

Moreno family builds legacy in Vacaville

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‘At the turn of the century, the governor of Hawaii came up with the idea that maybe the Portuguese and Spanish people would be good to work in the fields. They had knowledge of sugar cane, because sugar cane was raised in many of the Spanish colonies.

“So a flier was circulated in Spain offering work and free passage to Hawaii. I have a flier, which states the conditions: They would be paid \$24 in gold. Women got a few dollars less and children from 12 to 18 got another amount. They encouraged people that were married and had children. About 10,800 immigrants came during the years 1907 to 1913.

“My family left Spain in the year 1911. They were from Aldiere in the providence of Granada. My father, Augustine Moreno, and my mother, along with her family, came on different ships. They weren’t married at the time. My mom was also Moreno - Maria Dolores Moreno. They were from the same village, but they weren’t related.

“My father went to work in the sugar cane fields in Maui and my mom went to Ewa Plantation on the island of Oahu. After about six months my father said that he knew there were two young girls from the village living in Oahu and he was going to see if he could court one of them. He courted my mom and they were married there.

“My grandpa was very unhappy in Hawaii. He was working hard. They used to buy their food in the company store, so to speak, and he told me that to be a slave in a strange land he might as well have been a slave in his own country.

“He heard from some people who came to California that it was a lot like Spain; there were a lot of orange trees and fruit and the climate was good. So they decided to come over here. They came to California in the year of 1913. They heard from other families about Vacaville and they came directly here.

“My father went to work for Southern Pacific. He was working on the railroad tracks between Suisun and Elmira. One night - this was about 1920 or 1921 - they were coming home from work on those handcars that run on the track. They had oil and kerosene cans in there and somebody carelessly lit a cigarette and threw the match. Everybody panicked and my father fell forward and the handcar hit him. He spent seven or eight months in the hospital in San Francisco. He broke his ribs, so they put two steel ribs. He died of cancer 10 years later, I think as a result of his accident.

“After the accident, he went to work on the ranches. A lot of Spanish people worked on the farms. In Spain they have fruit trees and grapes, so they knew all about the agriculture and farming.

“I was born on Feb. 19th in 1927. Our house is still standing, 119 Kendall St. My family worked a lot on the Bassford’s ranch, Cherry Glen. In those days, when they went to work on the farm, they would live on the farms the whole summer in tents or little houses that the farmers had for them. None of them had cars, and the farmers didn’t want to go back and forth everyday to pick them up.

“When my father became sick, I was 5 years old and I went to live with my grandpa. I lived there for two years. When we sat down at the table as a family to eat, we had to speak Spanish. I wish I had been that smart to do that with my children. The older you get you find out how smart they were. He didn’t want us to forget the Spanish language, our roots. Now I feel a certain happiness when I go to Spain and I can speak to my cousins.

“My father died when I was 7 and my mother had to raise us. She worked in the sheds cutting fruit, which was to be dried. I remember being 8 years old going with my mother and cutting fruit. We weren’t very fast, but we were there with our mother. Then you get to pick prunes off the ground. From the time I was 8 years old, I didn’t know what it was to play. We had to work. My father had died and it was just my mom, my brothers and me.

“My mom was pregnant when my father died. She named the baby Augustine for my father. When he was 3 years old, we were working on a farm and he was playing under a gasoline tank. The 2-by-4s that hold the tanks were missing or fell off and the tank fell and killed him. My mom cried a lot. I often wondered when she was going to get over it. Then I had a son that was killed three years ago and now I know.

‘My mother had family here. She was 12 years older than my aunt and 10 years older than her brother. When my grandmother died, they were still young and they moved in with my father and mother. My aunt married, but her husband died shortly after my father died. We spent a lot of time together and my cousins we were like brothers and sisters.

“Christmas we always spent together. We were Catholic, so on Christmas Eve it was fish or chicken. Christmas Day we would have meat. I still make a lot of the Spanish foods - fried chicken, rabbit, paella, rice, potatoes. Spanish food is very European, meats and sauces.

“My mom worked packing fruit for shipping in the years 1920 to 1940. She worked at the Bucktown Ranch, McKevitt’s packing sheds, Pacific Fruit Exchange and Lamberts. Just about all the ladies who were packing were Spanish. There would be an Italian lady here and there, but it was mostly the Spanish ladies. About four or five women would work in the packing sheds on the ranches and more at the Pacific Fruit Exchange and American Fruit Exchange.

“We grew up during the Depression, but we lived better than the people in the city. Our clothes were not as nice as other children, but we never starved. We had tomatoes, bell peppers and fruit in our gardens. You had chicken coops in your backyard and rabbits. My mom would go out, get a rabbit, hit it behind the head and we’d have fried rabbit.

“I was going to school in the ‘30s. We had a class of 40 and 20 of us were of Spanish decent. Every year, the

last month of school, I would transfer to the country school. That was the time of year my mom would work on the ranches and that's where we lived. Cherry Glen is only three or four miles out of town and the E.K. Rogers Ranch is only about six miles, but we lived there.

“When the war broke out, I was a freshman in high school. Of course, the men went to war, so there was a shortage of labor and I worked on the farms. Then in 1945, I graduated and went into the service. When I got out of the service I worked for Mr. Cadina for nine years. The Spanish people owned grocery stores in Vacaville. Mr. Cadina and Mr. Lorenzo had these big grocery stores.

“Then my brother, Tony, and I had a bakery here in town until I got an allergy from the flour. That was 1957. I went back to work at the grocery store delivering groceries and then they notified me they were giving up the delivery part of it. By now I was already married with two little boys.

“On the last day that I was working there, they had a dinner for me. A lady who came into the grocery store all the time said, ‘Why don't you try the Nut Tree? You know about fruit and everything.’ I got a job buying fruit they didn't have locally. The Nut Tree had a lot of their own fruits, peaches and apricots and they would buy a lot from farmers here. They bought locally if a farmer had beautiful tomatoes, but no one had lettuce, cucumbers, zucchini squash, so we would go to San Francisco and buy fresh fruits and vegetables.

‘About seven months later they opened up the plaza where they had a hot dog stand and served sandwiches. They asked me to manage the plaza and sent me to management school in Los Angeles for about two months. I enjoyed my years at the Nut Tree tremendously.

“Then my mother-in-law and father-in-law, who owned the Monte Vista Motel, wanted to retire and they asked us if we wanted to run the motel. It was the family business and, of course, my wife, Carmen, wanted to go there. I gave the Nut Tree three months notice.

“Vacaville was small, it was a little hamlet, when I was growing up. When I went to high school, there were only 200 of us. We were like brothers and sisters. Even now we still hug each other.

“There was no television. No bowling alleys. All there was was the theater. We loved the movies. And getting together and having parties. . . . dances, we'd dance with everybody.

“Everybody worked, unless their fathers and mothers had a lot of money. They worked on the farms or bagging groceries if they were older. But if you were 8 or 9 years old and you had to work, you worked in the farms. I looked forward to going and living in a tent. It was a happy time in our life.

“When we worked on the farms, they talked about Spain. At nighttime you'd get around a little campfire and they'd talk. The men would play cards and the women would talk and tell Spanish jokes.

“I remember the first trip to Spain. I was so happy to meet the family, but when I got home I went to the cemetery and said, ‘Thank you, Grandpa, for coming to America.’ “

“My family loved it here. My cousins in Spain asked me, ‘How is it in America? Do you get along? I thought about it and I said, ‘You know what I think that's what makes it great. In essence, we really are people from all over the world and it was strong stock that came here.’ It took a lot of guts to leave your country, leave

your family, friends, cousins, and go to a land with hardly any money in your pocket.

“The Moreno family in America, it is surprising how big it is. When we have a family reunion there is over 100 already with the little kids, husbands and wives.”

Author’s note: The Moreno family has printed a book about their family. In it there is a record of when and why they decided to come to America. There are pictures of the family and the ship they came on, the SS Willesdon, and a manifest of the ship’s passengers. A copy has been donated to the Vacaville Museum.