The Race

“Look, guys, here comes old Cayetano. Let’s have some fun.” said Oscar Valencia to his mischievous cohorts, Beto Gutierrez, Cuco Rodriguez and Carlos Ponce. They weren’t a bad bunch, just a little irreverent and disrespectful, but normally just for fun. They were more rascal than criminal.

Cayetano Moreno was known throughout El Modena as “Compa” and the standard greeting he gave and received was, “Ay Compa”. He walked with a slow slouching shuffle, covering most of the north side of the community on his late afternoon walks. Most folks said he spent so much time on his walks just to get away from his overbearing wife, Maria. Whatever the reason, those walks kept him fit and hale, despite his emaciated appearance.

“Ay Compa”, said Oscar with a slightly sarcastic tone, “you walk as slow as a tortuga and just faster than a caracol. ¡Muevete, viejo!”

“Montón de cabrónes, ¿como no respéitan a sus mayóres?” asked old Cayetano, scolding Oscar and his accomplices. Normally, Cayetano tolerated a small dose of fun and joking, but now he felt that he had been seriously disrespected, Oscar likening his gait to somewhere between that of a tortoise and a snail.

“Calmate, Viejo, no te enojes tanto!”, reasoned Oscar, as he saw that he had gotten under the old man’s skin. “Ay Compa, I will make it up to you. What do you say we have a race down to the plaza in Orange and back?”

“Just say when, bribonés! I’ll teach you all a lesson.”

So, old Cayetano had called Oscar’s bluff. A race to downtown Orange and back was about 6 miles distance. There was no backing down now, but Oscar thought he could convince Cayetano that a race of such a long distance would be foolhardy for someone of his age.

“Look, Compa, it would be dangerous for you to go that far. You could die. Your wife, Maria, needs you. It’s not worth the risk. Let’s just forget about it. What do you say?”

“No!” bellowed old Cayetano. “You disrespected me, then you challenged me and I say the race is on!”

It wasn’t long before word spread throughout the community on both sides of Chapman Avenue that Compa and Oscar were going to race to Orange and back. Details of who challenged whom differed, but the whole community was buzzing with excitement as the day of the race was nearing.

It was springtime, 1933, the early years of the Great Depression and the folks of El Modena were always looking for a bit of diversion and this race was just what the doctor ordered. El
Modena had small-time carnivals passing through from time to time, setting up in various vacant lots around the community, with their various games, sideshows and rides. They also had infrequent Jamaicas (pronounced Ha-Mykas), fundraising celebrations put on by the local chapter of the Sociedad de Progresistas, a Mexican-American fraternal organization. And, there was the guy that would come by once a month or so to show movies outdoors on a portable screen in one of the aforementioned lots, setting up his projector and sound system on the back of his flatbed truck, with folks paying a few cents for the right to sit and watch. Of course, folks had to bring their own seats.

As slow as the economy was, there was still plenty of work in and around the orange and lemon groves of Orange County. Old Cayetano picked oranges for a living and, with the new crop of Valencia oranges at their peak of ripeness, he was working 5 ½ days a week, resting Saturday afternoon and all day Sunday.

It was agreed that the race would take place on Sunday, April 30, after 8:00 A.M. Mass, starting from in front of La Purisima Mission on Center Street. The course would go ½ block west to Earlham Street then south to Chapman Avenue, followed by a right turn on westbound Chapman Avenue. The race would be down to the Plaza in Orange, negotiating around the traffic circle then east back to Earlham Street in El Modena. The participants had less than 10 days to prepare and Oscar and his cohorts could be seen running laps around the schoolyard between the segregated Lincoln and Roosevelt schools every other day or so. They figured it was not good to over train, even though they felt that there was no way they could lose. That’s right! It was supposed to be a race between Oscar and Cayetano but Oscar’s buddies wanted in on the fun also. So, THEY grew to a group of 5, including Beto Gutierrez, Cuco Rodriguez, Carlos Ponce and Renaldo Solorio. And, there were others in the community who thought it would be great fun to join in the competition, as evidenced by the sudden short supply of tennis shoes at all of the city of Orange shoe stores.

Meanwhile, people still saw Compa going for his usual afternoon walks, although he was seen walking later into the afternoon and at a faster pace than usual. There were rumors that old Compa was taking a daily tonic of orange juice, a dash of tequila and a raw egg mixed together (it was Prohibition Era, but folks still had their sources for spirits). He had been a mail carrier in Mexico before he fled to the U.S. during the Mexican Revolution. The amount of walking he had done for so many years belied his physical appearance, but he was known as a good worker in the groves, picking fruit at a steady pace with just a short break for lunch, earning enough to keep him and his Maria in beans, tortillas and an occasional cut of prime beef, with enough to pay the bills and sock a little bit away for a rainy day. His wife, Maria, kept a vegetable and fruit garden to supplement their diet.

George Bartley was the local constable and everybody in El Modena revered him for his kind and caring demeanor. He was known for even going so far as to warn the liquor runners whenever a raid by Federal agents was about to take place. The safety of all of El Modena’s residents was his responsibility, for which he took great pride. And, he assured everyone that people along the race route would be at their best behavior. Further, he warned Compa and
Oscar (and the rest of the swelling group of runners) to watch for traffic and vicious dogs along the way. George wished them all well, but, secretly, he was hoping that old Cayetano would prevail.

And so it was, as the 30th of April quickly approached, it became evident that the support for the stars of the coming event was split along age lines; with the teens and the younger adults encouraging Oscar, while the older residents were hoping that Compa would put Oscar in his place.

Young Cayetano grew up in San Diego de Alejandría in the western Mexican state of Jalisco, dreaming of one day attaining an important position in Guadalajara, the state capitol. He had become a mail carrier for the Mexican postal service in hopes of advancing one day to the big city.

There has always been turmoil in the world and the early 20th century was no exception. It seemed that there were problems in kingdoms, dukedoms, sheikdoms and empires throughout Europe and Asia. And, North America was no exception, as the dissatisfied populace of Mexico had grown so weary of President Porfirio Diaz’s tyrannical rule, that one conflict after another erupted all over the country for socialists, liberal and agrarian reasons primarily, although much of the old prejudices against the old Spanish ruling class had created an increasing danger for those who considered themselves “blue-blooded” Spanish. Roving militias randomly attacked anybody of light complexion and of obvious Spanish descent. And, the quickest path to refuge for these targeted “blue-bloods” was north to the United States.

A short swim across the Rio Grande, while risky, was much more expedient than a boat ride across the Atlantic Ocean. And, it was recognized that repatriated folks (going back to Spain, their forefathers’ homeland) might be looked upon with more disdain than actual refugees seeking asylum (in the U.S.) from the growing dangers of their homeland.

So, in 1910, when the Mexican Revolution began with the overthrow of their despised President Diaz, the flood of humanity into the U.S. began in earnest. Mexican citizens did not know from one week to the next whom to pledge allegiance to, with splintered groups of the Federalist troops, and the armed militants of regional heroes such as Pancho Villa, Emilio Zapata and Venustiano Carranza running amok. One wrong response to the Federales or the Revolucioneros could get you a bullet right between the eyes. Danger was extreme and, with Pancho Villa conducting raids across the U.S. Border, there was the real risk of encountering inhospitable American troops, who were policing the border and conducting counter-raids.

Nevertheless, several members of the Moreno clan of San Diego de Alejandría, mostly of fair-complexion and Spanish in appearance, decided it was high time to go north.

So, in the fall of 1915, brothers Agustin and Venceslao Moreno convinced their cousin, Cayetano to head north with them. For Cayetano, it didn’t take much convincing since he
found that mail delivery had become much too hazardous for his liking. And, after a long journey, highlighted by part-time employment along the way, they ended up in Lorain, Ohio, on the shores of Lake Erie.

World War 1 had started in 1914 and the U.S. government had actually appealed to Mexico for help in the form of laborers to fill the positions left open by the departed men and women in the U.S. military forces.

After 2 years of trying, Agustin, Venceslao and Cayetano could just not get used to the bitter cold winters by the lake and decided it was time to find a milder climate. Through correspondence with friends and family, they learned that the citrus industry in Orange County, CA was in dire need of men to work the harvests, so they packed up and headed west on Route 66, arriving in El Modena in a couple of weeks.

Very soon they managed to find work in the groves picking fruit. Cayetano, wiry frame and all, took to picking oranges and lemons well. Meanwhile, his cousins Agustin and Venceslao saw the need for merchants in the community of El Modena, so Agustin started a bakery, featuring all the essential Mexican baked goods, from bolillos to pan dulce and empanadas. And, Venceslao opened a small grocery store. Both Agustin and Venceslao realized that the growing community had to eat and they much preferred selling provisions over picking fruit.

Oscar Valencia was the third of the 4 children of Herminia Uribe and Mauro Valencia, who had emigrated from Autlán de Navarro, in the same state of Jalisco that the Moreno’s hailed from, at the outset of the Revolution. Herminia and Mauro arrived in California in 1913 for the same reasons as all the Mexican immigrants of the day – the bloody revolution and the opportunity to start over. Their eldest son, Enrique, was just a toddler when they first arrived in El Modena and he was soon joined by a sister, Ofelia, in 1915 and Oscar in 1917. The youngest child was Helen, who was born in 1925.

Disillusioned by life in America, Mauro returned to Mexico in 1925 and was rarely heard from after that. That left Herminia to look after her brood all by herself. The Troncoso family took in Herminia and her children while she got on her feet. Her 2 boys, Enrique and Oscar were a handful, but she managed to keep them in line while paying the bills, working at the local citrus packing houses on the Irvine and Hewes ranches.

Born deaf, Enrique didn’t let that bother him. He was an extrovert who had many friends, and they defended with ferocity anyone who made sport of his impediment. Oscar, meanwhile, was a born leader, who from a young age kept a select group of friends, involving them in various adventures around the neighborhood.

One of Oscar’s favorite pastimes was to infuriate the local farmers and citrus ranchers by courting their daughters. El Modena had a segregated school system, which went from kindergarten to 8th grade. There were 2 school buildings, Lincoln, which was for the Mexican-
American kids and Roosevelt, which was for the Anglo kids. The school board was heavily influenced by the local ranchers, farmers and their cronies and they felt, in their twisted way of thinking, that the way to keep the Mexicans as the bulwark of their work force was to keep them segregated in grade school. The number of the Mexican kids advancing to high school was much lower than that of the Anglo students, ensuring, they reasoned, a source and constant flow of excellent and highly revered workers for their farms and groves.

Word had gotten out that at one of the closed-door Board meetings, a member of the El Modena School Board had stated, “We have to keep these Mexican boys from mixing with our daughters.” This was all the encouragement that Oscar and his gang needed! They reveled in inviting the Anglo girls into the groves for quick games of hide ‘n seek and other such innocent-sounding activities.

Finally, the morning of the big race arrived! At Mass, Father Escanez, noting that it was the third Sunday of Easter, exhorted his congregants to live out the Easter message of the Resurrection and accept Jesus’ peace offering, hoping that the bitter rivalries that the upcoming race had created would be tempered to a philanthropic level.

Fat chance!

As soon as Mass ended, folks hurried out of the small wooden church as if somebody had shouted, “Fire!”, not wanting to miss the start of the epic event that was about to take place.

It was learned that Compa and Oscar, while not exactly mortgaging their homes, had put up the sizeable sum of $20 each, with the winner taking the whole $40 pot. And, there were bets being taken down at the Sanchez pool hall, around the corner from La Purisima, at the intersection of Earlham and Vine. Oscar, due to his younger age, was the clear favorite among the bettors.

So, as the runners lined up, Father Escanez bestowed a blessing upon them, sprinkling them all with Holy Water and then he shouted, “Runners on your marks, get set, go!” On cue, the steeple bell pealed several times, announcing the start of the race as well.

They were off, 20 or so participants, some dressed in baggy shorts or loose-fitting work trousers and the popular sleeve-less undershirts. Most wore tennis or canvas deck shoes, but others simply wore their comfortable work boots. And, sure enough, many of the neighborhood dogs ran out of their yards barking and nipping at the runners’ heels. After a couple of the curs got trampled and went yipping to the safety of their respective yards the rest of the dogs gave up the chase.

At the first turn onto Earlham, less than a hundred yards from the start, a number of the runners slipped on the loose gravel along the shoulder of the road, tumbled and arose with
scraped elbows and knees and decided that discretion was the better part of valor, so they retired to the convent on the corner, seeking first-aid for their injuries from the good sisters.

As they approached Chapman Avenue, where they were to turn west and continue all the way to downtown Orange, Oscar and Compa were both unfazed by the dogs and injured runners they had left in their wake. Oscar had taken off like a shot, in his gym shorts, undershirt and tennis shoes, leaving the pack quickly behind, while Compa, in an undershirt, baggy khakis and old canvas shoes, settled into a leisurely, almost effortless pace.

Running west on Chapman Avenue, they ran down the short grade at Esplanade Street and then continued towards Orange. The weather was mild and the course well-shaded, with the tall eucalyptus windbreaks on either side of the road providing protection from the morning sun.

The conditions were ideal!

As he approached the half-mile mark, Oscar glanced back and, confident that his lead was sizeable enough, he slowed down to a trot, as he was feeling winded from the quick start.

Meanwhile, Beto, Cuco, Carlos and Renaldo, though trailing, were trying to stay within shouting distance of Compa, trying to discourage the old-timer by saying things such as, “Boy, that Oscar is amazing! Look how far ahead he is. There’s no way anybody is going to catch him. Compa ought to give up right now!”

This all fell on deaf ears, as Compa kept up his leisurely pace, flashing back to his dreams of representing Mexico at the 1916 Olympics, which eventually were canceled due to World War 1. Compa thought of how dame fate could be so seemingly cruel and yet providential: His Olympic dreams were dashed, but that disappointment resulted in his being able to come to America to fill the work shoes of some doughboy fighting on the frontlines of the war somewhere in Europe.

He realized how blessed he was to have been able to come to America, with steady work, away from the brutality of the Revolution in his homeland. Putting up with young miscreants such as Oscar and his gang was a walk in the park, compared to the conditions he had left behind in his beloved Mexico.

Compa had Oscar comfortably in his sight and could see that he was actually gaining on him slightly, trailing him by about 200 yards as they approached the Santiago Creek bridge, which was about ¼ of the total race course distance.

Meanwhile, all of the other participants except for Beto, Cuco, Carlos and Renaldo had given up the chase, deciding that they would rather be back at the finish line to see if their bets were going to pay off. Oscar’s aforementioned accomplices decided to run as far as the bridge and wait for Oscar, whom, they reasoned, they would join on his victory jaunt to the finish line.
Oscar reached Tustin Street, the eastern boundary of Orange and was beginning to feel fatigued. He also had a cramp in his right side just below his ribcage which was beginning to hinder him. He eyed the recently erected water tower on the south side of Chapman Avenue at Water Street and he suddenly realized that a drink of water would sure go good right then. Another ¼ mile and he saw one of the irrigation culverts gushing water, which was irrigating the large grove alongside of the road. He dashed across the street and quickly cupped his hands and took several gulps of water. Refreshed, he ran back to the course, looking east to see where old Compa might be. To his horror, he saw Compa about 100 yards behind and closing the distance with each stride.

Oscar cursed himself for staying out late the night before, partying with his friends with large quantities of food and drink. To himself, Oscar muttered, “This viejo is incredible! What have I gotten myself into? And I bet $20 that I would whip Compa? What was I thinking?”

Frantically, he took off faster than he liked, knowing that he had to widen the gap between himself and Compa.

And along came Compa, arriving at the culvert, taking a small amount of water and splashing his face and head with the cool, clear liquid. Again, he took up the chase, sensing that Oscar was beginning to lose confidence.

At Cambridge Street, there were again signs of life, as this was where the residences on the eastern side of Orange started. Dogs barked from their front yards and many folks who had heard about the race were standing along the road, not sure whether to admire the valor or question the sanity of the runners. Nevertheless, they applauded and shouted encouragement as first Oscar ran by and then Compa a short while later.

Another ½ mile and Oscar was at the Orange Plaza, with its pretty-as-a-picture gardens and trees shimmering in the morning light. It was now about 9:30 A.M. As he negotiated the road around the plaza he stared eastward and did not see Compa. Suddenly, he glanced north and saw that Compa was directly opposite of where he was.

Compa had closed the gap to less than 50 yards! Sensing again the terror that Oscar was feeling, Compa dashed quickly into the plaza and doused himself with water from the central fountain and got back onto eastbound Chapman Avenue.

2 blocks east at Grand Avenue, Constable George Bartley sat incredulously in his car, amazed at what was transpiring. It looked as though the young buck was going to go down to a bitter and embarrassing defeat to the unassuming old-timer. He whooped with delight! And, he decided that he had better follow the runners from a safe distance back to El Modena to make sure that no shenanigans took place.
The onlookers along the street offered polite applause as the runners continued eastward. Oscar dared not look back but he was sure that he could hear footsteps. He felt sick but he knew there was no stopping now.

At Tustin Street, with just under 2 miles to go, Compa was less than 10 yards behind Oscar, enjoying himself as Oscar, with a pained expression, could sense the inevitable.

At the Santiago Creek bridge, Beto, Cuco, Carlos and Renaldo caught sight of the runners and collectively rubbed their eyes in disbelief as Oscar and Compa approached where they stood. They were running stride for stride, with Compa breathing down Oscar’s neck a couple of yards behind. Cuco thought briefly of disrupting Compa’s efforts but suddenly George Bartley appeared, giving his car’s siren a short blast and wagging his index finger at him and his friends, saying, “Don’t even think about it!”

At their best behavior, the four went back onto the course and followed from a safe distance, not wanting to miss the finish, which they now felt wasn’t going to go their way.

Compa believed strongly in the Golden Rule, seeing the value of doing “unto others as you would have them do unto you”. And, while he wanted to teach Oscar a lesson, he did not want to seriously humiliate him. So, he stayed on Oscar’s shoulder as they passed by the packing house at McPherson, again shaded from the sun by the towering eucalyptus trees on either side of the road.

As they crossed Prospect Street, Compa made his move. He overtook Oscar and passed him without so much as a peep. Oscar groaned and tried to gain his second wind but it was nowhere to be found. His face was flushed and he was gasping for air as he tried to keep up with Compa.

Up ahead at the finish line, the spectators were cheering wildly as the runners approached the grade just below Esplanade Street, with Compa holding off every challenge that Oscar had to offer.

And at last they reached Earlham Street, Oscar a good 5 yards behind Compa. He headed straight to the Friends Church parsonage, where he collapsed onto the front lawn, shouting for water.

Meanwhile, the spectators mobbed old Compa, hoisting him on their shoulders and carrying him up and down the block until he shouted, “Basta! That’s enough! Put me down!” In a show of good sportsmanship, Compa went to Oscar and said, “Nice run, Oscar.”

The good Constable Bartley gave his siren a long celebratory blast as the crowd continued to cheer. Mr. Sanchez, from the pool hall, stepped forward and handed Compa his winner’s purse of $40.
And so ended one of the most exciting events of the 1930’s in El Modena.

Mexican Revolution – 1910 – 1920
Porfirio Diaz – President
Francisco Madero
Venustiano Carranza
Pancho Villa
Emiliano Zapata

World War 1 – 1914 – 1918

Olympics – 1916 games cancelled due to WW1

Agustin, Venceslao, Jesus and Cayetano Moreno were from San Diego de Alejandría, Jalisco.

Herminia Uribe and Mauro Valencia were Oscar’s parents and were from Autlan de Navarro, Jalisco.

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Distances:
La Purisima to Earlham 0.1 mi.
Chapman 0.15
Esplanade 0.25
Prospect 0.8
McPherson 1.0
Yorba 1.3
Tustin 1.8
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