

COACHELLA

A HISTORY OF COACHELLA AND ITS PEOPLE



A History of Coachella and its People

An overview of economic opportunities and social realities facing immigrants and migrants from other states in the eastern Coachella Valley since 1900

Dedication

This book is dedicated to the immigrants of Coachella and the Eastern Coachella Valley and their descendants.

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Foreward

Several books have been written about the history of the Coachella Valley, most of which focus on the efforts of white settlers to develop the valley's agriculture and tourism industries.

But while some scholars have written extensively about the history of the Cahuilla Indians and ancient Lake Cahuilla, relatively little has been written about the immigrants from Mexico, Japan and other countries who have fueled the Coachella Valley's economic growth since the early 1900s, let alone the people who have come to this valley from other states.

The Palm Springs Historical Society published a book in 2005 titled, *We Were Here Too: The History and Contributions of the Original Mexican Families to the Palm Springs Village*. But aside from a self-published book titled *Coachella Valley Mexican American Pioneer Roots*, which was produced by the Mexican American Pioneers in December 2009, and a commemorative yearbook, *Coachella Valley Union High School: The First 50 Years 1910-1960*, relatively little has been written about the immigrant history of Coachella and the eastern Coachella Valley.

This book is an attempt to fill the void by highlighting some of the more interesting aspects of the eastern Coachella Valley's immigrant history, as told by several of the valley's pioneering immigrants and their descendants, in an effort to better inform our youth and everyone else, for that matter, about the significant economic and social contributions of immigrants in our community.

This book includes many direct quotes from heretofore unpublished accounts of Mexican American pioneers who were interviewed in 2007 by Dr. Sarah McCormick-Seekatz as part of an oral history project organized by the Coachella Valley History Museum and Cultural Center in Indio.

Dr. McCormick-Seekatz is one of a handful of historians who have taken an interest in researching various aspects of the Coachella Valley's immigrant history.

Jeff Crider, the former *Desert Sun* and *Press-Enterprise* reporter who wrote this book, also interviewed the children and grandchildren of several of the eastern Coachella Valley's Mexican American, Japanese American and African American pioneers in addition to incorporating information they presented in public displays during a March 17, 2018 Heritage Festival at the Coachella Valley History Museum.

Mr. Crider also conducted additional historical research using the valley's oldest newspapers, such as the *Coachella Valley Submarine* and *The Date Palm* as well as *The Desert Sun*, the *Los Angeles Times* and other sources, including history books and scholarly articles.

Mr. Crider interviewed people with direct knowledge of historical events that have taken place in Coachella, such as David Villarino, CEO of the Tehachapi-based Field Institute for Education and Leadership Development, who worked as a bodyguard for Cesar Chavez during the farmworker protest marches of the 1970s, which riveted national media attention on Coachella as the United Farm Workers fought for their right to collective bargaining, for better pay and working conditions and for protection from pesticides.

As you will see in the pages of the book, immigrants have played key roles in Coachella Valley's history. They not only worked for the Southern Pacific Railroad, which brought settlers from across the United States into the Coachella Valley, but they nurtured the growth of the valley's agriculture industry, including our famous date palms and table grape vineyards. Some became farmers with their own ranches. Many immigrants were already successful business operators in Mexico when political violence involving the Mexican Revolution and the Cristero Rebellion prompted them to leave their native country for a new life in the U.S.

Coachella's immigrants and their families worked in every industry, including the valley's first hotels and restaurants. They fought alongside U.S. troops in World Wars I and II, in Korea, Vietnam as well as Iraq and Afghanistan. Many distinguished themselves with their service.

The successes and perseverance of Coachella's immigrants and their families are particularly noteworthy given the many periods of economic, social and political discrimination they have had to endure and overcome at various times during the past 120 years.

Many immigrants who came to the eastern Coachella Valley from Mexico during the first half of the 20th century were segregated by classroom or placed into separate schools distinct from anglo students, according to Mexican American pioneer families interviewed by Dr. McCormick-Seekatz. The practice of segregating Mexican American students in California did not end until after a U.S. District Court ruling in 1946, which found that segregating Mexican American students violated the 14th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. The case was a precursor to the U.S. Supreme Court's 1954 Brown vs. Board of Education decision, which made it illegal to segregate black and white students across the country.

Coachella's Mexican immigrants and U.S.-born citizens of Mexican descent also suffered economic and political discrimination throughout much of the Great Depression because of concerns they were taking away jobs from anglo workers. Between 400,000 and more than 1 million Mexican and Mexican-American workers and their families were deported to Mexico between 1929

and 1934 in a dark and seldom talked about chapter of American history called the “Mexican Repatriation,” a topic that is also explored in this book.

While anglos feared job competition from Mexican immigrants during the Great Depression, growers in the Coachella Valley and across the country were desperate for their help during World War II, when many of America’s able-bodied men were sent to fight overseas. The federal government’s enactment of the Bracero Program on Aug. 4, 1942 helped to ensure that growers could offset World War II-related farm labor shortages by importing temporary guest laborers from Mexico. The Bracero Program continued until 1964.

Coachella’s immigrant families not only endured the ups and downs of anti-immigrant sentiment in the Coachella Valley and across the country, but many of them prospered, starting their own ranches and other businesses and building the sense of community that we have today.

It’s important for Coachella’s youth and for everyone else to know about the important roles that immigrants have played in building and expanding the agriculture and tourism economies of the Coachella Valley because this is part of our history. It’s also important for everyone to be aware of the injustices that various immigrant communities and ethnic groups have suffered in the past — not only in the eastern Coachella Valley, but across the country — so that current and future generations can take the necessary steps to promote positive social changes that are needed if we ever hope to live up to the ideals of equality that America’s Founding Fathers articulated in the Declaration of Independence 243 years ago.

It’s also important for our youth to be cognizant of their own talents and of their own abilities to make positive economic, social and political impacts in their own lives, in their communities and in the world.

With this in mind, the book also highlights the rise of several Mexican American politicians from Coachella, many of whom have earned advanced degrees from some of America’s most prestigious universities and demonstrated, through their own highly visible careers, some of the ways in which immigrants and their children and grandchildren can advance into professional careers and make positive impacts in their communities.

This book concludes by providing striking examples of East Valley children of immigrants who have overcome daunting obstacles to pursue their dreams in healthcare, in government and in law. Each of them are convinced that anyone, really, can change their circumstances if they work hard in school, make use of mentors, and seize opportunities for education, internships and work that come their way.

We hope their stories inform and inspire current and future descendants

of eastern Coachella Valley immigrants, and that they take advantage of Coachella's new library and use its educational resources to build their successes in school and in the workplace so that they can pursue their dreams and make their own positive impacts, not only in Coachella and other East Valley communities, but wherever their talents take them.

— Mayor Steven Hernandez, October 1, 2019

Acknowledgements

This book was made possible by members of the Coachella City Council with the opening of the city's new library.

Since relatively little has been written about the immigrant history of Coachella and the eastern Coachella Valley, the City Council felt it was important to produce a history book that highlights the positive contributions of immigrants and their descendants in fueling the growth and development of Coachella Valley's agriculture and tourism industries.

Councilmembers also felt it was important to include discussion of the various types of discriminatory practices that took place during the first half of the 20th century and beyond that are seldom, if ever, addressed in high school textbooks. These topics include the segregation of Mexican American schoolchildren, the repatriation of Mexican families during the Great Depression, and deed restrictions that prohibited African American ownership of land.

Mayor Steven Hernandez and Councilmembers Philip "Felipe" Bautista, Megan Beaman Jacinto, Steve Brown, Josie Gonzalez, Emmanuel Martinez and Beatriz "Betty" Sanchez represented the city as this book was being written and published.

I owe a great deal of thanks to Raymond Torres and Gilda Guitron of the Mexican American Pioneers and to the Coachella Valley Historical Society, Inc. for their guidance and for making their archives available for my research, including transcripts of interviews with several Mexican American pioneers that document critical periods in the eastern Coachella Valley's immigrant history. I also wish to thank Dr. Sarah McCormick Seekatz, a local historian who conducted extensive interviews with the eastern Coachella Valley's Mexican American pioneers and provided further insights and guidance to help me understand the valley's history. Louise Rodarte Neeley, former chairwoman of

the La Quinta Historical Society, provided tremendous insights over multiple interviews as did her cousin, Gilbert Hernandez. I also want to thank several of the valley's African American pioneers, including R. Gene Wilson and Leah Jordan of Indio, and Shirley Wallace of Thermal, for their insights into their experiences and those of their families in the eastern Coachella Valley.

Others who helped provide insights and perspectives for this book include Christian Paiz, an assistant professor of ethnic studies at the University of California, Berkeley, who grew up in Thermal; David Villarino, CEO of the Techachapi-based Farmworker Institute for Education and Leadership Development; Bianca Berriozábel, operations coordinator for Pueblo Unido CDC; Jean Martinez of Indio; as well as Jonathan Hoy and Andrea Carranza of the city of Coachella, who provided research and fact-checking support.

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While I have attempted to make this book as accurate as possible, any errors of fact or interpretation are my own.

— Jeff Crider

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Chapter 1

Coachella: A city of immigrants

According to the latest U.S. Census, 97.5 percent of Coachella's 45,443 residents are Hispanic, and 39.6 percent of them are foreign-born immigrants.

For over a century, in fact, immigrants from Mexico and their descendants have provided most of the manpower for the Coachella Valley's agriculture and tourism industries. Immigrants from Central America and their descendants are also joining their ranks in increasing numbers.

"Immigrants of Mexican and Central American background are extremely important for the agricultural sector in the Coachella Valley as they are the only ones who are willing to perform the arduous work under extreme weather conditions in order to put food on (people's) tables," said Bianca Berriozábel, operations coordinator for Pueblo Unido CDC, a non-profit organization dedicated to economic development, infrastructure needs and affordable housing in the eastern Coachella Valley.

"It is through their hard labor that the Coachella Valley continues to produce millions of dollars in revenue from the crops grown each year," she said.

Indeed, \$639.6 million in agricultural products were produced in the Coachella Valley in 2016, according to the Riverside County Agricultural Commissioner's Office.

Immigrants also provide much of the labor for the valley's \$5.5 billion tourism industry, which includes more than 18,000 hotel rooms and 124 golf courses.

"A lot of the folks working in the hotels, the golf course landscapers, and the people working in the kitchens of restaurants are immigrants, and a great percentage of them are from Latin America," said Christian Paiz, an assistant professor of comparative ethnic studies at the University of California, Berkeley, who grew up in Thermal.

But while many of today's Coachella residents have family just across the border in Mexicali, the earliest waves of Mexican immigrants came to Coachella and other East Valley communities from throughout Mexico. Indeed, many of the valley's earliest Mexican immigrants sought refuge here as they fled the political violence and economic instability caused by the Mexican Revolution and later the Cristero Revolution of the 1920s, according to historical accounts documented by Coachella Valley's Mexican American Pioneers.¹

The Coachella Valley's farm fields also enticed immigrants of Mexican

¹ *Coachella Valley Mexican American Pioneers*, (2009). *Coachella Valley Mexican American Pioneer Roots*.

descent who had previously settled in Arizona and other states and worked in agriculture or mining.

Some of the earliest Mexican immigrants, however, came to the Coachella Valley and other areas of the U.S. to help build the first railroads, according to Dr. Jeffrey Marcos Garcilazo, who documented their efforts in his 2016 book, *Traqueros: Mexican railroad workers in the United States, 1870-1930*.

“During the late 1800s,” he wrote, “virtually all types of native-born and immigrant labor worked on the tracks in this region at one time or another. However, by the turn of the century, Mexican immigrant labor far outnumbered all other groups of immigrant and or native-born labor on the tracks in the Southwest.”²

Coachella not only attracted Mexicans, but immigrants from many other countries, including Japan, Portugal, Turkey, Armenia, as well as migrants from other states, including African Americans fleeing persecution in the South.

² Garcilazo, Jeffrey Marcos. *Traqueros: Mexican Railroad Workers in the United States, 1870-1930*, (2016), 11.

Chapter 2

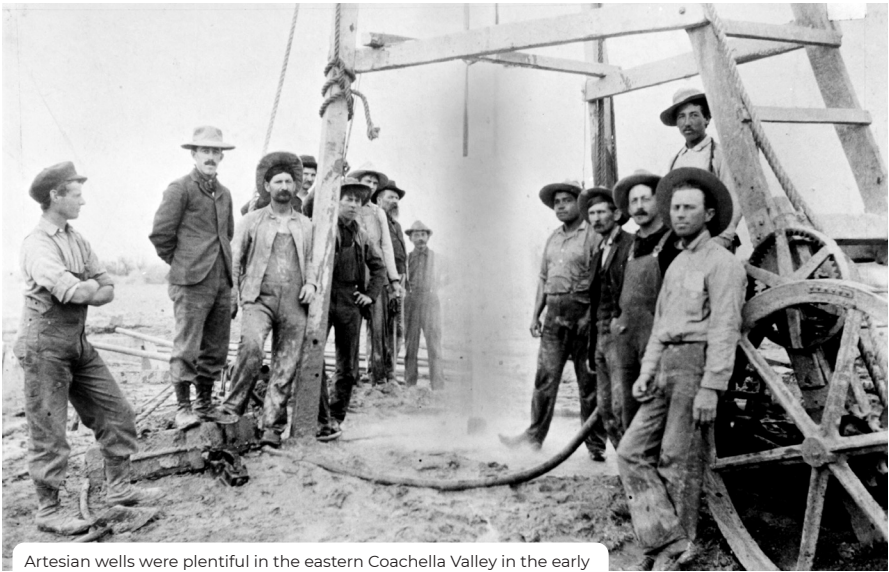
The birth of Coachella and the eastern Coachella Valley's agriculture industry

While Coachella's growth has been fueled by mostly Mexican immigrants for more than a century, the townsite was originally developed by white settlers who came into the Coachella Valley following the construction of a Southern Pacific Railroad line between Los Angeles and Yuma.

Jason L. Rector was the first recorded non-Native American to make a permanent home in Coachella, which was originally called Woodspur.

A native of Iowa, Rector was active in the real estate, farming and cattle businesses before accepting a job with Southern Pacific Railroad company and the A.N. Towne Estate to harvest a dense growth of mesquite trees in the eastern Coachella Valley for the Los Angeles market.

Rector established the mesquite wood siding or slow-speed section of track known as Woodspur where train cars filled with lumber could be loaded for transport to Los Angeles.



Artesian wells were plentiful in the eastern Coachella Valley in the early 1900s. Photo courtesy of the Coachella Valley Historical Society.

But the development of Woodspur into the thriving farming community of Coachella didn't take place until after Rector and his brother, Lon B. Rector, drilled a well in April 1900 near the corner of Grapefruit Avenue and Fifth Street

and discovered a significant groundwater supply. They quickly realized that the local groundwater supply could transform the desert sands of the eastern Coachella Valley into productive farmland.

“Thus fortified with a water supply, the Rector brothers began, in November 1900, to clear the native brush from a tract of twenty-five acres, which, in the course of the next three months, they planted to barley, wheat, cantaloupes, watermelons and sugar beets,” the *Los Angeles Times Magazine* wrote in a March 23, 1902 report, adding, “The land proved wonderfully fertile, and all of the crops did well, coming to maturity in a phenomenally short time.”

It didn’t take long for enterprising farmers to follow the Rectors’ lead.

Indeed, two years after the Rectors drilled their test well, there were over 100 artesian wells and growing numbers of settlers who were transforming the eastern Coachella Valley into productive farmland. The *Times* noted that the economic incentive to develop the Coachella Valley into farmland was the fact that Coachella Valley farmers could produce crops earlier than any other area of the country.

“The whole secret of this profitable production lies, of course, in the fact that the desert farmers are able to capture the very earliest market,” the *Times* wrote. “Their crops mature at least a month earlier than those of the Salt River Valley, near Phoenix, Ariz., and the Salt River crops are at least a month earlier than those of Southern California.”

Coachella area farmers quickly found demand for their produce not only in Southern California, but across the country, which they marketed and shipped through the Coachella Producers Association, an entity initially formed by 27 growers, according to the *Times*, which noted strong demand for Coachella’s high-quality cantaloupes.



A plentiful groundwater supply and early growing season gave Coachella growers the ability to produce certain crops before other regions of California. Photo courtesy of the Coachella Valley Historical Society.

“W.H. Woods of Chicago, who has made a specialty of handling cantaloupes during the past seven years, stated that the desert crop beat the record in his experience, both in marketable quality and in earliness,” the *Times* wrote, adding, “Nearly all of the crop was shipped East and a large share of it was absorbed by the Waldorf-Astoria in New York and the White Star line of steamers.”

Of course, as farming operations expanded across the eastern Coachella Valley, so did the demand for farm labor. But before Coachella area growers began to recruit



An early grapefruit shipping label. Photo courtesy of the Coachella Valley Historical Society.

and employ Mexican immigrants in large numbers, they initially relied on local Cahuilla Indians as a source of labor.

Growers' use of Cahuilla Indian labor is documented by local and regional newspapers, including *The Date Palm* in Indio and *The Submarine* in Coachella as well as the *Times* and other published historical accounts of the

early 1900s.

When they exhausted the supply of Cahuilla Indians to help with harvest and packing operations, growers affiliated with the Coachella Producers Association recruited farmworkers from Japan.

"Last season, the Coachella people employed Indians mostly for gathering their crops," the Times wrote in its 1902 report, adding "This season, it will require all of the available Indians and, in addition, the association has contracted for a force of 450 Japanese to carry on this work and the packing. A large force is necessary because an immense amount of work must be crowded into a very short period."

By tapping local Cahuilla Indian and later Japanese laborers, Coachella area growers quickly transformed the eastern Coachella Valley into a thriving agricultural mecca.

"It is doubtful whether ever before in the entire history of the Pacific Coast an agricultural community has been so quickly gathered or launched," the Times wrote.

Coachella in 1903. Photo courtesy of the Coachella Valley Historical Society.



The Salton Sea

The Salton Sea occupies a portion of an area of the Salton Sink that was previously covered by ancient Lake Cahuilla, a freshwater lake created by the floodwaters of the Colorado River.

While the Colorado River normally flows southward across eastern Baja California, Mexico to the Gulf of California, the river would periodically create sandbars that would cause its waters to flow northward into the Salton Sink, which is more than 230 feet below sea level.

“As a result, the Salton basin has had a long history of alternately being occupied by a fresh water lake and being a dry, empty desert basin, all according to the random river flow, and the balance between inflow and evaporative loss. A lake would exist only when it was replenished by the river, a cycle that repeated itself countless times over hundreds of thousands of years,” Eugene Singer writes in his 1998 monograph, “Geology of the Imperial Valley.”¹

The shoreline of ancient Lake Cahuilla can be seen on the hillsides west of Coachella on the way to El Centro.

The current Salton Sea was formed during the massive Colorado River floods of 1905 to 1907, which overwhelmed the irrigation channels that were initially built to direct Colorado River flows across northern Mexico to Imperial Valley farm fields.

¹ Singer, Eugene, *Geology of the Imperial Valley*, 1998, posted at <http://www.sci.sdsu.edu/salton/AncientLakeCahuilla.html>



Eighth grade students from John Kelly Elementary School in Thermal enjoy a trip to the Salton Sea in the 1940s, including Nieves Arias (holding drink) and Alice Arias (third from right). Photo courtesy of the Arias and Torres family collections

The Little Shells of Ancient Lake Cahuilla and the Naming of Coachella

Coachella was supposed to be named “Conchilla,” little shell in Spanish, in recognition of the many shells that were scattered about the area by ancient Lake Cahuilla.

However, the print shop that filed the prospectus papers to change the name of the town from Woodspur to Conchilla misread the name and filed it as Coachella, which has no meaning in any language.

“The townspeople, after discovering the mistake, decided not to pursue changing the name, and the town became known as Coachella,” historian Erica M. Ward writes in her 2014 book, *Coachella*.¹

1

Ward, Erica M., *Images of America: Coachella*, (2014), 22.

Chapter 3

Cahuilla Indians: The Valley's First Farmworkers

Development of the Coachella Valley's agriculture based economy marked the end of the tribal economy developed by the Desert Cahuilla people

The Coachella Valley's emergence as a vibrant agribusiness area in the early 1900s marked the final dismantling of the tribal economy that had nurtured and sustained the Desert Cahuilla people for thousands of years.

Indeed, the ancestors of today's Agua Caliente, Augustine, Cabazon and Torres Martinez tribes had their own "walk in" wells and their own farms and lived off the land and traded with other Southern California tribes long before California became part of Spain in 1769, Mexico in 1821 or the United States following the Mexican American War in 1848.

"Trade was important to the Cahuilla way of life," according to Priscilla H. Porter, who documents the destruction of the Cahuilla's way of life in the

2014 *Periscope*, the annual journal of the Coachella Valley Historical Society.³



A Cahuilla Indian basket weaver. Photo courtesy of the Coachella Valley Historical Society.

"The villages traded with each other using a system of supply and demand. The coastal Indians would trade dried fish, sea otter skins, asphaltum, and shell beads with the inland villages of the Cahuilla who would trade animal skins, including deerskins, acorns, salt and obsidian in return. Pottery and agricultural products were traded with tribes to the east. Often trading was for treasured objects such as ritual equipment, jewelry, baskets,

obsidian, and other manufactured articles."⁴

But even before the Desert Cahuilla experienced the upheaval caused by the imposition of the reservation system and the disruption of their economy and way of life, they suffered a smallpox epidemic in 1862-63 that wiped out a third of their population, reducing their numbers from 6,000 to about 2,500, according to Porter, citing estimates by Cahuilla historians Lowell J. Bean and Lisa Bourgeault.⁵

The epidemic affected people across North America, but especially

³ Porter, Priscilla H., "The Cahuilla Indians," *Periscope*, (2014), 14.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid, 18.

Native American tribes, according to historical accounts.

The U.S. government began imposing a reservation system on the Desert Cahuilla in the 1870s, which had the effect of not only shrinking but disrupting ancient land use traditions. This also affected members of the Chemehuevi tribe, the ancestors of today's Twenty Nine Palms tribe who had migrated from Utah, Arizona and Nevada into the Southern California desert in 1867.⁶

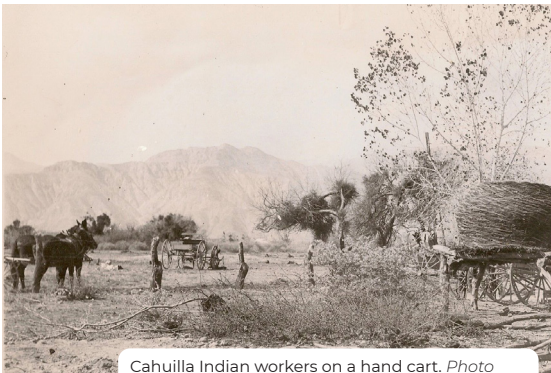
"The American government established tribal names and reservations based on names the Spanish and Mexican governments had written on maps. In the process, the U.S. government often put multiple families into one tribe, disregarding Cahuilla and Chemehuevi traditions or politics in the process," Erica M. Ward writes in the 2014 *Periscope*.⁷



A Torres Martinez Indian on a pony. Photo courtesy of the Coachella Valley Historical Society.

"Under President Ulysses Grant, the Torro and Martinez reservations were combined to create the Torres-Martinez reservation. President Grant also created the Cabazon and Agua Caliente reservation in the same 1876 presidential order. Congress formed the Augustine reservation in 1891, while the Twenty-Nine Palms reservation was created in 1895 by President Grover Cleveland."⁸

Porter said the tribes were negatively affected by the development of land ownership, which resulted in a checkerboard system of one-square mile land sections across the Coachella Valley.⁹



Cahuilla Indian workers on a hand cart. Photo courtesy of the Coachella Valley Historical Society.

"Primarily influenced by the railroad development through the valley, this system deeply impacted the Coachella Valley tribes," she said. "The tribes' focus was on the community as a whole rather than on the individual. The

checkerboard system divided the reservations into multiple one-mile sections that often did not touch, making it difficult for families to visit or interact with each

⁶ Ward, Erica M., "An Introduction to the Journey of a People: A History of the Cahuilla & Chemehuevi Tribes in the Coachella Valley," *Periscope*, (2014), 3.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Porter, 18.

other. Tribes also had difficulty governing over these disconnected sections.”¹⁰

The Cahuilla way of life was further disrupted by The Dawes Act of 1887, which allowed government agents to divide reservation land into separate tracts for individuals. This effectively transformed the Cahuilla concept of communal land ownership to individual land ownership.

“The privatization of the reservation land directly clashed with the Cahuilla people’s belief in the community over the individual,” Porter writes. “The new land ownership also created a drastic divide between those with land and those without.”¹¹

Porter also notes that most of the Cahuilla Indians’ land allotments were too small for efficient farming.

“As non-Indians destroyed the Cahuilla economy, the Cahuilla people went to work on farms and ranches and had to rely on wage labor. This is the economic result of the settlement and development of the Coachella Valley.”¹²

In addition to forcing the Desert Cahuilla to become wage laborers, the U.S. government also forced many Cahuilla and Chemehuevi children to attend Indian boarding schools, including the St. Boniface Indian/Industrial School in Banning and the Perris Indian School. The Perris school first opened in 1892 and later relocated to Riverside in 1903 and reopened as the Sherman Institute. It was renamed Sherman Indian High School in 1971.



Torres Martinez Indians in front of their home. Photo courtesy of the Coachella Valley Historical Society.

“While attending the school, the children were prohibited from speaking their native Cahuilla language,” Ward writes, adding, “These children were forcibly alienated from their own culture while at school.”¹³

Spanish speaking children of Mexican descent would

have a similar experience years later in the eastern Coachella Valley.

10 *Ibid.*
11 *Porter, 20.*
12 *Ibid, 20.*
13 *Ward, 3.*

The Disruption of Native Americans' Way of Life Began with the Spanish

The disruption of Native Americans' way of life in the Southwest began long before the arrival of white American settlers.

"When the Spanish first arrived, they used native labor on the missions," said Dr. Sarah McCormick Seekatz, a local historian.

Indeed, the subjugation of Native Americans in California began in the late 1700s as Spain developed its mission system, which eventually led to the establishment of 21 missions from San Diego to Sonoma. The Spanish used the mission system to forcibly relocate California's Native Americans to mission lands where they were coerced into adopting Spanish agricultural practices and to abandon their indigenous spiritual beliefs in favor of Catholicism.

Steven W. Hackel documents the effects of the Spanish mission system on California's Native Americans in his 2013 book, *Junipero Serra: California's Founding Father*.

"What Serra saw at the end of his life was the beginning of a major cultural transformation he had helped initiate in which California Indians would assimilate aspects of Spanish culture: religion, language, dress, music, literacy, art, animal husbandry, and domesticated agriculture," Hackel wrote.

***"What Serra did not live to see and understand was that later, for many Indians, this bridge led to a graveyard."*¹**

Indeed, Hackel notes that the concentration of Native Americans in missions led to their demise.

"... in a morbid irony," he wrote, "the concentration of Indians in the missions — the first and necessary step in Serra's plan — allowed for the wide and ready transmission of disease that only accelerated new baptisms and expanded death's work. This became the missions' undoing and Serra's albatross."²

Native American deaths continued to mount after Spain ceded California to Mexico in 1821.

"By the time the missions were secularized in the early 1830s,

¹ Hackel, Steven W. *Junipero Serra: California's Founding Father*, (2013), 238.

² *Ibid.*

more than 80,000 Indians had been baptized between San Diego and north of San Francisco, but almost 60,000 had been buried, nearly 25,000 of whom were children under the age of ten,” Hackel wrote.

“Nothing, however, could prepare the California Indians who remained for the brutality of the Anglo-Americans who descended on the region in the 1840s and 50s.”³

Indeed, the only thing that protected Desert Cahuilla, for a time, was their relative isolation in the Coachella Valley. “The San Gabriel Mission, built in 1771 just east of present day Los Angeles, was the closest mission to the Cahuilla people,” Erica M. Ward writes in the 2014 *Periscope*, the annual journal of the Coachella Valley Historical Society.⁴

3 *Ibid*, 239-240.

4 Ward, 17.

Chapter 4

Transplanted Dates and the Romance of Arabia

Entrepreneurs used early 20th century fascination with the Middle East to market the valley’s nascent agriculture and tourism industries

In the 1800s and even into the early 1900s, dates were an exotic luxury, a costly fruit that could only be imported from North Africa and the Middle East.

Indeed, date producers in those days could hardly satisfy European demand, let alone demand from U.S. consumers.

But by the 1890s, researchers with the U.S. Department of Agriculture were exploring the feasibility of transplanting date palms in arid areas of the desert Southwest, including the Salt River Valley in Arizona and California’s Imperial and Coachella valleys.

“The United States annually imports nearly a million dollars’ worth of dates, and it is possible, the department believes, to raise all of the dates needed in this country,” the *Los Angeles Times* wrote in a June 28, 1901 report.

Dates, in fact, were one of the first crops to show extraordinary potential as settlers expanded their farming operations in the eastern Coachella Valley.

“In 1900, Walter T. Swingle of the U.S. Department of Agriculture supervised the shipment of 405 date offshoots from Algeria for an experimental growing program in Tempe, Arizona. The climate and soils of the Salton Basin

were later identified by Swingle as closest to those of Algeria, where the best Deglet Noor dates were grown,” Coachella Valley Water District wrote in a December 2002 report.¹⁴

Bernard Johnson is credited with making the first commercial importation of mostly Deglet Noor date shoots, which he successfully transplanted near Mecca in 1903.

Shingle’s research prompted the USDA to establish an experimental date garden near Mecca in 1904 in collaboration with the University of California. The station was subsequently relocated to a site near Indio due to the then rising waters of the Salton Sea, which threatened land near Mecca.

Importing date offshoots was a costly undertaking, however.

“One of the contributing factors for the high price of date offshoots is that most of them are brought from the oases of Algeria and Egypt on camel-back to tidewater, oftentimes 1,000 miles across the sands,” the *Los Angeles Times* wrote in an August 17, 1913 report.

It didn’t take long, however, for publicity surrounding Coachella Valley’s date growing potential to attract investors and entrepreneurs from across the country. Even



Dates imported from Africa and the Middle East were one of the first crops to show extraordinary promise in the Coachella Valley. Photo courtesy of Palm Desert Historical Society



Bernard Johnson (pictured here) is credited with making the first commercial importation of mostly Deglet Noor date shoots, which he successfully transplanted near Mecca in 1903. Photo courtesy of the Coachella Valley Historical Society

Edith Wilson, the wife of President Woodrow Wilson, considered purchasing land for date growing purposes, according to a front page story in the September 26, 1913 issue of *The Date Palm*.

Meanwhile, entrepreneurs used picturesque images of date palms to market the Coachella Valley as not only a lucrative place to do business, but as a unique vacation destination, according

¹⁴ Coachella Valley Water District, “A History and Evaluation of the Coachella Canal, Riverside and Imperial Counties, California,” December 2002, 51.

to Dr. Sarah McCormick Seekatz, a Coachella Valley historian who examined the growth of the valley's date industry and America's fascination with the Middle East in the 20th century in her Ph.D. dissertation for the University of California, Riverside. She also explored this topic in her 2016 book titled *Indio's Date Festival*.

"Those who used fantasies of the Middle East as a form of boosterism in Southern California did so with the hope of promoting the unique ties the areas shared — the imported date fruit industry and the desert landscape — to sell the crop, the land, and tourist experiences," Seekatz wrote in a Feb. 5, 2013 historical essay.¹⁵

*"The Southern Pacific Railroad also functioned as a backer, seeking to encourage development in the Coachella Valley that would foster tourist travel, expand land sales and perhaps increase railroad usage by future farmers," Seekatz writes, adding, "These local boosters heralded the profits of date growing to anyone who would listen. They quickly turned to the romance of Arabia to put their small towns on the map."*¹⁶

Seekatz notes that the town of Mecca was originally called Walters to honor an early Coachella Valley settler, but the name was changed to Mecca in 1904 for marketing purposes. In 1913, developers announced plans to establish another Coachella Valley city called Arabia, again for marketing purposes.

"The land and water company that sought to develop it had plans to create a city that looked as if it belonged in the Middle East," Seekatz writes, but the plan was eventually abandoned during the Depression years of the 1930s.¹⁷

An Arab mascot was also selected for Coachella Valley High School, the



Some Coachella Valley growers used Americans' early 20th century fascination with the Middle East to market their produce. Photo courtesy of Palm Desert Historical Society

¹⁵ Seekatz, Sarah McCormick, "Harem Girls and Carnel Races: Middle Eastern Fantasies in the Deserts of Southern California," Feb. 15, 2013, <https://www.kcet.org/author/sarah-mccormick-seekatz>

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

valley's first high school, in 1932. A Middle Eastern theme was subsequently used to promote the Riverside County Fair and National Date Festival in Indio. Its annual Arabian Nights pageant and Queen Scheherazade contest began in 1949.

“Instead of swimsuits and evening gowns,” Seekatz writes, “these young women were dressed as visions of harem girls, with bare midriffs and billowing pants.”¹⁸



Keanna Garcia (center) was crowned Queen Scheherazade at the 2018 Indio Date Festival. She is pictured here with Princess Dunyazade (Sianna Gonzalez) and Princess Jasmine, (Caedwyn Lethlean). Garcia, who was raised in Indio, attended Palm Desert High School while Gonzalez and Lethlean attended Shadow Hills High School in Indio. *Photo courtesy of Stuart Smith and Keanna Garcia.*

Chapter 5

A Safe Haven

Mexican migration to Coachella Valley farm fields increased with the Mexican Revolution and the Cristero Rebellion



Date research by Walter T. Swingle prompted the U.S. Department of Agriculture to establish an experimental date garden near Mecca in 1904 in collaboration with the University of California.
Photo courtesy of Coachella Valley Historical Society

While Mexican immigrants came to the United States in the late 1800s to help build railroad lines, large numbers of Mexican immigrants didn't begin to seek work in Coachella Valley farm fields until the Mexican Revolution of 1910 to 1920.

Many more Mexican immigrants came to Coachella during the Cristero Rebellion of 1926 to 1929, a violent uprising against the anti-Catholic policies of the Mexican President Plutarco Elias Calles.

But while many of today's Coachella residents have family in Mexicali, the Mexican immigrants who sought work in Coachella area farm fields during the first two decades of the 20th century primarily came from the interior regions of Mexico, such as Zacatecas, Jalisco and Chihuahua, which suffered from political violence and instability.

The Mexicali Valley itself was just beginning to be developed as a farming

Anti-Chinese Immigration Policies in the U.S.

Congress authorized construction of the transcontinental railroad system in 1862, but manpower shortages resulting from the Civil War of 1861 to 1865 prompted railroad builders to import Chinese laborers to do much of the work.

Central Pacific Railroad, which built a section of track between California and Utah, crossing the rugged Sierra Nevada Mountains, made extensive use of Chinese labor.

“By 1867, 12,000 of Central Pacific’s 13,500 workers were Chinese immigrants, who were paid between \$26 and \$35 for a six-day workweek of 12 hours a day,” Gregory Rodriguez wrote in a September 27, 2005 article in the *Los Angeles Times*.

But not long after the transcontinental railroad line was completed, the U.S. imposed the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882.

“It was enacted in response to economic fears, especially on the West Coast, where native-born Americans attributed unemployment and declining wages to Chinese workers, whom they also viewed as racially inferior,” according to a report posted on the Harvard University website, which noted the passage of several subsequent laws designed to restrict Chinese immigration, including the National Origins Act of 1929, which barred Asian immigration.¹

“The (1929) law was repealed by the Magnuson Act in 1943 during World War II, when China was an ally in the war against imperial Japan. Nevertheless, the 1943 act still allowed only 105 Chinese immigrants per year, reflecting persistent prejudice against the Chinese in American immigration policy. It was not until the Immigration Act of 1965, which eliminated previous national-origins policy, that large-scale Chinese immigration to the United States was allowed to begin again after a hiatus of over 80 years.”²

The U.S. House of Representatives belatedly passed a resolution in June of 2012 apologizing for the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882.

1 Harvard University, “Chinese Exclusion Act (1882)”, <http://ocp.hul.harvard.edu/immigration/exclusion.html>

2 *Ibid*

area in the late 1800s and early 1900s and was populated primarily by Chinese laborers that the Mexican government had recruited to work in farm fields in Mexico's northern border areas.

In fact, Chinese immigrants in the Mexicali Valley outnumbered Mexicans by three to one in the 1914 to 1916 period, according to Saul Chong, a former secretary of the Chinese Consulate in Mexicali, who discussed Mexicali's Chinese roots in an Aug. 16, 1990 article in the *Los Angeles Times*.

While many Chinese also came to Mexicali with hopes of crossing the border into California, their efforts were complicated by the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the first of many efforts to restrict Chinese immigration into the U.S.

But while political and economic instability in the interior of Mexico fueled Mexican immigration to the Coachella Valley, the valley also enticed transplants of Mexican descent from Arizona, New Mexico and other states who also came to Coachella Valley during the early 20th century to seek jobs in the area's growing farm economy.

Chapter 6

The Eastern Coachella Valley's Mexican Pioneer Families

Coachella's early Mexican immigrants established their own ranches and other successful businesses. They also built the Coachella Valley's first Catholic Church

Many of the Mexican immigrants who came to the Coachella Valley in the early 20th century came with an entrepreneurial spirit and established successful businesses, from produce transport companies to markets, restaurants and ranches.

Some had already established successful farming businesses in Mexico, but wanted to relocate to the Coachella Valley to escape political violence and instability in Mexico. Others fueled the economic growth of the valley by working as farmworkers, cooks and and construction workers and were otherwise deeply woven into the community. Some even served in the U.S. military during World War I.

The histories of 26 pioneering families from Coachella and other East Valley communities are documented in the December 2009 book, *Coachella Valley Mexican American Pioneer Roots*, which was published by the Coachella Valley History Museum.



Eastern Coachella Valley pioneers of Mexican descent brought many talents to the greater Coachella area, including music. Early band members performing at the KCHV Building in Coachella included, from left to right in the top row, Juan Rivera, Felipe Rojas, Onesimo Arias, Unknown, Gabriel Arias and Palemon Arias. Band members from left to right in the bottom row include Gilbert "Gildo" Rojas, Herculaneo Corea and Jesus "Cachule" Rivera. Photo courtesy of the Coachella Valley Mexican American Pioneers

Following are highlights of eight of the 26 pioneering families of Mexican descent who are profiled in the book. These pioneering families are from Mexico as well as other U.S. states. In some cases, the information drawn from *Coachella Valley Mexican American Pioneer Roots* has been supplemented with additional information from their descendants as well as heretofore unpublished interviews that were conducted in 2007 by Dr. Sarah McCormick Seekatz as part of an oral history project organized by the Coachella Valley History Museum and Cultural Center in Indio. These profiles also contain information from Coachella Valley newspapers. The eight families include:

The Arias Family of Chihuahua

Four brothers from the Arias family came to the eastern Coachella Valley from Casa Grande, Chihuahua, Mexico in 1918 and initially worked for the Coral Reef Ranch in what is now La Quinta.

The Arias brothers — Gabriel, Toribio, Palemon and Onesimo — initially worked for the Coral Reef Ranch in the La Quinta area, but later re-established themselves in Thermal.

The four brothers worked in the agricultural fields to support their families and not only managed to save money, but they pooled their resources, bought their own land and established their own ranches to raise vegetable crops, according to Raymond Torres, a grandson of Gabriel Arias and son of Carmelo Arias who lives in Coachella.

Gabriel had a 25-acre ranch north of Avenue 62 and one half mile east of Polk Street. Onesimo established a 40-acre ranch south of Avenue 60 and just



1937 photo of the Arias family, including from left to right, Ruben, Celia, Alice, Hector, Robert and parents, Mercedes and Gabriel Arias with baby, Raul. Photo courtesy of the Arias and Torres families.



Toribio Arias, a produce hauler, and his brother, Gabriel Arias, in the 1930s. Photo courtesy of the Arias and Torres families



Palemon Arias working on the family farm in Thermal. Photo courtesy of the Arias and Torres families

west of Fillmore Street, while Palemon had 20-acre farm south of Avenue 60 and just east of Fillmore Street, said Torres, who is also a longtime volunteer with the Coachella Valley Mexican American Pioneers.

“The Arias families farmed tomatoes, cantaloupes, beans, squash, eggplant, cucumbers and okra,” according to *Coachella Valley Mexican American Pioneer Roots*.

“The raising of vegetables, the harvesting and packing, was a family affair. Everyone participated and worked together to bring in the crops.”¹⁹

Toribio was the only Arias brother who did not establish his own ranch. Instead, he bought a truck and developed a business transporting fresh picked produce from his brothers’ farms and other ranchers to produce markets in Los Angeles.

¹⁹ *Coachella Valley Mexican American Pioneers, Coachella Valley Mexican American Pioneer Roots*, (2009), 8.

Toribio was killed on July 4, 1941 in West Covina as he returned from delivering produce in the Los Angeles area, Torres said.

The Carrillo Family of Zacatecas

Jose Carrillo was born in Valparaíso, Zacatecas and came with his parents to the U.S. in 1916, initially settling in Oxnard, where he attended elementary school, according to his granddaughter, Mary Carrillo Carmona, who was interviewed August 23, 2007 by Dr. Sarah McCormick Seekatz for the Coachella Valley History Museum.

The Carrillo family later relocated to El Centro before permanently establishing themselves in the eastern Coachella Valley in the 1920s.

According to Mary Carrillo Carmona, Jose first worked as a grocery store clerk for Jim Cash at Wah's Market in 1921. He also worked for Sakemi Ranch on the outskirts of Indio. He also worked from 1927 to 1932 for George Abrams, who owned George Abrams & Brothers, an all purpose grocery store in Indio. Jose later went into business for himself and opened The Azteca Cafe on Requa Street in 1937 and later El Charro Cafe on Towne Street in Indio in 1944. In 1948, he opened Rancho Carrillo, bar, restaurant and dance hall.



An early photo of the Carmona family of Indio. Photo courtesy of the Coachella Valley Mexican American Pioneers

The Diaz Family of Jalisco

Miguel and Luisa Centeno Diaz first came to the U.S. from San Miguel El Alto, Jalisco in the 1920s with their four children, Nicolas, Natalia, Antonia y Soledad.

They initially settled in Los Angeles but relocated to the eastern Coachella Valley around 1926.

An historical account included in *Coachella Valley Mexican American Pioneer Roots* indicates that Miguel worked in agriculture, initially at Whittier Ranch, a ranch on the border of Coachella and Indio with a large packing house, near the current Walmart store in Coachella, and later at the Dr. Carreon Ranch.²⁰

Luisa, for her part, worked for Robert and Eve Bowlin as a housekeeper and cook. She would cook for their guests, who included General George Patton, the four star general who commanded Allied troops during World War II.

“She worked as a cook and housekeeper at the Whittier Ranch, and had the distinction of cooking for General Patton, who enjoyed her Mexican food while he was a guest at the ranch,” according to an historical account by Silver Valenzuela in *Coachella Valley Mexican American Pioneers*.²¹



General George Patton (left) at Camp Young. Photo courtesy of the Coachella Valley Historical Society

The Gonzalez Family of Chihuahua

George Gonzalez was born in 1885 in Meoqui, Chihuahua and came to the United States in 1903 at the age of 18.

According to *Coachella Valley Mexican American Pioneer Roots*, Gonzalez initially worked for the Southern Pacific Railroad, but was later hired to do farm labor in 1904 by J.W. Newman of Thermal. He returned to Meoqui in 1910, where he met Josefa Peña.

“He had to go back to Meoqui to find his bride because there were virtually no Mexican women at all in the Coachella Valley at that time, and the few women that were here were all Anglo women and there weren’t very many

²⁰ *Ibid*, 22.

²¹ *Ibid*, Historical information included on a page with no number near the end of the book.

of (them), either,” Gonzalez’s grandson, Alex Sicre, told Dr. Sarah McCormick Seekatz in a July 19, 2007 oral history interview for the Coachella Valley History Museum.

“So he courted (Joseph Peña) and she finally decided to marry him after he proved he could take care of her in a foreign land.”

According to *Coachella Valley Mexican American Pioneer Roots*, “she agreed to marry him and move to California. They had six children: Maria, Esther, Adela, George Jr., Ramon ‘Chino’, and Victoria.”²²

George Gonzalez was very entrepreneurial and found early success with ranching in the Coachella and Indio areas.

“In 1913, George was hired as a foreman for the Tropical Date Company, and two years later, he purchased 20 acres in Thermal and created his own ranch. He would eventually purchase, improve, and sell land in the Indio area and grow grapefruit, oranges, lemons, grapes, dates and pecans. He continued to keep and maintain three different ranches totaling 400 acres.”²³

Gonzalez later had to sell some of his land through eminent domain so that it could be used as the site for Roosevelt Grammar School and the present day Jefferson Elementary School, Sicre said.

The Gonzalez family was also instrumental in building Our Lady of Soledad in Coachella, the Coachella Valley’s first Catholic Church, in 1924, Sicre said.

“When (my family was) living in Thermal,” Sicre said, “they had to go to the Torres-Martinez Indian Reservation to go to Mass on Sundays. It was quite a trek from Thermal to the Torres-Martinez Ranch or Reservation. And there was a small chapel. It was the only one in the whole valley. Once a month, a priest from Riverside would come down to serve Mass. My grandfather and his family and a couple of others and the Indians, too, supported that little chapel.”

But Sicre said his family didn’t like only being able to go to church once a month, so they started building a church on their own.

“And so they started building a church in Coachella. That was actually the first Catholic Church in the whole Coachella Valley, and it was built by my grandfather, his money, his laborers. And also he enlisted some other people to help, so they did. That was Our Lady of Soledad Church.”

Sicre said his grandmother, Josefa, took care of him during World War II while his mother, Ester, worked in a factory to support the U.S. war effort. “She worked in ... an airplane factory in Los Angeles,” he said. “They called ‘em ‘Rosie the Riveters’ then.”

Later, in 1951, Josefa became the first president and founder of the Sociedad Funeraria Mexicana del Valle de Coachella, an organization that

²² *Ibid*, 28.

²³ *Ibid*.

helped grieving families cover the cost of funerals,” according to *Coachella Valley Mexican American Pioneer Roots*.²⁴

Josefa Gonzalez died in 1974.

The Guitron Family from Jalisco

Benjamin Guitron was a successful Mexican farmer from Puerto Vallarta, Jalisco who sent his oldest son, Felix, to the United States during the Mexican Revolution to scout for a peaceful place where the family could re-establish their farming business.

The Guitron family ultimately decided on the eastern Coachella Valley, which they reached in April of 1919 after taking a boat to Mazatlan and a train to Nogales, where they obtained visas.

The migrating family included Benjamin Guitron and his wife, Elisa Montes De Oca Guitron, as well as their children, Felix, Maria, Carlos, Benjamin and Francisco.

“My father (Benjamin Guitron) was an affluent farmer who grew coffee, tobacco and bananas in the remote village of Puerto Vallarta,” Frank Guitron recalled in a May 24, 1991 interview with The Desert Sun. “But when the revolution began, soldiers from both sides would descend upon us, commandeering whatever they could.”

It was a tense time.

“When the cry went out that the soldiers were coming, my mother would round up all the young girls and her pillow, then head for the hills. It didn’t take long to figure out why she took the young girls with her, but it wasn’t until years later that I discovered she kept what gold and jewelry we had, hidden in her pillow,” Guitron said.

The political instability, combined with a smallpox epidemic, ultimately prompted Guitron’s father to send his oldest son to the United States to search for a peaceful place where the family could re-establish itself.

Frank Guitron said his family has both Mexican and European roots. “Being born in Mexico makes me a Mexican,” he said. “I’m European because my father was Spanish and French, and now I’m American through naturalization.”

The family’s first Coachella Valley home was “little more than a rented shack on property owned by C.R. Cathon at Calhoun Street and Avenue 52.” But Guitron said it didn’t take long for the family to establish their own farm.

Farm work was tough in the early days, however.

“It took a long time to clear a planting site, using mule skinnners to level the land,” Guitron said. “One year, the sand burrs were so thick we had trouble harvesting our onion crop.”

²⁴ *Ibid.*

But Guitron told *The Desert Sun* his family got help from members of the Augustin Band of Cahuilla Indians.

“My father had befriended Augustin Duro, chief of the El Toro Reservation, and he returned the favor by bringing in Indians to help us save the crop. All the Indians spoke Spanish, so we became well acquainted. My father had gelded the chief’s stallion for him. ... That’s what prompted the returned favor. In those days, we helped each other.”

Felix Guitron, in fact, was a member of the Charro Association of



Ben Guitron with his son, Ben Jr. Photo courtesy of the Coachella Valley Mexican American Pioneers

Mexico City and was widely known for his expert skills with horses in the eastern Coachella Valley.

It didn’t take long for the Guitron family to significantly expand their farming business.

“Our property at one time stretched from Grapefruit to Avenue 49, Avenue 50 and Van Buren and we employed 100 people,” Benjamin Guitron, Frank Guitron’s nephew, told *The Desert Sun* in an October 20, 1995 interview.

Carlos Guitron was the only member of the Guitron family who left the Coachella Valley in the early days. He went to San Francisco, where he married Francisca Bernal. Together, they opened two Mexican tortilla factories, Bernal Tortillería and Folsom Street Tortillería, both of which were very successful, according to Gilda Guitron.

Frank Guitron, for his part, ultimately held high-profile business and civic roles in the Coachella Valley, serving on the board of directors of the Riverside County Farm Bureau in the 1960s and 70s. He also served as a reserve deputy for the Riverside County Sheriff’s Department Aero Squadron and served for two years on the Riverside County Board of Education, according to *The Desert Sun*.

The Montoya Family of Las Cruces, New Mexico

Benjamin C. Montoya was born in Las Cruces, New Mexico in 1907 and came to the eastern Coachella Valley at the age of 16.

He initially came to Indio in 1923, where he worked for his cousin, George Gonzales, who had come to the Coachella Valley a few years before.

Benjamin Montoya was subsequently hired by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Experiment Station, which was managed by the University of California and Dr. Walter T. Swingle, who imported date shoots from Africa for transplanting and experimentation in the Coachella Valley.

*"Ben was an invaluable asset to the station," according to Coachella Valley Mexican American Pioneer Roots, adding, "Ben was one of the few young men who could communicate with both the Mexican farm laborers and the management of the station, as he was fluent in English and Spanish. Ben learned all about the 'date business' working for Dr. Swingle."*²⁵

Montoya's wife, Margaret "Margy" Ramirez Montoya, was born in 1913 in La Bonita, Arizona. Her family moved around, living in Canutillo, Texas and in the Los Angeles area before coming to the Coachella Valley in the 1920s. "She attended Coachella Valley High School from 1928 to 1929 and worked in packing houses around the Indio area."²⁶

They married in Yuma, Arizona in 1933 and had four sons: Ben, Richard, Jimmy and Art.

The Nieto Family of Chihuahua

Jose Nieto of Meoqui, Chihuahua brought his oldest four sons to the United States in 1913 "to avoid having them fight in the Mexican Revolution," according to *Coachella Valley Mexican American Pioneer Roots*.²⁷

The Nietos initially moved to El Paso, Texas, but after a while all of the Nieto brothers returned to Mexico, except Andres Nieto, who remained in the U.S. and served in the U.S. military during World War I.

"During World War I, the United States offered Mexican immigrants land and U.S. citizenship in exchange for fighting in the war," the Mexican American Pioneers write. "Andres joined and was injured. He was sent to a Kansas City military hospital for recovery and was subsequently honorably discharged."²⁸

"After being honorably discharged, Andres started making his way back to his family in Mexico. Along the way, in the small town of Anthony, New

²⁵ *Ibid*, 40.

²⁶ *Ibid*.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 43.

²⁸ *Ibid*.

Mexico, he met Juana Lara, another Meoqui native. Andres and Juana married in 1917 and moved to El Paso, Texas,” where they worked in the fields.²⁹

The Nietos moved to California in 1923, and lived the life of migrant farmworkers, moving back and forth between Los Angeles, Orange and Kern counties before finally settling in Indio in the late 1930s.

“Andres began farming with his mule and plow off of Jackson and across from Patton’s Ranch. Andres grew various vegetables, including corn, for market, keeping some to feed his family.³⁰

“Between 1917 and 1937, Andres and Juana had twelve children. Juana was a very busy woman. However, she was not unique. Large families were generally common in those days. This was particularly true of migrant farm worker families. It was necessary for the children of these migrant farm worker families to start working in the fields picking crops at a very young age in order to help the family financially.”³¹

The Ramirez Family of Superior, Arizona

Ramon Ramirez came to the eastern Coachella Valley from Superior, Arizona in 1931 with his brothers, Jose Jr., Manuel and Robert. His parents, Jose Sr. and Francisca came later.

The family initially worked on the Coral Reef Ranch.

“Ramon worked as a laborer until he became a field foreman for Harry Carian Enterprises, where he worked for 29 years, planting over seven thousand acres of grapes in Indio, Coachella, Thermal, Oasis and Mecca,” according to *Coachella Valley Mexican American Pioneer Roots*.³²

“(Ramon) also owned a 300-acre ranch in Coachella where he grew grapes, dates, grapefruit and tangerines. His neighbor was Mr. Ben Guitron, who also owned a 200-acre ranch on Avenue 50 in Coachella.”³³

29 *Ibid*, 44.

30 *Ibid*.

31 *Ibid*.

32 *Ibid*, 58.

33 *Ibid*.

Chapter 7

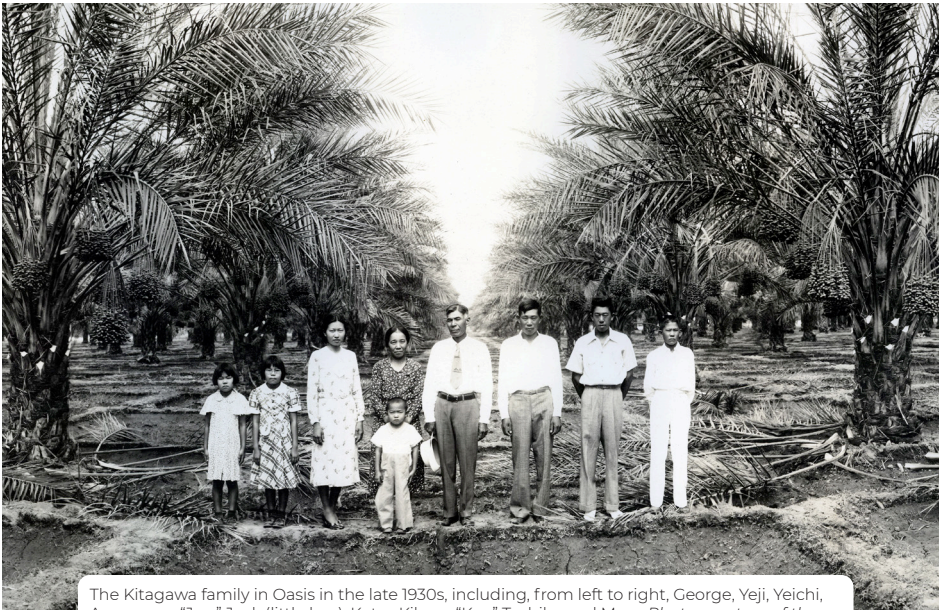
Early immigrants from Japan, Portugal and Turkey

Japan

Japanese immigrants have been farming in the eastern Coachella Valley for more than 100 years, including Asauemon “Joe” Kitagawa, who started sharecropping with Leland Yost in 1912.

Kitagawa returned to Japan in 1914 to marry Koto Nishimura, but returned again to the Coachella Valley and purchased their first farm in Oasis.

“Peppers and tomatoes are his best moneymakers, Mr. Kitagawa says,” according to a Dec. 26, 1926 interview article in the *Los Angeles Times*, which also noted his diversified production of Japanese peas, okra, sweet potatoes, grapes and Deglet Noor dates, all of which were irrigated with waters from an artesian well that supplies water at a constant temperature of 102 degrees, which was especially helpful in keeping the crops growing during the winter months.

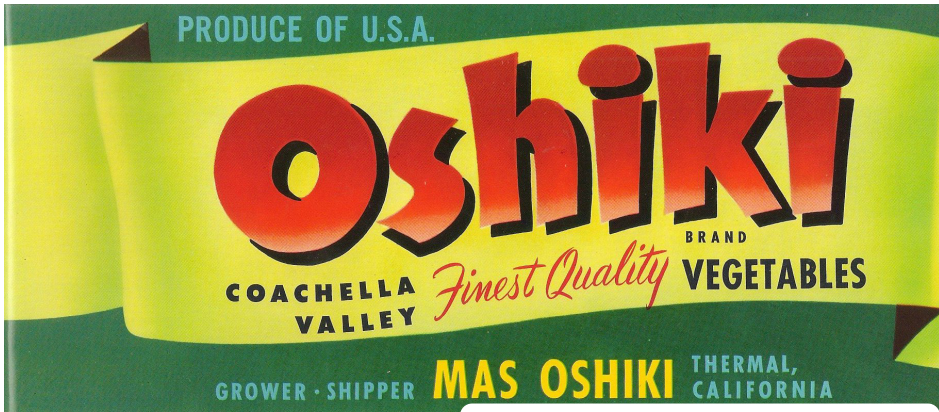


The Kitagawa family in Oasis in the late 1930s, including, from left to right, George, Yeji, Yeichi, Asauemon “Joe,” Jack (little boy), Koto, Kikuye “Kay,” Toshiko and Mary. Photo courtesy of the Kitagawa family

When the *Los Angeles Times* interviewed Kitagawa again on Feb. 2, 1930, he had developed eggplant as a winter specialty crop.

The Kitagawas were among some 20 Japanese immigrant families who came to the Coachella Valley in the early 1900s to work, mostly as farm laborers,

according to a November 7, 1999 article in *The Desert Sun* that highlighted the



valley’s Japanese pioneer families.³⁴

An early Coachella Valley produce label reflects the presence of farmers of Japanese descent. Photo courtesy of the Coachella Valley Historical Society

Turkey

Coachella’s date industry enticed immigrants from as far away as Turkey, including Nick Nigosian, Sr., who was born in Istanbul, Turkey, in 1907.

When he was seven, Nigosian was sent to an orphanage in Saudi Arabia to avoid the genocide that the Turks were undertaking against the Armenian people, according to the Nigosian family’s display at the 2018 Heritage Festival.

Nigosian escaped the Armenian Genocide of 1915 to 1917 before coming the United States in the 1920s and making his way to the Coachella Valley’s date fields in the 1940s.

Nick Sr. eventually relocated to East St. Louis, Illinois in the 1920s. He learned to be a furrier, someone who makes, cleans and alters fur garments, and eventually moved to Los Angeles in 1946 and worked on Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills. He married Pearl Marifian in 1935. She was also born in Turkey in 1914 and they had two children, Nick Jr. and Patricia (Relitz).

Nick Sr. later traveled to the Coachella Valley to explore opportunities in date ranching in the 1940s and eventually founded Nigosian’s Pyramid Date Gardens in Coachella, which he operated for 33 years until his death in 1988, according to his Sept. 24, 1988 obituary in *The Desert Sun*.

Portugal

Coachella attracted immigrants from other distant corners of the globe as well, including Vergilio Lopes, an immigrant from Portugal, who opened Lopes Hardware on the corner of 6th Street and Orchard Avenue in 1948.

According to *Coachella Valley Mexican American Pioneer Roots*, Lopes relocated his namesake hardware store in 1950 to the former First National Bank of Coachella building at 1604 6th Street, where it remains today.³⁵

When Lopes became ill, he sold the hardware store to Juan Rosalio Torres in 1976, who by that time had worked full time at the hardware store for 20 years — since his graduation from Coachella Valley High School in 1956 — with the exception of a short period of time when he was drafted into the U.S. Army for service during the Berlin Crisis.³⁶

³⁵ *Ibid*, Historical information included on a page with no number near the end of the book.

³⁶ *Ibid*.

Chapter 8

African Americans from Southern States Settle in Thermal and Indio during the Great Migration

While the farm fields of the eastern Coachella Valley attracted immigrants from around the world, they also enticed African American families from Texas, Oklahoma and Louisiana who fled to California and other states in an effort to escape the racism, discrimination and outright persecution they experienced in the Southern states.

Until 1910, more than 90 percent of the U.S. African American population lived in the Southern states. But harsh racial persecution in the South combined with economic opportunities elsewhere prompted large numbers of African-Americans to begin leaving the South in 1916 in a multi-decade movement that would become known as the Great Migration.

Indeed, between 1916 and 1970, more than 6 million African Americans fled the South for the Northeast, the Midwest, and the West as they sought a better way of life.

“They were seeking political asylum within the borders of their own country, not unlike refugees in other parts of the world fleeing famine, war and pestilence,” Isabel Wilkerson writes in a September 2016 article on the Great Migration in Smithsonian Magazine.

“When the migration began,” Wilkerson added, “90 percent of all African-Americans were living in the South. By the time it was over, in the 1970s, 47 percent of all African-Americans were living in the North and West. A rural people had become urban, and a Southern people had spread themselves all over the nation.”

Some of the African-Americans who came to Southern California in the 1940s found economic opportunities in the Coachella Valley’s cotton farms.

“The wages were better here,” said R. Gene Wilson, whose family relocated from Texas to Indio in 1942. “They were paying \$1 a pound for cotton in Texas. But they were making \$1.25 here.”

Wilson said her mother worked in the fields and did housework. Wilson also worked in the fields since she was 13 or younger. “I’d go to school and then work in the fields,” she said. “I worked in cotton fields, grape fields, corn, tomatoes, whatever needed to be picked.”

Other African American pioneer families who came to the Indio area include the Castleberry family of Longbranch, Texas, and the Roberson family from Henderson, Texas, according to Steve Castleberry, whose believes his father,

Willie Castleberry, and his uncle, Eugene Castleberry, arrived in Indio in 1946.

“They felt they could have a better life here in California,” Steve Castleberry said, adding that his father met and married Oralee Roberson soon after he arrived in the desert.

“My mom came (to Indio) with her parents, Goldist and Hattie Lou Roberson,” Steve Castleberry said, adding that his grandfather, Goldist Roberson, worked as a labor contractor for cotton farmers in the eastern Coachella Valley.

While the Castleberry family had also worked in agriculture both in Texas and in the Coachella Valley, Willie Castleberry also helped build the Coachella Extension of the All-American Canal, Steve Castleberry said.

Chapter 9

Racial Discrimination in the Eastern Coachella Valley

While early immigrants to the eastern Coachella Valley found economic opportunities, they also encountered various forms of racial discrimination, which reflected the biases and mandates of American white culture as well as U.S. and California laws in the early 20th century.

Deed Restrictions on Japanese Americans

As farming operations expanded in the Coachella Valley and throughout California in the early 1900s, growers depended on increasing numbers of Japanese immigrants, who they viewed as a cheap source of labor.

But as entrepreneurial Japanese immigrants climbed the ladder from laborers to sharecroppers to tenant farmers and farm owners, they came to be seen as a threat, not only by white farm owners, but by politicians and the news media, prompting lawmakers to pass the 1913 California Alien Land Law, which was intended to prohibit land ownership by Japanese immigrants as well as their leasing of land for more than three years.

Japanese immigrants were able to find ways to get around the law, however.

“Japanese farmers were able to place land in trusts and guardianships for the American-born children, form agricultural land-holding corporations, put land in the name of friends and American-born relatives or enter into three-year leases that were simply renewed for another three years at lease’s end,” Keith Akoli writes in his article, “No Right to Own?: The Early Twentieth Century ‘Alien Land Laws’ as a Prelude to Internment,” which was published in 1998 by the *Boston College Law Review*.³⁷

Akoli notes that this and other anti-alien laws were also driven in large part by “a xenophobic paranoia that John Higham has called ‘racial nativism,’” citing the historian known for his research into American culture, historiography and ethnicity.³⁸

But paranoia over Japanese and Japanese intentions continued to increase during the second decade of the 20th century.

“Following the end of World War I, the American Legion and other veterans’ organizations entered the equation, weighing in on the ‘Japanese

37 Akoli, Keith, “No Right to Own?: The Early Twentieth Century ‘Alien Land Laws’ as a Prelude to Internment,” *Boston College Third World Law Journal*, Vol. 19, Issue 1, Dec. 1, 1998, 56.

38 Ibid, 40.

Problem' in California and reinforcing the growing sense of disquiet over the rise of Japan as a threat to U.S. interests in the Pacific," Akoli writes, adding, "The American Legion combined forces with more established nativist politicians, small agricultural interests and virulent anti-Japanese media interests such as the McClatchy and Hearst newspaper chains."³⁹

These anti-Japanese activists secured another ballot initiative in 1920 that was designed to close the loopholes in the 1913 Alien Land Law.

Opponents of the 1920 initiative took out nearly full-page advertisements in *The Date Palm* in Indio, which noted, among other things, that the proposed initiative "is a violation of the spirit of the Constitution of the United States" and that it poses "a hardship on an industrious law abiding people."

Voters in Riverside County and elsewhere in California were unconvinced, however. According to Akoli, "The 1920 Initiative amendment to the 1913 Alien Land Law passed with a decisive majority in every county in California."⁴⁰

Such pervasive anti-Japanese sentiment would eventually set the stage for the internment of Japanese Americans in the Coachella Valley and throughout California during World War II, Akoli wrote.⁴¹

Deed Restrictions on African Americans

While African Americans experienced racism in the Coachella Valley, including deed restrictions that prohibited them from owning land in many areas, economic and social conditions were better than they experienced in the South, according to surviving descendants of some of Indio's first African American families.

"To me, it was better out here. I had more freedom," said Leah Jordan, an African American who was born in Hennessey, Oklahoma in 1932 and came to Indio with her family in 1938.

R. Gene Wilson was born in 1933 in Longbranch, Texas and relocated to Indio with her family in 1942. Like other African Americans, she, too, said conditions were better in the Coachella Valley than in the Southern states.

"I went to Roosevelt School (in Indio)," she said. "It was the first time I had ever been to a mixed school. In Texas, we couldn't go to a white school. I was living right next to a white school, but I couldn't go there."

But while conditions were better for African Americans in eastern Coachella Valley schools than in the South, deed restrictions prevented African Americans from purchasing land and homes in many areas of the valley.

In fact, many African Americans who arrived in the valley in the 1940s initially lived on Indian reservations because they couldn't immediately find other

39 *Ibid*, 56-57.

40 *Ibid*, 57.

41 *Ibid*, 62.

places to live, according to Steve Castleberry, whose father, Willie Castleberry, arrived in the Coachella Valley in 1946.

Other African American families found temporary housing at the farm labor camp in Indio, said Louise Rodarte Neeley, a 93-year-old former chairman of the La Quinta Historical Society who worked at the farm labor camp in the 1940s.

John Nobles of Indio, however, was one African American migrant from the South who found a way to bypass the early deed restrictions.

Nobles managed to develop a friendship with Dr. Reynaldo Carreon, an ophthalmologist and humanitarian who would later gain prominence for his efforts to co-found John F. Kennedy Memorial Hospital in Indio.

“What we do know is that in the late 1930s, when deed restrictions prevented the sale of Coachella Valley land to African Americans, Nobles and his wife Miranda were given Dr. (Carreon’s) ranch, a sizeable spread just south of the then-compact city of Indio, near the intersection of Avenue 46 and Monroe Street,” Chris Clarke writes in a Feb. 9, 2012 report on “African Americans who helped shape the Coachella Valley,” which is posted on KCET.org, the public television station in Los Angeles.⁴²

Nobles prospered growing peanuts, cotton and winter lettuce. He also raised chickens and hogs, according to Clarke, who added that Nobles helped other African-American families to develop their own community in the Indio area using the land that Dr. Carreon had given him.

“Over the course of the 1930s and ‘40s, as African-American settlers moved into the Indio area, John Nobles’ ranch became a Mecca for families seeking a stable place to live. Odious, racist deed restrictions were still in place throughout the valley. Nobles was one of the very few landowners in Indio willing to sell portions of his land to black families. By the time Nobles died in the wake of World War Two, his ranch hosted private homes, apartments, stores and churches. His granddaughter, who inherited the ranch on Nobles’ death, soon sold it off and the thriving, largely African American neighborhood continued to grow.”⁴³

Leah Jordan said John Nobles was her mother’s uncle. “He let us have a little property on his place,” she said. “We lived in a tent for a while until we were able to buy a lot.”

Jordan said she remembers the Indio area “when it was nothing but tumbleweeds.” But she said her dad found work in the table grape and cotton fields in the eastern Coachella Valley.

“They wanted a better life,” Jordan said of her parents, Albert Woods

⁴² Clarke, Chris, “African-Americans Shaping the California Desert: Coachella Valley,” Feb. 9, 2012, <https://www.kcet.org/socal-focus/african-americans-shaping-the-california-desert-coachella-valley>

⁴³ Ibid.

and Willie Mae. “They were looking for something new.”

Not every African American family who came to the eastern Coachella Valley encountered deed restrictions.



Deartis and Teresa Wallace of Thermal were among the first African Americans to come to the eastern Coachella Valley from Southern states. *Photo courtesy of Shirley Wallace*

Deartis and Teresa Wallace were independent farmers who relocated from Cathage, Texas to Thermal in 1942, where they were able to purchase land, build their home and raise their family, which included seven girls and five boys.

Deartis drilled a well and used the water to irrigate his crops, which included a variety of vegetables, including okra as well as tomatoes. He also raised pigs and cattle. He bailed alfalfa on his own ranch and sold firewood during the winter months.

In addition to farming, Deartis also helped build the Coachella Extension of the

All-American Canal, which brought Colorado River water into the Coachella Valley to help irrigate farm fields and replenish the local groundwater supply.

In her family’s written display at the March 17, 2018 Heritage Festival at the Coachella Valley History Museum, Shirley Wallace shared a description of her parents, Deartis and Teresa Wallace, and the impact they had on their children and on the community.

“They instilled family values such as mental, physical, social and spiritual wellbeing and they knew each of their children’s needs and desires and were truly proud of their unique qualities. Amazingly, all of their children graduated from high school and seven of them received college degrees and all of their children became productive workers and successful citizens.”



Shirley Wallace stands next to her family history display during the 2018 Heritage Festival at the Coachella Valley History Museum in Indio. *Photo courtesy of Jeff Crider*

The Riverside County Board of Supervisors named the road leading to Wallace Ranch Wallace Road in recognition of the Wallace family's achievements.



The eastern Coachella Valley's African American pioneers include the Wood family of Indio. Standing in the back row are Senofie, Ruby, Albert, Josie, Glen and Leah Wood (Jordan). Sitting in the front row are Douglas, Cassie and Sam Wood. *Photo courtesy of Leah Jordan*

Segregation of Mexican Schoolchildren

The segregation of Mexican schoolchildren in the eastern Coachella Valley is documented in oral histories provided by the families of Mexican American Pioneers, which were recorded and transcribed in 2007 by Dr. Sarah McCormick Seekatz for the Coachella Valley History Museum and Cultural Center in Indio.

According to these oral accounts, children of Mexican descent in the eastern Coachella Valley were directed to report to certain classrooms or to attend certain schools based on the color of their skin.

Alex Sicre, whose grandfather, George Gonzalez, came to the Coachella Valley from Meoqui, Chihuahua, in 1903, describes the segregation of children of Mexican descent in interviews conducted July 19 and July 23, 2007 by Dr. Seekatz for the Coachella Valley History Museum.

"There was an elementary school (in Thermal) and it was mainly for Anglos," Sicre said. "But because there was no other place to go, (children of



Mexican descent) went to that school for the first, oh, couple of years of grammar school, and then they were told that they would have to go to the Torres-Martinez Reservation instead of the Anglo school.”

Early newspaper reports in *The Date Palm* and the *Coachella Valley Submarine* note the existence of “Mexican first grade” and “Mexican second grade” classes in grammar schools in Coachella and Thermal, but provide no details on what children of Mexican descent encountered after those initial grades.

Several of the Coachella Valley’s Mexican American pioneers describe situations in Coachella and Indio where school officials separated children, even siblings of the same family, based on the color of their skin.

Gilda Guitron Sandsness, whose father, Felix, came to the Coachella Valley from Puerto Vallarta, Mexico in 1919, described her experience attending grammar school in Coachella with her sister, Elisa, in a July 16, 2007 interview with Dr. Seekatz.

“I went to the Coachella Valley Union High School, but I went to grammar school in Coachella,” Sandsness said. “I was held back by my dad going to school because he wanted me to go with my sister who is fourteen months younger than I. Well, of course, we weren’t going to be in the same grade, you know, but, he took us our first day of school, registered us and there (were) two sides — a right hand side and a left hand side of the school. On the right hand is where they segregated the Mexican kids, and we had very few black families, but if there were any we were over there at the same place.”

Sandsness said her dad didn’t immediately realize his daughters would be segregated.

“Well, the first day of school,” she said, “we got home and we came home with lice. That sent my dad into orbit because he wanted to know why. So, I remember like if it was today. We had a huge lawn. (I) remember two chairs, my mother, my grandmother, and my aunt working on getting those things out. Once we were clean, he takes us back to school and he says, in his broken English, ... ‘I’ve been paying taxes for many years and for the first time I have children coming to school and they get separated, and that’s not acceptable.’ So he insisted and we went to the left hand side of the school which, of course, was where all the Caucasian children were, and zero English we knew. So we had a crash course. And we, within three months, we were up and ready, you know, keeping up with studies and everything. And that’s one of the reasons I know you can learn if you really want to and have the desire.

We were always brought up that we were as good as anyone else and better in some cases, and our job and our responsibility to ourselves and our family was to do the very best we could with whatever circumstances we had.”

Since Coachella Valley Union High School in Thermal was the only high school in the eastern Coachella Valley in the early days, students from Coachella to Indio and La Quinta went there, regardless of the color of their skin.

But Sandsness said high school wasn’t an option for many families of Mexican descent. “Very few Mexican people or children that I graduated (with) in the 8th grade had the opportunity to go to high school because they had to go help with the family,” she said. “My Uncle Frank, or Francisco, ... graduated in 1932 from CV High. ... He was the only Mexican in there graduating, and there was one Japanese fellow. It was pretty much Caucasian graduates.”

Indeed, no students with Hispanic last names are listed among the graduating classes of Coachella Valley Union School from 1910 to 1930, with the exception of one student — Nicholas Maxamus Lopez — in 1925, according to the commemorative yearbook, *Coachella Valley Union High School: The First 50 Years 1910-1960*, which lists the students in each graduating class. In fact, it isn’t until the late 1940s and 50s that one begins to see more than a few students with Hispanic last names listed among Coachella Valley Union High School graduates. About one fourth of the school’s graduating class of 1960 was Hispanic.

Segregation of students based on skin color also took place in Indio, with darker skinned students generally being sent to a school called “Lincoln School,” which was on the corner of Bliss and Oasis Street in Indio, while light skinned students were sent to Roosevelt School. This arrangement sometimes led to situations where siblings of the same family would be sent to different schools, solely based on the color of their skin, a situation that understandably enraged their parents.

“The ethnic groups and the lower class Anglos of the Indio area were sent to (Lincoln) School,” according to George R. Sicre, another grandson of

George Gonzalez, who came to the valley from Meoqui, Chihuahua in 1903.

In a July 19, 2007 Interview with Dr. Seekatz for the Coachella Valley History Museum, George Sicre said Indio school officials tried to send him and his brother, Alex, to different schools based on their skin color.

“Now, please understand that my brother and I don’t really look much alike,” George Sicre said. “He is what’s considered in the Mexican culture a guero. He looks very Anglo, like my father looked very Anglo. Whereas I took after my mother. I’m dark complected and I look very Mexican. At one point, when I was in the 2nd grade, my mother was called in to inform her that her son, George, myself, would be transferred to the Lincoln School, and my mother was wondering why is her son, George, being transferred to the Lincoln School? So she went to speak to the superintendant of schools. I remember it was Rex Johnson and (I) asked the same question. Well, they said because George is, academically isn’t performing as he should be at this school, which was really not true because I had better grades than my older brother, Alex, who looked Anglo. Apparently, they did not realize in the school district that Alex and I were brothers. So, my mother thought, ‘Why is this happening to us?’”

Alex’s mother was further enraged because the school was located on property that the Gonzalez family had been forced to sell through eminent domain proceedings.

“This was our property at one time where the school is,” George Sicre recalled. “She told them that this property used to be ours, it was taken from us, and you’re telling me now that my child cannot attend your school? And why is it that it’s my younger child that’s being pulled out of the Roosevelt School and not my older child? And for that reason they kept me in school. They had no answer for that other than it was because I looked ethnic. So that was my first experience (with) discrimination during that time.”

Louis Rodarte Neeley, a former chairman of the La Quinta Historical Society who was 93 at the time of this writing, remembers a dispute involving herself and her sister, Josephine, when they were young.

Louise, a Mexican American with light skin, was allowed to attend Roosevelt School, while her sister, who has darker skin, was told to attend Lincoln School. Louise’s mother complained to the principal about separating the girls and Josephine was allowed to attend Roosevelt school.

Louise also remembers school staff admonishing children not to speak Spanish, though Louise and her sister were fluent English speakers.

The segregation of Mexican and Mexican American and students is widely documented in California and across the country during the first half of the 20th century.

“Mexicans were never specifically mentioned in the Education Code of California. However, by the 1920s, they were by far the most



Louise Rodarte (Neeley) at Point Happy Ranch in 1937. Photo courtesy of Louise Rodarte Neeley

*segregated group in California public education,” Margaret E. Montoya writes in her article, “A Brief History of Chicana/o School Segregation: One Rationale for Affirmative Action,” which was published in 2001 in the Berkeley La Raza Law School Journal.*⁴⁴

Montoya notes that Mexican American families successfully challenged the legality of segregating students of Mexican descent in several different courts around the country.

Some of the earliest court battles include Francisco Maestas et al. v. George H. Shone et al, a 1912-14 case in Colorado; Alvarez v. Owen, a 1931 case in Lemon Grove, Calif.; and Mendez v. Westminster School District of Orange County, Calif., a famous 1946 case in which the judge ruled in favor of the five Mexican American fathers who filed the lawsuit.

The fathers’ attorney, David Marcus, sued in federal court, alleging that four school districts — Westminster, Garden Grove, Santa Ana and El Modeno — had maintained elementary schools with 100 percent Mexican and Mexican American enrollment in violation of their Fifth and Fourteenth Amendment rights.

Montoya said the schools argued first that federal courts had no jurisdiction in the case because education was a state matter. The schools also argued that the students were separated “not because of race or nationality, but because they lacked English-language skills and American values and culture.” The schools also noted that the principle of “separate but equal” was the law of the land, as noted in the infamous Plessy v. Ferguson Supreme Court decision of 1896.⁴⁵

Judge Paul J. McCormick didn’t buy these arguments, however.

“On February 18, 1946, Judge Paul J. McCormick concluded that the Plessy v. Ferguson precedent was inapposite because the California code did not provide for the establishment of ‘Mexican’ schools,” Montoya wrote. “Therefore, their establishment was arbitrary action taken without ‘due process of law,’ raising an issue under the Fourteenth Amendment and conferring jurisdiction on the Court. Judge McCormick rejected the educational rationalizations for the separate schools, concluding that language difficulties would not warrant segregating children through the eighth grade. Judge McCormick also rejected arguments that the children were intellectually inferior and heralded the notion that integration would instill ‘a common cultural attitude among the school children which is imperative for the perpetuation of American institutions and ideals.’”⁴⁶

The school districts appealed the case to the Ninth Circuit Court of

⁴⁴ Montoya, Margaret E., “A Brief History of Chicana/o School Segregation: One Rationale for Affirmative Action,” 2001, *Berkeley La Raza Law School Journal*, 165.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 167.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

Appeals in San Francisco, which upheld the lower court ruling opposing the segregation of Mexican American students.

California Governor Earl Warren subsequently signed a bill in June 1947 that outlawed segregation of students “based on race, creed or color,” according to a June 28, 1947 article in *The Pittsburgh Courier*.

The 1946 McCormick decision would later be cited as a precedent in the Supreme Court’s 1954 landmark decision in Brown v. Board of Education, in which the justices unanimously outlawed the racial segregation of children in public schools.

In 2010, President Barack Obama awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom to Sylvia Mendez, who was 8 years old at the time her father filed the famous 1946 case on her behalf when she was unable to attend the local school in her predominantly white neighborhood. President Obama said Mendez grew up to become a civil rights advocate who “made it her mission to spread a message of tolerance and opportunity to children of all backgrounds and all walks of life,” according to a September 11, 2011 report in *The Desert Sun*.

Discrimination in Death

The Coachella Valley Cemetery at 82925 Avenue 52 in Coachella was the site of discrimination in the early 20th century, with Mexican Americans and African Americans being buried on one side and anglos on the other, according to Raymond Torres of the Mexican American Pioneers and Louise Rodarte Neeley, former chairman of the La Quinta Historical Society.

Both Torres and Neeley have family members who are buried at the cemetery. Torres said the cemetery eventually changed its policy as a result of public outrage. “People started complaining,” he said.

Coachella was not unique in having a racially segregated cemetery. “Until the 1950s, about 90 percent of all public cemeteries in the U.S. employed a variety of racial restrictions,” according to a January 16, 2017 article on slate.com.⁴⁷

African Americans who lived and died in the Palm Springs area were buried on nearby Indian reservations, said Kathy Roberson, whose grandfather, Frank Crossley, who was of the first African Americans to settle in the Palm Springs area. Roberson said her family was told her grandfather’s body was buried on a Palm Springs area Indian reservation in the 1940s, but she has never been able to obtain information from the Agua Caliente tribe to verify the location of her grandfather’s grave.

Kate Anderson, director of public relations for the Agua

⁴⁷ “The Persistent Racism of America’s Cemeteries,” Jan. 16, 2017, http://www.slate.com/blogs/atlas_obscura/2017/01/16/america_s_segregated_cemeteries_are_important_troves_of_forgotten_black.html

Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians in Palm Springs, said she could not find records regarding Mr. Crossley's burial, though she did confirm the tribe's willingness to accommodate burials of non-white people.

"Historically, the Tribe allowed burials from Mexican and African American families in its cemetery as they were not allowed to be buried in the non-Indian cemetery (in Palm Springs) because they were people of color," Anderson said.

The practice of segregating cemeteries was eventually outlawed by a 1948 Supreme Court decision in *Shelley v. Kraemer* in which the justices ruled that state enforcement of racially restrictive covenants in land deeds violated the 14th Amendment's equal protection clause. "This had a major impact on the ability of blacks to buy houses in white neighborhoods, but it also affected the de-segregation of cemeteries. White-only restrictions on cemetery plots could no longer hold up in court."⁴⁸

48 *Ibid.*

Chapter 10

The Great Depression and the Repatriation of Mexican Immigrants, 1929-1934

Although their labor was desperately needed in farm fields across the country, Mexican immigrants suffered severe discrimination during the earliest years of the Great Depression, from 1929 to 1934, a period historians call “The Repatriation.”

During these initial Depression years, the U.S. government under President Herbert Hoover used a combination of zero tolerance immigration policies, mass deportations and negative publicity to create a climate of fear to encourage Mexican immigrants to return to Mexico along with their American-born children.

U.S. government policies during those early Depression years are reminiscent of the Trump administration’s “zero tolerance” immigration policies at the time of this writing, with its highly publicized deportations of Mexican immigrants across the country, the separation of immigrant parents from their children at the border, and Trump’s own anti-immigrant rhetoric, which he has used to create a climate of fear in the immigrant community.

Mexicans during the initial years of the Depression were unfairly scapegoated and blamed for stealing jobs that might otherwise go to white people, Francisco E. Balderrama and Raymond Rodriguez write in their 2006 book, *Decade of Betrayal: Mexican Repatriation in the 1930s*.

“Americans, reeling from the economic disorientation of the depression, sought a convenient scapegoat,” Balderrama and Rodriguez write. “They found it in the Mexican community. In a frenzy of anti-Mexican hysteria, wholesale punitive measures were proposed and undertaken by government officials at the federal, state and local levels. Laws were passed depriving Mexicans of jobs in the public and private sectors. Immigration and deportation laws were enacted to restrict emigration and hasten the departure of those already here. Contributing to the brutalizing experience were the mass deportations and repatriation drives. Violence and ‘scare-head’ tactics were utilized to get rid of the burdensome and unwanted horde. An incessant cry of ‘get rid of the Mexicans’ swept the country.”⁴⁹

The *Los Angeles Times* documented the repatriation in numerous stories, including this April 12, 1931 report:

⁴⁹ Balderrama, Francisco E. And Raymond Rodriguez, *Decade of Betrayal: Mexican Repatriation in the 1930s*, (2006).1.

“Moving southward by rail and automobile in families of two to ten in one of the greatest migrations of a single nationality in modern times, more than 10,000 Mexicans, men, women and children, are leaving Southern California monthly and returning to Mexico,” the *Times* wrote, quoting Rafael De La Colima, Mexico’s Consul in Los Angeles.

“Pressed by economic adversity, stirred with fear at recently renewed activities of immigration authorities and perplexed by what they regard as an anti-Mexican sentiment, the Mexicans have been leaving Southern California in amazing numbers for more than three months,” the *Times* wrote, adding, “Thousands are leaving without requesting assistance or reporting their intentions to leave.”

While the Depression era media campaign asserted that many Mexicans were receiving public assistance, such claims were largely unfounded. “... *in spite of the severe crisis, most Mexican families chose not to demean themselves by asking for public aid,*” Balderrama and Rodriguez wrote. “*Therefore, contrary to the widely held belief that most Mexicans were on welfare during the depression, such was not the case.*”⁵⁰

Historians estimate that anywhere from 400,000 to over 1 million Mexicans and U.S. citizens of Mexican descent were sent to Mexico during this period. Many also left on their own.

“*To avoid the humiliation of official repatriation, many Mexican Nationals ‘voluntarily left the United States,’* Balderrama and Rodriguez *wrote*, adding, “As the depression worsened, repatriation, deportation, and voluntary or induced departures spread their ominous shadow across the entire United States. Trains, cars, trucks, and buses streamed southward from every corner of the land. Los Angeles, Phoenix, El Paso, Denver, Kansas City, Chicago, Detroit, Pittsburgh, New York, New Orleans, San Diego, San Francisco, Portland, Seattle, and Fairbanks, Alaska, spewed forth their human jetsam.”⁵¹

Coachella Valley newspapers say very little about deportations during the 1929 to 1934 period. However, *The Date Palm* in Indio documented one of the deportation roundups on October 30, 1931, citing *La Opinion*, the Spanish language newspaper in Los Angeles.

“*La Opinion*, Spanish newspaper of Los Angeles, states that 2,000 Mexicans left Brawley last Friday for Mexico and 2,000 from Los Angeles Thursday of this week. Fifteen families from Coachella Valley were included in this exodus,” *The Date Palm* wrote, adding, “These people are furnished stock and implements and land for farming in Mexico. Jo Morino and Philip Nava of this locality are active in arrangements for the movement. It is further stated that 85,000 Mexicans have left California for Mexico in the last nine months.”

50 *Ibid*, 95.

51 *Ibid*, 122-123.

This excerpt from *The Date Palm* was also published in the commemorative yearbook, *Coachella Valley Union High School: The First 50 Years*, along with additional text noting that the repatriation was not a benevolent effort, but “a coordinated effort by the federal government, municipal governments, and the American Federation of Labor to reduce the number of Mexicans in the United States” that included U.S. born children. In fact, the book said the Gomez family was taken back to Mexico in one of the roundups, though the family’s son, Manuel Gomez, was later brought back to finish school between 1931 and 1933, while his family remained in Mexico.

Newspaper reports from the 1930s document efforts by the Mexican government to provide land for people who were repatriated, but the Mexican government did not have nearly enough land or resources to assist everyone who was deported.

“The task of resettling and assimilating the horde of people returning to la madre patria overwhelmed the Mexican bureaucracy,” Balderrama and Rodriguez wrote. “The sheer numbers and the enormity and complex nature of the vast undertaking taxed the government’s ability to respond effectively. Farmland — vital to successful colonization and the crucial factor on which the nation’s prosperity would be based — was not available in sufficient quantities. ... No one anticipated that one million people would be dumped into a society of fifteen million, still struggling to recover from the aftermath of a revolution that had ended barely a decade ago.”⁵²

No records are available involving repatriations of Coachella Valley residents at the Mexican Consulate in San Bernardino, which wasn’t even established until the late 1930s, according to consulate officials.

The U.S. government, for its part, says “in most cases, no federal record exists for these departures,” according to a statement regarding the repatriation of Mexicans on the website of the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, which is part of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

“This is because, while an estimated 400,000 to 1 million Mexicans and Mexican-Americans left the US for Mexico during the Depression, relatively few of them were expelled under formal INS-directed removal proceedings. The majority returned to Mexico by their own decision or through officially voluntary – though often coercive – repatriation programs directed by state and local governments and charitable aid agencies.”⁵³

Even historians say it’s difficult to obtain reliable statistics involving the numbers of Mexican immigrants who were deported or left the U.S. on their own.

“Although attempts were made to record the mass migration, Mexican

⁵² *Ibid*, 334.

⁵³ “INS Records for 1930s Mexican Repatriations,” March 3, 2014, <https://www.uscis.gov/history-and-genealogy/our-history/historians-mailbox/ins-records-1930s-mexican-repatriations>

consuls, county welfare agencies, and local officials lost track of how many families merely left town or were actually relocated,” Balderrama and Rodriguez write in *Decade of Betrayal*. “The lack of precise figures is not surprising since the majority of the repatriates, contrary to popular myth or belief, paid their own way, provided their own transportation, and left without official intervention.”⁵⁴

Regardless of how many families were gripped by fear, many felt a sense of betrayal by their adopted country.

*“The inhumane treatment was particularly galling to the repatriates because they viewed themselves as honest, industrious workers,” Balderrama and Rodriguez wrote. “Their renown and reputation as a reliable workforce spoke for itself. They had performed their tasks admirably. Why, then, were they being heartlessly expelled?”*⁵⁵

Indeed, the repatriation effort was particularly hard on families with U.S.-born children.

According to Balderrama and Rodriguez, “Many of them had resided in the United States for such a long time, often their entire adult life, that they did not have close friends or relatives in Mexico. Bearing the traumatic burden of being shipped ‘back’ to Mexico were those least able to cope with their plight: the children. Shipping them to Mexico so they could ‘be with their own kind’ was absolutely absurd. Although of Mexican ancestry, they considered themselves to be Americans and many of them spoke only a limited amount of Spanish. To them, historically and culturally, Mexico was a foreign country.”⁵⁶

It wouldn’t be long, however, before the U.S. would again need large numbers of Mexican immigrant workers. Indeed, by the time World War II got underway, farmers in the Coachella Valley and across the country were faced with a manpower shortage, which prompted them to lobby the U.S. government to establish a guest worker program for Mexican immigrants in 1942 that would ultimately become known as the Bracero Program.

The state of California belatedly apologized for its involvement in the repatriation program in December 2005 with the passage of Senate Bill 670, otherwise known as the “Apology Act for the 1930s Mexican Repatriation Program.”

No such apology has been issued by the U.S. government. However, Rep. Lucille Roybal-Allard of Commerce, California has introduced House Resolution 1412, a bill that, according to her press release, would establish the first-ever commission to study the Mexican Repatriation of the 1930s and “recommend appropriate legislative remedies.” The bill has been referred to the House Judiciary Subcommittee on Immigration and Border Security. However, as of the time of this writing, no action had been taken to move the proposed legislation.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 127.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 148.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 331.

The U.S. Border Patrol Wasn't Founded Until 1924. Its Focus: Asian and European Immigrants

There was lax enforcement of immigration laws along the U.S.-Mexico border during the first two decades of the 20th century.

“There were seldom more than sixty Bureau of Immigration agents stationed along the entire length of the U.S.-Mexico border at any one time,” Francisco E. Balderrama and Raymond Rodríguez write in their 2006 book, *Decade of Betrayal: Mexican Repatriation in the 1930s*.¹

Mexicans were not even the focus of the U.S. Border Patrol when the agency was established in 1924.

“The primary impetus for creating the new agency was to stop the smuggling of Asians and Europeans into the United States,” Balderrama and Rodríguez wrote, adding that the Border Patrol was initially staffed with only 450 agents to patrol both the Mexican and Canadian borders.²

Later, when the Border Patrol turned its attention to Mexican immigrants, it did so selectively.

“Regulations were loosely enforced when Mexican workers were needed to harvest crops or increase production in the mines or on the assembly lines,” Balderrama and Rodríguez wrote. “Conversely, the strict letter of the law was applied when Mexican labor exceeded the seasonal demand. Then, deportation raids at the work sites, usually before payday, became common occurrences. The raids were sometimes conducted at the request of unscrupulous employers.”³

1 Balderrama, Francisco E. and Raymond Rodríguez, *Decade of Betrayal: Mexican Repatriation in the 1930s*, (2006), 10..

2 *Ibid.*, 11.

3 *Ibid.*

Mexico's Discrimination Against Chinese Immigrants

Tens of thousands of Chinese immigrants entered Mexico during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and many of them went there with the hope of gaining entry into the United States.

But the Mexican government also signed a treaty with China in 1899 to recruit Chinese laborers to work in the farm fields of northern Mexico, according to Chao Romero, an assistant professor of Chicana and Chicano studies at the University of California, Los Angeles, who wrote the 2010 book, *The Chinese in Mexico: 1882-1940*.

By the 1920s, Romero said, Chinese immigrants were the second largest immigrant group in Mexico. But anti-Chinese sentiment had been building since the time of the Mexican Revolution and Mexican government discrimination against Chinese immigrants had gotten to the point where Mexico could not take a forceful public stance against the repatriation of Mexicans from the United States during the Great Depression.

“Mexico could hardly object to repatriation because it was also involved in expelling hundreds of Chinese and other unwanted aliens,” Francisco E. Balderrama and Raymond Rodríguez write in their 2006 book, *Decade of Betrayal: Mexican Repatriation in the 1930s*.¹

According to Romero, anti-Chinese sentiment boiled over during the early years of the Mexican Revolution, when sympathizers of revolutionary leader Francisco Madero made inflammatory speeches against Chinese immigrants, about 300 of whom were killed on May 15, 1911 as Maderista forces and civilian mobs targeted Chinese homes and businesses in the city of Torreon.²

Romero called the attack the worst act of violence committed against any Chinese diaspora of the Americas during the 20th century.

The state of Sonora even went to the extent of passing a law banning marriages between Chinese men and Mexican women, though it was loosely enforced.

1 Balderrama, Francisco E. and Raymond Rodríguez, *Decade of Betrayal: Mexican Repatriation in the 1930s*, (2006), 172.

2 Romero, Chao, *The Chinese in Mexico: 1882-1940*, (2010), 148-150.

Many Chinese immigrants in Mexico fled to the Mexicali area to escape the civil war in Mexico's interior, according to Saul Chong, a former secretary of the Chinese Consulate in Mexicali, who discussed Mexicali's Chinese history for an August 16, 1990 report in the *Los Angeles Times*.

"In 1914-16, as war dominated Europe, demand for cotton was high, and, according to Chong's estimate, 15,000 Chinese worked in the Mexicali Valley fields, while the area contained only 5,000 Mexicans," the *Times* wrote.

The large numbers of Chinese immigrants eventually established La Chinesca, Mexico's largest Chinatown, in the heart of Mexicali in 1918. Mexicali itself was established on March 14, 1903.

Chapter 11

The Internment of the Coachella Valley's Japanese American families during World War II

On December 8, 1941, one day after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, 64 Japanese residents of Coachella gathered at Coachella Presbyterian Church and publicly pledged their allegiance to the United States and to the U.S. Constitution, according to a December 12, 1941 report in the *Coachella Valley Submarine*.

But their public pledge was to no avail as they would soon be taken with their families to a relocation camp in Poston, Arizona, one of 10 relocation camps that were set up throughout the Western U.S. after President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, which authorized the internment of more than 117,000 people of Japanese descent.

While Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 on February 19, 1942, the Riverside County Board of Supervisors followed suit by unanimously passing its own resolution “requesting the military authorities to exclude all enemy aliens from Riverside county and also to remove all Japanese, irrespective of citizenship, from the confines of the county,” according to a February 27, 1942 report in *The Submarine*.

The Submarine also noted that a petition was being circulated in the Coachella Valley “asking that all Japanese citizens as well as non-citizens be removed from the entire west coast.”

The relocation of eastern Coachella Valley students of Japanese descent is documented in the commemorative yearbook, *Coachella Valley Union High School: The First 50 Years 1910-1960*.

“One of the saddest days in the history of Coachella Valley Union High School had to have been May 19, 1942,” the authors wrote. “On that day, all Japanese and Japanese-Americans in the Coachella Valley, citizens and non-citizens alike, were put on buses, with one suitcase or a small box apiece, and taken to a hurriedly constructed internment camp called Poston, located in the desolate mesquite desert outside of Parker, Arizona.”

Eleventh grade students at Coachella Valley Union High School threw a farewell party for their Japanese friends before they were taken away on May 14, 1942.

Charles Shibata, an Indio native of Japanese descent, was dumbfounded by the government’s orders.

“It never occurred to me that I was not an American,” Shibata told

The Desert Sun in an August 15, 1995 interview, when he was 72. “I was born here, raised here, went to schools here, never been to Japan. I was just like any boy who had been born here.”



Daisy Colbjornsen (left) with Louise and Josephine Rodarte and the Akahoshi children, including Hanako, Alice and John. Photo courtesy of Louise Rodarte Neeley

Shibata was attending Los Angeles City College when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. He subsequently returned home to his family’s farm and joined them and roughly 30 other Coachella Valley families of Japanese descent at the internment camp in Poston, which was set up on Native American land.

The U.S. wasn’t alone in interning citizens of Japanese descent.

On February 24, 1942, the Cabinet of Canadian Prime Minister William Lyon MacKenzie King issued Order-in Council P.C. 1486, which resulted in the relocation of more than 8,000 detainees of Japanese descent in the province of British Columbia, according to a *Canadian Encyclopedia* report, “Internment: Banished and Beyond Tears,” which is available online.⁵⁷

The detainees were initially sent to Hastings Park for processing. “Special trains then carried the Japanese detainees to Slocan, New Denver, Kaslo, Greenwood and Sandon — ghost towns in the BC interior. Others were offered the option of working on sugar beat farms in Alberta and Manitoba, where they would be able to keep their families intact. Though the camps were not surrounded by barbed wire fences, as they were in the United States, conditions were overcrowded and poor, with no electricity or running water,” the report said, adding, “Those who resisted their internment were sent to prisoner of war camps in Petawawa, Ontario, or to Camp 101 on the northern shore of Lake Superior.”

Mexican President Manuel Avila Camacho also followed the U.S. lead, and ordered the creation of internment camps and zones of confinement for Japanese

⁵⁷ “Japanese Internment: Banished and Beyond Tears,” <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/japanese-internment-banished-and-beyond-tears-feature/>

people in Mexico, according to Selfa A. Chew, who documents the internment of Japanese Mexicans during World War II in her 2016 book, *Uprooting Community*.

On August 10, 1988, President Ronald Reagan signed the Civil Liberties Act, which compensated about 60,000 surviving Japanese Americans who were held in internment camps during World War II. Recipients received a formal apology from the government as well as \$20,000 in compensation.

The apology and compensation didn't come easily, however. Congress approved the Civil Liberties Act only after a decade-long campaign by the Japanese American Citizens League, according to an August 9, 2013 report by National Public Radio.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ "From Wrong to Right: A U.S. Apology for Japanese Internment," Aug. 9, 2013, National Public Radio, <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2013/08/09/210138278/japanese-internment-redress>

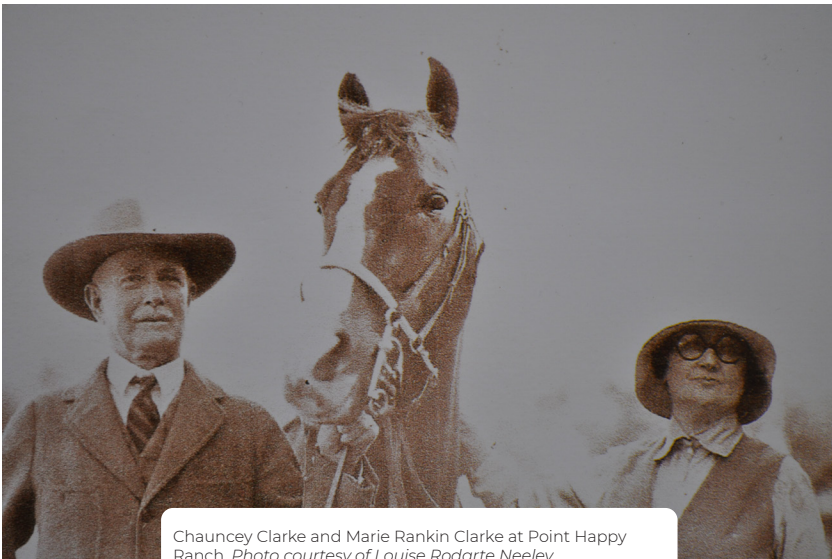
Chapter 12

The Eastern Coachella Valley's Humanitarian Heroes

Marie Clarke of Point Happy Ranch

Although the Riverside County Board of Supervisors unanimously passed a resolution calling on the military “to remove all Japanese, irrespective of citizenship, from the confines of the county,” some Coachella Valley residents were deeply troubled by the internment efforts and went out of their way to help their Japanese-American friends.

Louise Rodarte Neeley, who was living at Point Happy Ranch in present



Chauncey Clarke and Marie Rankin Clarke at Point Happy Ranch. Photo courtesy of Louise Rodarte Neeley

day La Quinta during World War II, remembers ranch co-owner Marie Clarke loading up her Rolls Royce with blankets to take to Japanese Americans being held at the internment camp in Poston, Arizona.

Arthur and John Westerfield

John W. Westerfield, president of the First National Bank of Coachella, and his son, Arthur, are remembered for their efforts to maintain the farms of their Japanese-American friends during World War II so that they wouldn't lose their properties while they were interned.

Charles Shibata described the Westerfields' humanitarian efforts in a

November 7, 1999 interview with *The Desert Sun*.

“There were some exceptional friends such as John and Art Westerfield of the Coachella First National Bank, who struggled to keep some farms alive and active, personally caring for and harvesting the crops left behind and placing



Arthur Westerfield (pictured above) and his father, John, helped to maintain the farms of their Japanese-American friends while they were held in internment camps. Photo courtesy of the Coachella Valley Historical Society

the funds derived into the farmer’s account,” Shibata said.

John Westerfield’s father, Harry Westerfield, co-founded First National Bank in Coachella in 1912 and, with his wife, he helped establish the Presbyterian Church in Coachella, according to his obituary in the May 10, 1984 edition of *The Desert Sun*.

“A Nebraska native, Westerfield came to the Coachella Valley with his family in 1905 and was one of the first residents of Coachella,” *The Desert Sun* wrote.

In addition to running First National Bank of Coachella, John Westerfield himself would gain prominence for his efforts to incorporate the city of Coachella in 1946. He also became the city's first Mayor.

Dr. Reynaldo Carreon

One of the early humanitarian heroes of Mexican descent in the eastern Coachella Valley was Dr. Reynaldo Carreon, Jr., an ophthalmologist who dedicated his life to helping others, ultimately establishing a scholarship fund to help aspiring college students from the Coachella and Palo Verde Valleys.

Born in San Antonio, Texas, Dr. Carreon later moved to California and was an Indio resident for 52 years. He also worked as an ophthalmologist in private practice for more than five decades, splitting his time between Indio and Los Angeles.

In addition to giving a portion of his Indio ranch property to John Nobles, which Nobles subsequently used to establish an African American residential community, Dr. Carreon opened a clinic in the eastern Coachella Valley during World War II that was “dedicated to serving the disabled, needy and elderly in Indio and (he) worked there at least three days a week for many years because doctors were scarce,” *The Desert Sun* wrote in a December 19, 1991 article following Dr. Carreon's death at the age of 91.

Dr. Carreon joined four other physicians in co-founding Indio Community Hospital in 1966, which was later renamed John F. Kennedy Memorial Hospital. He also co-founded the Coachella Valley Mexican American Chamber of Commerce in 1980.

Dr. Carreon was actively involved in the Los Angeles area as well, as a

doctor and a teacher. He also took on political and diplomatic roles.



Originally from San Antonio, Texas, Dr. Reynaldo Carreon, Jr. was an ophthalmologist who dedicated his life to helping others. He established the Dr. Carreon Foundation, which provides scholarship funds to aspiring college students from the eastern Coachella and Palo Verde Valleys. Photo courtesy of the Coachella Valley Historical Society

“He developed and directed the Pan American Medical Center in Los Angeles during his 27 years on the teaching staff of the Los Angeles County Hospital’s Department of Ophthalmology.” The *Desert Sun* wrote, adding, “Through the Center, he assisted many young doctors and aided Hispanic and other minority residents.”

He also served for 16 years as a member and four-time president of the Los Angeles Board of Police Commissioners in addition to serving as a member of the California Advisory Committee to the U.S. Civil Rights Commission and as a member and chair of the Los Angeles Civil Defense and Disaster Board.

According to an October 13, 1984 report in *The Desert Sun*, Dr. Carreon also helped establish the Los Angeles Mexican Civic and Patriotic Committee, the Los Angeles Mexican Chamber of Commerce and the Mexican Welfare Committee.

Dr. Carreon also took on major diplomatic roles, serving as Ambassador-at-Large to Central and South America during President Dwight Eisenhower’s administration and co-founding the American Committee of the World Medical Association. He also earned Mexico’s Order of the Aztec Eagle and Spain’s Medal of Madrid, The Desert Sun wrote.

Dr. Carreon was the first Hispanic to be recognized in Indio by having a street named after him. Dr. Carreon Park in Indio is named after him as well. His scholarship fund, which he established in 1990, has provided more than \$1 million to more than 400 students in the Coachella and Palo Verde Valleys.

“Almost everybody knew about his generosity and his many accomplishments,” Indio attorney Roberto DeAztlán told *The Desert Sun* in Dr. Carreon’s December 19, 1991 obituary, “but Dr. Carreon was always proud of his bilingualism and his bi-culturalism and he always considered himself to be an American of Mexican descent.”



Dr. Reynaldo Carreon, Jr. (right) was named an Ambassador-at-Large to Central and South America during President Eisenhower’s administration. Dr. Carreon is pictured here with Mexican President Jose Lope Portillo, who governed Mexico from 1976 to 1982. Photo courtesy of Coachella Valley Historical Society



A color guard performs during the Grand Opening ceremony of the renovated Veterans' Memorial Park in Coachella on November 6, 2016. *Photo courtesy of Jeff Crider*

Chapter 13

East Valley Residents and Immigrants of Every Ethnicity Have Served in the U.S. Military

Despite suffering various forms of discrimination, the eastern Coachella Valley's Native Americans as well as its immigrants from Mexico, Japan and other countries and their descendants have served in the U.S. military and, in many cases, given their lives for this country for close to a century, according to published reports and family members.

It started in World War I, according to the January 3, 1919 edition of *The Date Palm* in Indio, which ran a front page story highlighting the military service of Everisto Miguel of Coachella.

"A full-blooded Torres Indian, Everisto Miguel volunteered for service in the army of the United States from Coachella — the only Indian to volunteer from the valley, and now he is wounded in France, according to word received from Vincent Miguel who lives at Thermal."

The Date Palm noted that treaty provisions exempted Native Americans from serving in the U.S. military, but Miguel volunteered anyway.

"While it had been contended that under treaty provision, the Indians might claim exemption from the draft, young Miguel was glad of the opportunity of offering his services to the government," The Date Palm wrote, adding, "He was formerly a student at the Sherman Indian school and was widely known among the people of Coachella valley and the Beaumont and Banning districts."

Many of the eastern Coachella Valley's residents of Mexican descent were drafted before and during World War II and the Korean War and were among the valley's first casualties of both wars.

Herman Granados of La Quinta was the valley's first casualty of World War II. He died December 8, 1941 during the Japanese invasion of the Philippines. American Legion Post 739 in Indio is named after him.

Granados's sister, Louise Rodarte Neeley, attended the dedication ceremony for



Herman Granados of Point Happy Ranch in La Quinta was the Coachella Valley's first casualty of World War II. Photo courtesy of Louise Rodarte Neeley

Post 739 with former President Dwight Eisenhower on March 14, 1964 when it was rebuilt following a fire. Neeley said 47 members of her family have served in every U.S. conflict since World War I.

Eighteen-year-old Victor Juarez of Thermal was the first Coachella Valley casualty of the Korean War, according to a September 28, 1950 article in



Former President Dwight Eisenhower attended the dedication of the rebuilt American Legion Post 739 in Indio, which is named in honor of Herman Granados, the Coachella Valley's first casualty of World War II. Standing next to Eisenhower is Juanita Granados, mother of Herman Granados, and two legionnaires. The dedication ceremony took place March 14, 1964. Photo courtesy of Louise Rodarte Neeley

The Indio News. The son of Caterino Juarez, the young man lost his life while serving in the U.S. Army in Korea.

In fact, multiple generations of eastern Coachella Valley residents of Mexican descent have served in U.S. conflicts overseas since at least World War II.

Antonio Cano of Coachella was on the first U.S. tank that entered Rome, Italy on D-Day, June 6, 1941, according to a July 7, 1944 article in *Yank* magazine.

"On the same day Allied Forces launched the invasion of Normandy, my dad was entering Rome in a tank," said Antonio Cano's son, Manuel Cano of Coachella, who enlisted in the U.S. Army soon after graduating from Coachella Valley High School in 1985.

Since that time, Master Sergeant Cano has served in many of the world's hot spots, including two tours in Iraq and one in Afghanistan. He also helped protect Palm Springs Airport for several months immediately after the terrorist attacks of September 9, 2011.



Martin and Marshall Granados served during the Korean War. Photo courtesy of Louise Rodarte Neeley

Other eastern Coachella Valley residents of Latino descent who have served overseas include U.S. Navy Rear Admiral Ben Montoya, who graduated from Coachella Valley High School in 1953.

According to his January 7, 2016 obituary in *The Desert Sun*, Montoya was the ninth Latino graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy to attain the rank of admiral and “one of the most accomplished civil engineers in the history of the U.S. Navy.”

Montoya earned the Bronze Star Medal with Combat “V” for his service during the Vietnam War. He studied extensively and applied his knowledge to military service, including a Master’s degree in Environmental Studies from the Georgia Institute of Technology and a law degree from Georgetown University. In 1974 he served in Washington D.C. as director of the Navy’s Environmental Quality Division, which brought the Navy into environmental compliance. He was promoted to Rear Admiral in 1986 and served in the Office of the Deputy Chief of Naval Operations (Logistics), *The Desert Sun* said.



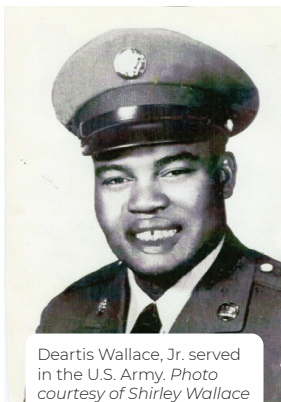
U.S. Navy Rear Admiral Ben Montoya was “one of the most accomplished civil engineers in the history of the U.S. Navy,” according to *The Desert Sun*. Photo courtesy of Coachella Valley Mexican American Pioneers

African-Americans from the eastern Coachella Valley have also served in the U.S. military, including Glen Wood and Douglas Wood of Indio. Both served in the Air Force during World War II, according to their sister, Leah Jordan of Indio.

Willie Castleberry of Indio also served in the U.S. Army in the South Pacific during World War II, according to his son, Steven Castleberry.

Other African-Americans from the eastern Coachella Valley include Alton Prior and Deartis Wallace, Jr., both of whom served in the U.S. Army, according to Shirley Wallace, whose family settled in Thermal in the 1940s.

Eastern Coachella Valley residents of Japanese descent also joined the U.S. military during World War II, including Charles Shibata of Indio, who was initially interned with his family at a camp in Poston, Arizona.



Deartis Wallace, Jr. served in the U.S. Army. Photo courtesy of Shirley Wallace

According to an August 15, 1995 report in *The Desert Sun*, “Some internees eventually were allowed to relocate in the central or eastern United States, and Shibata did so, moving to Chicago in late 1943 to work in a defense plant. He went on to join the Army in 1944, reaching the rank of master sergeant and spent three years in Japan as a soldier and a civil servant in the occupation force after the war.”

A member of the Military Intelligence Service,

Shibata was assigned to General Douglas MacArthur's team to help rebuild post-war Japan, Denise Goolsby wrote in a June 13, 2012 article in *The Desert Sun*.

President Barack Obama awarded Shibata the Congressional Gold Medal in 2012, the highest award that Congress or the President can give to a U.S. citizen for service to their country.

Shibata returned to the Coachella Valley in 1948.

"I just felt it was natural we would serve our own country," Shibata said. "When I went into the service, my dad reminded me that I was an American."

Herman Granados, the Canos, Montoya and Shibata are among the many Coachella Valley veterans who are honored at Coachella's Veterans' Memorial Park, which was redesigned with \$4 million worth of improvements in 2016, including a Veterans' Story Wall, an Honor Wall, an Ultimate Sacrifice Wall, and engraved tiles that honor the service of specific veterans from Coachella and other cities across the valley.

The tiles honor Coachella Valley veterans of every ethnicity, including John James, a direct descendant of the original Chief Cabazon of the Cabazon Band of Mission Indians.

James served in Korea from 1952 to 1954 and received two Bronze Stars as well as numerous campaign medals and unit citations. In 1977, he was elected tribal secretary-treasurer and in 1989 was elevated to tribal chairman. Through his leadership, the Cabazon Band of Mission Indians won a landmark court case, known as the "Cabazon Decision," which made them the first tribe in California to establish non-regulated gaming.

Some of the tiles highlight well-known historical facts, such as General George S. Patton's use of the Desert Training Center near Chiriaco Summit to prepare U.S. troops to battle German troops in the deserts of North Africa.

The commemorative tiles also document little known historical facts about the Coachella Valley's military history, such as the extensive use of the

Salton Sea for U.S. Air Force training flights to prepare for the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan, which ended World War II.



View of Coachella's Veterans' Memorial Park on Grand Opening Day, November 6, 2016. Photo courtesy of Jeff Crider

Chapter 14

The Bracero Program, 1942 to 1964

It satisfied farm labor needs, but also reduced farm wages

While the U.S. government coordinated a repatriation program that resulted in the deportation of 400,000 to more than 1 million Mexican workers between 1929 and 1931, rampant fears of farm labor shortages prompted the U.S. government to bring Mexican workers back to the U.S. a decade later — after the U.S. joined World War II.

“The Bracero Program was created by executive order in 1942 because many growers argued that World War II would bring labor shortages to low-paying agricultural jobs,” according to the Bracero History Archive at BraceroArchive.org.

The archive is a joint research project by the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media, George Mason University, The Smithsonian National Museum of American History, Brown University and The Institute of Oral History at the University of Texas at El Paso.

The Bracero Program, which was initially known as the Mexican Farm Labor Program, was repeatedly extended until 1964, with more than 4.6 million contracts signed. But while it was the largest U.S. contract labor program, it was also very controversial.

According to the Bracero Archive, “Mexican nationals, desperate for work, were willing to take arduous jobs at wages scorned by most Americans. Farm workers already living in the United States worried that braceros would compete for jobs and lower wages. In theory, the Bracero Program had safeguards to protect both Mexican and domestic workers. For example, guaranteed payment of at least the prevailing area wage received by native workers; employment for three-fourths of the contract period; adequate, sanitary, and free housing; decent meals at reasonable prices; occupational insurance at employer’s expense; and free transportation back to Mexico at the end of the contract.”

In reality, however, there were many abuses of the program, which had the effect of reducing farm wages.

“Employers were supposed to hire braceros only in areas of certified domestic labor shortage, and were not to use them as strikebreakers,” the Bracero Archive notes. “In practice, they ignored many of these rules and Mexican and native workers suffered while growers benefited from plentiful, cheap, labor. Between the 1940s and mid 1950s, farm wages dropped sharply as a percentage of manufacturing wages, a result in



part of the use of braceros and undocumented laborers who lacked full rights in American society.”

Table grapes have been one of the Coachella Valley's top crops for over a century. Photo courtesy of the Coachella Valley Historical Society

A Migrant Camp Was Established in Indio in 1937

One of the federal agencies created as part of President Roosevelt's "New Deal" was the Resettlement Administration, whose projects included construction of labor camps for migrant farm workers.

One such camp, known as "the Coachella camp," was built in Indio near the Coachella border.

"The purpose of the camp, according to Resettlement Administration officials, is two-fold," according to an April 9, 1937 report in the *Coachella Valley Submarine*.

"First, it provides decent living conditions for families of migratory workers now compelled to live under unsanitary conditions. Second, it provides a clearing house for farm labor. California crops cannot be harvested, it was pointed out, without the help of thousands of migratory workers who move from area to area, following the crops. Many large growers have provided housing and other facilities for their workers, but it is economically impossible for the small grower to go to this expense."

Louise Rodarte Neeley, a former chairwoman of the La Quinta Historical Society who was 93 at the time of this writing, worked at the farm labor camp in Indio, which provided temporary housing in tent-like structures with solid floors for Mexican immigrants as well as African American farmworkers who came to the Coachella Valley from other states.

"You could rent each one for \$3 a week," she said, "and if you had a big family, you could rent two or three."

Rodarte worked as a receptionist at the camp after World War II and met her future husband there, Charles Neeley, who was manager of the camp. "I liked him," she said. "He was very nice, and in three months we decided to get married."

One Backup Source of Farm Labor: German Prisoners of War

During World War II, one backup farm labor pool for growers in the Coachella Valley was German prisoners of war, who were held at a prison camp in Chino.

“Under federal directives, war prisoners must be used ahead of imported farm laborers and it is understood that 10,000 German prisoners of war will be available for work this fall,” according to an October 12, 1944 report in The Date Palm in Indio.

“One camp, near Chino, in Riverside county has already been established. However, with the Coachella Valley so close to the Mexican border, it is thought unlikely that German prisoners of war will be used in this section.”

The article discussed the need for Congress to continue to extend the National Farm Labor Program, later known as the Bracero Program, because of uncertainties involving the future availability of German POWs.

“The plight in which California would find herself should Mexican national labor be abolished, would be very bad because of the possibility of a change in the status of German war prisoners at any time,” *The Date Palm* wrote.

The article noted that over 40,000 Mexican farm laborers had been used across California in 1944.

Chapter 15

Incorporation of Coachella and the Post-War Growth of Coachella Valley's Agriculture Economy

While immigrant labor fueled the steady growth of Coachella's agriculture-based economy since the early 1900s, Coachella didn't become an incorporated city until December 1946, nearly half a century after Jason L. Rector and his brother, Lon, drilled an artesian well near the corner of Grapefruit Avenue and Fifth Street.

"Although one of the early communities of the Southland, with a history that dates back to the days when it was a stop on the Butterfield stage route, it was only a few days ago that the city was officially notified by the Secretary of State of California that its incorporation is now a matter of record," the *Los Angeles Times* wrote in a December 23, 1946 report.

There was an attempt to incorporate the city in 1920, but "the proposal was beaten by a margin of two votes," the *Times* wrote.

A petition for incorporation was subsequently circulated in late 1941 to measure the extent of support for making Coachella an incorporated city. The Coachella Valley Submarine supported the idea of incorporation with a front page story on November 7, 1941.

"Incorporation will give us proper police protection, proper building restrictions and inspection, the control of fire hazards, cleaning unsightly lots of



An undated aerial photo of Coachella. Photo courtesy of the Coachella Valley Historical Society

weeds, cleaning of streets and many other advantages which it is impossible to get without authority to enact and enforce regulations,” the *Submarine* wrote.

“Of course, this cannot be accomplished in six months, a year or in five years. But if we start now, we are on the road to building a bigger and better city in which to live and we have faith enough in our local citizens to believe that the city government will not be controlled by any one group within its limits.”

When the issue of incorporating Coachella came before the voters on November 27, 1946, they supported the proposal on a “six to one” basis, according to the *Times*.

John Westerfield of First National Bank in Coachella was elected to be the city’s first Mayor.

Other councilmembers included Lester E. True, Lester C. Cox, Paul Atkinson and T.W. Reyes. Marie Johnson was selected as City Clerk while John C. Skene became Treasurer, according to the *Times* report.

Coachella was initially a 2.5 square-mile area, though it would later grow to encompass nearly 40 square miles by 2018.

Coachella City Hall was built and then dedicated on October 29, 1949 on its current



A deep freeze in 1952 blankets Coachella Valley table grapes with ice.
Photo courtesy of the Coachella Valley Historical Society

site, which was originally parkland that the Coachella Land & Water Company had donated to Riverside County. One of the first actions of Coachella’s first City Council was to ask Riverside County to donate the land to the new city, which it did.

In addition to housing the city’s administrative offices, Coachella’s original City Hall also included a courthouse, the U.S. Post Office and the police department. The unused portion of parkland that Coachella obtained from Riverside County was originally called City Hall Park. The city later converted the land to its Veterans’ Memorial Park.

The All-American Canal

The farm fields of the eastern Coachella Valley could not exist today without the All-American Canal, which brings Colorado River water into the valley for irrigation and groundwater recharge purposes.

In fact, it was concerns over the depletion of groundwater supplies by growers that prompted local residents to establish Coachella Valley Water District (CVWD) in 1918 with the idea of using the agency to secure the financing needed to construct the 123-mile Coachella Extension of the All-American Canal.

CVWD's efforts to build the canal were delayed by decades, however, due to a variety of factors, including conflicts with Imperial Irrigation District, financially unstable contractors during the Great Depression as well as manpower and equipment shortages during World War II. Colorado River water finally reached the eastern Coachella Valley via the Coachella Extension of the All-American Canal in March of 1949. The network of underground pipelines to distribute Colorado River water to eastern Coachella Valley farm fields was built between 1948 and 1954, according a historical report on the All-American Canal produced by CVWD in 2002.¹

¹ Coachella Valley Water District, "A History and Evaluation of the Coachella Canal, River and Imperial Counties, California," December 2002, 25.



The Coachella Branch of the All-American Canal brings Colorado River water into the eastern Coachella Valley, where it is used primarily for agricultural irrigation and groundwater recharge. Photo courtesy of Coachella Valley Water District



Cesar Chavez at the UFW Convention in Fresno. *Photo courtesy of Clementina Olloque.*

Chapter 16

Coachella's Migrant Filipino Farmworkers, Cesar Chavez and the Rise of the United Farm Workers

While farmworkers of Coachella and other eastern Coachella Valley communities worked quietly for decades, they would eventually attract national media attention for their key roles in supporting the rise of Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers (UFW) union.

But while Mexican immigrants and their families had been the predominant farm labor force in the Coachella Valley and throughout California for most of the 20th century, the initial strike activity against California's table grape growers in 1965 was precipitated by migrant Filipino farmworkers in the Coachella area.

"They set the stage for everything," Cesar Chavez's son, Paul, told *The Press-Enterprise* in a September 3, 2005 interview. "Nobody showed the kind of conviction these men did."

Indeed, it was migrant Filipino farmworkers affiliated with the AFL-CIO-chartered Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC) who launched the first successful strike against table grape growers in May of 1965. The strike, organized by Larry Itliong of the AWOC, began on May 3, 1965, and involved "about seven" Coachella Valley vineyards, according to *The Press-Enterprise* report.

The strike, which lasted 10 days, ultimately encompassed nearly 1,000 farmworkers, according to an Associated Press report from May 12, 1965, which noted that farmworkers returned to Coachella Valley table grape fields after winning a 15-cent-per-hour increase, which boosted their pay to \$1.40 per hour.

The *Los Angeles Times* noted the historical significance of the Coachella Valley growers' May 1965 agreement. "The strike marked the first time growers have met in formal talks with union leaders, and agreed to pay what the union was asking, although the union failed to get formal recognition as bargaining agent," the *Times* wrote in a May 13, 1965 report.

The migrant Filipino farmworkers didn't limit their strike activity to the Coachella Valley, however. In fact, when they followed the grape harvest north to the San Joaquin Valley, they launched another strike under the direction of Itliong and Filipino leaders Philip Vera Cruz and Pete Velasco, in September 1965, and demanded that Delano area table grape growers also pay them \$1.40 an hour, according to reports from *The Press-Enterprise* and other news organizations.

But as historian Miriam Pawel notes in *The Crusades of Cesar Chavez*,

the Filipino workers didn't have the same leverage in the San Joaquin Valley that they did in the Coachella Valley, partly because of a longer harvest season in the Central Valley, which gave growers more time to find replacement workers.⁵⁹

Still, the strike action by the Filipino farmworkers affiliated with AWOC would ultimately trigger the biggest grapeworker strike in California history.

"On the morning of September 8, 1965, Filipino workers refused to leave their camps to harvest grapes at ten Delano vineyards," Pawel wrote. "Word spread quickly, and workers streamed into Chavez's office at 102 Albany Street, asking what to do."⁶⁰

It was a pivotal moment for Cesar Chavez, who at that time was president of the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA), which he co-founded with Dolores Huerta in 1962. With Huerta as his vice president, Chavez and his NFWA leadership team decided to join the Delano strike eight days later in a move that would ultimately catapult Chavez onto the national stage.

"Filipinos were a minority in the primarily Mexican farm workforce and lacked the capacity to win the strike," Randy Shaw writes in his 2008 book, *Beyond The Fields: Cesar Chavez, the UFW, and the Struggle for Justice in the 21st Century*.⁶¹

"Nevertheless, their decision to strike on September 8, 1965 forced Chavez and the NFWA to either join the struggle or appear to be turning their backs on workers."⁶²

"They went out and basically forced everyone into action," Paul Chavez told *The Press-Enterprise* in a September 3, 2005 interview. "That credit belongs to the Filipinos — the brothers."

The AWOC and the NFWA would merge one year after launching the Delano strike and form the United Farm Workers (UFW) union in 1966. But while there were many influential people involved in organizing farmworkers in the 1960s, including Huerta and Filipino labor leaders, such as Itliong, Philip Vera Cruz and Pete Velasco, it was Chavez who would ultimately become recognized as the chief spokesman for farmworker rights.

Lauded by the late Senator Robert Kennedy in 1968 as "one of the heroic figures of our time," Chavez was an active participant in the Civil Rights Movement as he used non-violent methods, such as marches, boycotts and hunger strikes, to fight for higher wages and working conditions for farm workers in the Coachella Valley and across the country.

"He was the first Latino that many Americans ever saw or heard discussing the plight of Hispanics in this country," Raul Yzaguirre wrote

59 Pawel, Miriam, *The Crusades of Cesar Chavez*, (2014), 105.

60 *Ibid.*

61 Shaw, Randy, *Beyond The Fields: Cesar Chavez, The UFW, and The Struggle for Justice*, (2008),

18.

62 *Ibid.*

in an a June 7, 1993 article for The Santa Fe New Mexican following Chavez's death. "For many in the Hispanic community, he remains the symbol of the ongoing struggle for equal rights and equal opportunity."

Chavez is credited with securing the first collective bargaining agreements between farmworkers and growers in U.S. history as well as the first health benefits for farmworkers and their families.

In addition to obtaining increases in pay, Chavez's union contracts also required growers to provide farmworkers with rest periods, clean drinking water, hand-washing stations and protective clothing to protect workers from pesticide exposure.

While Chavez's and the UFW's initial unionizing activities took place in the San Joaquin Valley, they quickly spread to Coachella, which was the site of numerous farmworker protests, including an eight-day march from Coachella to Mexicali in May 1969.

"Coachella was very special to Cesar," said David Villarino, CEO of the Tehachapi, California-based Farmworker Institute of Education and Leadership Development, a non-profit organization founded by Chavez that provides specialized training for farmworkers in English and other subjects.

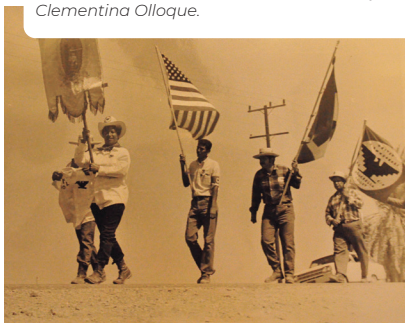
Villarino worked as Chavez's bodyguard in the 1970s and saw first hand how he interacted with the farmworkers of Coachella and other communities in the eastern Coachella Valley.

"Coachella was such a welcoming community, a good, small welcoming community, and they just embraced Cesar, his ideas, his commitment," Villarino said, adding, "They showed their inspiration by embracing him. We were never at a loss for food, for housing. Cesar was just embraced by the entire community."

Chavez's close relationship with Coachella's farmworkers was also critical from a strategic standpoint, Villarino said, because many of them would follow the grape harvest to the San Joaquin Valley, where they could, in turn, help inspire other grape workers to support Chavez and his unionization efforts.



Farmworkers participate in May 1969 UFW March from Coachella to Mexicali. Photos courtesy of Clementina Olloque.



“The people of Coachella became very central and very close to Chavez,” Villarino explained. “He was able to explain the theory of change. Back in the ‘60s, the rates of pay and the hours of work were pretty dismal. But Chavez was able to spend time with them and explain how there was hope that change could be attained.”

Villarino added that it was harder to organize workers in the San Joaquin Valley because of its vast size and because of the fact that the Central Valley communities there were so spread out.

Chavez was born March 31, 1927 on a small farm in the Gila River Valley, near Yuma, Arizona. He never graduated high school and once said he had attended 65 different schools — a result of his family’s lifestyle as migrant farm workers.

But it was the racism that Chavez experienced while serving in the U.S. Navy from 1946 to 1948 that helped influence his future work as a farm labor activist and union organizer.

Chavez was also profoundly influenced by Father Donald McDonald, a Catholic priest who he befriended in the early 1950s.

“It was Father McDonald who introduced Chavez to social justice and the principals of non-violence,” the *National Catholic Register* wrote in a March 2, 2012 article on the occasion of McDonald’s death.

“Cesar Chavez tried to live the gospels and the social teachings of his Catholic faith every day, but his career dedicated to service to others all began with the lessons he learned early in life from Father McDonnell,” Arturo Rodriguez, Chavez’s successor as president of the United Farm Workers, wrote on the United Farm Workers union website.

“Father McDonnell embodied those Catholic teachings and he profoundly impacted Cesar and so many others,” Rodriguez said.⁶³

Chavez began his union organizing efforts in 1952 and co-founded the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA) with Dolores Huerta in 1962.

But while Chavez gained national attention in 1965 after joining striking Filipino table grape workers in Delano and calling for a nationwide boycott of table grapes, his victories did not come easily. In fact, the table grape boycott lasted for five years until growers agreed to a contract with the UFW in 1970.

Chavez remained committed to non-violent methods to achieve his objectives, however. For example, he conducted a 25-day fast in 1968 to call attention to the many challenges and hazards faced by migrant farm workers. He ended his water-only fast with a Catholic mass on Easter Sunday and a visit by Senator Robert Kennedy, Democrat of New York, who called Chavez “one of

⁶³ Article posted Feb. 23, 2012 on the UFW website, <https://ufw.org/Father-McDonnell-introduced-a-young-Cesar-Chavez-to-social-justice-teachings/>

the heroic figures of our time.”

“I congratulate all of you who are locked with Cesar in the struggle for justice for the farm worker and the struggle for justice for Spanish-speaking Americans,” Kennedy said, according to a March 11, 1968 report by The Associated Press, which was picked up by newspapers across the country.

Chavez organized numerous marches and protests in Coachella and used the UFW office at 722 Vine Street in downtown Coachella whenever he was in town.

“The worst battles (with growers) were here in Coachella,” said Clementine Olloque, who worked at the UFW office in Coachella from 1970 until Chavez’s death in 1993.



UFW Office at 722 Vine Street in Coachella.. Photo courtesy of Clementina Olloque.

While news reports speak of a march from Coachella to Mexicali in May of 1969, including a May 11, 1969 report in the *San Bernardino County Sun*, most of the marches went from Mecca through Thermal to Coachella, Villarino said.

The local Safeway store at 49-989 Cesar Chavez Street, which at the time of this writing is the site of a

Smart & Final Extra store, was also a frequent site of UFW protests because it continued to sell table grapes despite Chavez’s call for a boycott.

Coachella was also in national headlines in the early 1970s as Chavez and the UFW battled the International Brotherhood of Teamsters union for the right to represent farmworkers. Chavez, in fact, took the Teamsters to court alleging that the Teamsters had colluded with growers to block the UFW’s labor organizing efforts.

The California Supreme Court ultimately ruled 6-1 in Chavez’s favor. “The 6-1 decision thus upheld the charge by Chavez that the growers and the Teamsters union joined forces without the consent of the workers themselves to try to stop an organizing campaign by Chavez’ AFL-CIO United Farm Workers Union,” the *Los Angeles Times* wrote in a December 30, 1972 report.



Cesar Chavez (center) with table grape boycott organizers in Coachella on Sept 11, 1970.. Photo courtesy of Clementine Olloque.

The *Times* noted that the UFW’s Supreme Court victory was historic for

the collusion it exposed.

“It was one of the first cases in which a major, established union has been found by the state Supreme Court to have been working with an employer group to help the employer keep out another union,” the *Times* wrote.



Cesar Chavez being arrested in Kern County. Photo courtesy of Clementina Olloque.

Chavez would face many subsequent court battles and continued to fight for the UFW and for farmworker rights until his death on April 23, 1993 at the age of 66.

Chavez’s memory lives on in farmworker communities, particularly Coachella.

Coachella, in fact, was the first city to have an elementary school

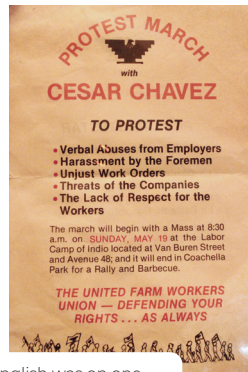
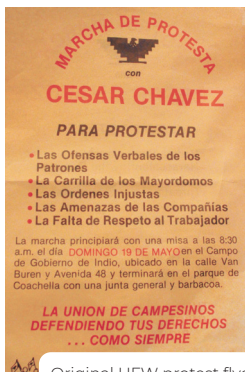
named in honor of Cesar Chavez, Villarino said.

“He was actually scheduled to be there for the groundbreaking, but got tied up in a snowstorm on the East Coast, so he sent his son, Anthony.” Villarino recalled. “But for the actual opening of the school, Chavez was there. That was the first school named for him and the only school that he personally visited.”

Harrison Street, the main north-south business street through Coachella, was renamed in honor of Cesar Chavez on May 31, 2018 during a ceremony at De Oro Park in which a memorial to honor Chavez and the UFW was also unveiled. The park is on the corner of Avenida De Oro and Avenue 50. It consists of an 18-foot tall, 36-foot long representation of the United Farm Workers flag.

Villarino said he hopes the people of Coachella and the eastern Coachella Valley will remember Cesar Chavez and the importance of his civil rights efforts, especially the younger generations, since they are in a position to continue to work for positive social and economic changes.

“I think what people have in Coachella is the memory of someone who gave his life in service to the community,” Villarino said of Chavez, adding, “Having an education is not enough. If you’re going to have an education (to improve your job prospects), you also have to be able to come back and improve your community.”



Original UFW protest flyer. English was on one side and Spanish on the other. Photo courtesy of Clementine Olloque.



Cesar Chavez speaks at the opening ceremony of Cesar Chavez Elementary School in Coachella. Photo courtesy of Clementina Olloque.

A color guard begins the dedication ceremony for the Cesar Chavez Memorial at De Oro Park. Photo courtesy of Jeff Crider



Chapter 17

Immigrant Labor Has Also Fueled the Growth of the Coachella Valley's Tourism Industry

While the eastern Coachella Valley's agriculture industry has its roots in the early 1900s, tourism was never far behind.

In fact, *the Los Angeles Times* and other publications were producing stories about the rugged Indian Canyons, the majestic mountain scenery and desert wildflower blooms long before there were even paved roads across the valley.

Consider this January 1, 1905 article in *the Los Angeles Times*, which encouraged people not only to visit Palm Springs, but to travel eastward to Coachella.

"To the visitor who can be persuaded to leave the beaten track of travel, I would give this recommendation: Drop off the train at Palm Springs, outfit there with burros or mule team, and come down the valley again at a leisurely pace. From Palm Springs to the south he can visit Andreas Cañon, Murray Cañon and Palm Cañon, where the Colorado Desert palm, the *Washingtonia filifera*, has its habitat and amid rocky, rugged scenery gives us realistic glimpses of Barbary or Araby right here in our American Far West."

The *Times* later writes, "Descending to Indio, the traveler finds at Indian Wells a spot the romantic loveliness of which I have never seen surpassed in any part of the world — rolling sand dunes held together and banked by lofty mesquite thickets, with a semicircle of jagged saw-toothed mountains in the near background. ... Further on are the Indian reservations of the Torres and Martinez, nooks of the so-called desert that for natural beauty might be the park lands of a rich man's country home. Finally, there is Coachella itself, with its gushing artesian wells, its lush pasturage and its wealth of greenery."

Articles like this enticed the curious and helped lay the foundation for a tourism industry that, by the 1980s, would surpass agriculture as the Coachella Valley's number one industry.

But the valley's tourism industry was already well underway nearly a century ago.

The La Quinta Hotel opened in 1926 and was soon followed by other fine accommodations at the west end of the valley, including El Mirador Hotel in Palm Springs in 1928, the Racquet Club of Palm Springs in 1934, and Desert Spa in Desert Hot Springs in 1940, which would later be renamed Two Bunch Palms.

The valley's first golf courses also appeared in the 1920s, including the golf course at the La Quinta Hotel, which was being played in 1927, according to Larry Bohannon, a longtime *Desert Sun* reporter who wrote the 2015 book, *Palm Springs Golf: A History of Coachella Valley Legends & Fairways*.⁶⁴

By the 1950s, celebrities such as Bob Hope, Bing Crosby and Desi Arnaz and even former President Eisenhower were frequenting the Coachella Valley's golf courses, and bringing national attention to the valley as a golf, tourism and second home destination.

Of course, as more hotels, restaurants and golf courses were built across the valley, more immigrant labor was also needed, much of which came from Coachella and other East Valley communities.



The La Quinta Hotel in 1930. Photo courtesy of La Quinta Resort & Club

⁶⁴ Bohannon, Larry, (2015), *Palm Springs Golf: A History of Coachella Valley Legends & Fairways*, 18.

Chapter 18

The Recent Rise of Latino Politicians from Coachella

Immigrants have been politically represented in Coachella since the city's earliest days with a man named Tomas Reyes serving on Coachella's first City Council beginning in December 1946.

But it would take another 20 years before Coachella's Mexican immigrant community would achieve majority representation on the council. That happened in 1966 with the election of three Latino council members.

By 1980, the entire City Council was represented by descendants of Mexican immigrants, and by 1984, members of the City Council had selected Yolanda R. Coba as the first Latina mayor in the Coachella Valley. Coba served on the City Council from 1980 to 1989 and served two one-year terms as mayor from 1984 to 1985 and again from 1988 to 1989. The Coachella City Council would later select additional Latina mayors, including Sylvia Lara Montenegro in 1999 and Lupe Loza Dominguez in 2000.

During the first two decades of the 21st century, Latino politicians from Coachella have risen to County Board of Supervisors, the State Assembly and the House of Representatives, while also distinguishing themselves with their achievements in education.

They include:

— Assemblyman Eduardo Garcia: The son of immigrant farmworkers from Mexicali, Baja California, Mexico, Garcia was born in Indio, California and raised in Coachella. He earned a bachelor's degree in Political Science with minors in Chicano and Native American Studies from the University of California, Riverside and a master's degree from University of Southern California, Sol Price School of Public Policy. He also completed the Senior Executives in State and Local Government Public Administration program through the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University.



In 2006, at the age of 29, he became Coachella's first elected mayor. As mayor, he worked to transform Coachella from a proud migrant worker community into an emerging social, economic, political, and cultural hub. García was subsequently re-elected for four terms. In 2014, García was elected to the State Legislature to represent California's 56th Assembly District, which includes cities and unincorporated communities in Eastern Riverside County and Imperial County.

In his first year in the Assembly, Garcia became the first freshman legislator to have all of his bills and resolutions signed by the governor (Governor Jerry Brown). In this same term, Garcia served as chair for the Assembly Committee on Jobs, Economic Development, and Economy overseeing and helping foster small business development, international trade, and tending to other issues related to state and local economies.

Currently, Garcia chairs the Assembly Committee on Water, Parks and Wildlife whose main priority is to examine the opportunities and challenges facing water resources, flood management, fish and game, parks and recreation, and wildlife. Major feats of Garcia and this committee include the passage of California Drought, Water, Parks, Climate, Coastal Protection, and Outdoor Access For All Act of 2018 approved by voters June 2018, which allocated \$200 million for the Salton Sea, including \$20 million for the Salton Sea Authority and \$10 million for New River projects. Other committees he serves in are Appropriations, Government Organization, and Utilities and Commerce.



— Castulo Estrada: Elected to the board of directors of Coachella Valley Water District (CVWD) in November 2014 at the age of 26, Castulo Estrada has the distinction of being the first Latino ever elected to the board of the water district in its then 96-year-history. CVWD was established in 1918.

Estrada, whose family is originally from Guerrero, Mexico, works as the Utilities Manager for the city of Coachella. He represents CVWD Division 5, which includes Coachella, Thermal, Mecca, Salton City, Oasis, Bombay Beach and North Shore. Estrada said his priorities include encouraging CVWD to serve as a lead agency to identify and apply for

grants that can aid the development of the water and sewer infrastructure for disadvantaged communities in the eastern Coachella Valley. As part of this effort, Estrada established the Disadvantaged Communities Infrastructure Task Force in 2016, which is currently working on the East Coachella Valley Water Supply Project

Estrada comes from a family of Mexican immigrants. His grandfather, Onesimo Estrada, came to the U.S. from Guerrero in 1955 through the Bracero Program and regularly sent money home to his family in Mexico, which helped pay for Estrada's father, Jeronimo, to attend school in Mexico before he started coming to the Coachella Valley to work in the fields at age 18. "Over the years, my father walked the hundred-mile distance between the U.S.-Mexico border and the Coachella Valley six or seven times, sometimes in the desert heat. It's what you had to do," Estrada said.

Jeronimo Estrada established his home and raised a family in the eastern Coachella Valley. He continues to work in the fields as an irrigator for Prime Time International.

Castulo Estrada, for his part, developed an early interest in mathematics, which led him to pursue a career in engineering. He graduated from California State Polytechnique University, Pomona, with a bachelor of science degree in civil engineering.

"As I became more aware of the world that surrounds us, I started wondering about the forces that shape people's lives," Estrada said. "How did the tracts, the roads, the fields and the towns get laid out? Who made the decisions about utilities and services? I started realizing that infrastructure and services have an enormous impact on many aspects of people's lives. I see engineering as the physical expression of the human race's evolution and maturity, a line we can trace back to ancient civilizations."

Estrada said his sense of responsibility towards the community comes from the experience of growing up poor and seeing his parents work very hard and have very little. He is of the mind that everyone should do what he or she can to improve their communities and acknowledge the efforts of the people that came before them. "There is a lot of work to be done and our communities need a lot of help. The injustices are there, but it is our responsibility to address them," he said. "If we don't say anything, these injustices are not going to go away."

— Supervisor V. Manuel Perez: Born in Indio, Perez grew up in Coachella as the son of immigrant farmworkers from Mexico. His mother, Virginia, was from Tepatitlán, Jalisco, Mexico and his father, Manuel, was from Mexico City, Mexico. Perez graduated from Coachella Valley High School, earned a bachelor's degree in political science and ethnic studies from the University of California, Riverside and a master's degree in education from Harvard University. He worked

as a high school teacher in the Bay Area, in Fremont, California, and taught at a local middle school before being elected to the Coachella Valley Unified School District Board of Trustees in 2004. During his time on the school board, Perez helped secure millions of dollars in funding to build new



facilities and to modernize classrooms. He won election to the state Assembly in 2008, representing eastern Riverside County and Imperial County, and served in the Assembly until being term-limited out in 2014.

While in the Assembly, Perez served as majority floor leader and was chairman of the Jobs, Economic Development, and the Economy Committee. According to a May 18, 2018 article by The *Desert Sun* Editorial Board, Perez's most significant accomplishments in the Assembly included "efforts to help stave off the collapse of the Salton Sea" as well as "the creation of the New River Improvement Project, which targeted millions in federal and state funds to clean up the highly polluted waterway that flows from Calexico into the sea. He also pushed energy-related projects at the sea as vital components to its restoration."

Upon leaving the Assembly, Perez was elected to the Coachella City Council, where he served two and a half years before being appointed by Governor Jerry Brown to the Riverside County Board of Supervisors to fill the Fourth District seat left vacant by Supervisor John J. Benoit, who passed away Dec. 26, 2016 of pancreatic cancer. Voters subsequently elected Perez to continue serving on the Board of Supervisors in the June 2018 election. Aside from his government service, Perez has worked for Borrego Health, most recently as Chief Government and Public Affairs Officer. Borrego Health provides healthcare services in Coachella, Riverside and San Diego. Perez is married to Gladis, his wife of 21 years. They have two sons, Ruben, 25, and Alejandro, 21. In November 2018, Ruben won election to the Desert Community College District (College of the Desert) Board of Trustees.

— Representative Raul Ruiz: Ruiz was born in Zacatecas, Mexico and came to Coachella with his parents when he was two. He graduated from Coachella Valley High School and earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Physiological Sciences/Pre-Med from the University of California, Los Angeles before going to Harvard University, where he earned a Master of Arts in Public Policy from the

John F. Kennedy School of Government as well as a Master of Science in Public Health from the School of Public Health as well as his Doctor of Medicine (MD)



degree.

Dr. Ruiz was the first Hispanic to earn three graduate degrees from Harvard University. He completed his residency in emergency medicine at the University of Pittsburgh and a fellowship in international emergency medicine with the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston.

During his training, Dr. Ruiz served as a consultant to the Ministries of Health of both Serbia and El Salvador. He subsequently became an emergency room doctor at Eisenhower Medical Center as well as a senior associate dean at the University of California, Riverside. Through the group

Volunteers in Medicine, he helped open a free clinic in Indio in 2010 to help underserved communities in the Coachella Valley. In 2010, he also started the Coachella Valley Healthcare Initiative, which created a strategic plan to improve healthcare access. Dr. Ruiz continued to work as an emergency room doctor until he was elected to the House of Representatives in 2012.

The “Coachella Walls” Mural Project

The City of Coachella launched its “Coachella Walls” mural project in 2014 as a way to transform the downtown Pueblo Viejo area into an arts destination with a historical and cultural walking tour. Armando Lerma and Medvin Sobio of Date Farmers Art Studios and their team of artists from Mexico City and Oaxaca were initially hired to paint five murals on existing commercial buildings along the Sixth Street corridor. The project has gained national attention and features artists who have painted murals throughout the United States, Europe and Latin America. More information, including a map of the Pueblo Viejo walking tour, is available in the visitors section of the city’s website at www.coachella.org.



The city of Coachella launched its “Coachella Walls” mural project in 2014 as a way to transform the downtown Pueblo Viejo area into an arts destination with a historical and cultural walking tour. The project has gained national attention and features artists who have painted murals throughout the U.S., Europe and Latin America. *Photos courtesy of Jeff Crider*



Chapter 19

Coachella in the 21st Century

As Coachella completes the second decade of the 21st century, the city is making major investments in new infrastructure and planning, while broadening the city's economic base to include its first hotels and medical cannabis cultivation facilities.

“With the ever increasing popularity of the Coachella and Stagecoach music festivals and other special events, we find we can now diversify our economic base and create more job opportunities for our local residents,” said Mayor Steven Hernandez.

At the time of this writing, Glenroy Coachella, LLC, was nearing completion of Coachella's first hotel, a 250-suite luxury resort called the Hotel Indigo, which was expected to open in phases beginning in 2019.

The city is also working with more than a dozen medical cannabis cultivation companies that are planning to construct nearly 2 million square feet of manufacturing facilities that will collectively employ more than 300 people, including immigrants from Coachella and other East Valley communities.

In the past seven years, Coachella has also secured more than \$80 million in grant funds for new sidewalks, wider streets and bridges, new traffic signals as well as green infrastructure projects.

In 2015 alone, the city completed more than \$100 million worth of infrastructure projects, including a new 194-kilowatt solar-powered carport for the city's Corporate Yard that generates enough electricity to cover all of the city's power needs in that location. The carport, which was fully funded by grants, has two electric vehicle charging stations that are capable of charging up to four vehicles at a time.

Fiestas Patrias Celebrations in Coachella

“Fiestas Patrias” celebrations have been taking place in mid September in Coachella for at least a century.

Indeed, a September 12, 1919 report in the Coachella Valley Submarine encouraged Coachella area residents to attend the celebration of Mexico’s independence from Spain.

Now called “El Grito: Fiestas Patrias,” is one of the largest Mexican Independence Day celebrations in the United States, attracting more 30,000 attendees who come to see the annual re-enactment of “El Grito” the shout or call for independence, which in recent years has been performed by representatives from the Mexican Consulate in San Bernardino. Mexican folkloric dancers from Mexicali also participate in the festivities as well as professional musicians. Mexican Independence Day is September 16.



Coachella hosts one of the largest Fiestas Patrias celebrations in the United States.
Photo courtesy of Jeff Crider

Chapter 20

Hope for the Future

A New Generation of Immigrants and Immigrant Children in Coachella and East Valley Communities

Mexican immigrants and their families in Coachella and other East Valley communities continue to provide most of the labor for the Coachella Valley's tourism and agriculture industries, much as they have since the days of the Mexican Revolution.

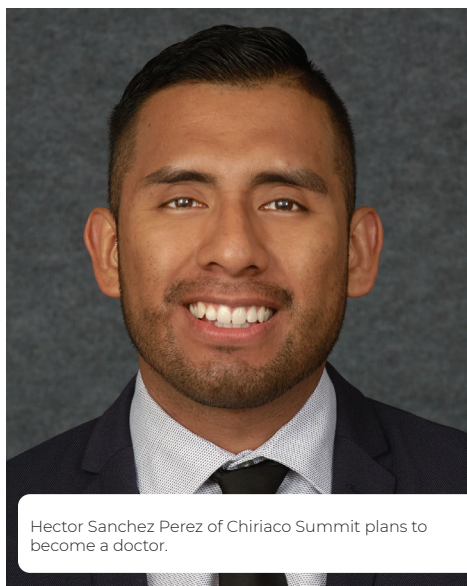
But despite the racism, threats of deportation and other hardships that many immigrants and their families continue to experience in the U.S., young people of Mexican descent from Coachella and other East Valley communities are earning the respect of their peers and making their parents proud as they blaze their own trails into America's most prestigious universities and into professional positions where they can make a positive difference.

These hard working students are also going out of their way to share their stories and their advice with the hope that other students from immigrant families across the East Valley will find the inspiration, self discipline and tenacity to pursue their own dreams. Consider these examples:

Hector Sanchez Perez of Chiriaco Summit, An Undocumented Student at Columbia University Who Plans to Become a Doctor

Hector Sanchez Perez was only four months old when his parents brought him from Oaxaca, Mexico to Chiriaco Summit, where he grew up with two other siblings.

"My parents left everything behind in Mexico to give my siblings and me a better life than they had and not endure their hardships," Hector said, adding that he excelled in school and kept his focus



Hector Sanchez Perez of Chiriaco Summit plans to become a doctor.

on going to college. “With my studies, I hope to one day have the knowledge and tools necessary to help immigrant communities live a healthy life.”

After graduating from Coachella Valley High School in 2012, Sanchez Perez got accepted into the University of California, Los Angeles. His schooling was largely covered with funding from the California Dream Act, though he used scholarships, part time jobs and help from his parents to cover his housing and personal expenses.

While at UCLA, Sanchez Perez majored in Biology and minored in Chicano and Chicana Studies and discovered his passions in medicine, public health, service and activism. He was a caseworker in UCLA’s Mobile Clinic Project as well as a project director for the AB540 Project, which provided intensive mentoring to high school students to help improve students’ study habits, notions of leadership and feelings about high education. He was also a principal investigator for the UndocuBruins Research Program; an onsite coordinator for the UCLA LeaderShape Institute; and a work study assistant at the UCLA Center for Health Services and Society. He was also a Health Career Connection summer intern at Desert Regional Medical Center and Planned Parenthood in Palm Springs.

In 2017, Sanchez Perez began attending Columbia University’s Mailman School of Public Health in New York City, where he is pursuing a Master of Public Health degree. He had also been accepted into Yale University, George Washington University and the University of California, Irvine.

But even though Columbia University initially offered him no tuition support, Sanchez Perez was ultimately able to convince the university to provide a scholarship to cover two-thirds of his tuition costs. At the time of this writing, Sanchez Perez was raising the remaining third through a GoFundMe account that includes highlights of his life story and of his dream to become a doctor.

Sanchez Perez originally posted his story on an Instagram account called UndocuMedia, where undocumented immigrants share their life experiences. Univision’s Coachella Valley affiliate saw his post and interviewed him to help raise awareness of the undocumented student identity. He was subsequently interviewed by Telemundo in New York City when he joined in protests against President Trump’s repeal of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, which provided temporary protection for children brought into the U.S. illegally by their parents before 2012. *People en Español* published a story on Sanchez Perez in March of 2018 highlighting his journey from the Coachella Valley to Los Angeles and now New York City.

All of this media exposure is helping Sanchez Perez as he raises funds for his Columbia University tuition.

Meanwhile, at the time of this writing, Sanchez Perez was working in Boston, Massachusetts where he had received a fellowship from the Massachusetts Health Policy Commission, an independent state agency that makes health policy recommendations. “I’ll be providing support and data analysis,” he said, adding that the commission “is really at the forefront of reforming healthcare in the U.S.”

Sanchez Perez is focused on becoming a practicing physician, though he is not yet sure what medical specialty he should pursue or if he should become a generalist.

“I really care about my community,” he said, adding that he hopes other students across the eastern Coachella Valley will reach for the stars, just like he did.

“The world is bigger than the Coachella Valley,” he said. “You really don’t know what the world can offer you until you dedicate yourself to something that’s bigger than you. The world has so much to offer that you could easily take advantage of.”

Sanchez Perez also said it’s imperative to find mentors.

“Mentors are very key to get you to the next step in your life,” he said.

“Find those mentors and hang on to them. If it wasn’t for the network and support system I developed, I probably would not have gotten where I am.”

One of Sanchez’s mentors, Yadira Valencia, was the coordinator of UCLA’s UndocuBruins Research Program.

“With my research project and eventually my graduate school applications, she expected nothing but the best and would challenge my thinking and my approach,” he said. “I can honestly say that without her advice, guidance, support and ‘tough love,’ I probably would not be where I am today.”

Another critical mentor was another undocumented medical student who recently obtained his Master of Public Health degree at Harvard University. “This guy is who I aspire to be in so many ways,” Sanchez Perez said. “He was someone I was able to relate to on a personal level and who shared similar life experiences. I hope to one day work with this individual and work towards achieving health equity among immigrant communities.”

Even though he remained undocumented at the time of this writing, Sanchez Perez said he remained hopeful that immigration reform would happen in the future. “I’m just taking it day by day,” he said. “When the going gets tough, I remind myself of my parents’ dreams and my own dreams as well.”

Itcelia Segoviano of Thermal

Itcelia Segoviano's father was a construction worker who abused her mom and was deported to Mexico. U.S. authorities never allowed him to come back.

"My mom worked in the field. She also baby sat at the house. She was always working," Segoviano recalled.

But being without a father in Thermal was difficult. "Elementary

school is when I had the hardest time," Segoviano said. "I would get bullied a lot because people knew I didn't have a dad."

But Segoviano kept her focus on doing well in school. "I saw education as a way to get ahead," she said.

By the time she got into Coachella Valley High School, her Spanish teacher, Doris Vaglienty, saw her potential and encouraged her to take AP classes and to pursue college, even though some of her family members encouraged her to set her sights lower and go to a technical school instead of a four-year university.

Segoviano was ultimately accepted into the University of California at Berkeley, which is considered the number one public university in the world, according to *U.S. News & World Report's* global university rankings.

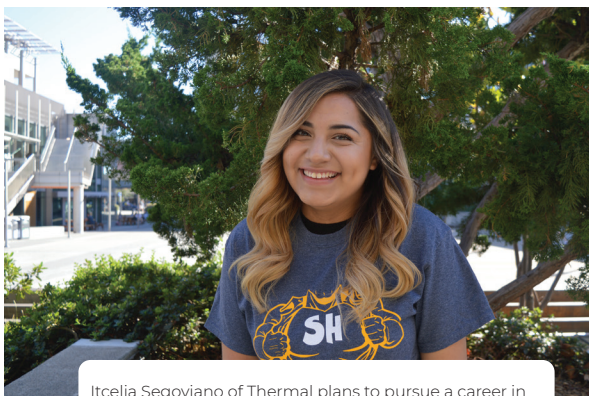
She plans to graduate from UC Berkeley in the spring of 2019 with a bachelor's degree in legal studies and a minor in education. She plans to pursue law school at either UC Berkeley, Yale or Princeton University, focusing on juvenile justice or immigration law.

Like Sanchez, Segoviano advises high school students to seek out mentors and build a support system to help them pursue their dreams.

"If you have a dream, just keep working on it. It takes a village to get things done," Segoviano said. "Make connections with people who know what the path to higher education looks like."

Segoviano herself makes frequent trips to schools in the Coachella Valley, where she speaks to high school students, offering them tips on how to succeed and pursue their dreams.

"Look where you are sitting!" she tells students. "You get to sit down in



Itcelia Segoviano of Thermal plans to pursue a career in law.

air conditioning while your parents are doing hard labor in 110 degrees.”

Segoviano said her mother has since remarried and she is proud of her for what she has achieved in college. But Segoviano also respects her mother and what she has endured to bring her the opportunities she has in life.

“Even though I had it hard,” Segoviano said, “I had it easier than she did.”

Brenda Ayón Verduzco of Coachella

Brenda Ayón Verduzco’s family relocated from Durango, Mexico to Thermal when she was only four years old.

“I was the youngest of seven siblings,” she said. “We settled in Thermal first. Then later got a bigger house in Coachella.”



Brenda Ayon Verduzco of Coachella works for the California Department of Justice in San Francisco, where she is part of the Attorney General's Healthcare Strike Force.

Like many immigrants who live in the eastern Coachella Valley, Ayón Verduzco’s parents worked in a variety of jobs in the agriculture and tourism industries.

“They did a lot of field work. Both worked in table grapes and dates,” she said. “My parents also worked in a shutter factory, and after this closed as a result of the recession, my mother began working at a country club in La Quinta doing maintenance work and landscaping. My dad now does construction work.”

But even though Ayón Verduzco was undocumented, a fact her teachers and counselors readily understood, they recognized her academic and professional potential

and reached out to help her succeed.

Ayón Verduzco credits many Coachella Valley High School counselors, including Mrs. Lynette Wohlmuth, Mr. Rafael Barbosa and Mr. Kent Braithwaite, whose passion for helping her and other students helps them find pathways into college as well as sources of potential financial support.

Their efforts included arranging a meeting with two Coachella Valley agribusiness operators who ultimately helped provide the funding that enabled

Ayón Verduzco to attend UC Irvine, where she earned a bachelor's degree in political science and sociology with a minor in Spanish, obtaining her citizenship only months before graduating. Ayón Verduzco's citizenship application had been pending, in fact, for over 14 years.

Ayón Verduzco later recalled her experience giving a commencement address for the 2012 graduating class at UC Irvine in a writeup for Loyola Law School in Los Angeles, where she obtained her juris doctorate.

"I stepped up to the podium to deliver a student speech," she wrote. "I had done this before — as the valedictorian of my high school. But this was different. Despite the risk and contrary advice, I was coming out as a formerly undocumented immigrant in a conservative setting. Orange County. One of the last 'red' safe-havens in otherwise liberal California. *I was one of the lucky few. In the nick of time, my petition for legal residency had been granted. But while I had shed the status of being undocumented, I did not shed the experience. I looked out at the largely white audience and took a breath. I told my story. I may have been born in Mexico, but I was every bit as American as my peers. The lesson I learned was that it didn't matter whether my parents were refugees or Ph.Ds. We can join together to better this world.*"

The crowd's reaction surprised her.

"The sea of white faces erupted in applause," Verduzco wrote. "But they didn't just embrace me. They embraced my family. As I make my way through the crowd to my mother, she tells me that a white woman moments before shook her hand and asked, 'Is that your daughter? You must be so proud.' In her sweet Spanish, she adds, 'Thank you.' My heart melted. Those few words validated every immigrant living in America wanting nothing more than to further the American dream. That one mattered. Of all the accolades along the way, hearing of my mother being treated with dignity was a moment I will never forget."

After graduating from Loyola Law School, Ayón Verduzco obtained a one-year fellowship with the Congressional Hispanic Caucus Institute in Washington, D.C. "I worked in the Civil Rights Center of the U.S. Department of Labor and later worked on the U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions."

In 2018, Ayón Verduzco left Washington D.C. to work for the California Department of Justice in San Francisco, where she is part of the Attorney General's Healthcare Strike Force, which is tasked with enforcing federal healthcare laws and protecting access and delivery of healthcare for all Californians.

Looking back on her career and education, however, Ayón Verduzco acknowledges she didn't know when she was in high school that she would wind up finding the opportunities that came her way.

"Everything that came to me felt like an opportunity I had to take," she

said, “because I didn’t know how much longer my family had to pursue our goals. As you know, Coachella is very close to the border, and we were not naive to the fact that a mere traffic stop by either police or Border Patrol would uproot all that we had been working to build.”

Ayón Verduzco said she believed this was an immigrant’s view of the world. One needs to make every opportunity count.

“When you work in the fields,” she said, “you don’t know if you’ll get hurt or not. Every day you work really hard in case you can’t any more (tomorrow). As an immigrant, you’re well aware of not having anything to fall back on.”

Ayón Verduzco remembers being humbled at the thought of her mother’s work ethic during a particularly tough period at Loyola Law School. “I was spending a crazy number of hours in the library,” she said. “The stakes were high. I remember telling my mom one day I was so tired.”

But then Ayón Verduzco thought to herself, “How can I be telling this to a woman who works 10 hours a day in the hot sun when I’m spending hours in an air-conditioned library only reading?”

“I found it humbling,” Ayón Verduzco said, adding, “My efforts are not just my own.”

Ayón Verduzco said it’s important for high school students across the eastern Coachella Valley to look beyond their present circumstances when they think of what they would like to do in future. It’s also important for them to seek work experience in offices and retail establishments to build their skillsets.

“I know that I’m not any different from any other person who had undocumented status,” Ayón Verduzco said. “I was just fortunate. I know that there are so many other individuals that have the will and the capacity to succeed. And if given the opportunity, the students of the Coachella Valley can really go on to make a difference and live their dreams.”

APPENDIX

THE COACHELLA VALLEY'S JAPANESE PIONEER FAMILIES

**Akahoshi
Doibatake
Higashi
Hiroto
Kitagawa
Kono
Koono
Masushige
Mizutani
Mushashi
Nagata
Nakamura
Sasaki
Sakemi
Sakai
Shibata
Sugimoto
Takano
Takeda
Tsunoda**

Source: The *Desert Sun*, November 7, 1999

EASTERN COACHELLA VALLEY MEXICAN AMERICAN PIONEER FAMILIES

**The Arias Family
The Avila Family
The Carmona Family
The Carrillo Family
The Celaya Family
The Diaz Family**

The Fernandez Family
The Gonzalez Family
The Granados Family
The Guitron Family
The Gutierrez Family
The Hernandez Family
The Montoya Family
The Montanez Family
The Otton Family
The Nieto Family
The Perez Family
The Pescador Family
The Preciado Family
The Ramirez Family
The Rodarte Family
The Rodarte Hernandez Family
The Ruiz Family
The Salazar Family
The Salcido Family
The Torres Family
The Trujillo Family
The Villegas Family

About the Author

Jeff Crider is a former *Desert Sun* and *Press-Enterprise* reporter who has lived and worked in the Coachella and Imperial Valleys for over 20 years. He initially wrote about the struggles of immigrant farmworkers while working as a reporter for the *Imperial Valley Press*, a position that gave him opportunities to cover farmworker rallies led by Cesar Chavez during the final years of his life. He later covered agriculture and tourism for *The Desert Sun* and *The Press-Enterprise*. He has produced articles and press releases for the city of Coachella since 2013 in addition to writing several history books. He recently wrote “*The Story of the Coachella Valley Water District: Making Every Drop Count Since 1918*.”

About This Book

“Jeff Crider’s new book, *A History of Coachella and its People*, uncovers the often overlooked history of the Eastern Coachella Valley. In doing so he shares with readers the struggles and contributions of Coachella’s largely immigrant population and the ways in which they came together to form a vibrant community. The book is a must read for anyone interested in the Coachella Valley’s past and its future.”

— Dr. Sarah McCormick Seekatz, Historian Specializing in Eastern Coachella Valley History

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