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Oh, They Were So Young

A glimpse of La Historia Society Museum/Museo de Los Barrios in El Monte

By Kat Avila | Web Published 11.20.2002

I got a phone call at the rectory, "Father, they are coming. A whole caravan, about 40 cars, full of Anglo toughies and Marines. They started beating zoot suiters in Los Angeles, and now are heading for El Monte." --from "Memoirs of Juanote" by Monsignor John V. Coffield, (c) 1999



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I went to visit La Historia Society Museum/Museo de Los Barrios at 3240 Tyler Avenue in El Monte, California (not to be confused with the nearby El Monte Museum of History supported by the El Monte Historical Society on the same street). I went there to hear stories, because many of the stories my father Alfred Avila told me came from his experiences growing up in this area, within a barrio called La Mision, as well as the adjacent La Colonia. La Mision is one of eight El Monte barrios documented by the museum, the other seven being Canta Ranas, Chino Camp, Hicks Camp, La Granada, Las Flores, Medina Court (Hayes), and Wiggins Camp.

The small two-room building, acquired from the City of El Monte, temporarily houses the office and budding museum of La Historia Society of El Monte. The museum's grand opening was last year on September 29, 2001. The non-profit Society was established on March



21, 1998, to preserve and showcase the local history and contributions of Mexican Americans, other Latino groups, and the Tongva people (better known by their non-indigenous name of Gabrielinos after the Mission San Gabriel).

Land for a permanent museum has been generously donated by the City of El Monte. Robert Bautista, who is on the Society's planning committee for the new facility, shared with me their ambitious plans for an autonomous center that will educate and support both students and researchers. Toward this end, the members of the Society have held fundraisers and sold calendars featuring photographs from their museum collection.

In past years, I had attended events sponsored by La Historia Society. One was a book signing by Monsignor John V. Coffield for his book "Memoirs of Juanote" in January 2000. I had wanted to see him because he had baptized me on my first birthday when he was at Dolores Mission. He was a courageous Irish American priest who had been assigned to a parish in the Medina Court (Hayes) barrio and whose activism on behalf of that parish and the surrounding immigrant community during the 1940s and 50s had an everlasting impact on the residents. He earned a lifetime membership in the California Teacher Association for his leadership during efforts to desegregate the schools in the El Monte School District.

Another La Historia Society event I had attended was a Mass and reunion of all the El Monte barrios held on September 9, 2000, partly to commemorate the founding of the original Mission San Gabriel, or Mision del Santo Arcangel San Gabriel de los Temblores, on

September 8, 1771. The barrio La Mision gets its name from its predecessor. The reunion was also held to acknowledge the beginning of the El Monte barrios from the hope-filled masses who fled the violence of the Mexican Revolution (1910-20).

"Nothing remains of the old buildings [the original Mission San Gabriel] save a few adobe tiles, which are still occasionally plowed up by the Japanese farmers....," says a 1932 Historic Spots in California guidebook. In the 1930s, the population of El Monte was 75% European/European American, 20% Mexican/Mexican American, and 5% Japanese/Japanese American.

This was the time of the repatriation of Mexicans and their U.S.-born children. I have a copy of a letter that was sent to my grandfather. It reads simply, "Will you please call at 438 So. San Pedro, Los Angeles, at 8:00 A.M. on Saturday, May 27, 1933. There is a Mexican Government Boat leaving here on the 30th of this month. This is an opportunity for you to repatriate on your own Government's Boat."

1933 was also the year Mexican and Japanese strawberry pickers in El Monte went on strike for higher wages, the "El Monte Berry Strike," and they were eventually joined by other workers in the Los Angeles area.

In the summer of 1942, after the forced evacuation of Japanese/Japanese Americans to U.S. internment camps (echoing the earlier Mexican repatriation), my father's family moved to El Monte from their previous home in an area below Boyle Heights known as "The Flats" (Old Russia Town Flats). My father attended segregated schools until 1945.

Dr. Ben Campos, the first Ph.D. to

come out of the El Monte barrios and who is my guide through La Historia Society's museum, shows me a wall filled with photographs of the schools they attended. There's Temple, Lexington, and Columbia for the lower grades. Later I look up Ben in my father's El Monte Union High School and Rosemead High School yearbooks (my father was one grade ahead). Oh, they were so young!

In the back of the museum there is a wall honoring the men and women of the local barrios who served in the U.S. military. There's a picture of Gilbert Aguilar, one of my father's closest buddies who was killed in Korea as a member of the California National Guard, the sad news received by my father while he himself was en route to Korea as a member of the U.S. Navy. Also, I see photographs of my uncles who served during World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War.

On the other walls are photographs of everyday barrio life and street maps arranged under the names of each of the barrios. There is an interesting interactivity with the community represented by yellow post-it notes on some of the photographs. The notes have been placed there by visitors recognizing people in the photographs or making corrections.

El Monte today is over 70% Latino, with Mexicans comprising the largest portion, and about 20% Asian, mostly Chinese (not including Taiwanese) and Vietnamese. La Historia Museum/Museo de Los Barrios will help El Monte residents to understand historically and culturally a large part of the city's population. The planned permanent facility will open up that opportunity even further.

Current museum hours are Tuesday,

Thursday, and Saturday, from 11:00 a.m.-3:00 p.m., and on Sunday from 1:00-4:00 p.m. Please call (626) 279-1954 to verify the museum's hours and for more information.

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