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The Latino Baseball History Project Salutes our Veterans!

The Latino Baseball History Project sponsored two gatherings saluting Mexican American veterans who played baseball in the military. The first was held in Pomona on Sept. 4, and the second in San Bernardino on Oct. 30. The events included an exhibit, *Mexican Americans in the Military, 1930s to 1970s: From the Battle Fields to the Baseball Fields*, composed of photographs and stories from the Latino Baseball History Project.

Here are a few of the great stories that were shared at those events:

Ernie and Manuel Abril’s nephew, Ray Rodrigues, spoke about their time in the service. They were twins and a general chose them to serve overseas during the Korean War. One of their assigned duties was to escort Marilyn Monroe as she visited the troops in Korea in 1954. A photograph of them with Monroe is in the forth Mexican American baseball book. Manuel had said he’s never felt a softer hand than Marilyn Monroe’s hand, and that she was a very kind lady.

Sam Leon spoke about his 1970 Air Force posting at the Azore Islands in Portugal. They were fielding a team, and he wasn’t sure he would make the cut. Then he saw the guys play! He was voted Most Valuable Player after their first tournament. He also told us about the surprise inspection where his commander, a full bird colonel, turned a blind eye to the bottle of scotch in Sam’s footlocker. The best part of the story was the stunned reaction of his captain and first sergeant!

Richard Mendez, whose photo is the cover image for Mexican American Baseball in Orange County, was stationed in Japan, and his unit put together a ball team. They were good enough to make it into the Regimental Finals, but were sent to the front before their game. They thought that the series was over for them—they couldn’t play from the front! But someone pulled some strings and put a plan together when...

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This fall, the Latino Baseball History Project worked hard to spread the word and preserve the legacy of our players.

Two exhibits are currently mounted: "Mexican Americans in the Military, 1930s to 1970s: From the Battle Fields to the Baseball Fields" (at the Pfau Library, California State University San Bernardino), and "Mexican American Women in Softball: A League of Their Own" at Chapman University’s Leatherby Libraries.

Mexican Americans in the Military, 1930s to 1970s: From the Battle Fields to the Baseball Fields tells the stories of our military veterans who both engaged the enemy and played ball through World War II, the Korean War and the Vietnam War.

The military found that creating baseball teams entertained the troops, increased unit cohesion and kept up morale. It became part of our war effort! Players who faced racial discrimination, even in the military, showed everyone their prowess at America’s favorite pastime. This exhibit was previously displayed from July through Sept. 10 at California State Polytechnic University, Pomona.

At a Sept. 5 CalPoly event, veterans and veterans’ family members spoke about baseball and the players who went to war for our country. Rosemarie Olmos spoke about her brother, Alfonso. He was offered a contract to play pitcher/second baseman for the San Francisco Giants at just about the same time that he was drafted by the military. He went to Vietnam, carrying the contract with him. His family sent him baseballs and he kept in practice! Two months before the end of his tour of duty, he was killed.

Poster used for women’s baseball display.

Mexican American Women in Softball: A League of Their Own tells the stories of Mexican American women in baseball and softball. Everything from women who sold burritos at the games to help defray team expenses, to women who married players on the field, to women who played the game themselves on teams such as the Santa Ana Queens, the North Hollywood Vixies, the Orange Lyonettes, the Tomboys, La Habra Aces, San Fernando Bluejays, the Fullerton-Anaheim McMahans, the Colton Mercury Senioritas, La Jolla Kats, Las Gallinas, San Bernardino Raiderettes of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Tony’s Fiesta, the Questionettes, the Cherokees, Las Debs de Corona, Casa Blanca Busy Bees, East Los Angeles Columbians, the Flirts, and Las Aztecas.

It tells the story of their determination in the face of discrimination; efforts to balance family roles and team responsibilities; and the judgment of society’s expectations of women against their love of the game. This exhibit debuted at California State Polytechnic University, Pomona last year in conjunction with an event honoring the history of Mexican American women in softball. It was displayed at California State University, San Bernardino during Women’s History Month. Now it...
has traveled to Chapman University. We hope to see it at California State University, Channel Islands later on.

With the publication of the LBHP’s fourth book this December, we will have published over 1,000 photographs detailing the history of Mexican American baseball in California. Richard Santillan and his co-authors have learned to work within the format to tell the stories that compose the legacy we want to pass on to future generations. The fourth book will be almost double the size of the previous books, and will incorporate some of the best photos that you have donated to the project in the last year.

The books in the series are: Mexican American Baseball in Los Angeles (2011); Mexican American Baseball in the Inland Empire (2012); Mexican American Baseball in Orange County (2013); and, coming out on December 9, 2013, Mexican American Baseball on the Central Coast.

The authors are working on two more books in the series: Mexican American Baseball in the Pomona Valley (materials are being collected now, planned publication for 2014); and Mexican American Baseball in the San Fernando Valley (planned for 2015). With every book we involve a larger community. We are keeping these memories alive!

The Latino Baseball History Project continues to hold events to celebrate the players and their families and to educate the public about the contributions of Mexican Americans, a history that has been sadly neglected in the past. In the last few months these events have included: a museum exhibition and day long symposium on Mexican American Baseball at the Plaza de la Raza in Los Angeles; a tribute to our military veterans at California State Polytechnic University, Pomona; a celebration of our military veterans at California State University, San Bernardino; and numerous promotional book signings throughout Southern California.

LATINO BASEBALL HISTORY PROJECT ANNOUNCES RELEASE OF 4TH BOOK: MEXICAN AMERICAN BASEBALL IN THE CENTRAL COAST (DECEMBER 9, 2013)

Mexican Americans have played baseball in the United States for over 140 years. The sport was an important part of the overall Mexican experience in the country. This book examines the love of the game by Mexican Americans in the Central Coast of California, specifically Ventura and Santa Barbara counties. Mexicans lived in California prior to statehood. Both Spanish and Mexican cultural influences are profoundly evident throughout these two counties, including geographical destinations, architecture, city and street names, missions, foods, language, traditional holidays, and customs celebrated by the people. Indeed, Ventura and Santa Barbara are Spanish words.

The Mexican people of Ventura and Santa Barbara counties, and San Luis Obispo can be found in various communities, including Oxnard, Fillmore, Ojai, Santa Paula, Camarillo, Piru, Ventura, Carpinteria, Santa Barbara, Goleta, Santa Maria, Guadalupe, Lompoc, San Inez and Pismo Beach. Like so many Mexican communities at the turn of the 20th century, these neighborhoods established an elaborate infrastructure that included religious groups, business associations, mutual aid societies, civil and political rights organizations, fine arts, Spanish-language newspapers, legal aid, labor unions and sports clubs.

Mexican Americans enjoyed baseball, softball, boxing, football, soccer and basketball. Yet, baseball and later softball, stood head and shoulders above the other sports. Baseball was played in Mexico by the late 1800s, and so many Mexicans continued their love for the game when they settled throughout the United States. In Ventura and Santa Barbara counties, players and their families helped create the economic infrastructure and prosperity that is evident in the Central Coast today, whether it was laboring in the fields, factories, parking houses, or on the railroads. For women, softball served as a social counterbalance to strict cultural roles defined in their time. Many former players, men and women, devoted their lives to the unrelenting struggle for social, political, cultural, and gender equality, while others dedicated themselves to youth sports. Sunday was a special day for Mexican American communities, with religious services in the morning and baseball in the afternoon. This book relives those glorious days when Mexican foods were enjoyed and the Spanish language was heard at ballparks throughout the Central Coast.
On Sept. 4, 2013 a ceremony was held at Cal Poly Pomona honoring Mexican Americans who played military baseball and softball between the 1930s and 1970s. Nearly 150 players and/or family members and friends attended the event. The program was divided into four parts: a luncheon; the distribution of special certificates to each of the participants; a panel discussion of players sharing their incredible stories; and finally, a first pitch ceremony. This wonderful event was sponsored by the Latino Baseball History Project at Cal State San Bernardino; the Ethnic and Women’s Studies Department, the Cesar Chavez Center, and the Veterans Office at Cal Poly Pomona.

The Cal Poly library also hosted a three-month-long exhibit, “Mexican Americans in the Military, 1930s to 1970s: From the Battle Fields to the Baseball Fields,” with vintage photos of players wearing their baseball and military uniforms along with sports memorabilia from this time period. Several Mexican Americans played baseball during World War II, Korea, and Vietnam while serving in combat. They risked their lives for their country and at the same time provided their fellow service people a brief escape from the horrors of war.

This exhibit was on view at the John M. Pfau Library at CSUSB from October to December 2013. The Latino Baseball History Project also hosted a luncheon for players and their families on the CSUSB campus on Oct. 4. Once again, players shared extraordinary and sometimes funny stories about playing baseball in the military.

Mainstream baseball history has neglected the Mexican Americans, with almost no mention of their valuable contributions while in the military, especially during war time. These exhibits, the first of their kind, take the initial step to remembering, saluting, and honoring those who played the game they loved so much while placing their lives in danger for all of us.

The Latino Baseball History Project salutes the following military/baseball heroes: Ernie and Manuel Abril (Colton); Art Gallego Amarillas (Santa Maria); Joe Andrade (Calexico); Eddie Aros (Tucson); Remi, Rudy, and Art Alvarez (South Los Angeles); Cuno Barragan (Sacramento); Jesse Briones (Chino); David Paul Camacho (Santa Ana); Ralph Castaneda Jr. (Scottsbluff, Nebraska); Marcos Castillo (San Fernando); Rudy Castro (Tucson); Ernie Cervantes Jr. (Sacramento); Juanita Conchola (Davenport, Iowa); Elias De La Rosa (East Los Angeles); Ray Delgadillo (Corona); Tommie Encinas (Pomona); Joe Garcia (San Fernando Valley); Manuel, Milo, and Sergio Hernandez (Los Angeles); John Hernandez (Irwindale); Louis Jimenez (Modesto); Bob and Art Lagunas (Pico Rivera); Margaret Villanueva Lambert (Lincoln, Nebraska); Sam Leon (Upland); Frank Layvas (Pomona); Ramon Martinez (Copeland, Kansas); Rudy Salvador Martinez (Lompoc); Richard Mendez (Santa Ana); Frank Mendoza (Tucson); Albert Moreno (Irwindale); Buddy Munoz (Pomona); Alfonso Olmos (East Los Angeles); Gabe Pena (East Los Angeles); Frank Prieto (Palm Springs); Ben Reyes (Guadalupe); Eugene Sam Sandoval (Riverbank); Ray Salazar (Albuquerque); Ray Sevilla (Claremont); Charlie Sierra (East Los Angeles); Fidel Soliz (El Monte); Art Tapia Jr. (Irwindale); Henry Toledo (Azusa); Carlos and Luis Uribe (Corona); and Marcelino Ybarra (Fillmore).
they got back and the series went on. They lost the final game, but it wasn’t Ray’s fault. His team was a couple runs down when he took the pitcher’s mound and, although his pitching held the other team, he could not make up the difference.

Rod Martinez spoke about his father, who turned down a professional ball contract in 1939, came to California, and joined the Army Air Corps. He was shipped out to England and founded a team with the 434th Fighter Squadron. In 1945 that team won the Division Championship of the entire wing of fighter squadrons stationed there, thousands and thousands of men. A museum at the base in Wattisham, where he was stationed, has asked for a copy of the LBHP certificate and photographs to include in the museum in honor of Rod’s father.

Carlos Uribe and his brother Luis played military baseball in the early 1950s. Carlos was scouted by the Cleveland Indians in 1949 right out of high school, but an injury kept him from playing for a few years. In 1952 he went to spring training and when he went home to pack to report to the Pioneer Leagues he found a letter waiting for him from Uncle Sam! They struck the armistice while Carlos was stationed in Seoul. The military troops there decided to form a league. It was 1953, the first time that many Koreans had seen anyone playing baseball. Someone later told him that those military games were the start of baseball as a national obsession in Korea.

Bob Lagunas spoke about baseball, the military, and his brother Art, who was an outstanding ball player. Bob could tell us that Art was good, because Art was not there! Bob served in Panama during the missile crisis and was issued a parachute. They went up in a cargo plane, it was hot, and they don’t tell you where you’re going they just tell you:

“When you see the red light, stand up.
When you see the yellow light, hook on.
When you see the green light, good-bye!”

So Bob wrote his brother and asked him what it was like to really make a jump. Art told him that it was fun, “...like sliding into second base.” Bob asked if it didn’t hurt when you fall down, and his brother said, “Depends on how you land!”

Buddy Munoz was drafted into the service and sent to Germany for two years, never got to finish a season because the military kept moving him around.

At Cal Poly Pomona, Ruben Alvarez spoke about his Army service. He was attached to his division’s baseball team. They toured the country, playing other military teams. Ruben was from California and it was the first time he had visited the south. He was shocked by the racism. In some towns it was not safe for him to eat in a restaurant with his white teammates. All the players of color would eat on the bus while the white teammates went into the restaurant. When he came back he attended Chapman on a baseball scholarship and he was a school principal when he retired. He still coaches whenever he gets the chance.

Rudy Martinez served in the Marine Corps during the Korean War. In 1956 he played baseball on a team making a goodwill tour of Asia and the South Pacific. The team would leave equipment behind as a gift to the cities that hosted them, planting the seeds of the love of baseball in those countries. They won an exhibition game at the Melbourne Olympics in front of 109,000 spectators.
“NEIGHBORHOODS OF BASEBALL” SYMPOSIUM A HIT
by Terry Cannon

On a clear and warm day, Saturday, June 22, 2013, at Plaza de la Raza in Los Angeles, the Baseball Reliquary, the Latino Baseball History Project, and Plaza de la Raza presented an all-day symposium entitled “The Neighborhoods of Baseball.” Made possible with support from Cal Humanities (www.calhum.org), the symposium consisted of three panel discussions and a wrap up roundtable discussion that documented and interpreted the role amateur and semi-professional baseball played in the history and development of the Mexican American, African American and Japanese American communities in Southern California, as well as in defining their identity in the process of Americanization. Participants included a variety of scholars, historians, and former players. The symposium was organized by Terry Cannon executive director of the Baseball Reliquary, Tomas Regalado, professor of history, California State University, Stanislaus, and a longtime adviser to the Latino Baseball History Project.

The festivities began promptly at 9 a.m. in the Margo Albert Theater with welcoming remarks by Cesar Caballero, dean/university librarian, the John M. Pfau Library at CSUSB, followed by a keynote address delivered by Dr. Samuel O. Regalado, professor of history, California State University, Stanislaus, and a longtime adviser to the Latino Baseball History Project.

Following Dr. Regalado’s speech, the first panel, titled “Community & Identity Building,” convened. Moderated by Dr. Jorge Iber, professor of history, Texas Tech University, this discussion provided a cross-cultural perspective of how the Mexican American, African American and Japanese American communities in Southern California were impacted by baseball; how their experiences differed and paralleled each other in the development of their communities and identities; how they engaged and interacted with each other through the lens of community baseball; and how baseball was a factor in defining identity (including gender issues and attitudes) and the process of Americanization. Panelists included Daryl Grigsby, Kerry Yo Nakagawa, Dr. Richard Santillan, Bill Staples Jr. and Sandra Uribe.

The second panel, moderated by Dr. Regalado, was titled “The Players’ Perspective,” and allowed former players to share their experiences of playing baseball in the community as well as professional environments. Panelists included Al Padilla, Armando Perez, Bobby Umemoto and Charlie Sierra.

The third panel followed a catered luncheon in the Plaza de la Raza courtyard. “Labor Relations” was a lively discussion on the impact of community baseball on labor practices was skillfully moderated by Mark Ocegueda. Panelists included Daryl Grigsby, Bob Lagunas, Kerry Yo Nakagawa and Armando Perez.

The fourth and final discussion wrapped up the symposium and looked at “Future Possibilities for Research.” Moderated by Dr. Richard Santillan, this discussion featured an informative brainstorming/networking session on the future directions of research related to community baseball in Southern California, particularly in terms of books, exhibitions, and scholarly projects. Panelists included Cesar Caballero, Christopher Docter, Alice R. Gomez, Daryl Grigsby, Dr. Jorge Iber, Susan Luevano, Kerry Yo Nakagawa, Mark Ocegueda, Dr. Samuel O. Regalado, Bill Staples Jr. and Sandra Uribe.

The event concluded with a book signing featuring many of the authors and historians who were present. The entire symposium was videotaped for archival purposes by Lucas Benitez, and will make an important contribution to the Latino Baseball History Project’s ongoing documentation of community baseball in Southern California.

If you would like to receive an email copy of the four-page program booklet for “The Neighborhoods of Baseball” symposium, including biographical profiles of the moderators and panelists, please email Terry Cannon, executive director of the Baseball Reliquary, at terymar@earthlink.net.
The Latino Baseball History Project’s 5th book, Mexican American Baseball in the Pomona Valley, will be published next fall, in 2014. This book pays homage to the wonderful teams and players from Azusa, La Verne, Claremont, Pomona, Chino, Cucamonga, Ontario and Upland.

The massive growth of agriculture, railroads and packing houses throughout this region in the early part of the 20th century drove the need for cheap labor. Simultaneously, the Mexican Revolution forced hundreds of thousands of refugees to settle in all parts of the United States including the Pomona Valley. The already existing Mexican American communities (dating back to 1850 before California became a state) and these new barrios established an array of community-based organizations in order to survive in a new and strange land. Baseball teams, and later, softball teams, were common among all these neighborhoods and the game played a critical role in advancing civil and political rights, labor reform, gender equality, educational integration, and cultural legitimacy.

The remarkable photos that accompany the text revive the often-overlooked history of Mexican American baseball in the Pomona Valley. The book’s seven chapters are: 1) Claremont, Pomona, Azusa and La Verne; 2) Cucamonga, Chino, Ontario and Upland; 3) Military baseball; 4) Women’s softball; 5) The Golden State; 6) Coast to Coast; and 7) Field of Dreams.

LBHP is still seeking photos from the following communities: Rialto, Fontana and Montclair.

The authors are Richard A. Santillan, professor emeritus of Ethnic and Women’s Studies at California State Polytechnic University, Pomona; Mark Ocegueda, Ph.D candidate at UCI; Alfonso Ledesma, Cucamonga Public Historian; Sandra Uribe, professor, Westwood College, Torrance; and Alejo F. Vasquez, Cucamonga Public Historian.
Mark Your Calendars - the LBHP has a full schedule this season!

Jan 19 Richard & Teresa Santillan House book signing
2712 W. Ross Ave., Alhambra, CA. 91803

Sunday, Feb. 16 from Noon-5 p.m.
San Fernando Museum of Art and History
519 S. Brand Blvd, San Fernando, CA 91340
Phone:(818) 838-6360

Saturday, March 1 from Noon-5 p.m.
Santa Maria Library
421 S. McClelland, Santa Maria, CA 93454
Contact person: Eddie Navarro (805)720-3581

Thursday, April 10 6:30 p.m.
Montebello Historical Society General Meeting Senior Citizen Center
115 S. Taylor Avenue Montebello, California 90640
Thursday, April 10 6:30 p.m.
Contact person: James Aguirre (626)-665-6452