

GROWING UP SPANISH IN VERMONT

by Elisabeth Ramon Bacon



Elisabeth Ramon Bacon with her family in Barre, 1926. Photo courtesy Elisabeth Bacon.

Elisabeth Bacon was born in Barre, Vermont, in 1921. Her playmates were the sons and daughters of immigrants from Italy, Canada, England, Ireland, Scotland, Poland, and Spain. Her Spanish heritage is important to her, as it was to her parents. To pass on this cherished heritage to her children and grandchildren, she has written down these and many other memories about her childhood and the special joy of growing up Spanish in Vermont.

My parents were born in Spain. They met and married in Santander, a city on the northern coast of Spain. It was there that my brothers were born. In the early 1900s they began to think about coming to America. These were the years when ships full of immigrants were leaving Europe, boat after boat after boat, all heading for **Ellis Island**.

My father came to Barre in 1913. My mother and my two brothers left Spain in 1914 with my grandmother, an aunt, and her husband, and arrived at Ellis Island on the 30th of May, 1914. My brothers were six and not quite four years old when they came to Barre.

Our house was fairly large. We called it “The Ranch.” It was big enough for our large family, a few **roomers**, and **boarders**. During the 1920s Europeans were still arriving in Barre, looking for work and a place to raise a family. Often the men would come alone and work until they could either send for their families or go back to Spain and bring them to Barre.

There were few restaurants in Barre and none that offered the food these immigrants were accustomed to. In addition to this, there was the language barrier. These men needed a place to sleep and eat. Many families like ours made room in their homes for one or more of these men. Besides food and/or a room, these men found friendship and a family atmosphere. Many evenings would be spent sitting around the dining room table reminiscing about the old country, talking about their work or about politics, playing cards or dominoes, singing or having boisterous discussions.

There were lots of other things to keep us busy: riding inside an old tire, pushing a metal hoop with a stick or metal pipe, playing jacks or jackknife, dressing up, playing with dolls, pretending we were grown up, or playing store. Jumping rope, bouncing a ball, hopscotch, and playing marbles took up some of our time, and now and then someone would make stilts. Yo-yos were somewhat scarce, but tops were not. Not many of us had ever had a tricycle or a bicycle but some of us were lucky enough to have scooters — store-bought or homemade. An orange crate made a fine cart.

Our barn, empty and clean, had a loft which was ideal on rainy days. My father let us use one of the garages for a clubhouse. We named it "The Rinkydink Club." We furnished it with a few old chairs, a table, and odds and ends. We would play school, house, or cut paper dolls from outdated pattern books or an old catalog.

A Spanish Home

At home we were all very, very Spanish. My brothers, sisters, cousins, and I learned English from each other, in school, and from our friends. We were allowed to speak English among ourselves, but only Spanish was spoken during family conversations and at mealtime.

Sandwiches were unheard of for picnics, at least in my family. My mother would prepare the food on Saturday, and on Sunday morning she would pack it in a large, oval basket. Fried chicken or breaded veal cutlets, salad, bread, fruit, and pastry. We sat on a blanket under a tree. The boarders were always included, of course, and just before we ate Pa would check the area to see if there might be someone who had no one to picnic with.

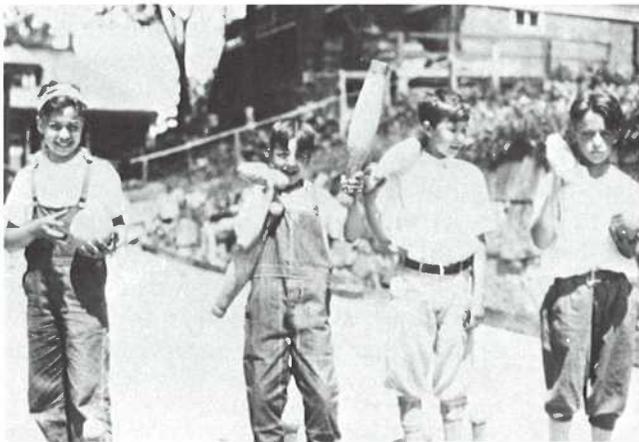
We would sometimes, usually on a Sunday afternoon, go to the Ganadara house on Quarry Hill. There we would enjoy a spring lamb roasted on a spit or perhaps a piglet or veal.

In summer the Spanish Club sponsored picnics and in winter there were dances, an occasional **masquerade**, and banquets. They were held on the top floor of the Scampini Block and sometimes at the Redmen's Hall on Brook Street. Pa would buy long, **perforated** strips of tickets for us kids and we would exchange them for ice cream and soda. There was always a *rifa* or raffle and prizes were given to the lucky ticket holders. The women and young girls dressed up for the masquerades, complete with lace *mantillas* (scarves), *peinetas* (combs), and masks.

The younger children didn't dance, but Pa would always ask me to waltz with him. When the grown-ups took a break from a waltz, or from Spanish dances like the *paso doble* or *jota*, it was fun for us kids to

slip out of our shoes and slide across the floor in our stocking feet.

There were many *boleras* in the area where the men enjoyed Spanish bowling, outdoor style. These were not public bowling alleys; they were well-packed dirt alleys in the backyards of several local homes. It was a way for families and friends to get together.



Four boys enjoy a game of *bolos*, a Spanish game similar to bowling, 1929. Photo courtesy Josephine Aja Grijuela.

My parents talked a great deal about Spain, but I never sensed homesickness or regret that they had come to this country.

Spanish Food

With a large family and boarders to feed and to please, I would say that my mother's cooking was extraordinary. All the European women, including the Spanish, were faced with problems when they couldn't find the ingredients they were accustomed to using in the daily preparation of meals. There were many things that just weren't available in local markets. Neighborhood ethnic grocery stores slowly began to appear, but until then housewives had to substitute and **improvise**.

Both our noon and evening meals were hearty. At noon there was usually soup and *cocido* or boiled din-

ner, made with whatever was available: sausage, beef, chicken, salt pork, cabbage, potatoes, carrots, and beans. After the *cocido* had simmered for some time, the broth was strained to be used for soup and the meat and vegetables were heaped on a platter or in a shallow bowl. Eggs were used in many ways: scrambled, sometimes with sausage, fried in oil or butter, boiled hard or soft.

Desserts were simple. *Arroz con leche* (rice pudding), fresh or canned fruit, baked apples (especially in winter), thinly sliced oranges sprinkled with sugar.

Our **Americanization** was helped along in certain ways. When the grown-ups were having something that we children didn't particularly like, my mother would surprise us with steamed hot dogs and rolls. Another American food that my mother adjusted to was corn on the cob. Although corn was grown in Spain for the livestock, sweet corn was not. To the amazement of my father and the boarders, who had

never seen corn eaten, mother would prepare it for us and, even more shocking, would eat it herself. They learned to accept this, and we had it often.

Holidays

Christmas and New Year's Eve were family celebrations. We called Christmas Eve *Noche Buena* and New Year's Eve *Noche Vieja*. None of us was allowed to go out on these nights. We could have our friends in, but we celebrated these holidays at home with our family. On New Year's Eve we anxiously awaited the hour of midnight. When it came, for good luck in the coming year, we each would eat a small, green, seedless grape at each stroke of the clock. Good luck was assured only if you managed to eat all the grapes before the clock stopped striking.

The Spanish people are noted for their **proverbs**. My mother knew many of them and quoted them often. On New Year's Eve, my father would use one as a toast: *Salud, amor y pesetas, en esa orden, y tiempo para disfrutarlas*. Which is to say, "Health, love, and money, in that order, and time to enjoy them."

VOCABULARY

Ellis Island - the main U.S. immigration center from 1892 to 1954, located in the New York harbor. The Statue of Liberty stands nearby.

roomer - lodger, someone who rents a room in a private home

boarder - someone who pays for and eats meals in a private home

masquerade - a costume party at which masks are worn

perforated - punched with a series of holes

improvise - invent a way to make something, using what's on hand

Americanization - the process of adopting American ways

proverbs - sayings, well-known truths



French, Irish, Scottish, Spanish, Swedish, and Yankee children, students at the Foxville Grammar School in Barre, pose for a school picture in 1936. Photo courtesy Robert Pirie.