

A Honeymoon on a Harley

My parents didn't speak the same language, but that didn't stop them from falling in love.

By Marcos Villatoro Nov. 23, 2019

As a child, I kept photos of my parents in an old, torn shoe box. I'd often gaze at the ones of them posing with my dad's 1947 Harley Davidson Knucklehead, and try to imagine their days before I came along. I'd wonder: What was it like for a white Appalachian man and a Salvadoran woman to ride a motorcycle cross-country in the postwar years? How had their love endured at a time when many Americans were hostile to interracial marriage?

My father, Ralph, joined the Navy in 1942. That same year, my mother, Amanda, and her family immigrated to San Francisco from El Salvador. My mother, who was 16 at the time, went to work in a factory, stitching closed the bullet holes in Navy life preservers, and washing the blood out of the cloth before they were sent out once again to the ships in the South Pacific.

After the war, Dad moved to San Francisco. He planned to save up to buy a Harley and drive it across the country. My parents first saw each other in a coffee shop in the city's Mission District. My dad pretended to read *The San Francisco Chronicle* while stealing glances at my mother from his booth. "¡Ay, sus ojos tan verdes!" Mamá would tell me growing up — he had green eyes, the color of fecundity back in the old country.

He eventually worked up the nerve to walk over and ask if he could join her. He didn't understand a lick of Spanish. She spoke a little English, but she had a hard time making out his Appalachian drawl, with its elongated words and drawn-out syntax. They may not have understood one another, but that didn't stop them from falling in love. He asked her to marry him three weeks

after they met, but she declined at first — “Know you I do not,” she said. After six months, she finally said yes.

My dad did eventually save up enough for the Harley. For their honeymoon, they drove to Tennessee to meet his family. It would be the first of seven trips they took across the United States on that bike. They’d return to San Francisco’s Mission District to visit my grandmother when Mamá would get homesick. But after a couple of weeks, they’d ride back to Tennessee. Sometimes they just got the wanderlust, hopped on the motorcycle and hit the road. When I was 16, the photos and their stories were too much to handle. It pains a teenager to know that his parents were far cooler than he will ever be.

They might have been too blind with love to worry about any racial concerns, but in Tennessee, they got a heaping dose of it. My white grandparents had never heard of El Salvador. They couldn’t make heads or tails out of who, or what, my mother was. She wasn’t black, but she sure wasn’t white. They told my dad he had tarnished the family name, and worried about grandchildren born with a brown taint.

We left San Francisco for good when I was 4 years old. I spent the bulk of my childhood years in the Appalachian Mountains, where, in the 1960s, my mother and I were the only Latinos in the town of Rogersville, Tenn. Back then I was an oddity, a mix between a white local and a brown foreigner. In local parlance, a half breed. A mongrel.

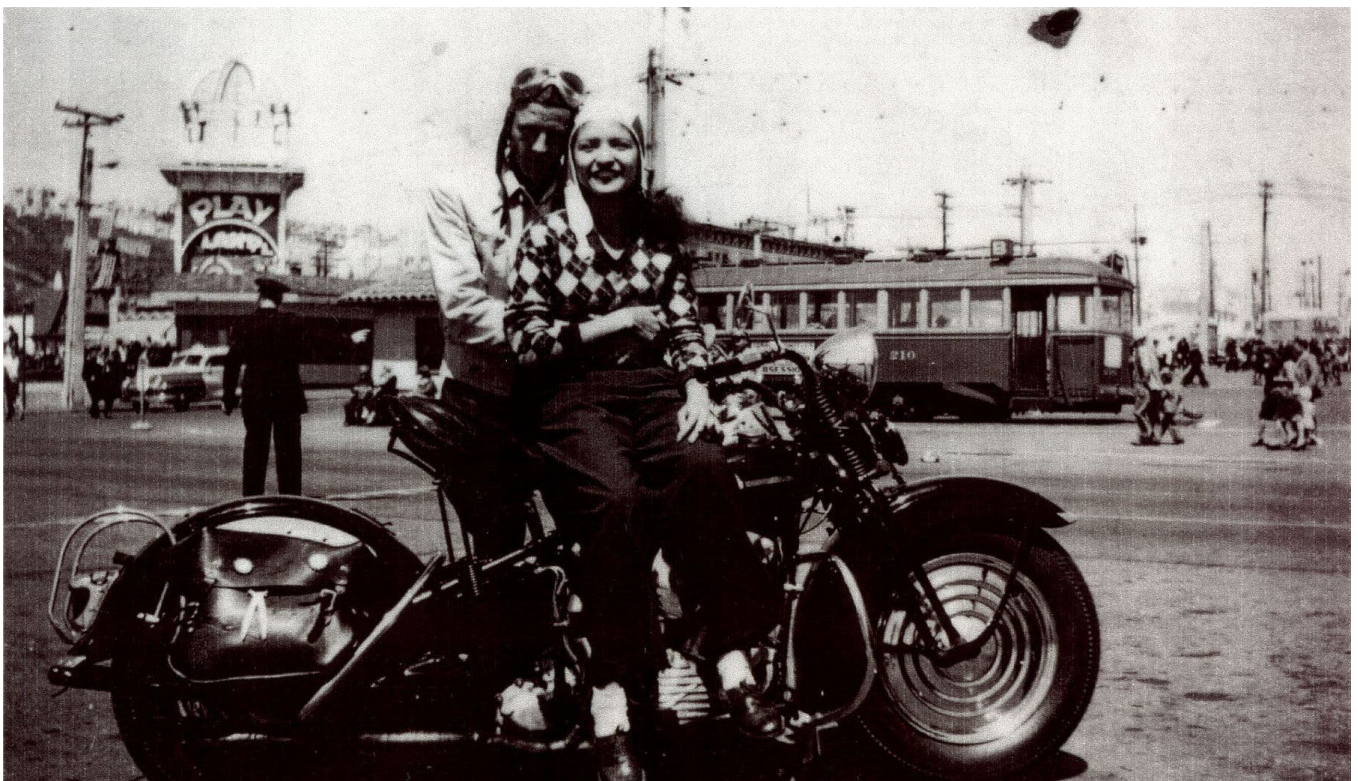
Mamá did her best to imbue me with an appreciation for our rich Latino heritage, which I would later honor by taking her last name. She cooked Salvadoran pupusas, tamales and black beans. She taught me how to move my hips to the rhythm of Latin music. She told me about the Salvadoran legend of La Siguanaba, a witch that rewarded good, respectful men with small cloth bags of gold, and ripped out the guts of bad men who treated women as objects to conquer. Hers was a silent, loving, guerrilla warfare against the racial thinking of the South, where white and brown love was a

crime against nature.

I can only imagine how hard it was for my father. People made comments about him marrying a “light-skinned nigger.” They asked what was it like to take an exotic foreigner to bed. He suffered this in silence, and spoke of it only in his later years. He never told me what people said about his son.

There are some who believe that the Latinos at our southern gate are a menace to their American way of life. But the thousands of migrants from Mexico and Central America who work our crops and butcher our chickens — jobs that few American citizens want to fill — are woven into the fabric of this country. Along the way they’re falling in love, just as my parents did. I’m part of this mestizaje, the multicultural mixing of America.

I look at those old, yellowed pictures now, 72 years after they were taken. An Appalachian white man, a Salvadoran woman and a Harley. You can’t get much more American than that.



Ralph McPeck and Amanda Villatoro, the writer’s parents, in San Francisco in 1947. Marcos Villatoro

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