

## A MAN'S MAN

David Hernandez, Mesa Community College  
Honorable Mention, Creative Non-Fiction

*Man is the measure of all things,  
of the things that are, that they are,  
and of the things that are not, that they are not.*  
-Protagoras 490 B.C.

OCCASIONALLY, I'll hear a man refer to another man as being a "man's man." He is usually referring to someone like a roofer because of his rock-like hands, or maybe a professional athlete who has an "old school" mentality when it comes to his game. Anytime that conversation comes up I whip out my measuring stick. My grandfather, whom I refer to as Tata, is the epitome of a "man's man."

My Tata was a *braccero*, meaning he spent his days walking up and down fields of cotton using his hands and arms to comb the fluffy white blossom off its wiry stem and into his *costal*, an elongated burlap sack that he would drag behind him. He worked on Mr. Charles Beal's farm which is where he met my grandmother, Nana. She was a *criada*, a maid for the Beal family. Even though my Nana was a single mother with five kids, frowned upon in those days especially in old Mexico, they eventually got married, had five more kids and moved from Palomas, Mexico to Deming, New Mexico. Over the years, my Tata gained a lot of experience in the farming and ranching industry, eventually becoming a sort of Jack of all trades for Keeler Brothers Incorporated, a huge farming and ranching outfit on the outskirts of town.

On April 30, 1983 at the age of fifty-eight, Tata was working out in the fields, building a new fence separating a company field from a neighbor's grazing pasture. He and fellow farmhand, Miguel, were using a tractor driven auger to bore fence post holes that were fifteen inches in diameter and six feet deep. Miguel was operating the auger from inside the tractor cab and Tata was outside guiding the bit to ensure the proper spacing and depth of the holes and clearing the bit's spiral blade of packed dirt clods. The ground around Deming is infested with patches of caliche, a hard, clay-like dirt that is nearly impenetrable with a shovel and tends to bind up auger bits. While the bit was rotating in reverse, Tata was clearing it when his fingers got caught between the blade and a solid chunk of caliche. His leather gloves acted as a lubricant, further wedging his hand. Talk about being caught between a rock and a hard place; he began spinning around with the bit at about sixty RPM's. With legs flailing in the air, he screamed at Miguel to stop the bit. In a panic, Miguel slammed the auger into the opposite direction at full speed. Tata's body violently jerked in the other direction and after a few revolutions, gave way to inertia and separated from his arm, flinging him fifty feet into a freshly plowed field. After realizing what had happened, Miguel split the scene and wasn't seen again until weeks after the accident.

Drifting in and out of consciousness, Tata stumbled to the tractor, shut down the auger and proceeded to retrieve his torn limb from the auger's strong-arm grip. He yanked and tugged at his arm but to no avail; cutting his losses short, he staggered to the work truck. To this day he remembers nothing about the drive but he managed to

navigate the standard transmission, 3/4 ton Dodge pickup sixteen miles to the county hospital. He says, "*Que bueno que era la izquierda*"—good thing it was the left arm. Because of the lack of emergency services in Deming, he was rushed to Valley Memorial in Las Cruces, sixty miles away. The emergency crew said his heart stopped three times on the drive and twice it started back up before they could shock him. A couple of my uncles were able to retrieve the arm but the extent of the damage was so great that efforts to reattach the arm were unsuccessful. Tendon damage was so bad, mechanical prosthetics proved to be of no use as he was fitted with a cosmetic piece. Following weeks of therapy, he slowly adjusted to life with one arm. They say when someone loses a limb, the remaining limb attempts to pick up the slack, gaining strength and dexterity. It must be true because he has spent his time gardening, cooking, cleaning, driving and caring for my terminally ill grandmother who just recently lost her two-year battle with cancer. Now he has assumed sole responsibility of his blind, retarded, forty-year-old stepdaughter whom he tends to with the same affection and care that a first time mother would exhibit with her toddler. The last time I visited him, I found him using my Nana's old Singer sewing machine to stitch a shirt he had torn while changing the transmission fluid on his car.

There are many ways to measure one man's manliness, whether it be by sheer brute strength or perhaps his skills in attracting members of the opposite sex. My measuring stick stands about five and a half feet tall and goes by the name of Pedro Manual Rios, a.k.a Tata.

