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Book spotlights Spaniards' contribution to Winters

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WINTERS — Gloria Lopez says she's always had an appreciation for history, which may be what prompted her to collect and document a local history that had been overlooked — that of the Spanish immigrants in the Winters community.

She says although much has been written about Winters history, very little of it mentions the Spaniards. Lopez sought to correct that.

"I was waiting for someone else to do it, to be honest, but no one did," she says. "I decided it was time. I decided to tell our story."

Her own family story is typical of many featured in her book and DVD, "An American Paella." Her mother's side of the family was on the first ship to leave Spain in 1907 for the Hawaiian islands to work in the sugar cane fields. Her father's side immigrated via Ellis Island a few years after that.

Like many of the Spaniards who labored in Hawaii, Lopez's relatives were searching for something more.

"They were still on a journey to find a better life and didn't quite find it in Hawaii," she said. "They still wanted something better than what they had in Spain."

Not willing to return to the poverty they'd known in their homeland, many of the Spaniards in Hawaii had heard about California and headed to the mainland, to the port of San Francisco.

"California sounded good, like the land of opportunity; the land of gold."

She says her grandfather arrived here just after the San Francisco earthquake and told stories of camping in tents on Nob Hill for housing because the area still hadn't been rebuilt. Many of these early settlers took jobs in factories, which were plentiful in San Francisco. Others kept moving to the valley, seeking agricultural work, often as laborers.

Here in Winters, Lopez says many of the Spanish agricultural laborers worked for pioneer families. Ironically, over the years, these laborers went on to purchase the very same pioneer land and farm it themselves. She says these early Spanish farmers were savvy about keeping up with changes in the agricultural market and, like other Spanish immigrants, saw the importance of educating themselves about everything from farming to finances, and valued a strong work ethic.

As new generations were born on American soil, the descendants of these immigrants also were encouraged to continue learning and many started attending college after finishing high school. Although they were succeeding educationally and financially, Lopez notes that with each generation, the ties to the old country are progressively diluted. Like many other cultures, ethnicity is often lost by the third generation in a new country.

"The first thing they lose when they immigrate is the language. The last thing they lose is the food," Lopez says. "That's why food is still really important to us."

She notes that many of the local Spaniards learned their traditional dishes from their mothers and grandmothers. Ironically, when the new generations visit Spain, they discover these dishes are often no longer made in the old traditions. People just buy the food at the market.

Going back to visit the country of their ancestors is important to American Spaniards, she says.

"It's the full cycle of the immigrant, from leaving home, to the second, third and fourth generations going back to Spain. It's a cycle of leaving as Spaniards and returning as Americans."

Lopez's family history is just one of many in the Winters community, and she decided to compile a representation of this history in "An American Paella." She videotaped 87 interviews, all of which can be seen on the DVD, and selected excerpts from each to be included in the book.

"It's their voices, even if it's bad grammar. It's everything," she says.

Besides recording a slice of history, Lopez says she decided to write the book because "it's important to note the contributions of the Spaniards to the community of Winters." She points out that Spaniards have been involved in everything from the schools to the city to local service groups over the years, and that Spaniards founded many of the familiar businesses here in town, such as Lorenzo's Market, Berryessa Gap Vineyards, Ficelle and Carbahal & Co.

Writing the book was a satisfying experience for Lopez, who teaches culture and diversity courses at Sacramento City College, because teaching these classes helped her to "cement my identity."

"I knew being Spanish was an important part of me."

Recording all these histories, as well as her own "helps keep the memories alive," she adds.

"If you don't write the memories down, they're lost. That's what history is — memories."

"An American Paella" was such a labor of love, Lopez decided to self-publish the book because she wanted to retain total control of its contents and ensure a high-quality publication. The book is hardbound, and features offset printing and hand-sewn bindings, and she commissioned a musician to do the original background music on the DVD. The book and DVD are available at Ficelle and Berryessa Gap, and directly from the author by calling 795-2242.

In addition to the culture and diversity courses, Lopez also teaches family and consumer science at Sacramento City College. She lives in rural Winters with her husband, Mike Autry. They have two children, Erin, 29, and Brett, 27.

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