

Historic Barrios of Banning

What does a frog, a lizard and a shoe have in common? La Chancla (the “Shoe”) El Sapo (the “Frog”) and El Lagartijo (the “Lizard”) were all historic barrios in Banning with roots established as early as the 1880s. The Southern Pacific Railroad was constructed through Banning in 1875 and 1876 and much of the workforce on the railroad were men of Mexican descent. Some of the areas of Chancla and Sapo were used for housing for the railroad workers and commercial ventures developed along Livingston Street in response to the new community. Livingston was one of the main streets in early Banning and included a jail, an electric plant, an early fire station, a laundry, and several eating and drinking establishments.

After the railroad was completed most of the area’s economy turned to agriculture. A check of the index of Tom Hughes’ book “The History of Banning and the San Gorgonio Pass” reveals no Spanish surnames involved in the history of the area although without the work of the Mexican-American community Banning would never have become the successful town it grew to be. Agricultural commerce could not have flourished without the hard work of these Mexican-American pioneers and it was through their efforts that the barrios of the Frog, the Lizard and the Shoe were developed.

The construction of the I-10 freeway through Banning in 1960 tore the heart out of Chancla and parts of Sapo . Lagartijo was not as affected because it was further north but entire blocks of Chancla and Sapo were destroyed and the freeway eliminated easy access between the north and south parts of these two barrios. Alola had been the main street running north and south through Chancla but after the neighborhoods were torn down to make room for the freeway there were only a few remnants of Alola left.

The following remembrances were documented through oral history interviews with several Banning residents who responded to the library’s request for information on the barrios of Banning:

Local businessman and Banning native, Richard Sanchez’s grandfather, Gregorio Sanchez, came to Banning in the 1890s from El Paso. He worked at times for the railroad and his home was on Alola Street in Chancla, the section of Alola that was demolished for the construction of the I-10 freeway. Gregorio Sanchez worked with John Repplier, Banning’s Tree Warden, and Samuel Hargrave, and helped plant many of the trees in Banning. Richard remembers that most of the land south of present-day I-10 was planted in apricot and almond orchards. “Pilas,” which were 8 x 8 ft. concrete reservoir tanks, were used for watering the orchards. These tanks often had croaking frogs in them in the warmer months, hence, a possible explanation for the name, El

Sapo. Some of the early families Richard remembers being in Banning were the Sanchez, Becerra, Espinoza, Rios, Reyes, Ortega, Diaz, and Olvera families.

Both Albert Diaz and John Santacruz are Banning natives who lived in Sapo, although Albert first lived in Chancla. Albert was born in 1940 and John was born in 1945. They remember a friendly kind of “warfare” between the kids who lived in Sapo and Chancla, usually resulting in rock throwing back and forth between the rival barrio boys. They remembered Chancla as being the smallest and Lagartijo as being the largest of the three barrios.

Both Albert and John attended the Eastside School and Albert remembers having Susan B. Coombs as his third grade school teacher. He has fond recollections of her as his teacher and remembers her to this day. The Banning Theatre was segregated when they were young boys and they remember having to sit on one side of the theater with all “children of color.” They remembered the manager of the theater at the time as being Judge Ray Holly, who they thought of as a nice man who was good to them. When they didn’t have enough money for the movies Mr. Holly would let them in free after the show started. They also remembered good times at the Banning Plunge which was located at 635 E. Ramsey Street where the present-day 99cent store stands. The plunge was not segregated when they were kids although it had been a generation earlier. Albert’s uncle had a business on the southwest corner of Hargrave and Ramsey called, Art C. Jurjado’s Auto, near the Shell station.

Banning native and schoolteacher Juanita Sibole remembers the three barrios of Banning well. Her grandparents, Rafael and Maria Gonzalez came to Banning in the early 1900s. Her grandfather worked on the railroad and later became a successful landscaper. Juanita’s father, Edward (Ovedio) Lara, was born in Indio and her mother, Teresa Lara, was born in Chancla. Her mother remembers the barrio names of Chancla, Sapo and Lagartijo being used as early as the 1930s, possibly earlier. Juanita and her parents remember the Sanchez and Olvera families as having lived in Lagartijo. Along with her mother and other supporters Juanita has been involved in the Mexican-American Scholarship dinners held annually in the Pass during the 1970s and 1980s. Today, the organization continues to award annual scholarships.

Carlos “Charlie” Ortega was born in Banning in 1924. His grandfather, Vidal, came to Banning in 1903, when Charlie’s father, Vidal Jr. was three years old. Charlie grew up in a house on Alola, on the edge of Chancla. His family’s house was just north of the present-day electric plant on Alola. Charlie was a student at the Eastside Elementary School until 3rd grade and then attended the Murray St. School where his teachers were, Mrs. Cherry, Mrs. Martin and Mrs. Nichols. He graduated from Banning High School in 1942 and joined the Navy, serving in the Pacific during WWII.

Charlie's father, Vidal Jr., started working for a living when he was only 10 or 11. Through his hard work Vidal Jr. became a foreman for a 70 acre almond orchard in South Banning against the foothills along the old Idyllwild Road. The property was owned by a Mr. Hubbard who also had an automobile dealership in Los Angeles. Mr. Ortega would drive truckloads of workers to the orchard and supervise the hulling of the almonds. Vidal Jr. also helped plant some of the orchards on the Banning Bench with Clyde Rutherford and assisted in building irrigation systems for the orchards. Charlie's uncle, Roque, at one time owned the market that later became known as "Baldera's Market." Charlie remembers the Martinez, Sanchez and Ortega families as being some of the oldest and best established families in the barrios of Banning.

Charlie has fond memories of growing up in Banning. He remembers walking up the wash from downtown Banning to St. Boniface with his friends, Marcello Ortega (not a relative), Catarino "Cata" Villalpando, Nino Quinones, and Lolo Coronado and playing baseball games with some of the boys at St. Boniface. He said the ballplayers at St. Boniface were good and they rarely if ever won a game against them. As a teenager Charlie played piano in a musical group performing in Banning and some of the desert communities. Growing up in Banning in the 1930s was a special time when the barrios, though separated by a few blocks from each other, created a feeling of community. When Charlie returned to Banning to visit in the 1950s and 1960s, everything was different from what he remembered it to be. So much of the neighborhoods had been destroyed there was little left of the small town community feeling he remembered.

All the participants interviewed for this article remember Baldera's Market on the northwest corner of Alola and Livingston in Chancla. There were several steps leading up into Baldera's Market which was the main hangout for kids who would gather to watch the occasional fight across the street at Mike's Place. Baldera's was an important market for all the residents of Chancla and Sapo as well as most of East Banning.

There are slight variances in the remembered boundaries of Chancla, Sapo and Lagartijo but everyone remembers them as being distinct neighborhoods with rivalries and unique characteristics indentifying all three of them. Rocks may have been thrown back and forth by kids protecting their turf but the rivalries were more friendly than hostile. Sometimes a boy from Sapo would get in trouble with his parents for wanting to date a girl from Lagartijo or vice versa and that's when the distinctions became more apparent. It is interesting to note that Chancla has another name attached to it which is more colorful in its description of the barrio and those who know Chancla know it by its more graphic name.

Photographs of Chancla, Sapo and Largartijo are few and far between. People were busy living their lives, not trying to document them. Today, a drive past the well-kept homes on Plaza and John Streets gives a feel of what the original Sapo area was like before the construction of the I-

10 freeway. If anyone has photographs of these areas, including Baldera's Market, please share them with the Banning Public Library!

The communities of the San Gorgonio Pass owe a great debt to the residents of La Chancla, El Sapo, and El Lagartijo. They have contributed to the development of Banning with their ethics of hard work and family pride and out of those contributions a great community was forged. It is the hope of the Banning Public Library that some individual, possibly a high school or college student, will be inspired to use this beginning research as the foundation for a paper or thesis on the unique barrio history of the San Gorgonio Pass. If you have a relative or neighbor who lived in Chancla, Sapo, or Lagartijo ask them to share their stories with you!

(Thanks to Charlie Ortega, Juanita Sibole, Richard Sanchez, Albert Diaz and John Santacruz for their contributions to this article)

Caption for Map:

"A 1947 map of downtown Banning (pre-I-10 freeway) showing the approximate boundaries of the three historic barrios in Banning; "La Chancla," "El Sapo," and "El Lagartijo."

Caption for Sketch:

"A sketch of Baldera's Market, a corner stone and meeting place on the corner of Livingston and Alola Streets." *Courtesy of the Mexican American Scholarship Dinner.*