

Carmela

Carmela from Oaxaca describes walking across the border into Arizona before continuing to South Carolina. "When I arrived here in the United States and I looked at my hands they were full of black spots where the thorns had penetrated." She was thirty seven years old at the time of this interview.

C: When we arrived in Arizona there were other people already there. We all got together and travelled as a group.

ML: Were they waiting for you?

C: My husband's brothers went first, and on their second attempt they made it because they were males. When they started to run, I told my husband, "I won't go. What if I get hurt? I'm not going." I laid down on the grass and said, "Go if you want." I remember that he touched my legs and said, "I am here, Carme, I will not leave." Then the Immigration (ICE) arrived with a huge dog and I said to my husband, "You see, if I had run . . . look at that dog! What if it had grabbed me?"

ML: When you finally decided to cross, how long did it take you to walk, Carmela?

C: We walked a full night. We spent one more day resting in the desert, and then we walked a lot more, like an hour and they picked us up. They told us that they would pick us up from a location in Arizona and then they arrived and took us.

ML: How does one prepare? For example, what is it like to get ready when you know you're going on such a trip and when you're scared of what's going to happen at the crossing? What are you carrying, a backpack, water? How did you prepare for the trip, Carmela?

C: We made totopos, which are made in Oaxaca. They are like dry tortillas or jerky. My mother-in-law dried them so that they didn't spoil. They had to be made like a toast, but without fat, without salt; like a pure tortilla. They are made into clumps, like a chip, and put into a bag. We brought with them, salt and garlic because sometimes they say that the air runs strong in the desert; you never know what kind of people you might pass. Bringing garlic is very good for that, or naphthalene, which is also good for the desert. I brought a backpack.

ML: What's the use of garlic?

C: It's for the air, they say. For the air . . . because as you walk, you pass where many people have died or it's good for—

ML: Like, protection?

C: For protection so nothing happens to us or you can put it on your feet. Put a clove of garlic on each leg because usually when you cross there are rattlesnakes, and what would happen if you

came across one when you were traveling and you stepped on it and it bit you? The bite is deadly. So, if we put the garlic in our pants, its strong aroma indicates to the animal where we are when we are approaching so it can move from our path.

I brought a small backpack, just like my husband. We brought two pairs of pants and since the first pair tore when we passed between thorns, we were left with only the pants we had on. We also nearly ran out of sweaters; we were left with only a t-shirt or light sweater and a double jacket. It was very cold in the desert and sometimes giant thorns got into our shoes. It happened to me once and I could not walk. I told my husband, "Sergio, I can't, I have a thorn in my foot and I can't walk." At times we also had to throw ourselves down when the guide who brought us would say, "Lay down!" When we threw ourselves down it did not matter if there were thorns. Whatever there was, we threw ourselves down and when I arrived here in the United States and I looked at my hands they were full of black spots where the thorns had penetrated.

ML: When they warned you to throw yourselves on the ground, was it because they heard noise?

C: Or they saw—I cannot describe much because I believe it was the job of the young men who helped us to cross. I believe that immigration could have been coming or that someone was going to see us, and he would say, "down!" and down we went. It didn't matter where.

ML: You had to throw yourself down, no matter where.

C: And if we were running out of water, we had to share a bottle between five or six people right there and we had to share the food. We brought topos with meat to eat, water, and serum to prevent dehydration. My husband explained to me, because he is the one who knows more, "You have to take serum so you do not get dehydrated."

And so we entered the desert walking and we passed areas with cows, areas with horses, and a lot of barbed wire. Here you had to be careful to not catch your clothes, or if you passed too close, you could hurt your hands or legs. You have to be careful where you put your hands and legs.

We slept in the desert the first night and I heard a coyote crying, or a wolf? I was very scared and I asked my husband, "What's that crying?" I said, "I'm very scared." And he said, "No, don't be afraid, we are far from them; they are crying, but far away." "How can they be far if I hear them so close?" And to that my husband replied, "Shut up, you talk a lot." I said, "I'm very cold." I felt it most in my stomach. The inflammation I had felt before had disappeared already. Before, I had felt very fat in my belly and I believe it was caused by the Caesarean section. I used to spend a lot of time feeling like I was very inflamed, as if I was holding a lot of air, but then I did not. My husband said, "Put my jacket on," and he gave me his jacket and wore only his t-shirt. My husband was very protective while we were crossing.

ML: What did you feel when you arrived in Arizona and you finally knew that you were on the other side?

C: Well, when one enters, you come in a car and you are lying down, you can't be seated, then someone comes in and says, "Get out, get out, we're already inside the house."

ML: Lying, where were you lying?

C: In the car. In the car you lie down in the seat or the part where they put their feet. Then he says, "Come down, we're here, we're already inside." Then you get out, but you do not see anything because you are already inside the house. I couldn't see anything anymore. When we left the house to come here, we drove in a gray Suburban and we traveled, seated. I saw a very different view of the country, very different and beautiful. I saw beautiful, but unknown places, something very strange to me.

Carmela, Interview by Marina López, January 26, 2016