

In Loving Memory of Our Mother – Esperanza Frances Fraga Valdez

(Original version submitted in 2015 by her son Ralph Valdez on behalf of the Valdez family as part of a Fraga Family tribute.)

When Esperanza Fraga Valdez was born in Mexico on November 5, 1914, her parents Valeriano and Martina Fraga couldn't have known what an amazing daughter, sister, wife and mother she would become or what a full and meaningful life she would live. But their love was strong and their faith was deep and this foundation helped prepare her for her life ahead.

Esperanza recalled coming to the United States as a small child with our beloved Grandparents and the many, many hardships they endured until, as if in a storybook, against all odds they made their way from Michoacan to Michigan to lay down the roots of what would become, for many of us, the family farm on Norman Road near Imlay City in Michigan's "Thumb" area and a special closeness to our many aunts, uncles, cousins and their spouses.

As a young girl, Esperanza's American school teachers - having trouble pronouncing her given Spanish name - simply called her Frances. This became the name by which she was best known by most of her friends and family. Young Frances had a sharp and insightful mind and absorbed knowledge and information like a sponge. She often recalled impressing the locals with how intelligent and well-spoken she was with only an 8th grade education.

In between her family duties and farm chores she loved to read popular magazines about the Hollywood movie stars of the day, acquiring a certain worldliness and sophistication from their pages. Even with little formal education Frances spoke easily and with confidence with anyone from any walk of life, and on any topic. She was genuine, a fast learner, a good listener and she spoke from the heart.

Among the many special gifts with which she was blessed was the ability to also listen from the heart, making you feel that you were the only person in the world when she spoke to you. Imagine the importance of that gift when you're a mother blessed with 18 children.

But she worked hard her whole life – as a child, helping her father in the sugar beet fields, as a young girl on the family farm helping to care for her 10 younger siblings and then as a young woman swept off her feet by the handsome ranch-hand who would become our dear, devoted father Natividad Valdez.

Again, as if in a storybook or a movie, they felt compelled to elope and were estranged from her parents back on the farm until the birth of their first child Isabelle, born in Detroit in 1935. Her parent's hearts, though broken by her disobedience and departure from their close-knit family, were softened and eventually healed by becoming first time grandparents. Though later, two little twin angels, Grace and Marie, would die at birth, her parents could never guess that she would proceed to give them 15 more to love and fuss over.

Our dear mother, who's Spanish name means "Hope", rose to every one of life's challenges with an unmatched poise anchored by profound love and an unshakable faith inherited from her "salt of the earth" parents. No matter what she went through, including the tragic and untimely death of our brother Michael, and many other unforeseen hardships and struggles, she always managed to find the grace in gratitude and her inner strength wiping away her tears to often proclaim, "I'm a lucky dog!"

Those of us lucky enough to have had her in our lives are all better for it - for the blessing of having her share the world with us. Her resilience, sense of humor and love of wordplay live on in so many of her children. There are so many other beautiful traits that she passed on to us, and through us, to her loving children's children, and so on and so on...such as her hard-earned wisdom and positivity in the face of adversity, her unwavering faith and spirituality, her gentle kindness and love of nature, her hard work-ethic, and strong but non-judgmental moral code, and her endless love of family. "The message is love..." is what she once answered when asked what she thought might be her legacy – and so it is.

On her last day with us in 2001 she asked, "When is the next family party?" Well, Esperanza, Frances Fraga Valdez, we celebrate it every day by remembering your smile, by loving and supporting each other unconditionally, and by trying to be as good as you showed us how to be by the example of your life.

Where there is life, there is hope and Esperanza is Hope.