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## Resident Releases Book

After 12 years of research and writing, East Hampton resident Al Vela has released a book, Tracks to the Westminster Barrio: 1902-1960s. The book is published by VERSA Publishing Inc. of Illinois and is available for sale.



Westminster, Calif., is a city near the beaches of Orange County, where Vela was born and went to school. The town began as a Presbyterian colony in 1869. A nearby German colony was Anaheim founded in 1857. These colonies came into being shortly after the peace treaty, Guadalupe Hidalgo, was signed between Mexico and the United States in 1848. Mexico lost a huge chunk of its northern territories: California, Arizona, Texas, and New Mexico.

In the 1890s, railroad companies like the Southern Pacific and the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe recruited Mexicans in major cities like El Paso and Mexico City. The companies brought them into southern California by the trainloads, Vela said. Mexican immigrants were the preferred workers not just for the railroad companies but other businesses such as working in the mines in the southwest. Many ended up working for Ford Motor Company in Michigan, the meat packing companies of Illinois and Indiana, and the iron mills of Pennsylvania, following the crop as far east as Florida, New Jersey and New York.

Tracks is a story of how Mexican families moved into the Presbyterian colony in the 1900s. This area became known as a barrio or colonia/colony. Restrictive residential covenants made it unlawful for Mexican Americans to buy properties in white neighborhoods. These real estate covenants were outlawed in the middle 1940s.

As late as the 1950s, there were as many as 53 colonias in Orange County. Not only were they segregated into the "other side of the tracks," but also boards of education in the counties of Los Angeles, Riverside, San Bernardino and Orange initiated policies of sending Mexican-American children to "Mexican schools," Vela said.

"White society regarded Mexicans as of inferior intelligence, dirty, profligate, and lacking in morals based on so-called scientific studies," he said.

Westminster Elementary School District opened a Mexican school in 1929 in the middle of the barrio: Hoover School. Its stated aim was to "Americanize" Mexican-American school children, Vela said. In the book, Vela, born in 1938, tells of attending Hoover in kindergarten and first grade (1943-1945).

During World War II, the children of a local resident and his wife, Gonzalo and Felícitas Méndez, were refused admission at the white 17th Street School even though they lived within the school's boundaries. Gonzalo's three nieces and nephew — who all, Vela said, were white complexioned, blonde and of French-Mexican heritage with a surname of Vidaurri—could attend the school. Not so the three darker and noticeably Mexican Méndez children, he added.

The result was a civil lawsuit, Mendez et al. vs Westminster et al., involving three other defendant Orange County school districts of Santa Ana, Garden Grove and El Modena.

Superior Court Judge Paul McCormick heard the case in 1945 and ruled in favor of the plain-tiffs in 1946.

The school districts took the case to the Ninth District Court of Appeals in San Francisco where the seven judges ruled unanimously in favor of Mendez severely castigated the offending districts. The offending districts reluctantly dragged their feet and were held in contempt of court in 1946. The Westminster Board of

Education integrated the 17th Street School while the case was being heard in 1945.

According to Vela, lawyers for the NAACP were present at all court proceedings, as "friends of the court."

"Mendez v. Westminster directly influenced the NAACP's legal strategies applied in Brown v. Board of Education in 1954," Vela said.

Tracks includes chapters on life in the barrio (recreation, sports, work, education and religion) as well as on the Mexican Revolution (1910-19) and the Cristero Rebellion (a religious revolt from 1926-29) in the central states

of Mexico. Vela said it took him a year to research and write these two chapters using primary sources found in Mexico City.

"Tracks has been as 12-year labor of love," Vela said.

In 2000, Vela earned his PhD from the University of Connecticut with majors in bilingual and math education. He retired from New Britain Public Schools in 1998. He graduated summa cum laude with a 4.000+ average in his doctoral studies.

For information on the purchase of *Tracks*, contact Vela at siglerpark@gmail.com.