

ST. HELENA
HISTORICAL
SOCIETY

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ILLUMINATING ST. HELENA'S HISTORY

The *Bracero* Program in Napa Valley

By Mariam Hansen

The St. Helena Historical Society celebrates Latino Heritage Month with this article on early migration from Mexico to St. Helena.

Farm workers from Mexico had been working and settling in Napa Valley for some years, but in relatively small numbers and with no government organizing. As early as 1939, the *Comite Mexicano de Beneficencia* (Mexican Benevolent Committee) was incorporated in Napa County to help workers with family matters. The directors were Domingo Gonzales, Joseph Torres, and Pilar Cruz, St. Helena; Jesus Bernal, Guadalupe Perez, Cristobal Marquez, Donicio Amato, and Lucio Perez, Yountville; A. Aureliano, Napa; and Pablo Mata, Napa Junction.

The *bracero* farmworkers program was prompted by the desperate demand for field labor during World War II. After a contract was signed between the United States and Mexico in August 1942, a few hundred experienced Mexican agricultural laborers arrived in the Stockton area to harvest sugar beets. The *bracero* program soon spread over most of the United States, providing needed agricultural workers, including in Napa Valley. By fall 1943, 700 *braceros* were working here. Along with volunteers from the Bay Area, they saved the grape, prune, and walnut crops from ruin.

The contract terms called for free housing, with each man guaranteed 60 square feet of sleeping space. Many were housed at the county's labor camp, located at 7329 Silverado Trail, east of Yountville. The former guard barracks at the Golden Gate Bridge were moved

to the new site to serve as dormitories. The camp was dedicated on September 29, 1943, by county and state officials, the Mexican vice-consul, and worker representatives at a dinner in the camp's dining hall. The camp could house 600 residents, who were provided with meals for \$1.50 per day. The kitchen was run by Louis Martinez, who cooked Mexican food for the men. Many workers also lived at the ranches where they worked.

The basic hourly wage was 60 cents plus housing. Piece work, such as picking prunes by the box, was paid the prevailing wage. The workday was 10 hours, and workers were guaranteed employment 75 percent of the time. Ten percent of each worker's earnings were supposed to be deposited by the employer to bank accounts in Mexico. Because many of these funds were mishandled, many *braceros* never received these savings. Most workers made relatively large and regular payments to their families across the border.

Ellery Murray, who was fluent in Spanish and had lived in Mexico, offered classes at St. Helena High School to facilitate the understanding of American customs. Students learned basic English, some business skills, and how to shop, use the post office, and the bank. Murray also offered classes in Spanish to locals who interacted with the workers.

While employment conditions were agreed to by the United States and Mexico, the *bracero* contracts were controlled by independent farmers associations
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The caption as it appeared in the St. Helena Star on May 8, 1943: This picture shows the first contingent of 78 Mexican laborers imported for harvest work through the efforts of the Napa Valley Farm Labor Association, working with the Farm Security Administration, when they arrived Saturday [May 2, 1943] at the Grange ranch, where housing facilities have been arranged for by the association members. The group of laborers . . . arrived by train in Sacramento, and came by bus to their new "home." . . . After getting settled, the laborers, who had already been given their assignments on various ranches, started to work Monday. Most of them are from the state of Michiocoan; they speak and understand very little English.

The *Bracero* Program in Napa Valley, continued from page 1

working with the Farm Security Administration (FSA). The 75-member Napa Valley Labor Association (NVLA) worked closely with the FSA and the *braceros* themselves. W. E. Lawson, a prune grower, was chairman of the NVLA, helped by Charles Forni, Hubert Fruehauf, Joseph Ponti, Louis Wurz, and Fred Marr. Managing secretary was

at first Julius Caiocca and later Duncan Fisher, the ag teacher at St. Helena High School. Due to illiteracy and contracts being written in English, *braceros* were often unaware of their rights and conditions of employment.

The *bracero* program officially ended in 1964 after over 3 million Mexicans had worked in US agricul-

tural fields. Most workers were supposed to return to their homeland, but many local households stem from the migration of *braceros* over 20 years earlier. Agricultural workers from Mexico continue to be the backbone of the wine-growing industry and field workers continue to cross the border to gain employment in Napa Valley.

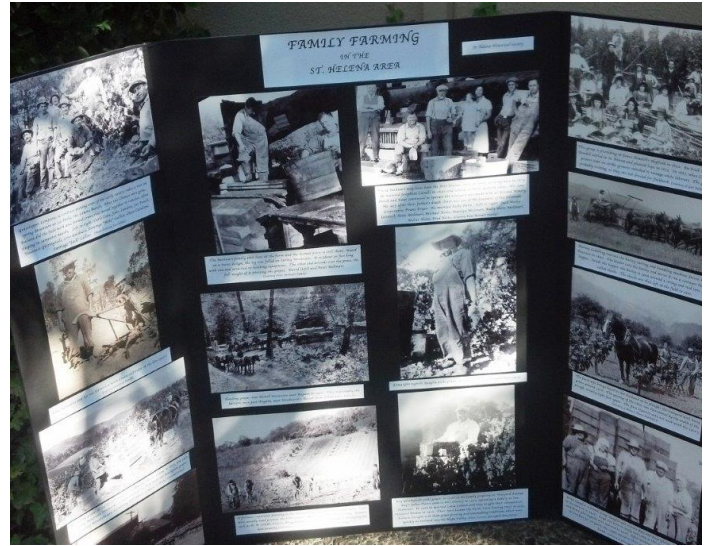


Photo at left: St. Helenans became very friendly with the braceros and attended the Mexican fiestas at the Native Sons Hall celebrating Mexican Independence Day. In 1944, the fiesta organizers were Lucio Perez, Emilio Cruz, Emilio Arroyo, Francisco Espinoza, Alfredo and Concepcion Martinez, and Paulino Lanedros. Also present were Zebedeo Garcia, Filiberto Castillo, and Mexican consular staff. The event was so popular that another dance was held a month later and again in 1945. Many locals enjoyed the fun, but there was no doubt about whose party it was. The entertainment was provided by camp residents and other Mexican locals, and a Latin-American orchestra from San Francisco provided dance music. Photo at right: The Historical Society's booth at this year's Harvest Festival featured an exhibit about "Family Farming in the Napa Valley."

Honorees of the 2013 "Spirits of St. Helena" Cemetery Discovery Walk

Because of heavy rain on the morning of Saturday, September 21st, the tour of some of the winemaker families buried at Holy Cross Cemetery was moved to the inside of St. Mary's Chapel. The Historical Society wishes to thank the docents who represented these St. Helena-area families.

John Korte, representing Clemens and Maria Korte (Korte Family Vineyards).

Larry Merla, a family friend, representing Cesare and Rosa Mondavi (Charles Krug Winery).



This photo of Cesare and Rosa Mondavi was taken in 1937 on the day son Robert graduated from Stanford University.

Mary Alice Ernish, representing George Schonewald, who built the Esmeralda estate, now known as Spottswode and owned by Mary Novak.

Mike Novak, son of Jack and Mary Novak, who told about restoring the Spottswode Estate.

Doug Patterson, great grandson of Anton and Caterina Nichelini (Nichelini Winery).

Paula Kornell, daughter of Hanns Kornell (Kornell Champagne Cellars, previous owner of Larkmead Winery).

Cornerstone

By Skip Lane, President

Since our last newsletter, the Historical Society has entered into an independent contractor agreement with Bonnie Thoreen. Bonnie is known to many of you as a longtime Historical Society member. She is also the retired dean of the Upper Valley Campus of Napa Junior College and now serves on Napa County's Grand Jury.



With an all-volunteer Board of Directors and no paid staff, the board has felt for some time that we were not being as efficient as we might be. Communication was not what it should be, and things were falling through the cracks. Bonnie's organizational abilities have already resulted in significant improvements in the way we function.

Her duties will vary depending on where she is needed most at any given time. She has already revived our long-dormant Oral History Program, and we have several interviews scheduled with prominent, longtime St. Helena residents.

Bonnie is also in the process of preparing a mailing aimed at soliciting new Historical Society members. Her other duties include applying for grant monies, organizing volunteers, and updating our files.

The Board of Directors is looking forward to working with Bonnie, and we expect to benefit greatly from her help.

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

By Bonnie Thoreen,
Administrator

Call for volunteers! The St. Helena Historical Society is ready to pursue our long-delayed Oral History Project, but we need more interviewers. You can do this! No

special background is needed. My team will provide fun and easy training in how to interview. We have a long list of venerable up-valley denizens willing to share and record their perspectives—living

history. Become part of this priceless opportunity! Please contact me to learn more at bthoreen@gmail.com, and share this idea with friends.



Museum for a Day

By Susanne Salvestrin,
Collections Committee



From left to right: Ken Taplin, Susan Wight, Stephen Taplin, and Sylvia Robles Taplin represent the Lewelling-Taplin-Wight family in 2012's Museum for a Day.

St. Helena Historical Society's bi-annual Museum for a Day is coming on March 23, 2014. At this all-day event, St. Helena Catholic Parish Hall is set up to be like the museum/history center we plan to someday create for our town. Many private collections will be on display that will shed light on family history and early times in and around St. Helena. Items from the Historical Society's collections will also be featured.

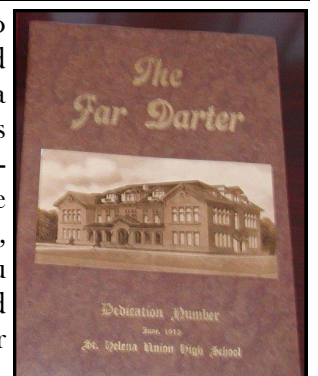
The last Museum for Day in 2012 included a vintage car show. In 2014, the focus will be on farm equipment used in yesteryear, along with some modern equipment.



If you would like to participate in the event, please contact co-chairs Helen Nelson and Susanne Salvestrin right away at susanne@salvestrinwinery.com. Thanks!

Still Calling for Yearbooks

Thanks to those of you who dug around your attic and found copies of St. Helena High School or Robert Louis Stevenson Middle School yearbooks. We're still missing some years in our collection, though, so please think of us when you come across a copy and would like the society to preserve it for future reference.





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HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Join SHHS Today!

St. Helena Historical Society's Member Holiday Dinner

at

Flora Springs Winery

1978 West Zinfandel Lane, St. Helena

Tuesday, December 3, 2013, 6 p.m.

Please make reservations early,
as there is seating for only 60

Dinner: \$65 per person

Must be prepaid at reservation time

Call 707-967-5502 or

Helen Nelson at

707-963-7097

Holiday Festivities

Preceding Dinner

Tour of the Caves

Appetizers

Wines from Salvestrin Winery, Heibel
Ranch Vineyards & Flora Springs Winery

Dinner Menu

Roasted Beet & Citrus Salad

Choice of

Lavender & Rosemary New York Steak

Rosemary & Lemon Chicken

Yukon Gold Potatoes

Butternut Squash Risotto

Dessert Selections by Susanne Salvestrin

Wines from Flora Springs Winery

