

Dear Herman,

Here's my part of the report our group did on the Latino community of National City. I don't have a copy of the entire report - we divided it up after we got our grade. In my opinion, what you said was the best part anyway!

I enjoyed our interview and hope you like the results. Best of luck to you in the future.

- Jan Stevens

INTRODUCTION

I. Present Conditions

In Spanish colonial days, the road that is now Highland Avenue in National City was used by travelers as they crossed over from Mission San Diego on their way to settlements in Baja California. Today, the thoroughfare in many ways is a microcosm of Mexico within the United States, with businesses much as you would see on streets south of the border: tortillerias, panaderias, carnicerias, pinata stores and many Mexican food stands and restaurants.

Our research group pinpointed a four-block area of northern Highland Avenue in which there was a heavy concentration of businesses distinctive to the Mexican culture. There we discovered not only the food and culture of Mexico but also a microcosm of the issues of the Latino immigrant community in San Diego County in general. Talking to people who owned and patronized the businesses along Highland Avenue, we found cultural pride and community awareness, but also a strong sense of the struggle against the forces hindering that community from moving forward: alcohol, drugs, prostitution, crime, juvenile delinquents, gangs, graffiti, the welfare system, schools that lack computers for student use, unemployment and too aggressive policing.

According to a 1995 Department of Housing and Urban Development summary, National City is 45 percent Latino. Latinos are the dominant racial group, followed by European Americans, Asian and Pacific Islanders and Native Americans. Yet despite that racial dominance and the fact that many people of Mexican descent serve in prominent positions in the city and schools, the Latino community overall is struggling economically, with many of its members living in poverty.

The HUD summary states that the Median Family Income (MFI) of National City is \$32,096, compared with \$39,798 for the San Diego metropolitan area. It notes,

"Almost-two thirds of the households in National City are considered low income because they earn 80 percent or less of MFI (\$25,676). Of these, 39 percent are very low income, earning less than 51 percent of MFI (\$16,368). Although low- and moderate-income households are concentrated throughout the city, the lowest income households are concentrated along the northwestern edge of the city, along the harbor and along the boundary with San Diego. These areas also contain higher proportions of the city's Hispanic households."

Such conditions cry for more attention from authorities, but the people living under the conditions seem more interested in earning a living than politics. This makes any kind of dramatic change seem unlikely, at least for the near future.

II. History

Before the first European contact, the area now known as National City was inhabited by San Diegueno Indians who led relatively peaceful lives devoted to hunting and gathering. The Spaniards arrived in San Diego Bay in the early 17th century, but did not begin serious colonization until the 18th century, when the Mission period began. At that time, the Highland Avenue area was part of a vast cattle range that served both the Presidio and Mission, and remained so until Mexico took control of California in the 1820s.

According to "San Diego ... Where California Began," an account of San Diego's early history published by *The Journal of San Diego History* in 1967, the Mexican government in 1833 ordered California to secularize Mission property, granting Mission lands to private individuals and stripping the Indians of the protection of the Church. Santiago Arguello, the brother of the first governor of California, subsequently received the ranges of the San Diego Mission, which were then called El Rancho del Rey and extended all the way to what is now Palomar Street in Chula Vista.

In 1846, the last Mexican governor, Pio Pico, gave El Rancho del Rey to his brother in law, an Englishman who became a Mexican citizen named John Foster. Pio Pico asked Arguello to prepare papers to ensure Foster clear title. This was the beginning of "El Rancho de la Nacion," later to become National City.

In her 1959 book "The Story of El Rancho de la Nacion," Irene Phillips writes that Foster maintained title to the ranch when the Americans took over and operated it as a cattle ranch until 1856. The "National Ranch," as it was known by that time, then passed through several owners until it was purchased in 1868 by Frederick Augustus Kimball for \$30,000. Kimball and his brothers, builders from San Francisco, subdivided the land and founded the town of National City. Victorian houses sprouted throughout the city as well as industries, including a brickworks at the western end of 5th Avenue. In this era, Highland Avenue was known as Summit. Local historical society member Margaret Puhn (nee Mendez) said her father, who came here in 1912, described the area as mostly open space and agriculture. There were orchards and dairies. The main business district was at 8th Street and National City Boulevard.

Mrs. Puhn said many beautiful homes were built between Highland and National City Boulevard during the late 19th and early 20th century, many of which survive to this day. Some are in desperate need of historic preservation, but the historical society has had difficulty in getting anyone to restore them since most of the people living in the Highland Avenue area now are renters. Sadly, a couple of vacant houses have been burned out or otherwise desecrated in recent months.

In the 1950s, when longtime community resident and activist Herman Baca came to National City, most people of Mexican descent lived west of National City Boulevard. The area between National City Boulevard and Highland was an affluent, all-white area and "you got stopped" if you went into those neighborhoods, he said. The demographics of the city gradually changed and the Latino population began moving eastward after South Bay Plaza was built in the late 1950s or early 1960s. Baca said there are still many

Latinos living west of National City Boulevard, but they are being squeezed out of their neighborhoods by local zoning decisions that favor converting the area to industrial uses.

Baca said two of the biggest issues in the Latino community in the last 20 years have involved the police.

In the 1970s, the police shooting of an 18-year-old youth of Puerto Rican descent touched off a political firestorm that resulted in the recall of the entire City Council. Baca said the youth was shot to death after stealing a purse that contained \$1.18. Though there had been previous shooting incidents involving Latinos, "that was the straw that broke the camel's back," Baca said. Latinos rose up not only against the police but against an overall lack of representation in National City politics and schools.

The other issue was cruising. With the construction of South Bay Plaza, located at Highland and Plaza, and a steady rise in the number of Latino businesses, Highland Avenue became a popular place to cruise as early as the 1960s. According to Mrs. Puhn, "the cruise" was not a problem until it started attracting too many people from outside of National City and causing traffic problems. As a result, police shut down the cruise about eight years ago, though youths continue to occasionally get cited for cruising. Baca became involved in the issue when people complained that only youths with certain racial characteristics were being hassled by the police. Chicano activists led marches and protests and held press conferences over these concerns.

QUESTIONARE FOR THE LATINO COMMUNITY OF NATIONAL CITY

1. Do you live around here? Yes.
2. If so, how many years have you lived here? "Since 1955."
3. Are you married or single? Do you have children? Married, 5 children
4. What religion are you? "Catholic, culturally."
5. Is this a common religion among your ethnic group? "Yes."
6. Where are you and your family originally from? "New Mexico."
7. What generation are you? "My family has been there since 1600."
8. What is your occupation? Owner of Aztec Printing, community activist.
9. How long have you been involved in your current career?
Printer since 1970.
10. What is the level of education that you have completed?
12th grade.
11. What type of foods do you eat? (is there a difference between daily foods and festive foods?)
Beans, chili, potatoes, tortillas, meat.
For fiestas, pozole, tamales, empanadas.

12. What are your cultural/ religious traditions? what do they consist of?

"For Christmas and Easter my mom keeps up the traditional foods. She also keeps Lent."

Being politically inclined he likes "Dia de la Revolucion" - Sept. 16. "Cinco de Mayo is more of a beer commercial."

13. What are the current issues in your community?

See attached.

14. What is the role of women in your community?

"Trying to survive. It's not like people are talking about breaking down glass ceilings. I think most people are tied to earning a living."

15. What is the role of men in your community?

"Same. Trying to make ends meet. Remember also, National City has the highest crime rate. So we got all the goodies!"

16. If you could change some aspect of your community what would it be?

See attached.

17. If you could live somewhere else, would you? Where?

No.

18. What is most valuable/important in your life?

My family.

19. What are your goals and aspirations in life? "I'm a printer. Over half my life has been devoted to civil rights, human rights struggles. There are no Don Quixotes here, no Zorros. It's a 'we' problem, not an 'I' problem."

20. What languages do you speak and where and when did you learn them?

"English and Spanish. Basically I was monolingual when I came from New Mexico. I was raised in a rural farming community where 99.9% of the people were Spanish speaking."

SUPPLEMENT TO THE QUESTIONNAIRE

13. What are the current issues in your community?

"In order to understand National City, you have to understand it as a disenfranchised community being ruled by an enfranchised segment of the community. ... There are festering issues that come out of disenfranchisement: police problems, housing problems, unemployment, youth problems, educational problems. ... A lot of individuals vote, but mostly everyone is going their own way." He said "how do you build power" among the disenfranchised was the biggest issue of the community.

Another issue he mentioned was policing. A year and a half ago, controversy arose over National City police who were stopping Latinos for routine traffic violations and forcing them to get out of their cars and go sit on the curb. He said the police chief at the time (no longer there) put out a memorandum telling officers to not do that in routine cases, but within a month the same practice was taking place again. The interviewee said he wrote to the mayor about it and is still waiting for an answer.

The interviewee also complained about "monolingual kids sitting in classes not knowing what's going on" rather than being placed in a bilingual class. He feels that educators are perpetuating the educational system's historic racism and discrimination against Latinos by not intervening in such cases. Asked why there is no intervention, he said, "most of them would probably be placing their careers or jobs in jeopardy."

The interviewee noted that Sweetwater Union High School District has the highest dropout rate in the county (tied with Mountain Empire Unified). "When you have more of your young people in prison than you do in the college, I think that's the proof of the pudding about your educational system."

16. If you could change some aspect of your community, what would it be?

He said the City Council exists to serve the Mile of Cars and the business interests. He said political input "doesn't exist in our community. That's why I always chuckle when people tell me about Spanish surnamed politicians (on the City Council). It doesn't exist. It's a mirage. ... Those people's names might as well be Jones, Golding, Kolender ..."

He said the Latino community needs "the same education, the same housing, the same opportunities" to be a part of the political system.