feliciano (Chano Ortega), Josefa (Ortega, my grandmother), Rafael (Guero Cruz), Maria (Cruz), Rita (Cruz) and Francisco (Rivera). It appears that Juan Ortega died or disappeared in the early 1900's. As far as I can tell, all of the Ortega children, including my grandmother Josefa, were born in Arivaca. Her birthdate was August 15, 1903. My mother informed me that my grandmother was part Opata and part Apache, and my aunt has stated that our great-grandfather, Juan Ortega, was a full blooded Apache. I do not know for sure which side of the family had which lineage. I do, however, recall being told that my great-grandmother Carmelita had blue eyes, which seems a bit odd, given her Indian background.

What I know of my grandmother's early life is sketchy. However, over time both my mother and an uncle of mine shared with me several stories that I've never forgotten. I remember as a child getting very scared, for example, when my mother would share the story of how wolves would sometimes surround the "rancho" in Arivaca when my grandmother was a little girl, forcing everyone to stay indoors until they left. This story is notable because in the book, A Beautiful, Cruel Country, author Eva Antonia Wilbur Cruce writes that "the Mexican wolves at the Cochis ranch were becoming abundant and bold too. They fed on young calves, and the way they eluded our traps was uncanny" (p. 88). She later states that at one point after the summer rains the fences were down at the Cochis ranch and that "packs of wolves were now coming down clear to the corral". (p. 174).

The Los Cochis ranch was situated right on the Mexican border, about 11 miles south of Arivaca at the foot of a mountain called La Cantizal. Wilbur Cruce's grandfather Francisco Vilducea, did

not like the region, and called it a God-forsaken place, as there were "hardships in the area". It angered him that his daughter, Agustin Wilbur's wife, would even dare contemplate traveling there. Agustin had attempted to homestead there and he "kept a family there part of the time as caretakers and had to make regular trips there to oversee the stock, fences, and water". P. 60. In the book, that family is known as the Gallego family, and it includes the parents Cipriano and Carmen, and their children Juana, Chanito, Roberto, Damian and Carmelita. (Note: Chanito is often used as a nickname for Cipriano and Feliciano.)

What struck me and piqued my curiosity when I first read A Beautiful, Cruel Country was that the names of some of the family that lived at the Los Cochis ranch were exactly the same as those of my grandmother's family. While the father's name was Cipriano Gallego, the mother's was Carmen, which was the same as my grandmother's mother. Some of Cipriano's and Carmen's children also had names that matched those of my grandmother's siblings. These included Juana and Chanito. I thought to myself, how can this not be my grandmother's family? I didn't think Chanito was a very common name, and how likely would it be for the mother to be named Carmen and the daughter Juana? How likely is it for a boy named Nachito, another of the names of my grandmothe's siblings, to be included in the book? And how likely would it be that this all occurred in the Arivaca region at the same time in history as when my grandmother's family lived there? There had to be a connection. I just *knew* the Gallegos were really the Ortegas, my grandmother's family.

Another story I heard about my grandmother's family was that bandits, the Mexican federales and Pancho Villa's revolutionaries would all appear at the ranch at one time or another in search of food and lodging during the Mexican revolution. At one point in the book, Cipriano complains to Agustin that "now we have the Mexican revolutionaries. The cross the line, kill the calves, and steal the saddle horses" and at another he complains about bandits helping themselves to livestock and food. This only further solidified for me that this was indeed my grandmother's family. Why, however, was the family named Gallego and not Ortega? This continues to remain a mystery to me. My guess is that it was because Eva Antonia Wilbur-Cruce may have known that the Ortega family was still around, many alive and living in Tucson, at the time she wrote the book, and that perhaps she didn't want them to feel slighted by some of the stories in the book. For example, she tells about an occasion where Cipriano has sheered the tails and manes of some horses that don't belong to him, considered an illegal and criminal act, to make horsehair rope. (pp. 186-188). I don't know for sure.

Once I finished the book, I convinced myself that Cipriano Gallego was really Cipriano Ortega, my great-grandfather. I didn't know anything about him other than what I had read in the Wilbur-Cruce book at this point, however, so I began searching for anything else I could find out about this person named Cipriano Ortega, who I had actually, in hindsight created in my own mind. I started my quest at the Arizona Historical Society Library. I figured that there had to be at least something there about the Ortega family. Incredibly, I actually did find a few tidbits of information. There really did exist a "Cipriano Ortega". In the biographical files, for

example, there's an entry for him that says that he was a border outlaw and one time owner of the Victoria mine, which he called "La Americana," located near the Arizona-Sonoran border in what is now the Organ Pipe National Monument. According to the Arizona Heritage News (Jan. 1979, vol. 9 no. 1) , the mine " was placed on the National Register of Historic Places on September 1, 1978, and is one of the oldest known examples of mining activity in the vicinity of the United States-Mexican border in southwestern Arizona". In 1899, Mikul Levy bought the mine and named it after the wife of one of his helpers, called it "The Victoria mine".

At the Arizona Historical Society, I also found an obituary for Feliciano (Chano) Ortega who I assume was the boy Chanito in the book A Beautiful Cruel Country. The obituary noted that he was born in Arivaca in 1901, and it listed all of his surviving siblings, including my grandmother as well as his daughter, Alice my mother's favorite cousin. I later found Feliciano's baptism record which stated that his parents were Juan Ortega and Carmen Cruz. (This was evidence that perhaps Cipriano wasn't my great grandfather after all, but I thought perhaps Cipriano didn't want to use his real name for some reason). Feliciano's godparents were Jose Vilducea and Mariana Cruz. In A Beautiful Cruel Country, Jose Vilducea was noted to be Eva Antonia Wilbur-Cruce's uncle, and according to Carmen Rivera's obituary, Mariana Cruz was her sister. According to his Social Security death record, Feliciano or "Tio Chano" as my mom would call him was born on April 3, 1901. and his last residence was in Tucson. Eva Antonia Wilbur-Cruce relays some very interesting stories about Chanito in her book, including one that describes an American white boy showing up to a family gathering looking for food and acting snobby with Chanito's family. Chanito challenges the boy to be more respectful to his family, and they get into a tussle. Cipriano intervenes and gives Chanito a good lashing with his belt and tries to get the gringito some food, but he too is snubbed by the little ruffian. Wilbur-Cruce relays that this was typical behavior for many of the newly arrived Americans, who felt that they were superior to the Mexicans and Indians. She notes that racism and prejudice were rampant in the region and only got worse over time, as more and more Americans, sickened with tuberculosis, came to Arivaca to take advantage of its clean air and mild climate.

After I found these bits of information, my search seemed to come to a grinding halt. I couldn't find a single thing more about Cipriano Ortega, although the information about him operating the Americana mine fit with other pieces of the puzzle I had discovered. For example, at one point in A Beautiful Cruel Country, Cipriano Gallego's son Damian tells Eva, the narrator, that he will marry her when she turns 15, and that they will not live with his father, who he described as being very mean, but with his grandfather in Mexico who had a "beautiful ranchito far away across from the Baja". It was called the Gallego Ranch and was near the Pinacate Mountain and beautiful Quitobaquito, near the sea"… This led me to realize that perhaps Cipriano Gallego was from further west and that he was indeed Cipriano Ortega. Quitobaquito and Santo Domingo, the ranch owned by Cipriano Ortega, were in fact, just a few miles apart.

A few years would go by before I found more clues as to who Cipriano Ortega was and what he was known for. Since I work in an academic library, I have easy access to library catalogs and

indexes. I've made it a habit over the years to search every now and then for new information about my family and where they resided. I routinely search for materials on Sonora and Southern Arizona and also seek out information in genealogical sources. For a long time, I was determined to prove that this man named Cipriano Ortega was my great-grandfather.

During one such search, I got lucky, and found an informative and beautifully illustrated book called Desert Heart: Chronicles of the Sonora Desert, by William K. Hartmann. The book provides a detailed description of the desert between Sonoyta, Mexico and Baja California, particularly the area known as Pinacate, and includes many stories about the people and events that took place along what is known as "El Camino del Diablo –the Devil's Highway," the road that leads from Sonoyta to California through the desert via Yuma. It recounts the journeys of previous visitors to the area, including the Spanish, among them the legendary Father Eusebio Kino, and more recently, American writers and explorers like William Hornaday and Carl Lumholtz. As I was looking through this book, I discovered that there were several references made to Cipriano Ortega, more than I had found in any other source. There was also a photograph of the ruins of Santo Domingo, the hacienda that Ortega built and where he and his family had lived during the last three decades of the 19th century. Could this possibly be what the boy in A Beautiful Cruel Country referred to as the Gallego Ranch? Surely, it had to be! It was so close to Quitobaquito, Pinacate and Baja California. I was convinced I was right.

Using the book's bibliography, I found several citations to works that refer to Cipriano Ortega (see bibliography). I sought out these sources and continued to convince myself that Cipriano Ortega was my great-grandfather, although none of them mentioned Arivaca or the Ortega family that resided there. I even created my own family history web page, noting that I was Cipriano Ortega's descendent.

It wasn't long before I received email queries from two members of the Ortega clan. One is a descendent of Refugio Ortega Celaya, Cipriano's sister, and another is a descendent of Francisco Ortega, Cipriano's brother. Each has done extensive genealogical research, and they were both surprised to hear that Cipriano had another family in Arivaca. They asked me questions and provided additional information about the Ortega family, and were kind enough not to show any disbelief in my theory, but were never able to provide any further proof of my claim. One of them referred me to an article in the Summer, 1990 volume of *The Journal of Arizona History*, "Sonoyta and Santo Domingo: A Story of Two Sonoran Towns and the River That Ran By," by Bill Hoy, about the Sonoyta region and the community of Santo Domingo. It would contain photos of the Francisco Ortega (Cipriano's brother) and his family and a wealth of information about Cipriano Ortega.

Using some of the newly available fulltext newspaper sources that the UA Library had recently acquired, I also found references to an outlaw named "Chano Ortego", who was associated with other "outlaws" like Procopio, men who fought what I refer to as the American invasion and American mistreatment of Mexicans during the California Gold Rush. Last but not least, I made

contact with Bill Hoy, the author of the article on Sonoyta and Santo Domingo, who sent me a copy of Cipriano Ortega's obituary. I, in turn, sent him a photograph of the Ortega family that was given to me by one of my aforementioned contacts.

Here is what I now know about Cipriano Ortega and his family:

Cipriano Ortega was one of several children of Gavino Ortega and Bartola Parra, from Altar Sonora. According to my sources, his maternal grandparents, Bartola's parents, were Isidora Ortiz Parra and Jose Manuel Parra. The family is said to have resided at one point at El Rancho Santa Rita near Tepic (present day Hermosillo). A great aunt of one of my informants noted that the family had Spanish origins.

According to the 1880 U.S. census, Cipriano was born in 1832. He married Concepcion Orozco in Arizona City (Yuma) in 1886 and had one adopted son named Jesus L. Ortega.

He had several brothers including Jose', Francisco, and Bartolo, and a sister named Refugio (or Refugia).

Cipriano's brother Jose married Demetria Salazar in Arizona City in 1868.

Refugio married her second cousin, Jose Jesus Celaya in 1851 in Altar, Sonora and among their 14 children was a son named Jose Cipriano, who was born in Altar in 1852.

Francisco married Dionicia Robledo in Altar on June 6, 1853. He may also have been married a second time to Ines Quiroz. Altogether he had 25 children. One of his daughters, Serapia was born in 1862 in Sonoyta and died at the age of 85 in Tucson. She was married to Charles B. Servanti, an entrepreneur, originally from Italy who became wealthy through mining and cattle ranching. According to his death certificate, Francisco died at the age of 77, on July 11, 1907, which means he was born in 1830. This date contradicts the date given on the 1880 US census which notes his birth year as 1837.

One of my contacts, a great grandchild of Refugio Ortega Celaya, notes that the Ortega family was very close, and that they likely all lived together in Santo Domingo.

As I noted earlier, one of the first references to Cipriano Ortega that I encountered noted that he was a "border outlaw turned entrepreneur". As I conducted my research, I kept this information in mind, as I wondered how anyone had come to that conclusion. I was able to find some information that makes this assertion plausible and worth exploring further. In an article from the San Francisco Bulletin dated August 28, 1871, about a bandit named "Procopio" or "Red Dick", titled "A California Bandit: A Nephew of Joaquin Murrieta on the Road His Exploits in the Lower Couties a Record of Crime and Blood", it is noted that

"Procopio began to attract attention by his picturesque moral character about 10 years ago. In 1861 or 1862, a family by the name of Golding, living at Corral hollow, San Joaquin County,

near the Alameda County line, had a misunderstanding with a ferocious Mexican named *Chano Ortego* about some money and incurred his hatred. Soon afterwards, the whole family were murdered, the house was burned to the ground, and a vaquero in its employ was found hanging to a tree on the premises, dead. It was supposed that he witnessed the murder, and his life was taken to prevent his giving information. Suspicion rested on Ortego, Procopio, Narciso Bojorquez, and a fourth party, whose name escaped our memory, and they were arrested and tried. Ortego proved an alibi, and the whole party were discharged for want of sufficient proof".

Other soures have refered to Cipriano Ortega in the same manner, one report calling him a "rough character and rumored to be a highwayman who robbed travelers on the Camino del Diablo.

Bill Hoy further elaborates with the following:

"Sonoyta's old raconteurs have it that during the 1860s Cipriano wandered over the Western desert, sometimes into California, buying horses, working briefly here and there. His sporadic companion was his younger brother, the impetuous pistolero Bartolo. The brothers, along with others struck up a partnership in highwaymanship on the Camino del Diablo. Valley elders claim that the bandoleros skulked about water holes, notably Tule Well, Tinajas Altas, and La Salada just below the southward bend of the Sonoyta River—for the business of robbing travelers, preferably returnees from the California goldfields".

Hoy provides additional stories about Cipriano's exploits and near-death experiences, enough to make one realize that this man was rough and mean enough to be greatly feared.

I think that it's important to put into context what was happening at the time. Southern Arizona had just been acquired by the U.S. through the Gadsden Purchase, there were attempted takeovers of Sonora by individuals like William Walker and Henry A. Crabb, and the California Gold Rush was underway by the time Ortega was a young man. Surely, the changes that were occuring along the border and in the West had a negative impact on the people already residing there. It is significant then, that Ortega had developed a deep-seated dislike of American "authorities," and this most likely extended to other Americans coming and going California as well. One could even interpret his behavior as one of defensive rebellion against American encroachment.

I do not have space in this paper, nor do I think it necessary to retell everything written about Cipriano Ortega, since Bill Hoy's article and the book Desert Heart are readily available for reading. However, I will at this point, mention what I think are some of the more important things to discuss, in addition to what I've already noted.

Hoy describes Ortega as a "dark-compected stocky man of average height with broad shoulders, a beard, and a finger missing from a roping accident. He possessed a keen business acumen and was even said to be smarter than a lawyer. He wore expensive wool pants, a yellow shirt, and a soft, finely woven Panama-type hat that was typically worn by elite caballeros. A solid gold watch chain bridged the gap of his vest".

Cipriano Ortega gave up his *outlaw* lifestyle, most likely because travel along El Camino Del Diablo had all but stopped by the 1860s, and he settled in what was to become Santo Domingo in 1870 near a Papago rancheria. By 1873 he had received title to 25,000 hectares of land. According to Hoy's article, a reporter from the Arizona Sentinal in 1878 noted that Santo Domingo appeared to be an impoverished place, but it had wood, water and ore enough to sustain a thriving camp.

The hacienda was really a community. Ortega was the "man" and he took it upon himself to provide discipline to the community and saw to it that everyone was provided for. There was a blacksmith shop, an arrastra for grinding ore, molinos for milling grain, a chapel, and a soap factory.

"In 1893, Dr. Edgar Mearns observed that Ortega's hacienda was the largest area under cultivation by one person near the entire boundary, with some 300 acres of cultivated land. Another observer noted that the Santo Domingo ranch was large, skillfully irrigated and so productive that corrals and sheds were filled with vigorous stock and abundant grain". Hoy. P136. Another source notes that the Mexican government established a customs station at Santo Domingo with Ortega in charge.

According to Hoy, the Ortega hacienda also developed rich mines of gold and silver on both sides of the border, milled the ore on steam-driven arrastres, and rented them for occasional use by American miners. Ortega made thousands of dollars from his mining ventures. One mine on the American side, called La Americana, yielded a profit of $80,000. Fearing that Americans would take it away from him, he collapsed the shaft and abandoned the mine, but later sold it to Mikul Levy, who named it La Victoria and made even more money from it. Hoy, p. 136.

Cipriano Ortega died of a "disease of the throat" (throat cancer?) at the home of his nephew Don Jose Orosco in Caborca, on May 3, 1904. According to the death certificate provided to me by Mr. Bill Hoy, Francisco C. Ortega, either Cipriano's brother or nephew, gave the news to Judge Camilo Villavicencio in Altar the following day. The death certificate notes that Cipriano was a laborer, a widower, a native of Santo Domingo, and the child of Batola Parra and Gavino Ortega, both deceased . He was to be buried at the first class department of the cemetary in Altar.

According to Hoy, after Cipriano Ortega's death it wasn't long before Santo Domingo fell into disrepair and was abandoned, as the remaining brothers were not able to sustain it. The residents all moved to Sonoyta and the family members later moved to Ajo and other places in Arizona and the U.S.

Was Juan Ortega, my great grandfather, related to Cipriano Ortega? I think it's quite possible, but I cannot yet conclusively say so. I continue to search for information and I am still in touch with my contacts, who I hope will one day confirm that Juan Ortega was either Cipriano's nephew or even son. Until then, I'll keep searching. There is data out there that I have yet to look

at. These include the records of the Catholic Church in Mexico, some of which is now available electronically via various online genealogical sources, and newspaper accounts. Finding sources from Mexico will be especially challenging, but I will keep on searching.

In conclusion, this quest has been a fascinating experience. Tracing my family history has given me a much deeper, more appreciative understanding of the research process. I have learned, for example, that one cannot trust written documentation. Obituaries, census data and other records should all be held suspect until one can verify the information with other sources. This is tedious work and I have developed a lot of admiration for historians, but also have learned to be skeptical about "facts" and the printed word. I'm especially skeptical about writings having to do with US/Mexico/American Indian issues, as it's clear to me that the interests and perspectives of Americans, especially in the 1800s and even into the 20th century were quite different from those of Mexicans and Indians. I found many examples, especially in historical newspapers, of exaggerated, racist descriptions of Mexicans. Unfortunately, its very difficult finding in print the perspectives of Mexicans and American Indians of the time, as their voices were either never recorded or are hard to find, likely buried in crumbling old newspapers housed in hard to access archives.

I find it quite interesting that when I tell people that it's possible that I was related to Cipriano Ortega, known at one time as a *border outlaw*, they typically want to tell me something about the "dark side" of their family history. I usually try to stop them immediately to let them know that I'm not ashamed that I might be related to an "outlaw". In my opinion, outlaws like Cipriano Ortega, Geronimo and Joaquin Murrieta stood up and fought for their rights and their land, as the Americans were the unwelcome intruders, not the other way around. I know this is a controversial perspective and one that would probably get me labeled "un-American", especially in today's volatile and anti-Mexican environment. So be it. The fact is, I'm as American as as can be. I just don't buy the propaganda that's been fed to me since childhood that our country was "destined" to rule this land. It was stolen in a trumped up war.

Is there really any such thing as "objectivity" when it comes to writing history? I don't know. Unfortunately, the history of the U.S.- Mexico border region has yet to be been written from the perspective of those who were intruded upon, but thankfully some writers like Tom Sheridan are starting to pay more attention and to write from a more balanced perspective about the border region. There were indeed people living in Arizona well before the arrival of the Americans, and they did resist the incursion. The so called pioneers of the American West weren't really pioneers at all. They were newcomers to a land that had already been populated by generations of people.

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