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Fire in the Morning

Yolanda Alvarez curates a photo history of Mexican Americans in Orange County

By Kat Avila | Web Published 10.1.2002

"I've always been struck by when people look at me and they go, well, you don't look Mexican. And I go, what do you mean? Am I not dark enough? Am I supposed to be dirty or something? Is that what you mean? Because of the derogatory images that people have. So these images to me...they show hard-working people. Honest people with stories and courage. A lot of guts."
--Yolanda Morelos Alvarez



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I received an invitation through the mail from the City of Irvine for "Fire in the Morning: A Pictorial Exhibit of the Mexican-American History in Orange County," curated by part-time Chapman University graphic designer Yolanda Morelos Alvarez. There was to be a presentation during the City Council Meeting after the reception. At the reception, I watched as Yolanda posed for pictures with her family, and I listened like a fly on the wall as people identified themselves and their relatives in the exhibit's some 100 black-and-white photographs.

Ah, the familiar stories they were telling!

The exhibit itself reminded me of a room in my grandfather Jose's house that was wallpapered with photos of familia, not surprising since most of the exhibit's photographs were



copied from family albums.

Later, I visited Yolanda at her home to talk about the exhibit and to exchange stories about life in Santa Ana, where she was born and raised, and where we had both attended high school, in a county where the landmark 1947 Mendez v.

Westminster case was settled which ended segregation in California schools of Mexican American children from European American children.

K: Kat Avila

Y: Yolanda Morelos Alvarez

K: How did you become the person you are today?

Y: When I was in first grade, they put my drawing of a deer and a grassy hill and a tree in a showcase at school. And I remembered that. Because of that, I continued drawing. In all of my electives through junior high school and high school, I always took art and Spanish.

I was raised very conservative, very Mexicano, traditional, keep me at home. My escape and my self-education was reading. I've always been very curious. What's on the other side of that hill over there? When I was a little girl, looking out the window I would wonder, what's down that road? I've always been like that.

K: What do you remember most about growing up in Santa Ana?

Y: We would walk everywhere because my mom didn't drive until she was 30. We'd walk to the market, and my mother would always speak Spanish. Every Sunday we went to Mass. We would go to my grandma's house and she would have menudo usually. Everybody would go and eat pan dulce and play and run.

On 6th Street my mom would talk to all the neighbors, and mostly a lot of Spanish was spoken. Then we moved to 11th Street and that was a white neighborhood. They actually got a petition because they didn't want us to move in there.

K: What time period was that?

Y: The mid '50s. Of course, the ladies became my mom's best friends. My dad was self-employed. He had the Army-Navy Store in the city of Orange.

K: He owned the Army-Navy Store on Glassell Street?

Y: He started it. See those two young men standing side by side. [Yolanda points to a photograph on the portable version of the exhibit that she takes to schools.] That's his story right there. When he and my mom were married, they saved money, then they shopped for a store location in Orange. He would go to the bracero camps and take money, socks, boots, and stuff, and sell them out of the back of a station wagon. And the mayordomos - the bosses - would bring truckloads of workers to the store and drop them off and they'd do their shopping, then they'd go back in the trucks.

K: Did your father stay with that for awhile?

Y: That's all he's ever done. He still has a store in Temecula.

K: While I was browsing your exhibit, I read a quote from D. Gomez of El Modena, California. That person remembered, "They would ignite these piles [of raked eucalyptus leaves], and the aroma of wet dirt mixed with the sweet smell of mist-covered leaves burning slowly would cut through the crisp morning air." The title of your exhibit

must refer to that. How did "Fire in the Morning" start?

Y: It started because I'm a black-and-white photographer, because I continued studying art, drawing, and photography. After my personal life settled down, I went to Logan to take pictures of what's out there. I already knew about La Colonia Independencia - one of the older ones - and I knew about Delhi too because it's in Santa Ana. I had a list of colonias that was growing, because I'd see an older person in the yard and I'd start talking and asking questions. You can see them disappearing. Agustin Gurza's column mentioned one in La Habra. I had driven up there and I thought, well, what happened to it? It's gone. Then I realized that some of them are going to be gone on this list.

I went to the libraries. I thought surely there had to be some history, because I found these neighborhoods. There was no book. Nothing.

I revisited the people I was interviewing because I was going to write a book on the colonias. I had never done anything like this before. So I go back to Mrs. Rivas, the first person I interviewed. She laid out for me this really long and skinny picture. She brings out all these pictures. All of a sudden, it hit me. This lady has a treasure by herself, and she's telling me the stories behind the pictures.

Then I started going back to and driving through the colonias. Talking to people I'd never seen before. And one person would say, you should talk to my uncle. So by word of mouth, I went back and forth and drove all over Orange County. There's this network...but they're getting older and sicker and they're starting to die.

I really wanted to have a story for every picture. Because it's not in the books.

K: Each of these photographs has a story?

Y: They're organized chronologically. I started with the Mexican Revolution when the colonias were flooded with immigrants coming from Mexico. Up to World War II when everything changed. We had more fatalities and were disproportionately in the front lines. These men were fighting all over the world. They realized that they were just as smart and just as strong. World War II made them stand up for their rights and organize. They wanted their kids to have equal opportunity. They had risked their lives and lost brothers and friends, and here they came back to segregated restaurants and pools. The schools eventually started to integrate. The exhibit generally ends there.

It takes a lot of guts to put up with stuff. Those people put up with prejudice to their face. They had dignity inside of them. That's one thing I remember about my grandparents' generation. They had so much self-respect.

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Asian American communities in
California. Yolanda Morelos Alvarez
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interested in hearing from early
settlers of Latino Orange County.*

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