

La Raza Unida Fire Brigade to the rescue
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Memo, Rafael and Adalberto of the La Raza Unida Fire Brigade, Summer 2016, covered in soot, taking a water break.

Big Sur: The Summer of Fire 2016

A quasi-fictional story written in a certain *je nais se quoi* (weirdness).

It was César Chávez Day March 31, 2016, and nearly 150 family and friends of the children at the Captain Cooper Middle School in Big Sur were listening to Mariachi del Sol while sitting in the 1-acre school garden, beautifully maintained by the children; many of them Latino Dreamers. The Latino parents had built an entire curriculum surrounding the realities of the garden starting with mathematics. They created assignments for the children that required them to figure out how many calories in each of the vegetables or from a physics standpoint how much energy it takes to produce one radish and more—it was brilliant.

You couldn't ask for a more wonderful day in such a beautiful setting. Who would ever guess there were so many Latinos in the woods? Of the many

unspeakable truths about life in Big Sur, the widely known fact that there were Dreamers in the schools has never been a point of contention, never.

It goes without saying that much of how daily life is sustainable in Big Sur has been due to the Latinos who cook and clean in every restaurant in the area. Latinos are the caretakers serving generation after generation over homes, ranches and coastal properties owned by individuals who find themselves obtaining wealth through inheritance and trust funds. It makes for a curious mix of peoples who live side-by-side, in the “hole,” as locals put it.

The “hole” has provided a safe haven for Latinos as it has for others seeking refuge in the woods away from the hustle and bustle of city life. Soon thereafter the Big Sur fire hit and someone started the rumor blaming “illegal Mexican aliens - drug smugglers” for starting the fire in the backwoods where they tended hundreds of acres of marijuana plants. The fire spread so fast it didn’t take long before the stigmatic attack on undocumented people fell to the wayside as fire-fighting work took precedent over the stigmatic attack.



The Brazil Ranch just prior to the wind shift resulting in the saving of the ranch, but causing part of my house to burn down.

There wasn't one Big Sur Latino family I could think of that wasn't there that day they arrived in work clothes and with a mission in their eyes; they were ready to fight the fire and win the fierce battle ahead. There were Spanish-speaking fire fighters that helped direct us and Latino paramedics and there were Latinos volunteers in every capacity. Que viva la raza!

As I looked across the fire line all I could see was a sea of black and brown faces, sometimes they were indistinguishable and sometimes not. The black faces were mostly white guys with charcoal black soot mixed in with their sweat and the brown faces were Latinos from Colombia, Guatemala, and Mexico, namely, Querétaro and Guanajuato. We had been shoveling mid-sized coals throughout the night turning them over-and-over again until their mini flames subdued; truth is sometimes they did and sometimes they didn't, but we pushed on much like Chicanos did in the Vietnam War, never really knowing the outcomes of their service—they just pushed on and kept fighting forward.

My right hand was inflamed (see picture above), carpal tunnel syndrome had now taken its toll, yet I wasn't yet concerned as there were many times when there was a disconnect between my hands, arms and brain. All I could think about was how "This must be what it is like to toil the nearby agricultural fields located on the other side of these mountains in Salinas. We used long and short hoes and shovels day-in-and-day-out as my mother had done with her father from the great Imperial Valley to Salinas. Truth be told, I had never worked so hard for so long under such austere working conditions. I was feeling quite alienated from myself but not at all alienated from my fire-fighting Latino camaradas.

There were hundreds of Latinos on the line and we were grouped together by natural tendencies of group survival. We were all well-known to each other because the social network is quite small in Big Sur Country and life was all about mutual aide, helping each other tacitly so. As we moved ahead doing god's work, no matter how hard we tried to put out each mini flame there seemed to be only half as many behind us as there was ahead of us.

"How was that even possible?" we asked ourselves when after more than 100 of us (Latinos) worked our way through the burnt acreage it always lit up again; the ground was simply so hot it melted our shoes. In order to ease the anxiety of the little chavalitos and chavalitas, and to take their minds off the fire, I told them that the reason my shoes were melted was not because of the fire but because we had seen a UFO up on Parrington Ridge and as we ran towards it, it took off, leaving extremely hot rocks glowing in the darkness.

We had dozens of all-nighters, fighting the fire there were many times I would fall asleep while standing up and sometimes I was so hungry that in smelling the smoke from the fire I would dream about pan de campo and frijoles cooked

outside, so they would get a smoky mesquite taste like they do in Tejas, and I found myself literally dreaming and taking bites right out of the air.

We were surrounded by dirty white fire hoses leading in-and-out of our sight (which at times was less than 10 feet, no kidding) as our only directive from the Fire Chief was to shovel over the mounds of fire, move forward and keep the hoses on our right that way we knew which direction was safe. After days of 15-17 hours of fire-fighting, burning eyes and lacking sleep, I was delirious and really hungry. Entre nosotros I envisioned the fire hoses as tripitas (cow utters) filled with liver, onions, cilantro, tomatoes and more ready to BBQ with Negro Modelo beer poured over them, wow!

And somehow just like while growing-up in the barrio I never felt like we were poor because great food would always magically appear, well not real magic as the women were working day-and-night as well. My wife and her camaradas were on the food line serving the best Mexican food in Monterey County with a Big Sur twist.

When my esposa made menudo she always used the local wild boar meat instead of a traditional pig. Just before the fire the U.S. Forest Ranger told us that the boars were “open season” as there was simply an over population of them this year so we could shoot as many as we wanted. So much ocean water had been dumped that it made the soil muddy and the boars that don’t normally come out during the day did so in order to dig for roots.

We saw plenty of wild boars with their razor sharp tusks in the heat of the night running for their lives; many of them were headed directly into the fire so I would yell out, “This way this way keep the water hose on your right, pendejos!” But they were wild animals and wouldn’t listen.

I didn’t like shooting them or their piglets so I would shine my Delta Force Shadow Hawk flashlight X800 (said to be 100 times stronger than an average flashlight) directly into their faces from just a few feet away and it would literally stop them in their tracks, blinding them, rendering them fair prey and someone else would shoot them.

My wife didn’t really enjoy carving up the pig but she saw this as her contribution and it was a great one, as our camp became known as the one with the best food, menudo and pig ribs; there was something uncanny about eating BBQ boar ribs while surrounded by massive fires out in the open. At the same time there was something about their wild meat that gave us the strength and spirit to fight the fire with much gusto.

All at once my wife cut a thigh off one of the boars wrapped it in paper and handed it to Little Lou, daughter to my camarada Chon. She instructed her to run the meat over to her mother in the other camp about 100 yards away and off she went. I watched the whole thing and because I was in a delirious state it didn’t

occur to me to chase after Little Lou until she was deep into the smoke. I was suddenly overcome with great fear because we all knew we had a 200-pound Puma living in our area for the last couple years; my wife had come eye-to-eye with it while jogging in the hills. Little Lou got to the other camp okay and as I headed back I thought I saw the Puma so I kept my Shadow Hawk flash light pointed straight ahead catching the eyes of every animal in sight.



The stairwell in our house that my wife, Patricia, had made after my son bought her a power-saw and taught her how to use it—just a year before the fire. She came to be known as “Power tool Patty” and used coast redwood from the forest where we lived. It was burned to ashes.

Days of breathing in heavy smoke will make you think peculiar thoughts especially while engaged in fireside chats (pun intended) in the middle of the night or early morning. Any way you cut it these were my camaradas for the better part of a decade. I had helped them acquire wood donated by Wilson Lumber in order to build onto the homes of the caretakers to los ricos (the rich ones) mostly “trust fund babies.”

Problem is for more than a century the people of Big Sur created a culture of hatred for the government and the U.S. Forest Service and built their homes without a permit and this caused a huge problem when many of the people whose homes burned to the ground assumed they had fire insurance until the insurance companies told them they did but not for any structures that were built without a permit or that burnt down because they were connected to a structure that was built without a permit, hijole!

This problem is so big right now that it may cause Big Sur to secede from the Union. In the case of most of the Latinos, however, they are mostly renters or caretakers and for the time being are having to live in tents.

At one point while fighting back the fires, the Fire Chief exclaimed over a loud electronic speaker, “Let the Brazil Ranch [pictured above] burn and save the homes and people of Palo Colorado!”

I was shocked to hear the Fire Chief say this as we lived both at and adjacent to the Brazil Ranch and next to the Little Sur Ranch so we were in the direct line of fire.

We watched as the fire rapidly made its way towards our ranch and my camaradas kept threatening to run down and hold back the fire; however, the Chicano Air Force had already started dropping fire retardant and the helicopters had already dumped several tons of water on the house rendering it officially “burnt down.”

At some point several weeks into the battle against the flames and after 15 or 16 hours on the line, a delirious Rafael yelled out at the top of his lungs, “Somos la raza unida! Somos la raza unida!” I hadn’t heard that term since our protest demonstrations in the 1960s, but I always felt a deep brotherhood to all the beautiful brown people of the world.

As I looked back at Rafael, hearing his voice echo off the steep Big Sur mountains against the full Charlie Brown-like moon, the melodramatic red-yellow smoky sunset reminded me of the same sort of methobromide sunset you see over the agricultural fields in Salinas and elsewhere where the farmers say they are “organic farmers.” But you know they are not because you can both see and smell the illegal chemical in the sky.

Armando Arias, Ph.D. writes under the general rubric of *historias verdaderas mentiras auténticas—true stories and authentic lies*. He has found this the most effective manner to convey his stories. This gives his stories a unique feel, a certain *je nais se quoi*(weirdness). Copyright © Arts and Sciences World Press, 2016.