

**The Rivas Family**  
**Mexico Café, Skagit County's First & Original**  
By Dan Royal

Skagit County's first Mexican restaurant, the Mexico Café, was created mixed ingredients of events that took place in the early 1960's

The old home base in Denver Colorado was no longer an option for Mama Rivas. The previous few years had been the beginning of the oldest children leaving home. Daughter Helen had married. Frank, then Robert joined the Marines Corp. The youngest and final child of 12, a boy named Adolph was born to Jesse & Celia Riva at this time. A daughter by the name of Hope had died in infancy.

A visit from Aunt Mary during that time encouraged the family to start doing more migrant work in the Toppenish, Washington area. Sons Phillip, Thomas, Ernie, Jesse Jr., and Steve were old enough to help in the fields, even young Mary and Debbie did their share. Plus Aunt Mary had her own Mexican restaurant called Adolph's El Charrito which was doing well and she used Celia's help in the kitchen. Thomas was very allergic to the chemicals in the fields so he worked in the restaurant as well.

The family had actually done migrant work in the Yakima valley since the late 1930's and 40's but never in Skagit County until 1962. First came the asparagus and apples in Toppenish during springtime, then to Skagit during the summer. Strawberries, peas and cucumbers between Bill Fisher's Sandy Ridge Farms in Bow where Phillip had been the first family member to work berries in the valley and Roger Knutzen's farm on Avon-Allen Rd. working cucumbers, cauliflower, broccoli and peas.

Finally in 1964 Celia Rivas had enough of the cramped and shabby migrant camps even with the gracious help of the farmers. She told her husband they needed to settle down in one place and she felt Skagit County offered more opportunities for their children. Thomas took the occasion to suggest to his parents that with the restaurant experience they had gained in Toppenish and with no Mexican restaurant in Skagit County, that they open their own.

At the time it was a risky idea, because unlike today, a Mexican restaurant was few and far between. They had no idea how people in the Skagit valley would take to a more exotic and spicy food. It took talking Helen, who was still living in Denver, into the idea of making a life change to join the family to cement the deal.

With \$1500.00 from the 1964 season contributed by the boys working in the fields, in the fall of 1964 an old fuel station turned restaurant, the Country Kitchen, was available on the corner of Avon-Allen Rd. and (today's recently torn down Village Pantry) Highway 20 for \$65.00 a month and a deposit for the electricity. \$200.00 went to second hand utensils and dishes, moneys for furniture and the rest for food.

The earliest menu was strictly made up of Tacos, Tostadas, Enchiladas, and Tamales and of course Hamburgers as a first time customer nervous about the state of something new and different would order a hamburger while checking out the cleanliness of the place.

Everything was homemade and Celia made tortillas by hand with Helen, already a fantastic cook worked in the kitchen as well. Thomas worked as the waiter and personality in the front of the house while educating the customers about Mexican food. Jesse ran the business and the finances with a tight fist and with all the kids contributing with money from work in the fields or work in the restaurant while also going to school, they managed to survive the first couple tentative years.

This early part of the story on the origins of the Mexico Café is just an appetizer to the rest of the story. It's the struggles and heartache that make up a pioneer experience and families who survive the battles together are the stronger for it. The Rivas family had this fortitude in spades and they are still extremely close knit. This is why they are honored as the 2009 Family Contributing to the Pioneer Spirit by the Skagit County Pioneer Association at this year's annual picnic and general meeting at La Conner's Pioneer Park.

**The Gates Family**  
**Earliest Founders & Pioneers in Skagit County**  
**2009 Family of the Year**

Jasper Gates may be the better known of the four Gates siblings to settle in Skagit County but his brothers Thomas and John and his sister Mary Elizabeth Gates Hensley who followed Jasper to the valley certainly fall in the category as pioneers in their own right.

They were born and raised in a large family in Cole and Adair Counties, Missouri to Abel and Mary (Burns) Gates; four of their eleven siblings died at a very young age. They were educated and grew up working the farm with their father. When the Civil War came during the 1860's Jasper and Thomas fought for the north cause while brother John the Southern Confederacy; a very common occurrence with large families at this time, especially in the state of Missouri.

Jasper's grgrgranddaughter, Beverly Erven of Vancouver, Washington related the following for the book, "Skagit County Washington and its People"; "The first time Jasper came out west he was a part of a surveying crew. He traveled the Oregon Trail thru Washington Territory with an army survey crew. He traveled across the Cascade Pass, where the crew built a surveyor's shack that was found many years later. Inside of it were some papers signed by Jasper Gates. "

The Gates siblings all followed the same route to what is now Skagit County. They traveled by wagon from Missouri to San Francisco, then by schooner to Seattle and by steamboat to the area of Utsalady on Camano Island. Work and living quarters were generally available and it was a chance to stop, resupply, gain their belongings and get their bearings. From this point they all traveled up the Skagit by steamboat as far as the river was navigable, then by canoe or row boat to the area south of what is now Mount Vernon, known as the Fir Island, Skagit City and Dry Slough areas.

The general location of the Gates homesteads encompass areas in Skagit City for Jasper, Dry Slough for Thomas and an area south and east of Mount Vernon which was the site of English Camp for John. Mary Elizabeth, who followed some ten years later traveled by transcontinental railroad on the first leg of the journey, then with her husband, Elcana Hensley, followed the usual route north and settled some 2 ½ miles southeast of Mount Vernon.

Jasper, raised as a farmer and business man on his father's farm and packing company in Missouri, contributed to the development of the area by moving north of the huge log jam on the Skagit, perhaps envisioning the day when the jam would be removed and the powerful Skagit River controlled and used for navigation and commerce. To this end, he settled and was a primary influence in the development of Mount Vernon.

Thomas, who remained a farmer, cleared land and put in crops, raised livestock in the Dry Slough area, located between the north and south forks of the Skagit. This area remains dedicated to the agricultural business today.

John, who was raised on the farm and had skills in the logging field, followed his trade and settled among the forested area. He worked as a logger while clearing approx. 23 acres, establishing an orchard and meadow land home south of Mount Vernon.

Mary Elizabeth and husband Elcana Hensley settled on a ranch 2 ½ miles east of Mount Vernon near Big Lake, east of Laventure Road.

Today many Gates descendants with names like Youngquist, Egbers, Hanstad, Peth, Warfield, reside in the valley and continue to enjoy the results of the vision of their ancestors. They are honored as the 2009 Family of the Year by the Skagit County Pioneer Association at this year's annual picnic and general meeting at La Conner's Pioneer Park.