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**The Experience of a *Mejicano*
Family Living in Rural Iowa**

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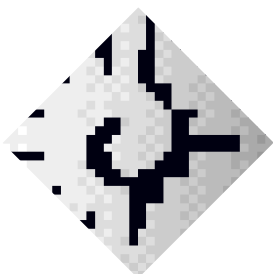
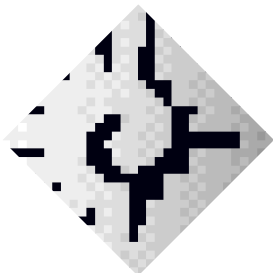
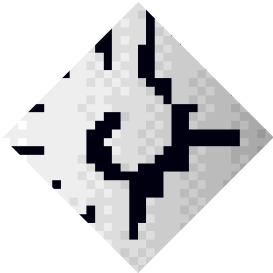
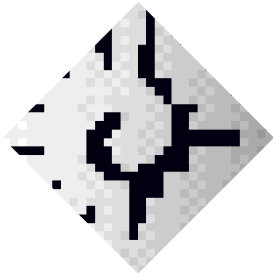
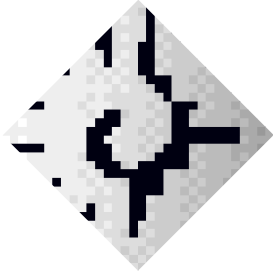
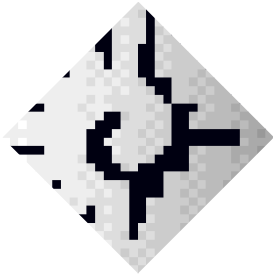


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Abstract: *A version of this paper was completed for partial credit for the Masters of Science in Human Development and Family Studies at Iowa State University. Portions of this paper were presented at the 1995 Annual Meetings of the National Council on Family Relations, and the National Association for Chicano Studies (NACS) Conference. Partial support for this work was provided by a special NICHD grant to Drs. Harriette P. McAdoo and Francisco A Villarruel. Additional support for this work was provided by grants to the second author from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation and the Julian Samora Research Institute. The principal narrator in this account is Ruben, a doctoral candidate in Family and Child Ecology. Dr. Francisco Villarruel served as faculty advisor for this paper. Special acknowledgement goes out to the following individuals and organizations: Proteus Agency of Iowa, Antonio Garza, research assistant, Paula McMurray-Schurtz, Ph.D., Iowa State University, Department of Human Development & Family Studies, and Michael Bell, Ph.D., Iowa State University, Department of Sociology*

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The Experience of a *Mejicano* Family Living in Rural Iowa

Introduction

To date, a majority of the studies on families of Mexican origin living in the U.S. have been conducted in the states of New Mexico, Arizona, Texas, and California. Social scientists have also concentrated on the inner-city barrios to conduct their studies. At the same time, the rural Mexican population has burgeoned over the last two decades (Goudy & Burke, 1991). Unfortunately, there is a paucity of research on the experiences of *Mejicanos* living in rural communities in the United States and in particular, in the Midwest.

This study documents a struggle related to the situation faced by a settled-out Mexican American family in rural north central Iowa. Prior to establishing residency in north central Iowa, the farm worker migrant stream had taken the Sanchez-Garcia family to the sugar beet fields of Minnesota, the potato fields of Idaho, and the apple orchards of Michigan. Ultimately, the Sanchez family decided that it was time to settle because their children were getting older and they believed that returning to their native homeland of Texas was not in the best interests of their children.

This investigation does not represent an effort to test a theory or set of hypotheses. Rather, it is intended to document the experiences of a Mexican American family within a rural community in Iowa. This study also utilizes a culturally appropriate methodology for documenting the life histories of Mexican families: through the telling and documentation of *cuENTOS* (short stories, tales). In this study I saw myself as the *cuentista* (story teller) seeking out the story of the rural *Mejicano* family in Iowa. To a degree, my narrative analysis corresponds to that described by Renato Rosaldo in *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis* (Beacon Press, 1989). This study was part of a larger study that examined the socialization of Mexican American children in rural Iowa (Viramontez 1994). In this report, I use the term *Mejicano* as synonymous with "Mexican-American." It is a common term used frequently by persons of Mexican descent when referring to their community and identity.

History of Mexican Americans in Iowa

Mexicans and Mexican Americans have worked the agricultural lands of America for almost a century. While other cultures have turned away from field work, Mexican Americans have continued to work the fields of America (Valdes, 1991). Valdes stated that Mexican Americans first arrived in significant numbers to the Midwest around the War World II era. They arrived as migrant workers and this migrant Mexican American population is still large today. The experiences of Mexican American families in rural Iowa, as in other rural regions, has not been a pleasant one. As minorities in a rural region, they have endured prejudice and racism. Valdes stated that *Mejicanos* were the last of the immigrant groups settle in the Midwest and unlike their experience in Texas and elsewhere, they found no prior Mexican presence in the region. Despite the ethnic diversity of the Midwest, *Mejicanos* had many negative stereotypes from a variety of sources — for example, soldiers who had developed negative attitudes towards *Mejicanos* when they had accompanied General Pershing to Mexico in 1916-1917.

Oral History of Mexican Americans in Annsburg, Iowa

The need to establish a historical background showing how long Mexican American families had been settled in Iowa, specifically in Annsburg, is central to understanding the situation and the impact that it had on the family involved and the entire Annsburg community. Therefore, I conducted several informal conversations with business merchants and locals, and discovered that the majority of the settled-out families had worked with a local nursery.

According to the nursery owner, Mexican American families first arrived in Annsburg around World War II. She pointed out that the majority of Mexican American families were migrants and usually did not stay after the migrant season. She also was helpful in giving me the name of the Chavez family, who had been in Annsburg for the longest time of all the Mexican American families.

First Contact with Annsburg

It was a straight shot on I-35 and as we arrived in Annsburg (a fictitious name), we were mesmerized by the endless miles of cornfields. Annsburg, a predominately European American rural community with a population of 4,500, was located in north central Iowa. We reflected on how the land had served as our predecessors' provider; the Annsburg area was a classic example of my forefathers' homelands.

Unlike the fields along the interstate, the fields of Annsburg were alive: they surrounded a community that had a story to tell. As a consequence, I sought out and met several *cuentistas* and continued to visit them over a period of one year. They were story tellers indeed, or perhaps witness to my ethnography of a single settled-out rural Mexican American family and its community in rural Iowa.

The St. Patrick's Meeting

My first experience with the Sanchez-Garcia family was during the summer of 1993. I had made contact with them through an agency that worked with migrant and settled-out Mexican American families. The Proteus agency is a private corporation receiving funding from the state and federal government to aid migrant workers and settled-out families. The Proteus representative and I traveled to Annsburg to attend a meeting concerning racial tensions among the European Americans, migrant families, and some settled-out families. The meeting was held at the St. Patrick Church with about 30 people in attendance. During the meeting, migrants and settled-out families expressed their frustrations and concerns about some of the local European Americans.

Towards the end of the meeting, a man and his family arrived at the church. They were late, yet the floor was given to them immediately. Lorenzo, the father, began to tell his story of a recent incident (Lorenzo incident, Appendix 1) with some local European American youths and the Annsburg Police Department. While telling his story, he also showed the group his bruises and his eye that required plastic surgery as a consequence of the fight. After the meeting, I introduced myself to him and commended him on his courage. After several weeks, I decided that my ethnography would focus on the experiences of the Sanchez-Garcia family.

Methods

The methods used in the study were unstructured ethnographic interviews and the outsider-within perspective (Rosaldo, 1989). Although I would not be a part of the community or the family, I would still be able to understand the family and the community perspective (Collins, 1986). I, too, had been raised in a family and community similar to the rural Mexican American family of Iowa; we shared the bond of depending on the land to survive. My understanding would go beyond the awareness of a typical researcher by my prior knowledge of the way of life for a Mexican American family in a predominantly European American community.

The family and my interviews were used as the primary data base. All interviews were tape recorded and conducted in the family's home. The interviews with other community members were conducted in local businesses, schools, and city government offices. The interviews were conducted in the preferred language of the respondents (English or Spanish), and were subsequently translated into English for the study. Although the interviews were also reviewed by a colleague, who also had experience with rural Mexican American populations, due to time constraints I was responsible for the majority of the transcribing and review.

Trustworthiness for the study was accomplished through the methods of triangulation and respondent validation. These approaches entail checking data from one participant by collecting data from other participants (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1986). To achieve trustworthiness, I used "thick descriptions" (in-depth interviews) of the family's and the community members' experiences from the interviews in the study (Spradley, 1979). In addition, the method of member check was also used with the family and community members to accomplish trustworthiness (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

I made the trip to Annsburg once or twice a week for a year, beginning in the summer of 1993 and ending in the summer of 1994. The interviews lasted from one to two hours. As time passed, I improved my relations with the family and community.

Profiles of the Sanchez-Garcia Family

Lorenzo and Eloisa had been married for 18 years. They had five children: Manuel, Robert, Oscar, Teresa, and Rebecca. Also with them in their household were Domingo *compadre* and Jose (grandfather). Lorenzo was in his forties and was originally from south Texas. He was a man of wisdom and knowledge who was willing to share his experiences with me. A good communicator and a man willing to listen, Lorenzo was still modest in his own way. He worked full time at a local dairy and was bilingual, although he preferred to speak Spanish.

Eloisa was also from south Texas and in her forties. She showed her leadership in the home and community, and she was willing to stand up for her beliefs. Eloisa worked part-time at the local dairy and sometimes during the summer she worked in the cornfields. She was bilingual, but preferred speaking “Spanglish,” a mixture of English and Spanish, during our interactions.

Their oldest son, Manuel, was a 16-year-old high school student. In addition to his demanding school work, Manuel was an athlete, competing in boxing. Manuel was talkative during our interactions.

Robert, the second child, was a 15-year-old high school freshman. Like his brother, Manuel, he was involved in competitive boxing. Unlike his brother, he was more involved with his teenage surroundings, exhibiting interests in dating and the latest fashion.

The youngest son, Oscar, was in grade school. He was 11 years old when I interviewed him. He always had questions and never hesitated to tell me about his boyhood experiences.

Teresa, who was 9 years old during this ethnography, was full of life. She was very bright, and was always willing to share her school stories. Teresa was an outstanding student.

Rebecca, the youngest daughter, was 7 and always on the move. She was a happy girl who made her life an adventure, and was considered a tomboy.

The *compadre*, Domingo, who lived with the family, was in his mid-forties. Although I had limited interaction with Domingo, I considered him to be an honorable man.

The grandfather, Jose, was in his mid-sixties. Jose once described himself as a hard worker and a man who always “thanked God for his good comings.” I would describe Jose as a man who had witnessed a lot of negativity in his life but who still had a good soul.

The Family View of Rural Iowa

After hearing Lorenzo speak at the church I wondered if the hostility between Mexican Americans and European Americans in Annsburg was really as bad as he had reported. During one of my first interviews, I asked if Lorenzo and Eloisa had enjoyed living in Annsburg before the incident. I specifically wanted to understand the Sanchez-Garcia family view of rural Iowa. I wanted to see how well they had coped with their environment before the incident. (E) Eloisa, (L) Lorenzo, (M) myself:

E: I have always liked Annsburg. Up until the incident with Lorenzo, everything was fine.

L: I agree with my wife. My life here was pleasant, but after the incident I cannot really project what the future holds for my family and me.

M: *Let's change the topic and talk about how the community of Annsburg looks at you and your attitudes towards Annsburg.*

E: I feel that the people of authority, like the bank and the older people, are good people. It's the kids and our generation that tend to be prejudiced.

L: I agree. I think that the kids and the young people are the ones who are prejudiced. It's not all of them, just a certain population.

M: *You spoke about prejudice. Does Annsburg have a bias towards you because of your ethnicity?*

E: I think that in the beginning there were some biases towards us because we settled so easily. We found a home and work and I think that some

of the locals in town were surprised with this. They expected us to ask for handouts. There is something about some of the local White people, when you're their equal they don't like it.

L: I feel that the White man, *el gringo*, is prejudiced. I think that the minute that they sense that you're an equal, they will turn against you.

M: *Has the community been helpful in any way?*

L: We both agree that the older generations and the people of power have been helpful.

M: *Would you encourage other Mexican American families to move to Annsburg if they had an opportunity?*

E: Up until the incident I would have not hesitated to encourage Mexican Americans to move to Annsburg. In fact, my sister was considering moving up here until the incident. Now I would encourage a family without children to move up here, but that is it.

L: Before the incident, I really thought that this place was great but after my incident I cannot really see myself encouraging someone and their family to move to Annsburg.

Lorenzo and Eloisa had developed negative feelings towards those European Americans who seemed threaten them or their family. In less than a year, their positive feelings about Annsburg had changed due to one incident in the community. Prior to the incident the Sanchez-Garcias felt comfortable with their decision to make Annsburg their permanent home. It is also important to observe that the family was still very much influenced by the incident, as noted in their strong expressions of anger and bitterness.

Effects of the Racial Incident on the Family

As time passed and I continued to interview Lorenzo and Eloisa, their frustrations about the impact of the incident on their children became increasingly evident. Eloisa expressed her concern about her children and what they were going through at school.

E: My children would tell me that some of the White kids at school were harassing them. They would make stupid racial remarks about Mexicans and when my children would respond they would get blamed for starting a fight between the kids. I have made so many complaints to the school that I cannot keep up with how many I have made.

After talking with the parents for several weeks, I decided to interview Jose, the grandfather. I wondered how he was coping with his son's incident and whether he had any frustrations about the incident or life in Annsburg.

M: *Do you think there is discrimination in Annsburg?*

J: I think that it is all based on luck. I think that it's really a person's luck. I would say that the people have been good to me here in Annsburg. Nothing has really changed except the work — there is less work now.

M: *What do you mean less work now?*

J: Well, with more chemicals being used now there is less work for us migrant workers — there are less weeds in the fields.

Jose was not very open during our initial interview, however, on one other occasion he spoke freely. We had been driving around Annsburg with no recording device and Jose began to share his thoughts with me. He said that his biggest concern was access to the church. He said that long as he had his church in Annsburg he would be satisfied. It turns out that his church was highly populated with Mexican Americans from the Annsburg area. The church was not only serving as a place of religion, but as a place for cultural and social events for the Mexican Americans of Annsburg.

As I interviewed the Sanchez-Garcia children I soon realized that they, too, were having to deal with some issues directly stemming from the incident. Robert explained that:

Sometimes my teachers will make smart remarks like “We’re not in Mexico, we don’t do that here in America.” One time one of my teachers challenged me physically. I think because of this I don’t get enough help in school. I could do better, but I feel that some of my teachers just don’t help me enough.

I interviewed the youngest daughter Rebecca about her school experience. During this interview, Eloisa was present to help Rebecca with some of her questions and to put Rebecca at ease.

M: *How is school for you, Rebecca?*

R: I like school.

M: *How about your teacher?*

R: No, I don’t like Mrs. X.

M: *Why don’t you like Mrs. X?*

R: She is prejudiced.

E: Rebecca is hyper and Mrs. X has a hard time with her in class.

M: *Rebecca do you know what prejudice is or means? (She could not answer the question.)*

During one of the interviews with the oldest son Manuel and his girlfriend (Ashley) who was European American, I asked how the small rural community viewed their relationship. Specifically, I asked Ashley how she felt about how the community and the school perceived the Sanchez-Garcia children.

A: I think that some of the police and people at school are prejudiced. And I don’t think that the police are fair. They are always looking for the Mexicans to do something wrong while the White kids get away with everything.

Ashley referred to the prejudiced people in Annsburg as the “hoods” — a select few troublemakers.

She pointed out that the White boys at school tended to be jealous of Robert and Manuel. She explained to me that Manuel was often being persuaded to join the White boys against the Mexican American boys because he was dating a White girl. Manuel and Robert agreed with Ashley’s statement about the local White boys being jealous. An individual from the school had also made a statement about jealousy between the European and Mexican American boys.

I asked Robert the same questions that I had asked Manuel and Ashley about interracial dating. He had previously made some comments about his girlfriend’s parents being prejudiced and I wondered what truly was the case. Robert responded to my questions in this way:

My girlfriend’s parents do not accept me because of our record (Manuel and Robert) — that being what the cops say about me and my brother. We don’t have an official record, but some of the cops say that we have a bad record. I have mainly dated White girls and a few Mexican girls. My girlfriend’s parents are not really prejudiced, they just think that I got a bad record because the cops have said that about my brother and I.

Annsburg’s View of the Incident

After interviewing all the members of the Sanchez-Garcia family, I decided to interview various other community residents, officials, and business owners. During my discussions with the family, it became apparent that the community was constantly influencing their family life, specifically in the year after Lorenzo’s incident. Through my experience with the Sanchez-Garcia family I had gained their interpretation of the relationship between European Americans and Mexican Americans in Annsburg. Thus, the purpose of interviewing additional community residents was to gain a holistic understanding of the two cultural worlds. My hope was that these interviews would give me better insight on how the community influenced the Sanchez-Garcia family and how this event influenced Annsburg.

A Mejjicano Business Owner

I arrived at a local business around lunch time with Carlos, my university colleague. Although the owner's business was not a restaurant, she did sell some Mexican food delights. Having had dormitory food, day in and day out, the rich aromas captured my senses as I walked into the business establishment. A taco counter had been strategically placed at the front of the business and we made it our destination. I guess Carlos and I had the same idea on our mind without saying a word to one another. Out of respect we would order some tacos with the hope that this might help us ease into our interview with the owner. Monica met us at the taco counter. We introduced ourselves, ordered lunch, and found a place to sit. After we had finished our lunch and had engaged in small talk about our regional background and why we had come to Iowa, we started the interview.

Because she was a business owner, I asked Monica how her experience differed from that of other Mexican Americans in Annsburg. She said that she often served as the representative of the Annsburg Mexican American community because she was a business owner. Moreover, she helped the migrants find housing before and during the picking season. Finally, she helped new migrant families become acquainted with the area by showing them around.

I asked her if this often put her in undesirable situations. She agreed, stating that because of her business ownership she was accountable to both Mexican and European Americans in Annsburg. A good example of this accountability was when the community asked her to serve as a peacemaker during a period of tension between the local European Americans, the migrants, and the settled-out Mexican Americans.

El Tejjano

Our interview with Monica was coming to an end when her brother and the rest of her family walked into the business. The family included her grandparents, aunts, uncles, and even some babies. Monica's brother, Juan, introduced himself and started talking. It did not take long for Carlos and me to realize that Juan was from Texas. His *Tejjano* accent and Spanish had South Rio Grande Valley written all over it. For the unfamiliar, a *Tejjano* is a person of Mexican descent who claims a heritage to Mexico when South

Texas was a Mexican state. I asked Juan how long he had been in Annsburg, and what he did for a living. He said that he had been in Annsburg for about the same period of time as his sister, and that he worked in construction. He said that during the warm season he was always working on the road and during the cold months, in Annsburg.

I asked him about his family's experience in Annsburg. He said that the Mexican Americans in Annsburg got along "just fine." He said that his family had never had any problems in the community. He did state, however, that occasionally a European American would get offended because he and his friends and family spoke Spanish to one another in public places and that occasionally they were asked why they didn't just speak English. However, Juan did not see this as a problem for the Spanish-speaking people, rather he saw it as a problem that the European Americans created.

As the informal interview continued, I wondered what Juan knew about Lorenzo's incident and how he felt about it. Speaking to him in his *Tejjano* language I asked him about the incident. Juan didn't see the incident as reflecting badly on the rest of the Mexican American families in Annsburg. According to him, it was an isolated incident that had no effect on him. He said that his nephew had witnessed the incident. According to Juan, Lorenzo had come to help his son who was in a conflict with another teenager.

In Juan's opinion, Lorenzo had no business interfering with the conflict between the boys. Juan felt that the boys could have resolved the conflict among themselves. After our discussion about Lorenzo's incident, I asked Juan about the future of Mexican Americans in Annsburg. For him, the future was as secure as in any other rural community. He was comfortable in Annsburg, and he was very confident about raising his children in Annsburg. Monica's business had been very profitable and would continue to be. He ended by stating that his family had done well for themselves in Annsburg.

After our discussion with Juan, both Carlos and I agreed that it was important to use Lorenzo's interpretation of the incident as the research base. We agreed that both Monica's and Juan's interviews were insightful when they pertained to family life experience and coping as ethnic minorities in rural Iowa.

Police Officer

I interviewed several city officials and listened to their interpretation of Lorenzo's incident. I didn't really know what to expect when I visited the Annsburg Police Station. A local police officer and I greeted each other and we began the interview on a good note by discussing a little about ourselves. He was in his mid-forties and had lived in Annsburg for more than five years. Small talk eventually led to a discussion of Lorenzo's incident. According to the police officer:

Lorenzo had been driving by and was clocked [hit] by one of the local jerks which caused him to lose control of the car. Then he was surrounded by about 25-30 White people. He pulled out his knife in self-defense. If he would of just held that knife... but Lorenzo baited one of the guys and finally wound up attacking the White guy. If he would have just defended himself versus attacking, hell, he'd of probably been all right. He went after this guy and cut him long, wide, and awful. He is lucky he didn't kill this guy. So he crossed, at that point then, he crossed the line.

I talked with the police officer about how police sometimes get put in tight situations. It is hard to determine what really happened when everything is chaotic. I asked him if that was what happened on the night of the incident:

Well, naturally it looked, I know what you are saying, it looked like when we got up there, you had a crowd of 30-40 people then all of a sudden we have a crowd of 150 people looking on, everybody knowing a Caucasian guy got cut by a Mexican.

We discussed the importance of perception and how this played its part in Lorenzo's incident and the police officer explained to me how the whole situation developed.

The group that was there all stated that it was the Mexican's fault. Well, by the time, it took two or three days to figure out everything, to get everything and everything. Things aren't always as they initially appear. You know what I mean? It takes two or three days to work through something like that and find out the truth of what really happened there. You know?

The interview was going well and the police officer revealed to me that initially Lorenzo had been charged with attempted murder. Once everything had calmed down and all the facts were in, however, Lorenzo's charges were reconsidered and the judge only gave him two years of probation.

I changed the topic to inquire about how the community of Annsburg was taking an active role in having good relations between the Mexican and European communities.

The officer discussed how they had hired a Hispanic reserve police officer and were about to employ another. He also discussed how the community had organized several meetings with community leaders, local business owners, the schools, and the city government on how to explore and discuss the relations between Mexican and European Americans. It is important to note, however, that the Mexican Americans targeted in efforts to improve community relations were the migrants and not settled-out families.

I asked him if he expected this effort of cultural sensitivity from the local European Americans with the migrants to eventually extend to the settled-out Mexican American families as well.

Let me say this, that is my hope. I would like to see this community grow, prosper, and, from my perspective... I would like to think that everybody would feel that way. I don't know if people are concerned. Perceptions that I hear, having coffee someone will make a comment, a "nigger" comment sometimes, and I hear that often. Not everybody's going to share what the old police officer does.

How Annsburg and the Family Were Changed

The interviews with the police officer showed how the community of Annsburg had changed after Lorenzo's incident. Until my interview with the police officer, what had happened that summer night in 1923 had always been hearsay. His story was consistent with Lorenzo's and, as I left his office, I had a good feeling. The importance of the study came with his explanation of how the community of Annsburg was trying to improve its ethnic and race relations. His hope for the future of all Annsburg residents was also promising to hear. Furthermore, the police officer's last statement about sharing reflected his experiences not only as an officer but also as a person who had seen Annsburg develop. Finally, my impression of this man was that he had not only witnessed Annsburg change, but was willing to tell his story regardless of what others thought.

In my last interview with Lorenzo we reflected on the year and wondered what the future would hold for Annsburg.

It took a life-threatening incident like mine to make the people of Annsburg realize that people are different and that we must respect each other. I think that it has been a learning experience for the European Americans and Mexican Americans of Annsburg.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to understand the experience of a *Mejicano* family in a predominately European American town of Iowa. Another purpose was to gain an understanding of how the community and the family interacted. Furthermore, it was also the intent of this study to examine the measures that the small community was taking to improve relations between the two cultures and more specifically, as a consequence of the incident of inter-racial violence.

In closing, I had spent a full year with the Sanchez-Garcia family and I was escorted along I-35 by the walls of cornfields. I had come to the small rural community to hear the *cuento* (story) of a single family, but I was leaving having heard the tales of a community. My hope was that Annsburg would take a step in the right direction in the understanding of its members, unlike so many other communities in our nation's history. Having learned much from Lorenzo, Eloisa, and the community all I could offer in return was simply my friendship. My thoughts were pleasant as I approached the interstate and looked back at the walls of corn cut by the winding road.

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