BERKELEY HISTORICAL SOCIETY & MUSEUM

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The Newsletter of the Berkeley Historical Society & Museum

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Honoring Roots, Celebrating Resilience: Berkeley's New Latino Community Exhibit

By Juan G. Berumen

Since last February, a dedicated group of longtime Latino residents of Berkeley have been gathering every week with a shared purpose: to honor their history, uplift their stories, and celebrate the resilience of their community. Their work now comes to life in the form of a new exhibit hosted by the Berkeley Historical Society and Museum (BHSM). Opened on September 21 and running through March 21, 2026, the exhibit is housed in the Veterans Memorial Building at Civic Center Plaza, a site layered with history in its own right.

Inside the exhibit room, the past feels present. Surrounded by remnants such as phone books from the 1940s and the museum's previous display honoring Japanese American residents of Berkeley, organizers envisioned what their own community's altar to history would look like. For many, this exhibit is not just a collection of photographs and artifacts. It is a tribute—a way of paying homage to the generations who came before and to the struggles, joys, and contributions that define the Latino presence in Berkeley.

As participants planned, the meetings themselves became a kind of reunion. Old friends reunited, new connections sparked, and laughter filled the room as stories and memories were exchanged. "We're not just putting together an exhibit," reflected Clementina Durón, the lead organizer of the project. Durón moved from Salinas to Berkeley in 1968 to attend UC Berkeley, where she participated in the historic Third World Liberation Front strike that paved the way for Chicano Studies and Ethnic Studies programs at Cal and other universities. A lifelong educator, she later taught at Casa de la Raza, the alternative school in Berkeley that served as a hub for bilingual education, cultural affirmation, and community activism. Today, her leadership in organizing the exhibit reflects her enduring commitment to preserving and sharing the city's Latino history. "We're reconnecting with one another, and in a way, we're reconnecting with the Berkeley that raised us."

Hermenejildo and Epifania Sanchez with their children in their Fourth Street backyard, ca. 1936. Courtesy of the Reyna family.

A Community Event, Rooted in Collaboration

The exhibit is being presented by BHSM, but it is far more than a museum event. It represents a truly intergenerational and community-driven effort. Launched during Latinx Heritage Month, the exhibit's opening celebration on September 21 also served as a community event in

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President's Message

Wow! Our new exhibit about and by Berkeley Latinos got started with even more of a bang than the one about and by Berkeley Japanese Americans, which also broke attendance records. So many people came to the Latino opening event that some never even got in to see the exhibit. Well, during the opening festivities is never the best time to focus on the contents of an exhibit anyway. But I hope a good time was had by all who came, what with the music, dancing, speeches, car show, food trucks, and color, color everywhere! *¡Muchisimas gracias a todos!*

The community involvement and support for both of these exhibits has been tremendously encouraging. *Domo arigato* as well!

The huge turnout reminded us that we occupy pretty cramped quarters. And unlike most local history museums, we have very little space for permanent or semi-permanent displays. The City Council has agreed to a plan in which the Berkeley Historical Society & Museum would have the entire ground floor of the Maudelle Shirek Building/Old City Hall, plus wall space on the other floors, to showcase the history of our unique city. The plan assumes that the building would be seismically retrofitted and renovated before we move in, and that will require a successful bond measure unless about $70 million can be raised in other ways.

An interim option we are starting to look at would be to expand from our current premises into at least part of the Shirek Building ground floor even before the seismic work. (The Veterans Building that we are in now is even more prone to damage in a major earthquake.) We could provide a foretaste of what a new museum in that beautiful landmark building could be and hopefully help inspire the citizens of Berkeley to support the vision that would include an addition to the building to house City Council and other meetings as well as weekend gatherings like the one we recently held. Once that is accomplished, the Veterans Building is slated to become a center for the arts. The defeat of Housing and Infrastructure Bond Measure L in November 2022 set the planning process back, but the movements to Save Old City Hall and the Community for a Cultural Civic Center will continue to make themselves heard.

Ann Harlow

Dancers and seniors at the September 21st opening event. Photo by Harvey Smith.

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partnership with Latinos Unidos de Berkeley, UC Berkeley's Chicanx Latinx Student Development Center (CLSD), and the Latinx Student Resource Center (LSRC) Tenth Anniversary event, Comunidad en la Placita, at MLK Jr. Civic Center Park. Together, the events highlighted the strength of cross-generational ties and the spirit of solidarity at the heart of Berkeley's Latino community.

"This is truly a Berkeley community event," said José Martinez, one of the student collaborators who works for the CLSD. "It's about honoring the past, but also making sure our stories continue to live and inspire. For us students, it's a chance to see ourselves as part of a longer legacy of activism, community, and belonging here in Berkeley."

The Story the Exhibit Tells

Spanning more than a century—from 1900 to 2025—the exhibit explores the dynamic history of Berkeley's Latino community. It traces the journeys of early migrant laborers who worked in agriculture, on the railroad, and in service industries, often under difficult conditions but with enduring resilience. It acknowledges the vibrant traditions of families who built their homes and neighborhoods in Berkeley, weaving their culture into the city's fabric.

From there, visitors encounter the powerful waves of organizing that emerged during the 1960s and 1970s, when Chicano students and community leaders mobilized for educational equity, cultural affirmation, and political empowerment. Archival documents and oral histories capture the spirit of that era, when young people demanded recognition and fought to create spaces for themselves and their communities at institutions like UC Berkeley.

The exhibit also highlights artists, educators, and activists whose work shaped Berkeley's cultural and political landscape. Whether through music, visual art, poetry, or classroom teaching, Latino community members helped define what it means to live and struggle for justice in Berkeley.

And, importantly, the story does not end in the past. The exhibit extends to the present day, spotlighting the ongoing contributions of today's community leaders, organizers, and youth. Through photographs, testimonies, and contemporary artifacts, visitors are invited to reflect on the living legacy of pride, resistance, and belonging that continues to guide Berkeley's Latino community.

Folklorico students from Casa de la Raza 1972–73: Rita Guerrero (left) and Patsy Madero (right).

More Than History: An Altar and a Celebration

For many, this exhibit is not just a collection of photographs and artifacts. It is a tribute—an altar—paying homage to the generations that came before and to the struggles, joys, and contributions that define the Latino presence in Berkeley.

That sense of history as ceremony runs deep for organizer Patsy Madero, whose memories of growing up in Berkeley are filled with traditions like Las Posadas. "I remember often gathering with community members for the Posada—the journey of Mary and Joseph," she recalled. "We would dress up as the characters, and when I was twelve, it was an honor to be chosen to play Mary. We would go to different homes each week during Christmas, sharing the rosary, food, and songs."

For Madero, those gatherings echoed in the exhibit planning sessions, where laughter, stories, and memories were woven together into something larger than a display of artifacts. "We see this exhibit as both history and ceremony," she explained. Madero is the daughter of longtime Berkeley activist Josephine "Josie" Madero, a champion for bilingual education and advocate for the Latino community. Josie worked for decades in local canneries and schools, while also volunteering in churches, senior centers, and grassroots political efforts. From farmworker grape boycotts to organizing at Casa de la Raza, she dedicated her life to advancing cultural preservation and social justice in Berkeley. On May 6, 1998, the city honored her on Outstanding Women of Berkeley Day. Patsy's work on the exhibit continues this legacy of honoring community history and resilience. "It's a way of giving thanks to the people who came before, of saying, 'We remember you, and we honor you.'"

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Why It Matters

Berkeley is a city known for its activism and cultural diversity, yet Latino contributions have not always been as visible in public historical narratives. This exhibit seeks to change that. By placing Latino experiences at the center, it challenges omissions in the city's collective memory and asserts that these stories are integral to Berkeley's identity.

It also serves as a bridge. For younger Latinos in Berkeley—especially students at UC Berkeley and local schools—the exhibit offers an opportunity to see themselves reflected in history. For longtime residents, it affirms that their lives and struggles matter, that their sacrifices are remembered, and that their community's story is worth telling. For visitors from outside the community, it provides an invitation to learn, connect, and understand the role Latinos have played in shaping Berkeley for over a century.

Looking Ahead

The exhibit will remain open through March 21, 2026, allowing ample time for community members, students, and visitors to experience it. Alongside the physical display, organizers plan to host programming that might include oral history events, community panels, and cultural celebrations, further bringing the exhibit to life.

But perhaps the most lasting impact will be the relationships rekindled and renewed in the process of building it. The weekly gatherings, the shared meals, the moments of laughter and reflection—all of these will linger long after the exhibit itself concludes.

In this way, the project embodies what it seeks to document: resilience, connection, and the power of community to carry history forward. The exhibit doors open not only onto a room filled with photographs, artifacts, and documents, but onto something larger: a living testament to the resilience, creativity, and spirit of Berkeley's Latino community.

As exhibit organizer Clementina puts it, "This isn't just our past—it's our gift to the future."

Juan's Place

By Beatriz Leyva-Cutler

Tony Mejia is the proud manager of Juan's Place, a Mexican restaurant located at 941 Carleton in Berkeley. His father, Juan Mejia, founded Juan's Place with his mother, Maria del Socorro Mejia, in 1972. They had nine sons: Alfredo, Arturo, Antonio (Tony), Francisco, Javier, David, Jorge, Bernardo, and Juan Miguel.

Juan Mejia, the founder, was born in San Sebastian de Alamo, Jalisco, Mexico. Tony's mother is from the same pueblo. In San Sebastian, Juan sold aguas frescas (fruit drinks) in his early days, unknowingly setting the pathway for his future and that of his family in the food business. Tony himself was born in a small rancho village nearby, Encarnacion de Diaz, also in Jalisco.

The following comes from an interview with Tony and his recollection of how his father, Juan Mejia, came to open Juan's Place. It's a story that gives us a glimpse of parts of West Berkeley that no longer exist. At the same time, it also explains what inspired a young father to open a Mexican food restaurant, today a well-known and respected establishment to many Berkeleyans and now one of Berkeley's longest-running businesses.

Juan Mejia, his wife, and five of his sons on the steps of Juan's Place, May 1972. Courtesy of Tony Mejia.

When my dad came to the United States, he was already married to my mom. My oldest brother was already born, Alfredo ("Freddy"). That must have been in the late 1940s or early 1950s. My mom and dad first crossed over the Rio Grande with Freddy when he was just a baby in arms. My second-oldest brother, Arturo, was born in Texas when my parents were in their early twenties.

In Texas, my dad got a job with a lady who had a business selling hot dogs. It was back in the '50s. The owner "adopted" my parents. She didn't have any children and asked my mom if she would leave my brother Alfredo with her to raise. My mom said "No."

My dad had a childhood friend, Elias Valdivia, who went to Texas with him. Elias had a brother already living in Berkeley on Seventh and Virginia; his name was Joel Valdivia. He told his brother Elias to come to Berkeley, and he did. Later, Elias sent my dad a letter telling him to come to Berkeley, too. Elias was working at Spenger's, on Fourth Street, and got my dad a job there. My dad worked at Spenger's for at least fifteen years.

Back then, where the old Wells Fargo Bank parking lot was located between Tenth Street and San Pablo, there used to be three buildings: a dry cleaner, a bar named Bonanza, and on the corner, another house. My dad started working at Bonanza, in the back, where they had a Hofbräu on a smaller scale than the one that used to be Brennan's near the train tracks. My dad opened his first business in the Bonanza bar, selling Mexican food. I used to go there to help my dad. I was about seven or eight years old. I would go and help him. I would pull up a chair and wash dishes at the sink.

My dad would cook a variety of dishes, including chilaquiles, barbeque chicken, turkey, stuffed green peppers, enchiladas, and chile colorado. It must have been around 1970 or 1971. When the bar closed, my dad started working at restaurants on the bay, including Solomon Grundy's and His Lordships. He didn't work there very long. He tried working at a sheet-metal place with one of his brothers, my uncle Alex. He found that foundry work was not what he liked or wanted to do. My dad started to go to a skills center, located on San Pablo near Ashby, where the Sports Gym is now. This was where they helped people get job training.

When my dad was going over to the skills center for training, he happened to walk by Ninth and Carleton. There was a bar on the corner owned by a lady. At that time, the bar section of Juan's Place was the only part of the building in use. Mary ran the bar. So my dad stopped in, had some beers, and asked the lady, "Where's the restroom?" So she told him to walk straight down that pathway to the back. So he went down and he happened to look through the pane windows of two doors, and he saw what looked like a restaurant space. But it was being used as storage, with boxes piled high to the ceiling. The owner of the building, Mr. Yee, also ran a boarding house above the bar. At that time, Mr. Yee was renting the adjoining rooms as a storage place. My dad eventually contacted the owner, and they worked out a deal. It took us three months to clear out all the items stored in that space. That was the beginning of Juan's Place.

One thing I learned from my father was the importance of always having faith. He would tell me, "Don't lose your faith; always have faith in yourself and in your abilities." When my dad opened up the restaurant, it was May 1972. He had all the faith in himself to open up a restaurant on his own.

Around 1973–74, things started picking up, and the restaurant became busier. I remember one day when the A's were playing in the World Series. My dad was in the back, making some taco shells in a frying pan. Then a glass of water spilled onto the pan, and the stove caught on fire. While the fire was being put out, it created a huge mess, as the firemen had to open up the roof. I was around thirteen, and my dad was still renting the space. The place was packed with people. Because the fire was burning, I had to tell the customers, "Excuse me, you guys, you have to exit the building because we have a fire in the kitchen." The fire spread quickly and caused significant damage. When the owner saw the damage, he told my dad that he was ready to sell the building. Dad worked out a deal with Mr. Yee. I think my dad gave him a $5,000 deposit and then paid a monthly amount, with a balloon payment at the end. I think it was 1974 when my dad finally became the owner. I believe the building was sold for a total of $35,000.

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Juan's Place today: family-run for more than fifty years.
Photo by J. Ziajka.

Mexicans in Berkeley During the Great Depression (1929–1939)

By Ana Fernandez

In the 1930s, during the Great Depression, Mexican and Mexican American families across the country and in Berkeley faced a wave of government-backed removals that would change the community forever. Known as the Mexican Repatriation, this mass expulsion targeted people of Mexican descent—regardless of citizenship—under the false claim that their departure would free-up jobs and reduce welfare costs for white Americans.

Although often called "deportations," most were not formal legal proceedings. Families were pressured, threatened, or misled into "voluntarily" leaving. Estimates suggest that between 400,000 and 1 million people were repatriated, with about 40 to 60 percent believed to be U.S. citizens, many of them children born in the U.S. Local governments, particularly in California and Texas, played an aggressive role, organizing raids in public spaces like parks and workplaces and collaborating with Mexican consulates to facilitate departures.

The Berkeley Historical Society and Museum's current exhibit, *Berkeley's Latino Community: A Story of Pride and Resilience, 1900–2025*, includes an interactive display, "Mapping Mexican Berkeley: Berkeley's Mexican and Mexican Americans, 1900–1950," that uses U.S. census data to explore demographic shifts in the local Mexican community. Berkeley's Mexican and Mexican American population dropped sharply—from around 850 people in 1930 to fewer than 400 in 1940. While this decline cannot be attributed solely to repatriation raids given the overlapping crises of the Great Depression and significant economic and migratory shifts across California, and though in part it reflects the different ways in which the census data was reported in the different years, it nonetheless raises important questions.

In 1934–1935, anthropologist Paul Radin led a commission for the State Emergency Relief Administration of California (SERA), surveying over 200 workers from diverse ethnic backgrounds in the Bay Area. Below are two of four cases from this study involving individuals with connections to Berkeley, each offering insight into the hardships faced by Mexican communities during the Great Depression:

- Angel Ornelas: A 26-year-old who fled poverty in Ciudad Juárez as a boy, traveled through California for agricultural work, and eventually found employment at Berkeley's El Dorado Coconut Works factory.
- Romolo Tellez: A Berkeley High School student who described the intense job discrimination Mexicans faced during the Great Depression, reflecting the desperation that led many young people to leave home in search of work.

For the full case studies, see *Paul Radin Papers: Mexico (1934–1935)* at the San Francisco Public Library.

These stories remind us that behind the statistics were individuals navigating both the economic devastation of the Depression and the racialized targeting of Mexican communities.

Even before the formal years of Mexican Repatriation, deportation raids were already targeting Mexican communities. As early as 1921, the San Francisco Spanish-language newspaper *Hispano-America* reported the repatriation of 1,500 Mexicans, 500 of them from cities across the Bay Area, including San Francisco, Oakland, Alameda, and Berkeley. According to the newspaper's estimates, these 1,500 individuals were not an isolated incident but part of a larger wave of removals, with at least 10,000 Mexicans already deported by that time.

Historian Marla A. Ramírez, in her forthcoming book *Banished Citizens: A History of the Mexican American Women Who Endured Repatriation* (Harvard University Press, 2025), argues that the terms "deportation" or "repatriation" fail to capture the reality. She uses "banishment" to highlight the systemic injustice—pointing out that the majority of those expelled were U.S. citizens, primarily working-class women and children.

Once in Mexico, many faced severe hardship. Some had never lived there, spoke little Spanish, or were unfamiliar with the regions they were sent to. Mexican towns and settlements were often unprepared, forcing families into overcrowded housing, refugee camps, or remote rural areas with no work.

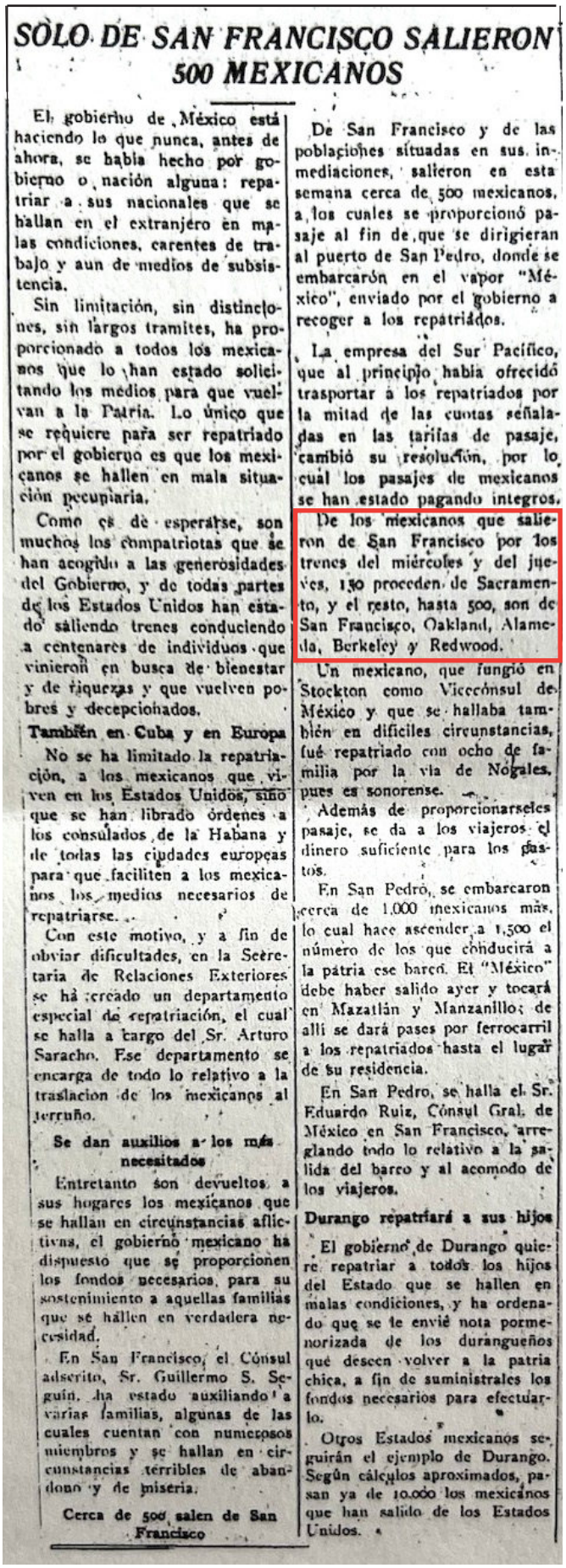
Mexican Repatriation during the Great Depression period remains an underdiscussed mass expulsion in U.S. history, but its effects are still felt within the larger Latino community today. This history, rooted in racism, economic scapegoating, and violations of citizenship rights, reminds us how quickly fear can be turned into policy, and how deeply it can shape communities even in Berkeley.

For Further Reading

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2023, "INS Records for 1930s Mexican Repatriations." Last modified August 23, 2023. *https://www.uscis.gov/about-us/our-history/stories-from-the-archives/ins-records-for-1930s-mexican-repatriations.*

Francisco E. Balderrama and Raymond Rodríguez, *Decade of Betrayal: Mexican Repatriation in the 1930s.* University of New Mexico Press, 1995.

Marla A. Ramírez, *Banished Citizens: A History of the Mexican American Women Who Endured Repatriation.* Harvard University Press, forthcoming October 14, 2025.



SOLO DE SAN FRANCISCO SALIERON 500 MEXICANOS

El gobierno de México está haciendo lo que nunca, antes de ahora, se había hecho por gobierno o nación alguna: repatriar a sus nacionales que se hallan en el extranjero en malas condiciones, carentes de trabajo y aun de medios de subsistencia.

Sin limitación, sin distinciones, sin largos tramites, ha proporcionado a todos los mexicanos que lo han estado solicitando los medios para que vuelvan a la Patria. Lo único que se requiere para ser repatriado por el gobierno es que los mexicanos se hallen en mala situación pecuniaria.

Como es de esperarse, son muchos los compatriotas que se han acogido a las generosidades del Gobierno, y de todas partes de los Estados Unidos han estado saliendo trenes conduciendo a centenares de individuos que vinieron en busca de bienestar y de riquezas y que vuelven pobres y decepcionados.

También en Cuba y en Europa

No se ha limitado la repatriación, a los mexicanos que viven en los Estados Unidos, sino que se han librado órdenes a los consulados de la Habana y de todas las ciudades europeas para que faciliten a los mexicanos los medios necesarios de repatriarse.

Con este motivo, y a fin de obviar dificultades, en la Secretaria de Relaciones Exteriores se ha creado un departamento especial de repatriación, el cual se halla a cargo del Sr. Arturo Saracho. Ese departamento se encarga de todo lo relativo a la traslacion de los mexicanos al terruño.

Se dan auxilios a los más necesitados

Entretanto son devueltos a sus hogares los mexicanos que se hallan en circunstancias aflictivas, el gobierno mexicano ha dispuesto que se proporcionen los fondos necesarios para su sostenimiento a aquellas familias que se hallen en verdadera necesidad.

En San Francisco, el Cónsul adscrito, Sr. Guillermo S. Seguín, ha estado auxiliando a varias familias, algunas de las cuales cuentan con numerosos miembros y se hallan en circunstancias terribles de abandono y de miseria.

Cerca de 500 salen de San Francisco

De San Francisco y de las poblaciones situadas en sus inmediaciones, salieron en esta semana cerca de 500 mexicanos, a los cuales se proporcionó pasaje al fin de que se dirigieran al puerto de San Pedro, donde se embarcarón en el vapor "México", enviado por el gobierno a recoger a los repatriados.

La empresa del Sur Pacífico, que al principio había ofrecido trasportar a los repatriados por la mitad de las cuotas señaladas en las tarifas de pasaje, cambió su resolución, por lo cual los pasajes de mexicanos se han estado pagando integros.

De los mexicanos que salieron de San Francisco por los trenes del miércoles y del jueves, 150 proceden de Sacramento, y el resto, hasta 500, son de San Francisco, Oakland, Alameda, Berkeley y Redwood.

Un mexicano, que fungió en Stockton como Vicecónsul de México y que se hallaba también en dificiles circunstancias, fué repatriado con ocho de familia por la via de Nogales, pues es sonorense.

Además de proporcionarseles pasaje, se da a los viajeros el dinero suficiente para los gastos.

En San Pedro, se embarcaron cerca de 1,000 mexicanos más, lo cual hace ascender a 1,500 el número de los que conducirá a la pátria ese barco. El "México" debe haber salido ayer y tocará en Mazatlán y Manzanillo; de allí se dará pases por ferrocarril a los repatriados hasta el lugar de su residencia.

En San Pedro, se halla el Sr. Eduardo Ruiz, Cónsul Gral. de México en San Francisco, arreglando todo lo relativo a la salida del barco y al acomodo de los viajeros.

Durango repatriará a sus hijos

El gobierno de Durango quiere repatriar a todos los hijos del Estado que se hallen en malas condiciones, y ha ordenado que se le envié nota pormenorizada de los durangueños que deseen volver a la patria chica, a fin de suministrales los fondos necesarios para efectuarlo.

Otros Estados mexicanos seguirán el ejemplo de Durango. Según cálculos aproximados, pasan ya de 10,000 los mexicanos que han salido de los Estados Unidos.

In 1921, the San Francisco Spanish-language newspaper *Hispano-America* reported the repatriation of members of Berkeley's Mexican community.

"Of the Mexicans who left San Francisco on the Wednesday and Thursday trains, 150 came from Sacramento, and the rest, up to 500, are from San Francisco, Oakland, Alameda, Berkeley, and Redwood."

Translation by Ana Fernandez. From "*Repatriacion de 1,500 Mexicanos: Solo de San Francisco Salieron 500 Mexicanos*," in *Hispano-America* (online), 4 June 1921, p. 1. Courtesy of the UC Berkeley Ethnic Studies Library.

(Juan's Place – continued from page 5)

Over the years, we have had many people come to Juan's Place, including Santana and his brother Jorge, from Malo, Dolores Huerta, filmmakers, and recording artists. We also catered to Fantasy Records, which used to be down the street.

I want people to know that Juan's Place is a business like a family. Nobody is perfect; we all have our faults. Just like in families, businesses like restaurants have their ups and downs; it's part of life. I do my best to the best of my ability. My parents instilled in me the values of sharing and staying positive. I think I was one of the lucky ones who had responsibilities at a young age to keep me from going astray. I don't ask anything from anyone except for a handshake or a smile, but don't come to Juan's Place and offer me something that's going to harm me, my family, or this place of business. And when they have, you know, these people disappear and respect my place and position as a business. If they ever come to bother me again, or the next time I see them, they will see me with more respect. I am grateful to a lot of my dad's friends who would come and visit him. They would all hang out, visit, talk, and laugh with my dad. They would also give me advice, like "Save your money" and "Don't get involved with these people." And of course, "Stay away from drugs."

I remember when I was about twelve that for three straight days in a row, I went to play at James Kenney Park with my friends right after school. When I finally went to the restaurant, I thought I was in trouble. My dad asked to talk to me, and I thought, "Oh no, here it goes." Instead, he said, "If you are not coming to the restaurant to work, that's okay, just let me know. That's all I ask," and since that day, I gave my dad my word that I would be with him until the end.

I learned to be responsible and to keep my *palabra* (word), not just to my dad, but to everybody.

Urban Care, Part 3: The Question of Memory

By Mitch Fleischer

Roz and Al Lepawsky, 1985. Photo courtesy of Lucy DiBianca and Susan Rosenstreich.

When I started this series of articles, I was particularly intrigued by the question of what happened to the memory of Urban Care as well as that of Al and Roz Lepawsky who championed it for so long. In some ways the comparison to the Save the Bay organization was inevitable. After all, they both operated in about the same timeframe to great effect, they worked on some similar issues, and Sylvia McLaughlin was involved in leadership roles in both organizations. Yet Urban Care and the Lepawskys are mostly forgotten, while Save the Bay still exists and McLaughlin has a state park named after her.

Urban Care had its greatest impact between its start in late 1966 and the spinoff of the Berkeley Architectural Heritage Association (BAHA) in 1974. But even during its period of greatest influence, Urban Care was kind of a shoestring operation, subsisting on member dues that fluctuated greatly as the number of members fluctuated. And the dues were never very much anyway, since most people paid only $1 to $5 a year. Urban Care regularly sought foundation grants to support an office and a paid staff, but it never succeeded in getting more than a few hundred dollars at a time this way. Members would be asked for supplemental contributions, over and above their dues, but this doesn't seem to have brought in much money. In the early years they managed to maintain a small office, often in donated space and staffed by work-study students, but they never found funding for even a part-time paid executive director.

This lack of funds meant that almost everything was done by the volunteer board of directors, and typically by just a few members of the board. As in many volunteer organizations, this led to a fair amount of bickering, board turnover, and burnout. Roz Lepawsky rotated in and out of the executive director position several times and resigned from the board at least once during the period before 1974.

By the time of the BAHA spinoff in 1974, it appeared that Roz and Al were done for a while, and the record shows little activity between mid-1973 and 1976. Roz attempted to revive the board in mid-1974, but a real revival had to wait until 1976. In an August 17, 1976, letter regarding potential new board members, Roz argues that Urban Care had accomplished most of what it had set out to do in 1966, and the only remaining major issue was the waterfront, so she asked that Urban Care be revived with that focus.

The organization seems to have revived to some extent, but within a few months Urban Care initiated another spinoff, creating the Berkeley Bayfront Council as a new membership organization, with Roz and Al as its prime movers, although Urban Care continued to limp along. The Bayfront Council continued as an influential organization in the city until 1986. Roz and Al stepped back from leadership in 1983, handing the reins of the Council to Bruce Chisholm. In 1983, the Bayfront Council was described in a city memo as an "affiliate of Urban Care," with Bruce Chisholm being invited to a meeting at the same time as Roz was separately invited to represent Urban Care. Al died in 1993; Roz died in 2000, having had a chance to see most of the waterfront issues she and Al had championed favorably resolved.

Let's contrast Urban Care's situation with that of Save the Bay. Save the Bay was tightly focused on a single issue in its first decade or so: keeping the Bay from getting filled and controlling development along its shore. This was not only a tight focus, but it also was easily understood by the general population, even by politicians. And it fed into an emerging environmental movement, so it was timely. In contrast, Urban Care tried to address lots of issues, without a topical focus. Thus people would join Urban Care, perhaps with an interest in one of its issues, and if that issue didn't play out well or was resolved, then some of those people would drop out, leading to a persistent recruitment crisis. Save the Bay also had a broad regional constituency—the entire Bay Area, with its population of several million—while Urban Care had a constituency only in the city of Berkeley, with its population of about 100,000.

The tight topical focus of Save the Bay along with its broad regional impact meant that many more people joined Save the Bay, and foundations and other funding sources saw the chance to have a huge impact from their funds. Urban Care

had far fewer members, and foundations apparently saw little reason to fund an organization with such a local scope. Thus, Save the Bay was able to hire paid staff early in its existence, making it easier to recruit new members and to secure external funding and support, resulting in even more influence. In contrast, Urban Care had to expend much of its volunteer energies on survival rather than growing its influence.

What about memory? Why have Urban Care and the Lepawskys been all but forgotten by the public? Indeed, why is the Eastshore State Park named after Sylvia McLaughlin when it's generally recognized that she was only one of three Berkeley women who founded and ran Save the Bay for many years (the others being Esther Gulick and Kay Kerr)? The answer to the latter question is pretty simple: McLaughlin was the public face of Save the Bay in its early decades, while Gulick and Kerr worked tirelessly behind the scenes. McLaughlin was also very active in several other environmental organizations (including Urban Care), increasing her visibility. So it's not surprising that she would be the one to be remembered over time. Similarly, Roz Lepawsky also spent most of her time behind the scenes at Urban Care, serving often as executive director, but never as president. She was not involved in BAHA, the most significant spinoff from Urban Care, while the other major spinoff, the Bayfront Council, disappeared by 1986, well before the creation of the Eastshore State Park, so the Council's contributions were hard to recognize. Urban Care and the Lepawskys sponsored and did the hard work for many problem-solving workshops for the City of Berkeley, but usually these events had multiple sponsors, again limiting Urban Care's visibility. Visibility is a prerequisite for being remembered. Urban Care as an organization never had the kind of visibility as Save the Bay.

Does memory matter? Are the shades of Esther Gulick and Kay Kerr jealous that the Eastshore State Park is named after Sylvia McLaughlin and not them? Based on their oral histories in the Bancroft Library, probably not; the two women seemed quite content to have played key roles in such influential events, and neither seems to have wanted the public role that McLaughlin took on. Part of the answer comes down to why people get involved in activist projects. Do they do it for the recognition, to be remembered for their work, or is the work satisfying enough in its own right? But memory can matter a great deal, especially when it's used to suppress the contributions of some groups (for example, women or minorities). More than anything, memory matters when it comes to providing an example and an inspiration for future generations. Hopefully this series of articles about Urban Care can provide inspiration for a new generation of urban activists.

Special thanks go to Al and Roz Lepawsky's daughters, Lucy DiBianca and Susan Rosenstreich, for taking the time to participate in telephone interviews and for providing photos of their parents. Thanks also to local luminaries Shirley Dean and Lesley Emmington for sharing their memories of the Lepawskys and Urban Care.

McLaughlin Eastshore State Park, named for Save the Bay co-founder Sylvia McLaughlin, extends 8.5 miles along the waterfronts of Oakland, Emeryville, Berkeley, Albany, and Richmond. Photo by Mitch Fleischer.

Erich Thomsen Builds the Redwood Valley Railway in Tilden Regional Park

By Fred Etzel

Berkeley children, parents, and visitors enjoy traveling on the Tilden Park Steam Trains, a.k.a., the Redwood Valley Railway (RVR), near the base of Vollmer Peak in Tilden Regional Park. Erich Thomsen was a professional railroader who spent twenty-eight years as a mechanical engineer for the Western Pacific Railroad and was awarded three patents. Thomsen envisioned, designed, and built the RVR, largely at his own expense.

Thomsen was born in Hamburg, Germany, in 1920. In 1927, the Thomsen family immigrated to the United States and settled in San Francisco. After graduating from Lick Wilmerding High School in 1937, Thomsen enrolled in San Francisco State University. He left SFSU without graduating to take a job with the Southern Pacific Railroad as a fireman on steam engines. (A fireman on a steam engine is responsible for maintaining the fire in the boiler to generate steam and power the engine.)

In 1948, Thomsen went to work for the Western Pacific Railroad as a mechanical engineer and track inspector. He developed an interest in vintage, narrow-gauge railroads and joined clubs of other narrow-gauge railroad enthusiasts.

(continued on page 10)

(Redwood Valley Railway – continued from page 9)

Erich Thomsen ca. 1971 in the vicinity of the former Army camp in Tilden Park. Photo courtesy of Ellen Thomsen.

When Thomsen learned that Richard E. Walpole, general manager of the East Bay Regional Park District (EBRPD), was interested in adding a miniature passenger train line to Tilden Park's attractions, Thomsen submitted a design for a line to be located at the south end of Tilden Park. Walpole accepted his design and had Tilden Park workers grade a parking area, the station area, and the track layout. In 1952, on land in Tilden Park leased from the Regional Park District, Thomsen used his own funds supplemented by funds from other railroad enthusiasts to build the Tilden South Gate and Pacific Railway, a 12-inch-gauge model railroad. In August of that year, the RVR opened to the public and was an immediate success.

For the first fifteen years of the operation of the RVR, Thomsen kept his weekday job with the Western Pacific Railroad, working in the company's San Francisco office. In 1957, to be closer to his miniature railroad business, Thomsen moved his family to a two-story brown-shingle house in north Berkeley. In 1965, in the basement of his home, he completed Engine No. 4—"Laurel"—a 5-inch-scale, 15-inch-gauge, 2-4-2 model: that is, a tank engine approximately an eleventh the size of a full-size version, running on tracks that are 15 inches apart (full-scale standard-gauge tracks are 4 feet 8½ inches apart), with two pairs of driving wheels, four trailing wheels, and two leading wheels.

The RVR is located on land used by the U.S. Army during World War II and the Korean War when the East Bay Regional Park District provided space for the Army at strategic high points in the Berkeley hills. In 1968 when the Army vacated, the general manager of EBRPD, William Penn Mott Jr., allowed Thomsen to expand his railroad to 15-inch-gauge track to accommodate the larger train and increase its length to three times as long as the original layout. This new, larger-scale equipment allowed two adults to ride side by side. The Berkeley-Oakland hills are isolated from urban development and have a rugged terrain, exactly the type of site Thomsen desired.

In 1978, Thomsen was joined by Raymond L. Pimlott, who was never employed by a railroad but was a life-time enthusiast of full-size railroading while he worked as an electronics engineer for Chevron Development. Pimlott became deeply involved in the operation of RVR and the construction of its locomotives and accessory equipment. He worked on the RVR for over forty years as chief engineer and shop superintendent.

Thomsen's daughter, Ellen Thomsen, told the author that she "was 'drafted' to work on the RVR as soon as I could see over the ticket counter." After Erich Thomsen died in 1995, Ellen took over the operation and management of the RVR and runs the RVR to this day. When asked what sets the RVR apart from other Bay Area entertainment venues, Ellen replied: "The regional parks. The regional park system has been there since 1934, when they started Tilden. Tilden was conceived not only to preserve the land, but also to have some very nice, low-key activities for families besides hiking—like the railroad, the antique merry-go-round, and the farm. We have a good way to show people the beautiful scenery without having to hike through it. You're five minutes from a major urban area. People get a taste of something that's very historical, because we're very fussy about scale and accuracy. It's kind of like period performance art."

According to the RVR, the railway carries over 160,000 passengers yearly. The locomotives and equipment are built to look like Baldwin locomotives and rolling stock from 1875 to 1910, and the right-of-way is lined with more than 600 coast redwood trees specifically planted by the RVR.

Sources

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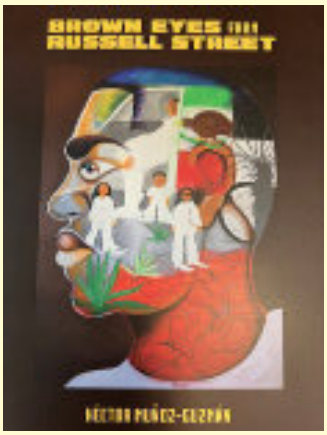

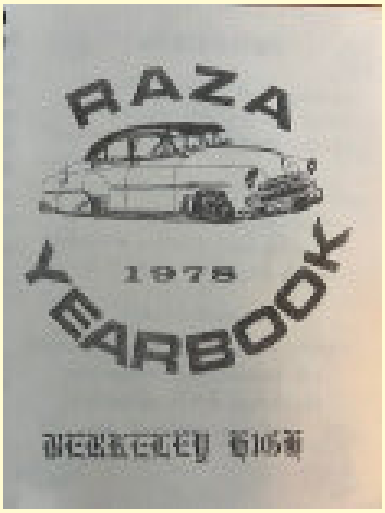

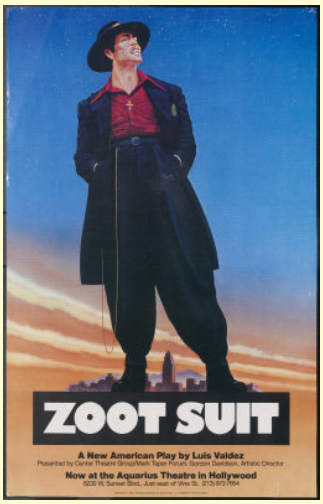

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