

Special Section

# 'Deportee' at 75



Photo Courtesy of Tim Hernandez

**RELENTLESS EFFORT TO LOCATE FAMILIES**—Author Tim Z. Hernandez (right) stands with descendants of the Mexican laborers killed in the 1948 plane crash near Los Gatos Canyon. Since 2010, Hernandez has located the families of at least 13 of the 28 Mexican passengers on board the DC-3 plane that crashed in the Diablo Range, 20 miles west of Coalinga, California.

**WOODY GUTHRIE'S LAST SONG TRANSCENDS TIME AS A CLARION CALL FOR HUMAN DECENCY**

# 'DEPORTEE' STILL HAUNTS AMERICA

**This is a large scale ongoing project that involves numerous collaborators and entities, in both the United States and Mexico. Since 2010, I have been dedicated to researching and locating the families of all 32 passengers killed in the famous 1948 plane wreck at Los Gatos Canyon.**

**TIM Z. HERNANDEZ**  
The Plane Crash Project

*Racist radiocast inspires America's troubadour to call out mistreatment and degradation of Mexican farmworkers in one of history's greatest protest songs*

**BY NICOLETTE MONIQUE LUNA**

*The crops are all in and the peaches are rotting  
The oranges piled up in their creosote dumps  
They're flying them back to the Mexican border  
To pay all their money to wade back again*

**W**oody Guthrie was pissed. Ravaged by the early stages of the Huntington's disease that would paralyze and kill him 20 years later, America's most famous songwriter of the first half of the 20th century could no longer play his famous Gibson Southern Jumbo guitar labeled with the rebel decree "This machine kills fascists."

But what he heard on the radio fired him to write one last great lyric. Puttering around his Long Island, New York home in January 1948 Guthrie heard a bulletin on the morning news.

"Story out of California," he recalled the announcer saying. "A plane crash near Los Gatos killed 32 people. It ain't as bad as it sounds, though, because mostly they were just deportees."

Infuriated, Guthrie grabbed paper and pen. His hands were shaking from a mix of rage and Huntington's, but he scratched out a lyric that today is considered one of the most important protest songs ever written and a composition that has been recorded hundreds of times by the likes of Pete Seeger, Joan Baez, The Byrds, Bruce Springsteen, Bob Dylan, Kris Kristofferson, Willie Nelson, Judy Collins, Joni Mitchell, Odetta, Dolly Parton, Cisco Houston, Hoyt Axton and Peter, Paul and Mary, among many others, including Woody's son Arlo Guthrie.

There, on his kitchen table, Guthrie's rage became a poetic masterpiece.

*Goodbye to my Juan, goodbye Rosalita  
Adios mis amigos, Jesus y Maria  
You won't have a name when you ride the big airplane  
All they will call you will be deportees*

Some of the bodies of the bracero-era farmworkers were returned in pine coffins to their grieving families in Mexico, but most were buried in a mass grave near



Photo Courtesy of Tim Z. Hernandez



Photo Courtesy of The Wenatchee World

**'ALL THEY WILL CALL YOU WILL BE DEPORTEES'**—(top) A mass funeral at Fresno's Holy Cross Cemetery for 26 of the 28 Mexican braceros who died in a January 28, 1948 plane crash in the Los Gatos hills near Coalinga. Many of the caskets were empty because the bodies were obliterated in the crash. (above) This marker at Holy Cross Cemetery was replaced by a monument in 2023 with the names of all the Mexican citizens who died in the plane crash.





**NAMELESS NO MORE**—Professor Tim Hernandez (r) has spent decades researching the tragic 1948 crash of a plane returning braceros to Mexico. “The fireball of lightning that shook all our hills” killed 32. Many of the victims names were unknown when the bodies were originally buried in a mass grave near Fresno. Hernandez and Jaime Ramirez, whose grandfather Ramon Gonzalez and great uncle Guadalupe Ramirez Lara died in the crash, lift a serape from a new memorial that includes all the names.



Photo Courtesy of Tim Z. Hernandez



**TO FALL LIKE DRY LEAVES**—Woody Guthrie, the legendary Oklahoma singer-songwriter, traveled America as a young man jumping on to moving trains. He spent time in California's Central Valley picking fruit with Mexican and Filipino farmworkers. He developed many friendships and a lifelong affinity for agricultural workers. He was infuriated by the racist radio broadcast announcing the plane crash at Los Gatos.



Photo Courtesy of Tim Z. Hernandez



Photo Courtesy of Tim Z. Hernandez



Photos Courtesy of Tim Z. Hernandez



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## DEPORTEES

• CONT FROM PG B1

Fresno, according to Tim Z. Hernandez's seminal study "All They Will Call You." Newspapers in Fresno County did finally start to put names to the victims and locals made makeshift memorials, but the victims of the plane wreck at Los Gatos largely disappeared from the national conversation.

Folk music legend Pete Seeger, Guthrie's long-time pal and former bandmate in The Almanac singers, was the first to perform "Deportee: Plane Wreck at Los Gatos." He did so as a chant accompanied by his banjo plunking out a sad melody in a largely improvised attempt to get Woody's message out to sympathetic audiences. Guthrie, the master tunesmith, could no longer play his guitar and struggled to sing. Even half-finished, "Deportee" started to stir emotions.

Cesar Chavez was pissed. The young U.S. Navy veteran who had begun his service to farmworkers shortly after World War II, read the lyrics and was further inspired to advocate on behalf of Mexican and Filipino farmworkers, people like himself and his family. He would have a second life-changing encounter with "Deportee" about a decade later.

*My father's own father, he waded that river  
They took all the money he made in his life  
My brothers and sisters come working the fruit trees  
They rode on the trucks 'til they took down and died*

Martin Hoffman was intrigued. As a Colorado university student he had attended a performance by Seeger that included his chant version of "Deportee." He decided such a stirring lyric needed a melody. Years later, in 1958, while he was working as a high school teacher in California, Hoffman came up with a simple yet beautiful melody in rancho waltz time that gave wings to Guthrie's angry poem.

Seeger loved it. So did Guthrie. Legions of folk and rock musicians came to love "Deportee," too.

*Some of us are illegal and some are not wanted  
Our work contract's out and we have to move on  
600 miles to that Mexican border  
They chase us like outlaws,  
like rustlers, like thieves*

Guthrie grew up in Oklahoma during the disastrous Dust Bowl years and, like the deportees in his poem, led a vagabond life looking for work and trying to survive. He played piano and guitar in bars and clubs when he could get a gig, but he also harvested wheat in Texas and the Midwest as well as fruit in California's Central Valley. He learned passable Spanish and grew fond of the hardworking migrants who selflessly labored to provide for their families.

"Jest about the most noble folks I've ever seed," Guthrie wrote in his intentionally Oklahoman lexicon.

He soon got his first real break performing his songs on the radio in Los Angeles and recording deals followed. Guthrie's train-hopping travels informed his classics like "This Land is Your Land," "So Long, It's Been Good to Know You," "Do-Re-Mi," "Billy the Kid," "Jesus Christ," "Pretty Boy Floyd," "Philadelphia Lawyer" and many others. Bob Dylan has been called America's greatest songwriter, but he declines the title and insists Woody Guthrie was "a God-given gift to everyone."

Guthrie whisperer Cisco Houston took the first crack at recording a radio version of "Deportee" and in 1961 the song began to get airplay in pockets across the nation.

*We died in your hills, we died in your deserts  
We died in your valleys and died on your plains  
We died 'neath your trees and we died in your bushes  
Both sides of the river we died just the same*

Cesar Chavez was tired. In 1961 he worked as a labor organizer who encouraged Mexican-Americans (as Latinos were most commonly referred as in that time) to vote. He had scratched his way out of the strawberry and lettuce fields into the middle class and had a home in San Jose. Like many revolutionaries, Chavez had his moments of doubt and bouts of exhaustion. His grandchildren—including granddaughter Christina who attended Southwestern College—said "Deportee" changed the course of his life.

Christina Chavez said her grandfather did what so many Americans do when they hear a compelling new song on their car radio—he stopped in his driveway with the motor running and the radio playing Cisco Houston's recording of "Deportee." It was a seminal moment that led to his decision to double down on his work on behalf of migrants and form the precursor of the United Farm Workers union.

"It shook him up," she said. "Right to his core."

*The sky plan caught fire over Los Gatos canyon  
A fireball of lightning that shook all our hills  
Who are these friends, all scattered like dry leaves?  
The radio said they are just deportees*

Houston's recording launched a thousand ships—more accurately, a thousand versions of "Deportee: Plane Wreck at Los Gatos." Folk, country and rock stars from each generation have kept the song and its message alive for 75 years. Human rights leader Enrique Morones said it is one of the greatest and most important songs ever written.

"There are a lot of great protest songs, but none more stirring than 'Deportee,'" he said. "This is the 75th anniversary of a song that is still recorded and performed by renowned musicians. That is a testament to its value and its staying power."

Southwestern College Professor of Mexican-American Studies Dr. Gerardo Rios said the song "hits home" for him because he has family members who have been mistreated laborers.

"For a long time Mexican-Americans were seen as disposable in American society," he said. "Woody Guthrie captured that and brought that message to a broader audience. Workers were not seen as braceros, but were called deportees in a degrading manner. Their names did not matter. They were people who did not matter."

Rios said artists have special power and an obligation to use it well.

"The song brought the experience of my family to others in very concrete terms," he said. "It says 'we're flying you back to the border.' Now we need you, now we don't."

"Deportee" has enlightened listeners for three quarters of a century, Rios said.

"It gives exposure to the horrific treatment of Mexicans and migrant workers that is still the situation today," he said. "I think the song keeps alive a critical American reality that migrant labor is the backbone of our economy."

*Is this the best way we can grow our big orchards?  
Is this the best way we can grow our good fruit?  
To fall like dry leaves and to rot on the topsoil  
And be called by no name except deportees?*

Morones said Woody Guthrie and Martin Hoffman are still working their artistic magic from their perches in Heaven.

"I recent years I've heard 'Deportee' in 'La Pastorela' at the Globe Theater and on KPBS," he said. "The great Chunky Sanchez used to sing it at Chicano Park. Those 28 farm workers are martyrs whose tragic stories caused many thousands of people to think about the way we treat migrant labor in the United States and around the world. That's the power of music."