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Residents look to honor local history with monument



by Brennon Dixon
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West Los Angeles is home to a large population of Mexican-Americans whose families have called areas like Venice home for decades, but the area's ever-changing demographics has local residents worried their history may soon be forgotten if action isn't taken.

In the early 1900s, the “Red Cars” of the Pacific Electric Railway connected Los Angeles to Santa Monica and were popular among the many tourists who frequented the area. The railway system would become known as one of the largest electric systems in the world during the 1920s, and remains popular enough that residents still hope to one day create a heritage museum featuring a restored Pacific Electric Railway Red Car.

But Venice native Laura Ceballos believes the thousands of workers whose blood, sweat and tears went into laying the track deserve recognition as well.

Inspired by the Venice Japanese American Memorial Monument located on the northwest corner of Venice and Lincoln boulevards, Ceballos currently heads the Venice Mexican American Traqueros Monument Committee in an effort to create a monument that would reflect the history of “Traqueros” — the Mexican and Mexican American railroad workers who built the Westside’s railroad transportation system.

“It’s imperative to preserve the Mexican American history on the Westside,” because it is a historical fact that Mexican migrants and Mexican Americans partook in the construction of the interurban railroad systems, but many in town are unaware of their important contributions, Ceballos said, mentioning the influence that Traqueros had on the geographical area and its transportation system remained largely unexplored until former professor Jeffrey Marcos Garcilazo explored the early origins of “Traqueros” prior to his death in 2001.

“Although our history books do not mention nor teach it in our schools, it is important to acknowledge and honor the great contributions that were made by the Mexican American railroad workers who were known as Traqueros,” Ceballos said, “because educating the community would allow local youth and others take pride in their culture — you know — so that’s why this has all been very important to us.”

Committee members said during a meeting Tuesday that the project is quickly gaining support and has garnered endorsements from legislative leaders, civil rights activists and even Santa Monica College as a project that’s vital to the community.

“Seven years of hard work went into the creation of Venice’s Japanese American Memorial Monument,” Ceballos said, so the group believes it could be as many as three to four years before a monument is placed at Windward Circle in Venice.

“We know this isn’t going to be something that happens overnight,” said Hector Garcia, a member of the Venice Mexican American Traqueros Monument Committee.

“But we’re hoping by 2023 to have something here (at Windward Circle),” Ceballos said, explaining how the lengthy process could be extended depending on city and coastal commission permits.

“The least we can do is try because we need to educate the community and our youth, especially during these times (when) the current president of the United States has repeatedly attacked our race with negative and false stereotypes,” Ceballos said, adding she knows not everybody buys into the negative rhetoric, but that doesn’t mean the community wouldn’t benefit from learning more about the Traquero culture and how it influenced the development of the Westside.

“Mexican Americans have a long history and it needs to be recognized not just in Venice, but on the westside as a whole, including Santa Monica over to Los Angeles,” Ceballos said, highlighting how the mural could prompt local schools to discuss the history of Traqueros in a formal classroom setting.

“Like I said, there is very little preservation of Mexican American history in Venice and it’s not taught in our schools or in our history books,” Ceballos said. “The Traqueros have a story that hasn’t been told, and with all that’s happening in the area and country, we as a committee feel this is the right time to build something that would reflect our true history.”

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