A Home Run in Orange County's Barrios

By Ron Gonzales

They toiled in the parking sheds and citrus groves of Orange County. They served their nation during World War II, from the Philippines to Europe, and served again in Korea. They were pioneers of the Mexican American civil rights movement. And they played baseball.

The photos and stories of dozens of Mexican American baseball players, from the early 1900s in San Juan Capistrano to the early 1960s in communities ranging from Placentia to Huntington Beach are in Mexican American Baseball in Orange County this is the third in a series of books about Mexican Americans and America's pastime - books that cover not just the sport, but how the sport helped shape the early barrios of California and other states, and the people who live in them. The Orange County book was written by Richard A. Santillan, professor emeritus at Cal Poly Pomona, and three Orange County residents: Susan C. Luevano, a librarian at Cal State Long Beach; Luis F. Fernandez, who works in the history room of the Santa Ana Public Library; and Angelina F. Veyna, a history professor at Santa Ana College. The book is distinct from two earlier books in the series, on Mexican American baseball in Los Angeles and in the Inland Empire, because it includes a number of non-sports photos - nearly 200 - to help tell the story of the Mexican American community in Orange County, including such topics as school segregation, the citrus industry and even the small businesses that Latino entrepreneurs ran - entrepreneurs who backed not just sports teams, but organizations engaged in the struggle for civil rights. "The Orange County book was the closest we've come to establishing the real sense of what we mean when we involve the community and invite the community to write its own history," said Santillan, who has worked on all three projects. "We don't write the stories, we don't write the captions. The families do. The friends do ... they talk how baseball was an instrument that was used to knock down barriers of discrimination. Baseball wasn't simply a game."

The authors note that the book, with photos reflecting seven decades of Mexican American history, also reflects the historical backdrop against which the sport was played, including the Great Depression, the repatriation of American citizens to Mexico, and the fight against school segregation. "Mexican American baseball history intertwined with the social, cultural and political struggle of Mexican Americans in Orange County," said Fernandez of Garden Grove. "Aside from being managers, umpires, coaches and players, they were leaders of their own communities on and off the baseball field. With

Continued on Page 5
MEXICAN AMERICAN BASEBALL IN THE MILITARY

California State Polytechnic University Pomona will host a summer long exhibit showcasing dozens of Mexican Americans who played ball in the military. Mexican Americans have contributed to the defense of the nation since before the American Civil War. They distinguished themselves in World War I, World War II, Korea, Vietnam, and many other foreign conflicts. Mexican Americans are one of the most highly decorated communities, earning dozens of Congressional Medals of Honor, including 14 during World War II. Many communities have named parks in tribute to their local heroes including Eugene Arnold Obregon Park in East Los Angeles, and the David M. Gonzalez Park in Pacoima. In addition to their bravery on the battlefront, thousands of more Mexican Americans worked in defense related industries. Several Mexican Americans played ball in the military, especially during World War II and the Korean conflict. This extraordinary exhibit will include vintage photos of men and women in their military baseball uniforms as well as service uniforms. Sadly, were killed in combat. The exhibit will highlight the lives of these special players, including Sergio Hernandez who played ball at Jefferson High School in the late 1930s and was scouted by several major league teams; he planned to play professional baseball after the war. He was killed at the Battle of the Bulge on his 21st birthday. Alfonso Olmos was a batboy for an East Los Angeles team during the early 1950s, and later played ball in high school and at East Los Angeles College. He was drafted by the San Francisco Giants, and looked forward to playing ball when he returned from Vietnam. Tragically, he was killed soon after beginning his tour. The exhibit runs from late June through September 2013. On Tuesday, August 27, 2013, a program will be held to honor these surviving players and/or their families. A luncheon, panel discussion, a special certificate ceremony, and a first pitch ceremony are part of the program.

For further information, please contact Dr. Richard Santillan at rsantillan@earthlink.net. We are also looking for names and photos of veterans who played ball in order to include them in our exhibit. The exhibit is sponsored by both the Latino Baseball History Project at Cal State San Bernardino, and the Ethnic and Women’s Studies Department at Cal Poly Pomona.
Mexican American Women’s Softball History

By Pat Rice-Daniels (based on Jill Vassilakos-Long, T. Benitez & Ervin Murillo)

The Latina Women’s Baseball History exhibits created by Professor Richard Santillan and, digitizer, exhibit designer, Manny Veron of the Pfau Library, are still on display in the Pfau Library on the 4th floor in Special Collections #4005. Among the memorabilia are historic photos of brides and their baseball-playing grooms on the baseball field, photos of women’s softball teams, plus pictures of individual former and current female players.

Just as the men’s baseball leagues were family affairs, so too, were the women’s softball leagues, which is displayed in team photos with players holding their children. Sisters, cousins, also daughters of baseball affiliates often played on the same team—with other family members in the stands watching and cheering them on.

Along with the wonderful times were some awful times. Latina players faced the trials and tribulations of discrimination and segregation. For example, in the early 1940s during a tournament in Phoenix, Arizona, Helen Parga, formerly with the Santa Ana Queens, was denied service at a restaurant. She was not allowed to eat in the dining room with Anglo teammates. In addition, Latina players were not considered ‘ladies’ because ladies were not typically involved in athletics. Despite the hardships, these courageous women of baseball were sponsored and supported by various businesses and communities. Through recognition of their talents and athletic skills, they transcended both racial and gender boundaries. These women also paved the way for female players like Professor Santillan’s granddaughter, Rhiannon Mejia, who plays for the Cardinals of the Alhambra American Little League.

Essentially, softball leagues provided an opportunity for girls and women to grow and glow on the baseball field. Such leagues crossed neighborhood boundaries, and brought people from various areas together as they became friends and family members. Moreover, these family networks created a broader community, a community that proved to be an effective social and political network in the civil rights movement.

These historical and nostalgic exhibits include photos of players from: the Tomboys, Colton Mercury Senioritas, San Bernardino Raiderettes of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Tony’s Fiesta, the Questionettes, East Los Angeles Columbianas, and Las Aztecas. Visitors have marveled over the memorabilia and remarkable photographs, and you still have a chance to see them for yourself. The Latina Women’s Baseball History exhibits will be on display throughout the Summer of 2013, so please stop on by!
Women Breaking Barriers through Softball

By Sandra Uribe

Growing up in Pomona during the 1950s, Estella Elias Acosta enjoyed playing ball with local youth. They shared equipment and played on an improvised field, which her father Pedro kept up. She stated, “All the kids would gather and we’d play for hours with odd size bats and gloves and home-made bases. Not all of us had equipment so we would share and/or play bare-handed.” Although, the games were informal, the games became instrumental to the development of her skills as a ball player that she later used at Pomona Catholic High school. At PC, she played either third base or shortstop. She played schools in the Los Angeles and San Bernardino counties. In 1963, she attended Cal Poly Pomona, only two years after the admission of the first women at the institution. She earned recognition for her strives in softball. The certificate signified that she completed the season and “lettered” in softball. She, along the other team members, built the foundation for the establishment of official women’s sports teams at Cal Poly Pomona, which emerged in the 1970s. The love for the sport continues through three generation of the Elias family with lively conversation and active participation within the sport.

CELEBRATE MEXICAN AMERICAN BASEBALL HISTORY AT THE POMONA PUBLIC LIBRARY

The entire month of June will be devoted to a special library exhibit of local Mexican American teams and players from the greater Pomona Valley between the 1920s and 1960s. The exhibit will honor the communities of Pomona, Claremont, Chino, Upland, Cucamonga, Ontario, Rialto and Fontana. In addition, the Latino Baseball History Project at California State University, San Bernardino has announced that its 5th book will be on the Pomona Valley. The community is encouraged to share their vintage photos and stories for possible inclusion in our forthcoming book in late 2014. On June 8, 2013, the library hosted a program, which included book signings by former players and their families, a panel discussion, first-pitch ceremony and photo scanning for possible use in the book Mexican American Baseball in the Pomona Valley. The project is seeking all types of baseball and softball photos prior to the 1970s: youth, high school, college, military, baseball in Mexico, women, business or religious sponsored semiprofessional, and professional. All three books will be for sale: Mexican American Baseball in Los Angeles (2011), Mexican American Baseball in the Inland Empire (2012), and Mexican American Baseball in Orange County (2013). The 4th book, Mexican American Baseball on the Central Coast, will be released early 2014. The Pomona Library is located at 625 S. Garey Avenue, Pomona, California. For further information, please call (909) 620-2043, ext. 2701.
A Home Run in Orange County’s Barrios

Continued from Page 1

the swing of the bat, with the steal of a base, and with the grip of the glove, they made advances in civil rights to ensure that their sons and daughters could simply play.”

Many families remember that Sundays were a day for church, and for baseball. Baseball, Fernandez said that Baseball gave Mexican American communities the means “to socialize and to organize politically.”

One photo in the book shows an El Modena team with brothers Silvino and Ignacio Ramirez. Their father, Lorenzo Ramirez, was an umpire. Lorenzo, and his wife, Josefina, were among five Orange County families who sued to desegregate Mexican schools in Orange County in the landmark Mendez, et al. vs. Westminster School District, et al. court case of 1947.

“The diamond field where they played in El Modena divided the Lincoln Mexican school from the white Roosevelt School,” Fernandez said.

Pioneering Mexican American entrepreneurs, Veyna said, were active on a number of fronts – providing financial support for the sports teams, and backing for civil rights organizations such the League of United Latin American Citizens and for mutual aid societies of Mexican immigrants such as Sociedad Progresista Mexicana. They included such men as her father, Placido Veyna, who ran Pete’s Market in Anaheim, and Cruz Barrios, who ran a market in Santa Ana.

“Besides socializing, besides having a good time, these are the persons who fought for the civil rights of our community,” said Veyna, an Anaheim resident whose family settled there in 1916.

A number of the photos include the late Gualberto J. Valadez. He came to Placentia in 1939 to teach Spanish and physical education at the segregated La Jolla Junior High, and became an early leader of the Mexican American civil rights movement in Southern California during the 1940s. He was a gifted coach, from young boys who played baseball, to young women, like the La Jolla Kats – who played softball.

The Orange County book has nearly 30 photos of Mexican American women’s teams.

“We were keenly interested to see how gender and sports participation might change the traditional role of Mexican American women,” said Luevano, a Fullerton resident who is related by marriage to some of the players pictured in the book. “Our biggest scholarly contribution was documenting some of the women players and teams that nobody knew about before this book came out. These players broke gender barriers just by normalizing the fact that women could play sports. They demonstrated that women could compete both on and off the baseball diamond.”

One of the most remarkable photos came from Placentia. It depicts the Placentia Merchants at a 1938 game at White Sox Field in Los Angeles, which one old player remembered as being around Compton Avenue and 38th street.

It shows the players, but also young women from Placentia who traveled with them, and wore traditional Mexican dresses.

“These were the queens, or Las Reinas,” said Luevano. “What they were supposed to do was to walk around the diamond in their outfits before the game. And then during the game they were kind of like cheerleaders for them.”

Women helped raise funds so that teams could obtain uniforms, equipment and cover travel expenses.

“It kind of shows the traditional and passive role that women played during this period when you had this very physical and very male dominated world of sports,” she said.

But young women were also forming their own teams, with coaches like Valadez mentoring them.

“They all had this kind of DIY attitude,” she said. “Going out and finding an empty field, taking it over, cleaning it up, and they just started playing ball. They’d practice three or four nights a week until it got dark.”
Latino Baseball History Project Membership

Player - $50
Coach - $100
Manager - $250

If you are interested in becoming a member, please contact Iwona Contreras at 909-537-3447, e-mail icontrer@csusb.edu or visit our website.

Mark Your Calendars - the LBHP has a full schedule this season!

June 28 and Sept. 10, 2013. Latino baseball history and military service exhibit. Cal Poly Pomona library, 3rd floor exhibit cases.


Saturday, July 27th, 10:30 a.m. - 12:30 p.m. at the Orange Public Library Book signing event.