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History of the Mexican Mafia Prison Gang

A former gang member's memoirs shed light on criminal organizations' internal operations.

July 25, 2007 | by Richard Valdemar

In his book "Mexican Mafia—Altar Boy to Hit Man," Ramon "Mundo" Mendoza tells the story of his Boyle Heights beginnings, his "state raised" crime and prison education, and his entry into the criminal elite of the Mexican Mafia prison gang. From his blood oath on 1970 to his conversion and defection in 1977, he rose through the hierarchy of the gang and became a close associate of gang "Godfather" Joe Morgan.

It is rare for law enforcement to have an opportunity to hear from the mind of one who lived it. Today, Mundo (with a new identity) continues to assist law enforcement to understand how criminal organizations operate.

The Mexican Mafia prison gang was formed in 1957 at Deuel Vocational Institution (DVI) in Tracy, Calif. DVI was the last stop for the worst youthful offenders in the California Youth Authority (CYA) system. Luis "Huero Buff" Flores from the Hawaiian Gardens gang was the founder of the Mexican Mafia. Unlike the rival Hispanic barrio gangs from which it would draw its members, it was to be a covert criminal organization modeled after the Sicilian Mafia. La EME (as the Mexican Mafia is commonly referred) was to be a prison super gang in which the leaders of their respective gangs could join together as allies and "carnales" (Spanish for brothers). Other names for the EME include the Black Hand, Los Carnales or Brothers, the Mob, and other euphemisms.

In the beginning, inmate Flores' idea was to recruit the most violent gang elite, those with a proven criminal resumes for his gang of gangs. His goals were to harness their criminal talents, to form them into a feared criminal organization, and to control the prison system. The initial goal was to control black market activities and terrorize the prison population at DVI. Soon the EME's violence and control of criminal activities became intolerable.

The California Department of Corrections (CDC) made the decision to transfer some of the EME's more violent members to hard core adult facilities, including San Quentin Prison. Unfazed by this move, EME made its presence known by conducting hits in both San Quentin and DVI. At DVI, EME members Doroteo "Sleepy" Betancourt and Frank "Moose" Bazure murdered a Correctional Officer. Recruiting members of Hispanic gangs from Northern and Southern California, the EME grew in strength and soon controlled criminal activity in both CYA and adult CDC facilities throughout the state.

Opposition to the EME materialized in the 1960's when two new prison gangs were spawned: the Black Guerilla Family (BGF)—composed of African American inmates—and the Nuestra Familia (NF)—which drew from the Northern Hispanic gangs and Southern inmates. Also entering the scene about this time was the Aryan Brotherhood (AB)—composed primarily of white inmates—which aligned itself with La EME against the BGF and NF. Each of these prison gangs also had their beginnings in CYA facilities, but from 1957 to the mid 1960's the Mexican Mafia alone ruled the prison system.

In the early 1960's at San Quentin, Flores and Rudy "Cheyenne" Cadena (the character played by Edward Olmos in the movie American Me) initiated a Mexican Mafia blood oath which in effect bound an EME member to the organization for life. Before this, gang members were allowed to return to their street gangs when they left prison. Now the only way out of the La EME was to be killed. For internal security reasons, the commandments of the Mexican Mafia were purposely never committed to paper. The following EME rules governed the life of a member under the guidelines instituted by Flores and Cadena.

- 1) A Carnal had to be sponsored by another member(s).*
- 2) Originally, unanimous approval from every EME member in the California Prison system was required for membership. Today the responsibility for recruiting a new carnal rests on those members who sponsor him and no unanimous approval is required.*
- 3) Death is the only exit from the EME.*
- 4) La EME must be a member's priority. It must come even before one's own family.*
- 5) A carnal is never to admit to the authorities or anyone outside of the organization that he is EME or that the EME exists. Admission to a person in the criminal underworld is permitted only on a strict need-to-know basis.*
- 6) A carnal never disrespects another carnal by word or deed. Personal conflicts from the past (especially street gang disputes) are to be forever buried for the larger goal of furthering La EME's criminal activities.*
- 7) A carnal is never to show fear or weakness.*
- 8) If a carnal is in the position to carry out an EME assignment, he is required to do so regardless of the degree of personal risk involved.*
- 9) The primary responsibility for the execution of an EME carnal-gone-bad is designated to the carnal that sponsored him.*

Very few Southern California gang homeboys resisted control by the EME. A great majority coveted membership and favor and would willingly "put in work" for the EME cause. These Surenos or South Siders became convenient and expendable instruments to be utilized by the EME to further its criminal enterprise. Their loyalty to EME is often expressed by identifying their respective gangs and adding "13" (for M—the 13th letter of the alphabet) or "X13" after their gang name. WFX13, for example, means the gang member is from the White Fence gang, which is an affiliate of the EME.

In the 1970's the Black Hand of the Mexican Mafia expanded outside the prison walls and evolved into a criminal organization specializing in extortion, narcotics trafficking, and other crimes. However, its main business remained murder. In 1971, EME conducted the first prison gang street execution in the Los Angeles suburb of Monterey Park. Credit for the murder went to Caucasian-by-birth but Mexican-by-choice Maravilla gang member Joe Morgan. Morgan was universally respected and he became the titular gang "Godfather." His status was also enhanced because of his vast heroin and cocaine connections in Mexico. He surrounded himself with an "inner circle" of carnales who laid the foundation in California and Mexico for EME narcotics distribution.

Ramon "Mundo" Mendoza and Edward "Sailor Boy" Gonzales were the first EME enforcers to "carry the EME gospel" throughout the state of California as they systematically replaced local drug dealers with EME dealers. Between July 1975, and November 1977, over fifty victims were murdered by EME enforcers with the bulk of these credited to Mendoza, Gonzales, Alfredo "Alfie" Sosa, and Robert "Robot" Salas.

During this period, the Mexican Mafia under the direction of Cadena infiltrated and gained control of numerous community organizations. The League of United Citizens to Help Addicts (LUCHA), Project Get Going, Community Concern, Special Program for Alcoholism and Narcotics (SPAN), and several other narcotic and alcohol prevention programs were systematically taken over and looted to provide money, influence, and vehicles for La EME. The gang used these taxpayer resources to buy drugs and murder its enemies. When Ellen Delia, the wife of Project Get Going director Michael Delia, threatened to expose the corruption to the State Senate, she was murdered in Sacramento. This system of infiltration and takeover of "self help" and gang prevention organizations continues to be one of the Mexican Mafia's favorite tactics today. They utilize corrupt and gullible politicians, policemen, churches, and attorneys to gain control of these resources.

Around 1992, Orange County law enforcement discovered that the Mexican Mafia was conducting mass meetings of numerous rival Hispanic gangs. Video surveillance of a meeting in El Salvador Park with hundreds of gang members was obtained. Several EME members were also present at this meeting, including Peter "Sana" Ojeda. Ojeda instituted a "no drive-by" edict to all Sureno street gang members. Any homeboy who engaged in a gang drive-by shooting would be "green lighted," put on the EME "hit list," and dealt with in the County Jail or on the streets. He also ordered the taxation of all drug dealers operating in areas controlled by the EME or its surrogate Sureno army.

The media and many politicians called this a "peace treaty" a good thing. However, it was in fact another means to ensure the loyalty of all Hispanic street gangs and bring them under the control of the prison gang. Drive-by shootings decreased, but gang murders increased. EME required that gang members exit their vehicles and walk up to shoot rival gang members, making misses unlikely and death assured.

In 1995 after numerous Mexican Mafia meetings were electronically recorded by a multi-jurisdictional task force in Los Angeles, 21 of 22 members and associates of the EME were prosecuted and convicted primarily under Federal Racketeer Influenced Corrupt Organizations, or RICO, statutes. Since then the EME has suffered two more RICO prosecutions in Los Angeles and another in Orange County.

Once labeled as a law enforcement myth or contrivance by community activists, this secret organization has been dragged into the clear light of the courtroom and is now recognized by the media and the general public as a diabolical criminal gang.