Newsletter of the Mexican Heritage Center Issue #1, September 2026

MEXICAN HERITAGE CENTER

Historias del Valle

Reclaiming our heritage and experiences by documenting our own history in our own words.

The Mexican Heritage Center (Centro Cultural Mexicano) of the Central San Joaquin Valley was officially founded as a non-profit Center on April 9, 2025. Discussions by a group of historians and community leaders began in 2024, creating the following vision, mission and goals as a foundation for the MHC:

Vision:

To be a vibrant and dynamic cultural center that celebrates the Mexican heritage of the central San Joaquin Valley, and is recognized for its research, archival data and educational activities that highlight the history and contributions of the Mexican/Mexican American community.

Mission:

The Mexican Heritage Center will seek to dispel the stereotypes that have plagued the Mexican community and place Chicano and Mexican American history in its rightful place, as a foundational people and culture that have made significant contributions to California's central San Joaquin Valley.

Goals:

→ Gather, archive and share the histories and documentation of our indigenous and Spanish roots, the Chicano movement and the wider Mexican and Mexican American experience in the central San Joaquin Valley.
→ Establish a permanent space to house a special collections library of the Central Valley's Mexican history, that will be accessible to researchers, academics, students and the general public.

→ Collect material expressions of history through interviews, photographs, documents, and publications and to archive the collections through both physical and electronic means.

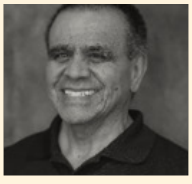
→ Train student and community scholars in the process of collecting, documenting and archiving oral histories and other relevant materials.
→ Disseminate the Center's collections and research through exhibits, publications, cultural activities, and speakers series.

The founding MHC Board of Directors Welcomes You

to enjoy, explore, and learn from the vast resources the Center has to offer. We also invite you to join the MHC as an Associate Member.


Dr. Patrick Fontes

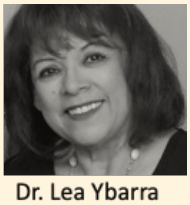

Nancy Marquez


Raul Moreno


Armando Valdez


Dr. Alex Saragoza


Eddie Varela


Dr. Lea Ybarra

The Need for A Mexican Heritage Center in the Central San Joaquin Valley

For over 300 years, Mexicans have lived and thrived throughout California, including the central San Joaquin Valley. Besides the roughly 100,000 Californios who resided in California by 1848, many more thousands immigrated during the Gold Rush and late nineteenth century. Half a century later, nearly one million Mexicans crossed over from Mexico into El Norte, with a great portion journeying to California and the San Joaquin Valley. From 1910–1930 Fresno County witnessed the highest percentage increase of Mexican immigrants compared to all other California counties.

The Mexican Heritage Center intends to illuminate the experience of the Mexican origin community of the central valley. The story of the community of Mexican descent has been frequently glossed over, too often relegated to a subtext of the agricultural history of the Valley. Yet, the contemporary, multi-generational Mexican origin community of the valley includes high-ranking university administrators, physicians, wealthy businesswomen, high-income professionals and a growing middle class, but also possesses a disproportionately large number of low-income working families, poor farm laborers, and recien llegados (immigrant newcomers). Still, there is an evident scarcity of academic research on the Mexican origin community of the valley; scholarly publications are few and far between.

The mission of the Center therefore intends to shed new, concerted light on a community whose roots span centuries, at least since 1772, when a Spanish soldier first witnessed the vast expanse of the central San Joaquin Valley. The Center aims to take a broad approach, encompassing forces and events framed by international, national, state and local considerations. It is a distinct story of a nearly continuous immigrant flow into the Valley, unlike that of any other immigrant group to this country. Nor can the story be reduced to a simplistic chapter in the immigrant trope of the "American dream." Thus, the Center's vision summons an extensive reach, involving indigenous people and European colonialism as well as U.S. expansionism and aspects of Mexican history, among other issues.

Obviously, the impacts of American politics, economics, and social life on the Valley's Mexican origin population represent a fundamental element of the Center's approach. Of necessity, the Center must delve into the racial animus toward people of Mexican descent and its resultant inequities. On the other hand, the Center's perspective unavoidably must address the various forms of resistance by the Mexican descent community, punctuated by its civil rights activism Obviously, the impacts of American politics, economics, and social life on the Valley's Mexican origin population represent a fundamental element of the Center's approach. Of necessity, the Center must delve into the racial animus toward people of Mexican descent and its resultant inequities. On the other hand, the Center's perspective unavoidably must address the various forms of resistance by the Mexican descent community, punctuated by its civil rights activism and its consequent progressive accomplishments, however embattled or unwelcomed by the wider society.

In sum, with the Central Valley in the foreground, the Mexican Heritage Center endeavors to document the development of the Mexican origin population, to trace its contemporary diversity despite formidable impediments, to chronicle its present-day challenges, and to highlight the perseverance, courage, and fortitude of a foundational community of the Central Valley.

Mexican Heritage Center Opening Reception



L–R: Dr. Lea Ybarra, Raul Moreno, Rep. of State Senator Ana Caballero, Nancy Marquez, Dr. Patrick Fontes, Eddie Varela

The Mexican Heritage Center (MHC) held an opening reception in July 2025 to celebrate he establishment of the Center. It was wonderful to see so many community members attend. A welcome proclamation from Senator Ana Caballero was presented to Board members. The reception was held next door to the Center in the beautiful SER lobby. Many thanks to Jesus Padron, SER Director and to Armando Valdez, CCAT Director, where the MHC is housed.

Website for Mexican Heritage Center is online!

The Mexican Heritage Center would like to announce that our website is now online. Our online presence will represent our mission, events and goals to Fresno and the wider community. At the present, the MHC website provides essential information on what the center is about, our current projects, and our Board Members. As our collections, services and outreach grows in the future, so will our website. Our on–line presence will serve as a way for the educators, students and the community to communicate and engage with us, both online and in person. Our website represents our mission as we seek to place Chicano and Mexican American history in its rightful place, as a foundational people and culture that have made significant contributions to California's central San Joaquin Valley. Please visit our website at https://mexicanheritagecentersjv.org

If you are a student, educator, or community member interested in the rich history of Mexican– origin people in our region, please contact us. We are also seeking donations of historical materials, and oral history interviews to add to our growing collection.

MHC COLLECTIONS TEAM

Helping to organize and build the resources of The Mexican Heritage Center

We initiated our archives in 2025 with donations from our board and "staff," and by May of 2026 now hold over 2,424 books and recorded Mexican music. Our print archives contain resources to examine the valley's history and community activities. One focus is on a continuing collection related to Mexican American organizations formed as part of the Chicano Movement, their progress and setbacks. So far these include the Association of Mexican American Educators, League of Mexican American Women, Torreón Sister Cities, Chicano Alumni Association and Colegio de la Tierra.



L-R: Karina Cárdenas, Ruth Saludes, Dolores Olmos Rodríguez, María Peña, Nancy Márquez, Jesús Pelayo, Armando Valdez



María cataloging a recent donation of books in our library.

The first steps go through Dolores Olmos Rodríguez, who receives all donations, sends receipts and maintains records. María Peña and Karina Cárdenas catalogue our library collection at MHClib, on LibraryThing, an online service of the Library of Congress. Both have extensive library experience, Maria with CSUF and Karina with a background in Chicano Studies and Library Science. Jesús Pelayo archives and researches our music related collections and projects. As Director, Nancy Márquez guides and coordinates the work.

Partnership with CCAT

Our center partners with the Center for the Arts and Technology, our host on North Fulton in the Lowell District. With six rooms for the library and archives and the resources of the technology center, we acknowledge the essential support of its director Armando Valdez, his history in the community and the media, plus his outreach to students and parents in the rural communities. Main library, gallery wall and meeting room.



MHC Current Research Project

MEXICAN WEST FRESNO: SEEDS OF CHANGE 1940S–1950S



West Fresno in the first part of the 20th century was a multicultural sampling of the diverse cultures making the central valley home. Within the multicultural stew were ethnic enclaves, segregation not only from Fresno on the other side of the tracks, but pockets of Armenian town, Italian town, German town, Japanese, and the expanding Mexican population of Sunset toward Kearney, where author Joe García spent his early years. At its center was the oldest group, Chinatown.

Judge Armando Rodriguez' father in his tailor shop on F Street in 1928, judging from the calendar of George's Studio on the wall. Before his death in 2018 Armando was interviewed with a focus on his west side history.

Recognizing the multicultural, mostly segregated but dynamic mix of the areas west of the tracks, our project teases out the Mexican strand. We intend to capture the generation's social, political, economic and cultural background that we identify as Seeds of Change. It was a time midcentury when the Mexican generation became the Mexican American generation that spread out and helped launch the Chicano generation. Their community businesses, organizations and cultural events, reimagined to the soundtrack of the times, will be a tribute to these pioneer leaders who were the seeds of change.

Work on the West Fresno Project is coordinated by Nancy Márquez and Ruth Saludes. Older interviews are from the Fresno City and County Historical Society's archives and current ones we are conducting with Frank Ramos, Angie Cisneros, Carlos Guzmán and others from the era.



Don Filiberto and Margarita Colmenero in their Thompson Bros. Concrete Company camp home across from 2115 "G" St in 1919. Photo contributed by grandson Frank Ramos

LISTENING TO THE VALLEY

The Mexican Heritage Center has a collection of over 1,000 CD's and records, featuring both local and international Mexican and Chicano Music. Additions to our music collection are always appreciated.

Reflections on our music collections by Jesús Pelayo



Beto García and the GGs, father Octavio above, Beto center, Manuel Peña below, Mária Peña right

One of the things that has surprised me most while working with the archives at the Mexican Heritage Center is how much history lives in sound.

When people think about archives, they often picture boxes of documents or old photographs. Those are important of course. But as I've begun working with recordings and materials connected to musicians and artists from the central valley, I've realized that music carries a different kind of memory; one that documents emotion, celebration, struggle and community all at once.

Every recording tells a story about where it was played, who gathered to listen, and what was happening in the lives of the people who heard it. Some of the music reflects traditions carried from different regions of Mexico. Other pieces show how those traditions evolved once families settled here in the valley. Over time, something new emerges: a sound shaped by migration, labor, family gatherings, and community celebrations. This is what fascinates me most. The central valley has always been a place where cultures meet and adapt. Musicians here have long been part of that process, blending influences and creating music that reflects life in this region.

Part of my work right now involves identifying and documenting these artists and their contributions. In many cases, these musicians were performing at community events, cultural festivals, schools, or local gatherings. They may not always appear in official historical records, but their work helped shape the cultural identity of this region. Archiving their music and the musicians means making sure those voices are not lost. It means recognizing that the history of the Central Valley is not only written in documents, it is also heard in songs, rhythms, and performances that brought communities together.

From his larger study: Sonido del Valle: Sonic Negotiations and the Making of Mexican American Bi-Musical Identity in West Fresno 1920s–1950s. Jesús conducted interviews with María Peña of Beto García and the GGS and Steve Alcala, retired music educator and mentor to many valley musicians. He is currently working with Stanley Lucero to produce a compilation book of his lifetime collection of children's music in Spanish. He reviewed our first two collections, that of Manuel Peña author and ethnomusicologist, and Pedro Santos' personal collection of Mexican music in LPs and CDs.

The Mexican Heritage Center Library

The MHC Library now has over 2,000 books and articles available on Mexican, Mexican American and Chicano history, arts, culture, and many other topics related to our community. The following is an opinion piece from one of the authors, Tim Hernandez. This is followed by a short review by Nancy Marquez of C. Mariano's book, The Five Joaquins, available in the MHC Library.

Opinion: Tim Hernández valley author

"Open Letter from a Campesino Boy to the United Farmworkers Movement"



You have to understand, for anyone on the outside, it's easy to strike down the memorials and statues, without feeling any resonance as to the weight of it all. But for those of us who've lived our entire lives within proximity of the UFW, it's not so easy to let go of these icons. There is a kind of grief we must work through. A grace period. From inside the belly of the beast, growing up with the images of Cesar and Dolores on billboards and banners scattered along highway 99, and then to attend a BBQ or an intimate gathering at a friend's house on the outskirts of towns like Sanger, Dinuba, Madera, only to find one of them there, in the flesh, just milling about, smiling, chatting as if it was just an ordinary day, and then that evening seeing them leap onto a stage and commanding an audience of 50 or 500, keeping the masses rapt on their every word and conviction, speaking (in two languages) with passion, with "love" and "reverence" for brown people, demanding "respect" for our grandparents, tíos and tías. And then the very next morning flipping channels and finding them on a television screen, only to run into them again, weeks later, at the local flea market, the Cherry Auction, or at the Fresno Fairgrounds, shaking the fruit-stained hands of people who looked like my mom and dad, who looked like me...I mean that's how accessible these icons were.

This wasn't make-believe. And I can't even begin to tell you what it meant for this little brown boy, this painfully shy son and grandson of campesinos, who would often watch my family rise in the shadows of morning, and humbly caravan into the invisible backroads of the great central valley we called home--to witness that, to see firsthand what an empowered person of color looked like, was a thing of magic and absolute possibility. Because the God honest, painful truth, was that no brown man or woman I knew personally had ever commanded that kind of visibility and respect, not in any forum, not in this country...

Tim Z. Hernández, valley author, copyright 2026, with permission (excerpt) Author of valley-related works, including Breathing in Dust, All they will Call You, and Mañana is Heaven.

THE FIVE JOAQUINS

BY C MARIANO, 2026

Merced Stories, Photos and Legendary Bandits of the Central Valley, En-Casa Productions 2026 Together with 7 previous works.

The eighth book in Charles Mariano's life's work is not so much ado about Joaquín Murrieta as it is another in his unique way of examining his own life. A miniseries mostly set in the 1950s through the 1980s in the central California's city of Merced.

Charles moved to Sacramento forty years ago, in 1986, but he never left his life in Merced. In a self-published combination of memoir, scrapbook, diary, poetry, journal he takes you on his camino (journey) with stops to examine the times or history that takes him off road. Kind of a fly on the wall, a Forest Gump wandering through his times as a humble and insecure writer.
Over the course of eight books (so far) you think you get to know him. You call him Charlie.

The Charlie we got to know in eight books.
By piecing together key times and memories, he was born in 1959 and left Merced in 1986, an almost 30 years history of growing up in Merced. Through his books and visits to family, he never left Merced. Time stands still to be re-examined, an overall impression of nostalgia and homesick. Living in the past.

Bicultural Charlie. "I was born on both sides of the cultural line when it comes to Mexicans and Filipinos, sunburnt brown and poor, no difference." His parents always lived apart, and he goes back and forth like tuning in radio stations, Mexican Charlie of the Alonzos and Filipino Charlie of the Marianos. Changing channels with ease.

Filipino Charlie remembers with passion and poetry the life of his fieldworker father, who was introduced in more detail in Piece Work in 2013.

For those who didn't know much about Filipino history of farmworkers, pinoys and manongs, he introduces us. He worked beside his father who inspired both a strong work ethic and a goal to get an education and out of the fields. Their trips to farmers markets in San Francisco to sell what produce they cultivated themselves.

INVISIBLE

It's so easy to
not see them,
farmworkers
in the fields

but they're there
always there

rows and rows of stick
figures against the sun
bundled, faceless
chopping, picking,
dying

it's okay,
it's them, not you
just turn your head
slightly,
drive by
pretend
they're not there

C. Mariano from Heart and Soil

Mexican Charlie talks of his mother Mary Alonzo starting in his first book, The Whole Enchilada, which we learn was a response in grief to her passing. His memories are tied to food and recipes and the bond he developed in reading the newspaper to her. His special connection to Tio Boogie, a boxer and great dancer, who sparked his interest in the local boxing scene.

From his early years Charlie remembers his time at Galen Clark Elementary on the south side of Merced and the teacher who stands out in his memory: Pete De la Cruz, one of only a few Mexican teachers at the time. He mentions Tenaya Jr High and Merced High, where he graduated in 1970. His high school years were a reflection also of his US cultural experiences, like American Graffiti times in in Modesto, Lowrider car club "Chicanos Unlimited," and Wolfman Jack on the radio.

Life measured in songs....Music is Memory... Movies and songs date his memories, like Cannibal and the Headhunters and their hit "Land of a Thousand Dances" in1967. The local "Beatles," Motown & Soul, his sister Dolores making mix tapes and CDs. He digresses with a musical backstory of "Angel Baby" in 1962 becoming, he says, the National Anthem of Chicano Soul. Do we know about Rosie Mendez Hamlin, first Chicana into the R&R Hall of Fame, Rosie and the Argonauts, who cracked the tortilla curtain?

As to the five Joaquins, which enticed me in, another offramp in his journey to explore the history that surrounds Merced, triggered by a book on Joaquín that was recommended to him and his subsequent pilgrimage to Hornitos. It's like similar offramps he takes in all the books, his Forest Gump moments or "triggers" " as he calls them--Kennedy's assassination, Chowchilla Kidnapping 1976, Seven Stayner missing 1972, Cory Stayner a serial killer. But the politics of today's world "horribly sad, a rabbit hole."

The Charlie I relate to, the Charlie of humor and wit, describing a prison as a "correctional place for the incorrect who need correcting," cultural assimilation as "baptism," and "even poverty was segregated." The poet Charlie, who becomes more poignant as he pauses the text to let emotion out as poetry.

And the reflective Charlie, who exudes a sense of urgency, getting older, wiser: "Old is when health becomes our most valuable asset, friendship a close second." "We're all old, end of the trail old." Disappearing members in family photos, like in the movie "Back to the Future." Fleeting images of loved ones gone, but they never leave, "Every loss a piece of me goes with them." Charlie, you seem serious this time

Easy Writer Charlie struggles in his conversations with himself, resorting to the "privacy" of the pages and expressing so well the misgivings, the insecurity of putting yourself out in the world and being compared to those you consider greater writers. Imposter syndrome. Early on someone told him: "You're going to make a good writer someday." It stuck, along with the reality of "no awards for incomplete," which drove him through eight books. He compares a photographer to a writer, "every photo has a story, everyone has a soul, it's up to me to find it."

Charlie, your superpower is making others want to write.

N. Márquez

ORAL INTERVIEWS AND HISTORIES

One of the important goals of the Mexican Heritage Center is to capture our history in the voices of our people. This will enable current and future generations to know the struggles, experiences and contributions of the Mexican origin community in the Central Valley. The MHC currently has over 100 oral histories that are being prepared for your listening opportunity and educational research.



The MHC is fortunate to have the story of Julia Balderas before she passed away (April 12, 1939–September 28, 2012). Throughout her life, Julia was a passionate educator and community activist. She was a teacher at Fresno Unified, as well as a professor in Business and Chicano Studies at Fresno State. The following are excerpts from her interview, done by Dr. Lea Ybarra.

From the Farmworker Fields to the Halls of Academia

"We were very poor. We lived a whole year in a bathroom. In other words, people had water toilets but they were still outside. My dad took all the plumbing out of this outhouse, which was in back of my grandmother's house, and we used that to live in for a whole year. I remember everyone in the area were Mexicanos and we were all poor and we would all get up in the morning and go to the fields...My father and mother had no education and they always believed that the reason they were poor was because they had no education and they made sure that the four of us went to college..." "It's funny how you grow up. You're really not aware that there are certain places you can't go and that you are being discriminated against. Like the summer pool, you could only use it on certain days, and you know, there were certain shows you went to and you had to sit in certain parts of the theater. I wouldn't pay now to go to a show like that but at that time we went and sat in certain places. I don't think they're as open about it now because of regulations and the civil rights movements, but it's still there."

"I have parents who have always been very proud of their culture and have believed that if you're going to make it, you are going to make it first by accepting who you are. Yet, there was a big trend in Fresno, because of the discrimination, of parents not wanting their kids to speak Spanish, not wanting to be associated with anything Mexicano because they felt if they got rid of all of that, they would have better treatment. So, for a while, there were very few activities that were really cultural. In the last fifteen years or so, that trend has reversed and people are saying no, they are going to have to accept us for who we are. So cultural activities have really increased." (Taped on 8/20/1980)

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In every MHC newsletter, we will include an oral history from our archives. The following excerpt is from a Vietnam veteran whose story will be highlighted in the next newsletter.

"I was a poor Chicano and we were just struggling to survive. I had no idea what Vietnam was. My friend Johnny and I had spent our training together. We were afraid that we were going to get sent to Vietnam, so when the orders came down from headquarters that we had been assigned to the Republic of Southeast Asia, Johnny and I jumped in the air and said, 'Great! We're not going to Vietnam.' And then somebody says, 'Hey, stupid, where do you think Vietnam is.' I said, Oh shit, you're kidding me!"

Associate Member Profile: Eva Patiño



This month's member selection is Eva Patiño of Bakersfield, originally from Donna, Texas, a participant in the Chicano Movement at Fresno State College, where she met and married Joaquín. Both became teachers in Shafter and community activists. Through Crafts by Amistad they made Chicano books and prints available to the public for 25 years. Along the way they raised and educated three daughters with love for folklórico and conducted Día de los Muertos workshops in the valley. Besides our interview with her and the couple's generous donations of books and prints over the years, she is now the author of her own biography, just added to the center's collection.

In 2025 we opened MHC to Associate Members and recruited so far 30 historians, scholars, community leaders, researchers, volunteers, and those willing to be interviewed, donate photos, materials, books, expertise, or in many ways support our efforts. As they share with us, they add pieces to this history puzzle and inspire further research. You can become a participant in our growing archives by contributing in your own way and in the process become an Associate of our growing team.
There are no fees or membership dues required, only an interest in preserving Mexican heritage and contributing the experiences and contributions of our diverse community.
You can read more about Eva's work and Dia de Los Muertos workshops on their website, calaverasconcarino.com. Besides our interview with Eva, and their donations of books and Chicano history materials, she is now author of her own biography, just added to the center's collection.

We invite you to become a Mexican Heritage Center Associate member

If you would like to become an Associate member, please feel free to contact any of the MHC Board members or email the following information to mexicanheritagecenterSJV@gmail.com:

Contact Us

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Hours 10–2 Thursdays or by appointment: mexicanheritagecenterSJV@gmail.com

Mexican Heritage Center is a non-profit community benefit organization currently funded by donations

In Memoriam Final Chapters, Leaving Legacies



Celia Maldonado Arroyo

1945–2026

Counselor, Administrator, Activist

Celia Maldonado Arroyo was a deeply respected and admired educator and community activist in the Central Valley for more than five decades. She devoted 34 years to education, as a counselor and administrator at Fresno City College, and Associate Dean of Student at the College of the Sequoias. Celia's dedication to community service spanned her entire professional life.



F. John Sierra

1942–2026

Artist, Educator, Founder Arte Américas

John Sierra was a muralist, illustrator, educator, and an icon of Chicano art. His mural, "The Planting of Cultures", is a cultural landmark in Fresno. He co-founded Arte Américas in 1987, serving as its artistic director. His work has been shown in museums across the country. The City of Fresno designated an annual John Sierra Day on July 17 th .

The Mexican Heritage Center is a non-profit community benefit organization currently funded by donations and an initial grant from the City of Fresno's Measure P EAAC fund through sponsorship of the Fresno City and County Historical Society.