

Mexican heritage deeply ingrained in the story of Palm Springs

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Vera Prieto Wall remembers how tall and strong Lawrence Crossley was. Even though she was just a girl, his striking green eyes were compelling. She smiles when she recalls that Frank Bogert was pretty darn handsome too, with his tousled dark hair and broad shoulders, a dashing cowboy. Vera knew both men very well. Her father met Crossley, whom he called Lorenzo in the Spanish translation, and Frank, whom he called Pancho according to the Spanish nickname, at the El Mirador Hotel in Palm Springs where the three worked in 1929, the year of the stock market crash and start of the Great Depression.

Crossley was busy designing and building the golf course for the hotel. Bogert was in public relations, taking pictures and sending them off to the wire services with fabulous stories meant to entice tourists. Vera's father, Tony Prieto, was assigned to the garage and also worked in the hotel where he met many famous guests, including Albert Einstein. But more importantly to Vera, he met Crossley and Bogert. The three young men, working in very different capacities for the same hotel in the remote desert town, became fast friends.

Antonio Prieto, Sr., Vera's grandfather, came to Palm Springs with his brother, in 1924 for the building boom. They worked paving Palm Canyon Drive, building the many rock walls around town, and then at Builder's Supply on Sunny Dunes. Tony, Vera's father also worked there unloading trucks before school in the morning.

Crossley had come from New Orleans in search of work, and was an accomplished musician, having played with the incomparable Louis Armstrong.

Bogert rode into town with a string of sixty horses from Wrightwood looking to set up a stable and give rides to dudes during the winter tourist season.

Vera recalls that her father and Bog-



The Marmolejo family with Frank Bogert during "Mexican Night" at the Chi Chi circa 1940s.

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ert often spoke in Spanish, as did many of the Cahuilla, and that Crossley tried his best to keep up with the conversation and the quick succession of jokes, "chistes" for which Frank was well-known in any language. Vera says the three men remained friends for as long as each lived.

Her father Tony and his new wife Ramona worked on a small ranch at what is now the corner of Racquet Club Road and Indian Canyon. The owner, Mrs. Edna Pomeroy of Laguna Beach, also owned the Mira Monte Apartments. Tony and Ramona spent their first summer as a couple there in 1930. They worked and saved and built a home on Section 14, where Vera was born.

Vera is careful to point out that her house had a wooden floor, not dirt. It had two bedrooms, a small kitchen, one bathroom and a dining room. Her father always drove a nice car and had good employment. She and her brother Ben have happy memories of the community surrounding their home. There were many families there, like her own, with deep roots in Mexico.

Fleeing the chaos of the Mexican Revolution, the families had come to the valley looking for work, plentiful in agriculture, on the railroad, and in construction. They settled primarily in Section 14, producing a vibrant community that would become known as the Mexican Colony, or Colonia Mexicana. Those first families, the original families of Mexi-

can descent, are described in the wonderful book written by Vera Prieto Wall, Barbara Eves and Cydronia Valdez entitled, "We Were Here Too!" which recounts their history (the book is available at pshs.org).

They write in the introduction, "Mexican people are an alchemy of mixed races. Spaniards intermingled with indigenous natives, labeling this mixture, 'mestizo' or Mexican. A cosmic race was born in which 'all the better qualities of each race would persist.' From this we evolved. We see the mixture of races in our faces; the Fontes, Ayala and Salazar families have predominantly light European features.

"Whereas, the Marquez, Chacon and Torres families reveal indigenous... bold features of Mexico's dynamic history...the Marmolejos have Moorish bold eyes, reflective of southern Spain,...the Quiroz, Herrera, Mendoza and Reyes families add an eastern mystery to our legacy. Yet the Prieto features depict an international lineage."

These families arrived in the desert in the 1920s. Some settled under tents in Whitewater. The Quiroz, Fontes and others set up camp at the O'Donnell golf course. Pasqual Quiroz, the first baby of Mexican heritage born in Palm Springs, was delivered under the stars in one of those tents.

The Colonia Mexicana was a vital part of the village. The children went to Frances Stevens School and for the first

through third grade were assigned to the "Americanization Room" where, despite many of them being natural-born American citizens, they received instruction in American culture and English. The book recounts, "We were the children of the Mexican, Indian and African American families." Starting in 4th grade they were no longer segregated and finished elementary and middle school, going on to Palm Springs High School. Vera graduated in 1950 with an integrated class.

Many of the children of Colonia Mexicana would grow up to serve in the United States military, and the book makes a special point of those heroic contributions.

Vera and her brother Ben have the fondest of memories of growing up in the center of town, amidst extended family and friends. The book details fruit trees and fiestas, adventures to Tahquitz Falls, and communal building of houses and the new charming Our Lady of Guadalupe church. La Colonia was known for its resplendent float in the Desert Circus parade each year and the gorgeous traditional Mexican dress of the fiestas and celebrations. And the book describes "Mexican families and Cahuilla people related as brothers in friendship and spiritual harmony."

It goes on, "In those early days, most Indians spoke Spanish. In a conversation, Dora Welmas, (married into the Prieto family), comically commented in her quiet voice, 'White men call us savages, even though our elders speak three languages. Whites with their intelligence speak only one language.'"

The purpose of the book is communicated beautifully and succinctly in its title, "We Were Here Too!" They write, "Documentation of Mexican settlement adds cultural dimension and historical accuracy to our Village. It is also significant to the later generations of these Original Families who may not be aware of their ancestral contributions."

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