Dean Cesar Caballero, Dean of the John M. Pfau Library at California State University, San Bernardino (CSUSB), hit a homerun that takes the Latino Baseball History Project (LBHP) on a national run. Latinos and Baseball: In the Barrios & the Big Leagues, a multi-year project, was ceremoniously pitched on Feb. 18 - 19, 2016, at the Pfau Library, in the barrio (community) of West San Bernardino, and in the Santos Manuel Student Union Event Center.

Dean Caballero expressed the significance of the partnership between the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History, the Smithsonian Latino Center and the John M. Pfau Library. “Let me start by saying that we are really excited to have this partnership with the Latino Center at the National Museum for American History, which is part of the Smithsonian Institute group of museums in Washington, D.C.” Essentially, this partnership promotes the LBHP from a local, regional, and southwestern project to a national level. This is “…quite important to us because when we started this project, obviously, we didn’t think we would even… reach other states so soon. We learned this project was in demand in other parts of the U.S.”

Dean Caballero explained the reasons for having this event on the CSUSB campus. “The whole purpose of having the event on campus is to launch the initiative that will lead to a collection that would be deposited at the national level at the Smithsonian, and those artifacts, images, and oral histories will be used to put together a traveling exhibit for the national exhibition [that] would travel throughout the U.S.” Also, included in the LBHP collection are several published books, with more publications expected.

The Smithsonian’s national museum project directors, project coordinators and its curators have told us “…that our model is a very unique and viable model in terms of collecting and documenting Latino community history.” Hence, Margaret Salazar-Porzio, a curator for the National Museum of American History, asked us if we could put together a tool-kit for other communities to replicate our model.

Dean Caballero is excited and proud that this LBHP collaboration is established as a “…community history documentation and literacy outreach event.” Further, the Latinos and Baseball: In the Barrios & the Big Leagues is a national run that can facilitate a successful community outreach platform for enthusiasts across the country.
On February 19, 2016, I drove to San Bernardino to attend what turned out to be a very special project and event. This past summer I attended an advisory board meeting of the Latino Baseball History Project, at Cal State San Bernardino. As I arrived at the John M. Pfau Library, I took a few minutes to rehash my last visit to the building.

At that time, we were talking about the possibility of San Diego having a baseball book like many other cities. I returned this time as a member of that advisory board.

I had recently completed a chapter for San Diego in a book that will be published in August. I thought that on this trip I would have the opportunity to listen to the trials and tribulations that other participants had experienced obtaining enough pictures in order to qualify for a book in the series.

When I reached the 4th floor where the event was being held, I saw beautiful banners that characterized the various books, all of which had pictures from the stories in each book. As you look at the pictures, you realize that they represent baseball and are a mini-documentary on the social and cultural events that took place at that particular time in history. After the meet and greet, I started reviewing some of the materials that were on display.

A particular book with Greeley, Colorado on the cover caught my eye; I have a friend that was born and raised in Greeley. I picked up the book looking for something I could tease her about. Instead, I found an amazing resource about baseball in the Rocky Mountain area. One of the authors, a woman named Jody Lopez, started sharing information about the book; she had my undivided attention.

Jody is married to Gabriel, and together they have produced these wonderful resource books. This project, which started as a study in genealogy, has resulted in an oral history project on baseball in a region that does not always come to mind when thinking of Mexican Americans. Gabriel soon came over and was generous enough to share what I refer to as a teaching guide, a sample of what is available to learn/teach about baseball in the Rockies.

As early as World War I, companies in the area had recruited workers from Mexico to work in the beet fields. Their big concern was that when the harvesting was done, the workers and their money would disappear. In an effort to keep the workers in the area, the beet farming company formed colonias where workers could live for a minimum amount of money. The following paragraph is taken from one of the books Gabriel and Jody Lopez wrote.

Work in the beet fields was arduous, and men and boys of ‘las colonias’ found recreation and relief from beet work in baseball. Local teams were soon formed, and teams traveled to neighboring towns and ‘colonias’ to play. The teams got together to form an organization that later became the Rocky Mountain Leagues of the National Semi-Pro Baseball Congress. On Sundays, many Spanish/Mexican players and their families enthusiastically stepped up to the plate and became a part of America’s ‘national pastime.’ The team’s reputation for consistently high caliber players and great ballgames brought them to the attention of envious players from outside ‘las colonias.’

Today, we know that in addition to the recreational aspect of the game, community activism sprung from those gathering at the playing field. Civil issues were discussed, family friendships were established, and a certain amount of political activities took place.

Cesar Caballero, Dean of the John M. Pfau Library, welcomed the group. Mr. Caballero has been very supportive of the Latino Baseball History project, which is part of the Special Collections and which has grown under his leadership. Juan Delgado, the Provost, spoke about how the baseball field was where shared values and shared experiences took place.

After the welcome speeches, two Latinos from the Smithsonian spoke. Eduardo Diaz is
Director of the Latino project for the Smithsonian and Steve Velazquez is a curator for the Smith-sonian. Mr. Diaz, a former San Diego State College student and a Mechista, went to the Smith-sonian from New Mexico where he was Executive Director of the National Hispanic Cultural Center. Steve Velasquez, is the Associate Curator, Division of Home and Community. They will need the support and help of all of us in obtaining the needed pictures and artifacts to establish the Smithsonian display.

Steve Velazquez is best known for his work on the Bracero Oral History Project which includes over 3000 stories and artifacts. The Bracero Program ran from 1942-1964. Both men are well respected and have committed to having an exhibit for the Latino baseball players. At dinner that evening I learned that they have only been able to collect one short-handled hoe — el cortito. "Until it was banned in California in 1975, the short hoe was responsible for the excruciating pain and permanent disfigurement of hundreds of thousands farm workers." I am sure that sitting in someone’s garage dust is a short hoe that would benefit the Smithsonian and the preservation of the history of the farm worker.

The stories behind the story of Mexican-American baseball A panel discussion followed the welcome speeches. The three panel members were Dr. Richard Santillan, Dr. Jose Alamillo, and Ana Bermudez. Ana Bermudez is the curator at the Museum Ventura County. She has been instrumental in bringing Mexican and Latino art to the Museum. She is also one of the authors of Mexican-American Baseball in the Central Coast. Ana, like myself, did not start out as a baseball fan but has had a transformation since starting her work on researching baseball.

Dr. Jose Alamillo is a Professor of Chicano Studies at California State University at Camarillo, California and author of Making Lemonade out of Lemons. His writing and preservation of the history of Chicanos is well known and respected in the academic world.

Dr. Richard Santillan is an professor emiterus at Cal Poly Pomona. He is the co-author of every book that has been written about Mexican American baseball through the project housed at California State University at San Bernardino. Dr. Santillan not only co-author's the books, but is the contact person for those of us working on adding to the collection. So I would give him the title of Padrino of the Mexican American baseball project.

As he spoke, he recognized both the tremendous support from Cesar Caballero, Dean of the Pfau Library, as well as Provost Juan Delgado. I have met Cesar Caballero on two occasions and have seen how much he supports this project. Although Richard’s wife was not on the panel, Teresa Santillan has been his right-hand person for all of Richard’s baseball books. Teresa is currently working on a chapter about baseball in the Catholic Schools.

The three panel members shared stories they had heard as they worked on the books. One engrossing story was about a Mexican team in Santa Paula called the Aztecs. Interesting enough, they had an Anglo player named Goul Taylor who moved from his team to play for the Aztecs. The reason for the change: the Aztecs were a winning team.

Another engaging story involved a Los Angeles team sponsored by the El Paso Shoe Store whose owner was from El Paso. The team was so good they were considered semi-pro. The players had El Paso Shoe Store on their shirts. As every Latino knows, we have a tendency to use nicknames or add on to peoples’ given names. This team was soon called “Los Zapateros.” When the team was down, it was not unusual to hear “qué se pongan las botas” (put your boots on!) coming from the stands.

Players competed all over Southern California and Mexico. In the case of Chile Gomez, who played on both sides of the border, the story is that he was once prevented from attending a game by immigration officers.

On Saturday morning a breakfast presentation was at the Mitla Café and a walking tour was scheduled. The Mitla Café is located on Mt. Vernon Avenue in San Bernardino. The presenter
was a young, bright Chicano named Mark Ocegueda, a Ph.D. Candidate in History at the University of California, Irvine. This is the second time I have met Mark and each time I am immensely impressed with his knowledge and with the idea that young people like him will be leading the preservation of history.

Mark told us about the history of the Mitla Café. The Mitla Café’s Mt. Vernon Route 66 had a tremendous effect on the success of the Mexican merchants located on Mt. Vernon. The explosion of the automobile further contributed to their success. In the 1930s and 1940s, the merchants sponsored baseball teams and formed a Mexican Chamber of Commerce. Success was being experienced by the Mexican American Community, not only in business but also in their recreational activities.

One of the merchants was Juan Enciso, whose granddaughter was present at the meeting. Juan Enciso owned La Esperanza Market and was very well respected in the community. In 1931 he was arrested in Mexico and was charged with conspiracy against the Mexican Federal Government. The Cristero War in Mexico separated the Catholic church and the Mexican Government. One of the after effects was that anyone with ties to the Catholic Church was viewed with great suspicion.

Juan had very close ties to the church on both sides of the border and was especially close to a priest in San Bernardino. The Merchant community in San Bernardino led a protest at the Mexican Consul in San Bernardino which was being guarded by the San Bernardino police. At one point the police went to a community gathering busting everything and everyone.

Mark believes there was as many as forty-five Mexican merchants flourishing in San Bernardino in its heyday. Like Logan Heights in San Diego, there was a movie theater, restaurants, beauty shops, all part of the makeup of the Mexican community. This progressive community was destroyed when the 215 freeway was built and off-ramps to the Mexican-American community were not included. In San Diego, the freeway dissected the community and changed Logan Heights forever.

In 1943, the Mitla Café was the meeting place for strategies and organizing. That was the year Mike Valle and his friend Bobby decided to ride their bikes to the Perris Hill recreational plunge and enjoy a nice swim in the pool. Mike Valle was asked if he was Mexican and when he responded in the affirmative, he was denied entrance. The Mexican-American kids from Logan Heights were similarly denied access to the plunge at Mission Beach. In both cities Mexican American and African-Americans were allowed to use the pools the day before it was to be cleaned. Both cities had excuses such as hygiene and fearful mixing of the races to justify their policies.

When Mike went home and told his father about this incident, his father called for a community meeting at Guadalupe Church. With the support of the Mexican-American Defense Fund, a letter was drafted to Mayor Seccombe asking that he meet with the group. The Mayor failed to attend the second meeting. In order to strengthen their case, they sent a group of kids accompanied by Father Nunez, the parish priest, to the plunge. A special effort was made to assure the kids were dressed especially well that day. Once again the kids were denied entrance to the plunge.

Ignacio Lopez, a newspaper editor from Pomona, led the group in filling a lawsuit. The lawyer for the Mexican-American community was David C. Marcus. The law suit was known as Lopez vs Seccombe and argued that under the fifth and fourteenth amendments, it was illegal to deny access to recreational facilities. This case was won by the community.

A few years later, this case would be cited in...
the proceeds of Mendez vs Westminster which banned segregated school in California. Please note this case banned segregated schools, but did not terminate de facto segregation in California. Once again, if you are interested in history or want to know more about discrimination in California, I recommend you read Mark Ocegueda’s work or research on any of these court cases.

Another guest spoke about the discrimination their families endured in San Bernardino. Judith Valles, a former Mayor of San Bernardino, described the discrimination that occurred when her brother was denied burial at San Bernardino’s Mountain View Cemetery. While in the service Mike Valles died in an accident at a lagoon. His body was flown back to San Bernardino where his father, Juvenal Valles, went to the cemetery to make burial arrangements.

Mr. Valles was light-skinned and was not questioned when he arranged for his son’s burial. The day before the funeral, both parents went to the cemetery. Mrs. Valles was of darker skin and it was very obvious that she was Mexican-American. It was then the family was told their son could not be buried at Mountain View Cemetery.

For the next two weeks Mrs. Valles would have to endure the pain and sorrow of seeing her son’s coffin in the middle of their living room. The U.S. Army Corp offered to have him buried at Arlington Cemetery, but the family wanted their son near his home. Under pressure from the U.S. Government, Mountain View Cemetery finally relented and allowed Mike to be buried there.

As Mayor, Ms. Valles led the charge to establish freeway off-ramps to the west side of San Bernardino. These ramps facilitate entrance to the Mexican-American community.

Breakfast was over and we were told to wait a few minutes for a special guest. Our special guest was indeed very special and none other than World Series Champion Fernando Valenzuela. You then saw adults from twenty to eighty become teenage groupies.

When Fernando was playing for the Dodgers, the term “Fernandomania,” was coined to describe the reaction when Fernando came on the field. That morning you saw the senior citizen version of Fernandomania. We took pictures, asked questions and exchanged comments. He was very patient with us and smiled through many photo shots.

Fernando Valenzuela played for the Los Angeles Dodgers from 1980 to 1990. He was born in Mexico and was not quite twenty years old when he came to Los Angeles to play for the Dodgers. He led the Dodgers to the World Series and is the only player in major league history to win both Rookie of the Year and the Cy Young Award in the same season. After leaving the Dodgers, he played with the San Diego Padres for a year before moving to the St. Louis Cardinals. In 2015, Fernando became a U.S. citizen. It is a hope that his becoming a citizen will encourage others to become citizens. Today, he is the commentator for the Spanish broadcast of the Dodger games.

Our next activity was a short walking tour of the Mt. Vernon area. Part of this tour was the Santa Fe Train Station. This station and the trains that went in and out of there were crucial in the move west. Many Mexican-American were employed at the train station and contributed to the well-being of the community. However, the Santa Fe Museum does not reflect their contributions.

Our walking tour included a hot dog/hamburger stand located directly across from The Mitla Café. At one time the owner of that little stand was Glen Bell, founder of Taco Bell. As the story goes, Mr. Bell started eating at the Mitla and asking about the preparation of the food. He was soon invited into the kitchen to see how the food was made. He took what he learned and opened his own Mexican restaurant which he eventually named Taco Bell. Today Taco bell is owned by Pepsi Cola.

Unfortunately, because of a prior commitment I was only able to stay for a short period of time in the afternoon. A panel discussion was taking place about the contributions Mexicans and Mexican-Americans made to baseball.

Baseball is said to be the American pastime. I contend that baseball/beisbol is a Mexican-American pastime. This game has been played on both sides of the border for many years. Baseball/beisbol is enjoyed and serves to unite people on both sides of the border.

I had the privilege of attending the Latinos in Baseball in the Barrios and the Big Leagues first collecting activity which was sponsored by the Latino Baseball History Project at the John M. Pfau Library and Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of American History in collaboration with the Smithsonian Latino Center. The activities were held at California State University, San Bernardino.

The purpose of the collecting initiative is gather photographs, artifacts, and memorabilia that tell the narrative of the historic role that baseball/softball have played as a social and cultural influence within Latino communities across the United States.

The activities began on Friday, Feb. 19, at 1:30 p.m. with presentations by the CSUSB Provost Juan Delgado and President Tomás D. Morales. What was so impressive about their presentations was the unwavering support that the university has given to the Latino Baseball History Project through the John M. Pfau Library, headed by Dean César Caballero, and to Richard A. Santillán, principal investigator and author of the Mexican American Baseball series, published by Arcadia Publishing.

The presentations continued with Eduardo Díaz, director of Smithsonian Latino Center discussing the importance of the collecting activities to the overall narrative of Latino immigration, settlement, and social/cultural development in the United States. Steve Velasquez, curator at the National Museum of American History discussed the logistics of the collecting endeavors, which will be accomplished by co-hosting events in Latino communities across the United States in 2016. It is anticipated that the collecting activities will build interest in the Latino sports history, expand the NMAH archives, as well as the archives of local partnering organizations and ultimately bring collections to the national stage in the form of permanent and travelling exhibitions.

The program continued with various co-authors of the Arcadia Publishing’s series: Mexican American Baseball, sharing their experiences of gathering photographs, and oral histories that have been published or will be published in the near future. This writer shared his vision for telling the history of baseball and softball in Mexican-American communities across the Midwestern region.

The closing activities for the day involved a tour of the baseball exhibits in the John M. Pfau Library and a hosted dinner at El Torito Mexican Restaurant in San Bernardino. Saturday, Feb. 20, 2016, activities started with a no host breakfast meeting at the renowned Mita Café in San Bernardininos’ famed Old Route 66 strip. The café is known for its continual sponsorship of Mexican immigrant and Mexican-American baseball and softball teams in the barrios of San Bernardino.

Doctoral candidate in history at University of California, Irvine, Mark Qcegueda, gave an excellent presentation about the presence, growth, and development of the Mexican American community in San Bernardino. He introduced family members of the original Mexican immigrants that settled in the city. The family members shared their insights into the strategies used by their forefathers to overcome the discrimination and segregation experienced by the early Mexican settlers.

A highlight of the presentation was the visit by Fernando Valenzuela who is a former Major League Baseball pitcher. During a 17-year baseball career, he achieved his greatest success with the Los Angeles Dodgers from 1980–1990, and went on to pitch for five more Major League teams. He gave a brief presentation in English and Spanish after which he graciously signed autographs and took pictures with the breakfast participants. What a wonderful experience of “Fernandomania!”

The activities of the day continued with a walking tour of historical landmarks that are important to the Mexican and Mexican-American narrative of San Bernardino. The tour ended at the San Bernardino History and Railroad Museum, where a curator explained the relationship of the area with the Mexican and other immigrant communities.

After a period of relaxation, the collecting activities continued at the CSUSB Santos Manuel Student Union Events Center with a panel presentation of veteran baseball players and book signing. Former players and their family members recounted stories and
LA Plaza de Cultura y Artes will present an original exhibition celebrating baseball as a crucial part of Mexican-American life in Los Angeles from the early 20th century to the present day. Through historic photographs, scrapbooks, oral histories, paintings, ephemera, and sports memorabilia, Peloteros in Paradise highlights legendary teams and players while examining the impact of baseball on the Mexican-American community and the ways in which Mexican-Americans have transformed the sport both as active participants and dedicated fans.

The exhibition begins by telling the story of early Mexican-American baseball teams in Los Angeles. These men’s and women’s ball clubs, affiliated with local high schools, colleges, churches, and businesses, served as important sites where immigrants gathered to socialize and celebrate; gain access to education and careers; and define an emergent Mexican-American identity. The robust Mexican-American baseball scene gave rise to wildly popular teams such as the Carmelita Chorizeros, known as “The New York Yankees of East Los Angeles.” More importantly, as Francisco E. Balderrama and Richard A. Santillan write, baseball was “directly linked to the political and civil rights activities of the Mexican-American community as it demanded equal sports participation in both educational and public facilities.” Later, Mexican-Americans drew upon these experiences as they organized for fair labor standards and demanded full social equality.

*Peloteros in Paradise* then turns to the era of Los Angeles baseball that began with the arrival of the Dodgers in 1958. The city’s forced displacement of the Mexican-American community of Chávez Ravine and later use of the land for Dodger Stadium caused great controversy. In the words of Eric Avila, the “long-term reverberations of the evictions left a residue of bitterness among many local Mexican-Americans, who remember a much longer history of displacements and dispossession in California.”

Eventually, the Dodgers pioneered outreach efforts among Mexican-Americans in Los Angeles. Through Spanish-language broadcasting and marketing, the team made overtures to—and eventually gained—a significant Mexican-American fan base. The 1981 rookie season of superstar Mexican pitcher Fernando Valenzuela—called by legendary announcer, Jaime Jarrín—incited “Fernandomania” city-wide, and cemented the relationship between many Mexican-Americans and the Dodgers.

LA Plaza worked closely with the Latino Baseball History Project to research, select, and present historic photographs, jerseys, baseball equipment, and memorabilia, which help illustrate the story of Mexican-American baseball in Los Angeles.

*Plaza de Cultura y Artes:*
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 events that occurred during the heydays of the Mexican American Leagues. The activities concluded with an informal reunion and collection of memorabilia donations by former players and their families. Richard Santillan and co-authors of the Arcadia Publications series: Mexican American Baseball conducted a book signing. All participants were invited to the 50-year anniversary celebration of the university held in the university’s Coussoulis Arena.
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AUG. 22, 2016

AUG. 1, 2016