

From Repatriation to the President's Cabinet: Romana Acosta Bañuelos

By Jack L. August, Ph.D.



Romana **A**costa **B**añuelos, born in Miami, Arizona on March 20, 1925, appeared destined to live a life of quiet desperation. Her father worked for the Miami Copper Company earning \$3.00 per day, she

attended the segregated Bullion Plaza Elementary School built in 1923 for the town's Mexican children, and some of her earliest memories were ones of poverty and destitution. By 1933 the Depression wrought economic havoc on Arizona's copper country miners and Gila County officials and mining company executives arranged for the repatriation of Mexican families whose jobs had disappeared. The Acosta family was one of those repatriated from Miami to Mexico. Young Romana, eight years-old at the time of repatriation, never forgot the humiliation of becoming an unwanted Mexican and joining the migrant stream southward. The family joined relatives in Sonora, Mexico, and continued its struggle for survival. Romana began rising early to tend the crops and helped her mother in the kitchen as well, making empanadas that her mother sold to bakeries and restaurants to make extra money. Romana later recalled that her mother "was the type of woman who taught us how to live in any place and work with what we have." She noted also that her mother was a resourceful businesswoman who presented a strong role model for what a woman could do economically.

Bañuelos married in Mexico at age 16 and had two sons, Carlos and Martin, by age 18, but her husband deserted the family in 1943. She returned to the United States with her children. Some reports speculate she worked in an El Paso, Texas laundry for a time, while others have suggested she followed an aunt to Los Angeles. Most accounts describe Bañuelos arriving in Los Angeles with her children, unable to speak English, and with only seven dollars to her name.

She quickly found two jobs; as a dishwasher during the day and as a tortilla maker from midnight to 6 a.m. Romana soon saved \$400.00 which she used to buy a tortilla-making machine, a corn grinder, and a fan and made \$36.00 on the "factory's" first day of business in 1949. The tortilla venture turned profitable quickly and as

post-World War II Los Angeles boomed with opportunity so too did Romana's tortilla venture. In 1964 she established "Ramona's Mexican Food Products, Inc." and profits continued to grow. There is some discrepancy as to how the business' name came about: some suggest the sign painters made a mistake when spelling "Romana"; others argue "Ramona" was an early California folk hero; and still others believe it was a product of people's unfamiliarity with the name "Romana." Regardless, by the mid-1960s, Ramona's Mexican Food Products, Inc. was thriving and Bañuelos had a daughter, whom she named Ramona after the business.

As her personal and professional success grew, Romana never forgot her repatriation experience and vowed to help the less fortunate in East Los Angeles. In fact, shortly after she formed her food products company she founded the "Ramona's Mexican Food Products, Inc. Scholarship Program" which assisted college-bound Mexican American students. Her public stewardship reached beyond the scholarship program into the realm of community empowerment. In 1965 she and her business partners created the Pan-American National Bank of East Los Angeles. In 1969, Romana became its Chairman of the Board of Directors. Within ten years the Pan-American National Bank held deposits of \$38.8 million and assets of \$41.4 million. Romana received recognition beyond her wildest dreams throughout the business world. She was named "Outstanding Businesswoman of the Year" and Los Angeles Mayor Sam Yorty presented her with an award from the Los

Angeles County Board of Supervisors for her tireless efforts in working to better the lives of the poor in her community.

Romana's business talent drew the attention of President Richard M. Nixon and in 1971 he nominated her for the position of Secretary of the U.S. Treasury and she was confirmed. She became the highest ranking Mexican American in U.S. government during the Nixon administration and "ran the U.S. Treasury as a business and not just another wing of the government." She served until 1974 when she returned to the private sector, where she divided her time between Ramona's Mexican Food Products, Inc. and the Pan-American National Bank of East Los Angeles. By 1979, Ramona's was making and distributing 22 different food products. It had more than 400 employees and sales of \$12 million a year. The company's success was instrumental in the popularization of Mexican cuisine in the United States. As the Hispanic population of the country grew, of course, so did sales of tortillas, empanadas, and many other traditional favorites.

Until recently Bañuelos continued to serve as president of Ramona's and Pan-American National. She has since retired and allowed her children to take over the food products company and the bank. Indeed, from an Arizona copper mining town to repatriation to Mexico to the President's cabinet, Romana Acosta Bañuelos's unlikely rise to national prominence reveals much about her spirit, her ability to overcome personal and institutional prejudice, and the hope inherent in the American dream.

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