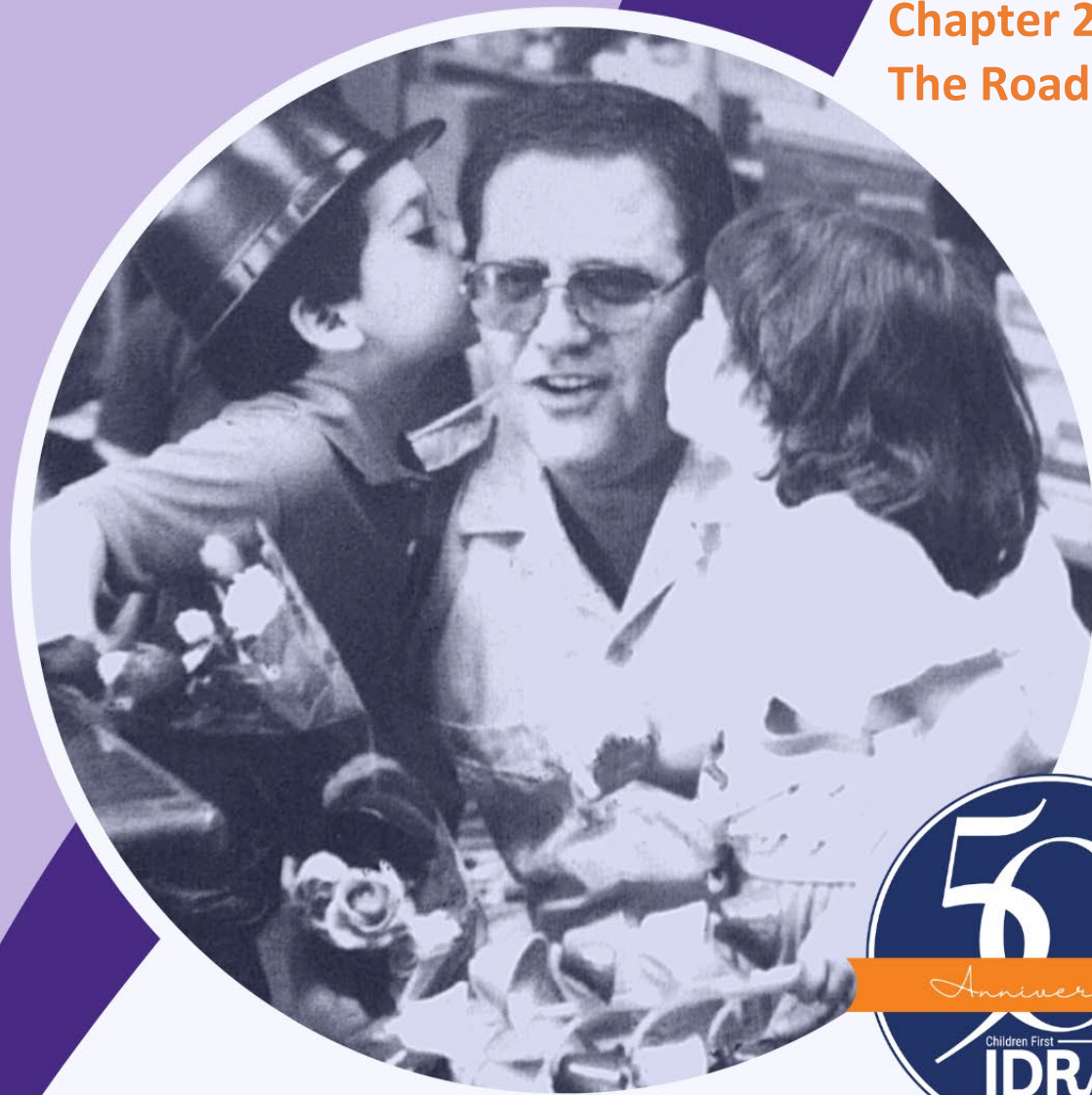


**Chapter 22:
The Road to Indio**



All Pianos Have Keys & Other Stories

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Chapter 22: The Road to Indio

My good friend, Armando Rodríguez from Los Angeles, was appointed assistant commissioner of education in the days before the breakup of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare. Not only was Armando the first Hispanic to reach this high a level in the federal government, he was one of the first Hispanics employed in the Office of Education at any level. I have heard it said that he was the first Hispanic employed in the Office of Education, but I don't think that's true because when they first established the Office of Spanish-Speaking Affairs, which Armando was appointed to head, Lupe Anguiano preceded Armando by a few weeks. Maybe Armando was hired before Lupe, but it took him longer to clear up his business in California and move to Washington.

It was indeed unusual to see a Mexican American in the Office of Education. It was even more unusual since Armando Rodríguez looked like the Zapotec Indian who served as president of the Republic of Mexico. As Bob Sanchez in McAllen used to say, "Armando Rodríguez es Benito Juárez vuelto a nacer."

One day Armando was driving from Los Angeles to Indio, California where he was to be the keynote speaker at a conference.

He stopped at a gas station to fill up the car. As the Mexican American attendant pumped gas, Armando, curious about how far he had to go before getting to Indio, asked him, "Que me falta para Indio?"

The attendant looked at the Benito Juárez look-alike and responded, "Nomas las plumas, hermano."

One time when Armando as assistant commissioner was visiting federal programs in San Diego, he boarded the commercial airliner for his flight back to Washington. An officer of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) boarded the plane just before takeoff. One look at Armando and he asked, "May I see your papers?"

In the ensuing argument the INS officer admitted that he wanted to see Armando's proof of citizenship because he "looked Mexican." Armando pointed to a blond, blue-eyed passenger in front of him and asked the INS officer, "Why don't you ask for his papers? He looks German."

Armando was not the only prominent Mexican American receiving special treatment from the INS because of his looks. One time a very respected Mexican American appointed as a federal judge, and subsequently promoted to the district court of appeals, was riding in a car to San Antonio with a group of other federal judges. The car was stopped at a border INS checkpoint just south of Falfurias. The INS officer peered into the car, singled out the Hispanic judge, and demanded to see his papers. On objecting, he was ordered out of the car and would still be there if he had remained obstinate about not having to provide proof of citizenship.

For many years later, lawyers with immigration cases exerted an all out effort to have their cases tried in his courtroom. On the other hand, INS prosecutors avoided trying immigration cases in his court. INS personnel presenting evidence would be reminded by the court or the injustice of Hispanics having to carry proof of citizenship in this country, an honor afforded only to members of very unique ethnic groups.

Mexican Americans have become accustomed to such special treatment. In 1974, my wife Laura, Rosie Castro, a friend who was an expert in the education of migrant children, and I went to Laredo on the Texas-Mexico border to do a workshop for teachers and administrators in the Laredo public schools. I had promised Laura and Rosie that I would get them home at an early hour, so we deviated from the usual ritual of having a delicious and inexpensive dinner in Nuevo Laredo on the Mexican side of the border and opted for three orders of Kentucky Fried Chicken to go. As soon as we were on the highway, we ate our fried chicken. Laura took all of the chicken bones and other trash from our portable dinner and placed them in the Kentucky Fried Chicken paper bag.

We had barely finished eating when we reached the INS border checkpoint on Interstate 35 outside of Laredo. Since Rosie has a darker complexion than Laura or I, we made bets that the immigration officer would want to see her papers. Sure enough, as soon as I stopped my Cadillac at the checkpoint, and Laura lowered the window, the officer peered into the car and began his familiar ritual.

“Where were you born,” he asked Rosie. All three of us answered, “In the U.S.A.” Before he could ask Rosie for her papers, my wife placed the trash bag in his hands, asking, “Will you please dispose of this?” She then raised the electrically operated window on her side. I didn’t know what else to do but step on the gas and get out of there. As the car sped away, all three of us looked back to see the immigration officer standing alone in the middle of the road with the bag of Kentucky Fried Chicken in his hands. We didn’t stop laughing until we got to the outskirts of San Antonio three hours later.

Some years later, Lionel Castillo was appointed commissioner of immigration by President Carter. At the time I was running cattle on my ranch in Duval County in South Texas. Every time I grabbed a hoe to clear the weeds around my mobile home, an INS helicopter would come around and hover while the INS agents studied me through binoculars. They figured that anyone doing work in the hot South Texas sun must be an illegal alien. Just for kicks, I would lower my Stetson and move to the opposite side of the house. The helicopter would circle around, keeping me always in sight. Eventually they would decide that I wasn’t dark enough for them to mess around looking at my papers, and they would move on to other ranches in their relentless search for undocumented aliens.

For several years, I tried to get Lionel Castillo to visit my ranch. My plan was to get Lionel to lock up his wallet, identification papers and all other valuables in the glove compartment of my pickup truck so he wouldn’t lose them as he helped me clean up around the house. I would then wait for the INS helicopter to spot him working with a hoe and drop down to apprehend him. Of course, I would deny that I had any papers or anything else of his. Just think of the beauty of it, the South Texas office of the Immigration and Naturalization Service hauling off the commissioner of immigration. Unfortunately, he never got around to visiting my ranch, so my favorite fantasy remained unfulfilled.

In spite of there being little love lost between Mexican Americans and Immigration and Naturalization Service, INS would occasionally provide some pleasant surprises. During the trial of Doe v. Plylar and the subsequent Multiple District Litigation, I received a call from Joe Staley, head of the INS regional office in San Antonio. He informed me of his concern that undocumented children would be kept out of school by their parents for fear that the school would report their undocumented status to INS. He assured me that in his region, INS would not use the schools as a focal point for the identification of undocumented children and would even ignore and not follow up on tips received from the schools.

This concern for the education of children contrasted sharply with the attitudes of the educational leadership in Texas that was demanding that undocumented children be excluded from Texas schools. It has always been a bone of contention for me that there was more advocacy for the education of children in the federal Immigration and Naturalization Service than in the educational system of Texas.

When LBJ became president and Hubert Humphrey became vice president, a whole bunch of us Mexican Americans received invitations to the White House. The reason for this rare recognition was that Vice President Humphrey had Chris Aldrete, a Mexican American from Del Rio, on his staff, and Chris often participated in putting together lists of invitees to White House functions.

One time Armando and I received invitations to the White House for a state dinner honoring some foreign dignitary. We showed up in our new tuxedos and black ties as early as possible. As other guests arrived, Armando started getting very nervous. Movie stars, corporate CEOs, famous singers, top politicians and internationally known dignitaries crowded the East Room. We were pushed further and further back until we had our backs to the wall in the most remote corner of the East Room. Suddenly, Armando's face lit up as he saw a closet in the corner. In joyous anticipation, he opened the little closet, but his new-found elation quickly disappeared as he peered into the empty closet.

"Golly, Joe," he said in disappointment, "I was hoping we would find a broom and a dustpan in the closet. Then we could feel at home sweeping up the room during this reception."