

**Place Matters:
Memory, Community and Displacement
in Oxnard's Wagon Wheel Neighborhood**



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Executive Summary

Latino residents of Wagon Wheel Trailer Lodge were threatened with eviction in 2004 when their 169-space mobile home park and surrounding area was purchased by a land developer with plans to build new housing units and retail shops. Residents refused to move, so they organized a campaign for fair compensation and relocation rights and to be treated fairly by the developer and city officials. Residents secured the assistance of a local attorney to negotiate a fair settlement. After ten years of court battles and lobbying to the Oxnard City Council, residents of Wagon Wheel negotiated a settlement in summer 2014 that gave residents priority at the Wagon Wheel Family Apartments. This new housing complex included 120 units of affordable housing for low-income residents. Beyond a fair settlement, Wagon Wheel residents were interested in preserving the history of their tight-knit neighborhood. CSUCI students and Professor Alamillo conducted a community-based research (CBR) project to document the history of the Wagon Wheel Trailer Lodge community. For three semesters, students worked with members of the Wagon Wheel Residents Committee to document the stories of community unity, memories of struggle and resilience, discrimination, and displacement. It is important to recover the forgotten history Wagon Wheel residents to ensure that future working-class Latino/a neighborhoods are not easily displaced and erased from history.

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Introduction

Most people driving along the 101 Freeway will remember the Wagon Wheel Restaurant and Motel, a Western ranch style motel and restaurant that attracted residents, tourists, and famous Hollywood celebrities for over 60 years. The area that became known as “Wagon Wheel Junction” was bordered by California State Highway 1 (known as Oxnard Boulevard), on the north by U.S. 101 Freeway, on the west by Ventura Road, and the Union Pacific Railroad tracks at the southern end (*See Figure 1*). Oxnard developer Martin V. “Bud” Smith developed Wagon Wheel Junction in 1947 and later expanded into a shopping center with restaurants, a bowling alley, ice skating rink, retail shops and a mobile home park. Most were not aware that a working-class Latino neighborhood existed behind this shopping center. In 2001, Martin Smith died and two years later his company sold the 64-acre complex to a land development company with plans to build over 500 housing units and retail shops. The news generated controversy because trailer park residents were now being forced to relocate but had nowhere to go. While trailer home residents organized themselves into the Wagon Wheel Residents Committee to prevent their eviction, Oxnard city officials and the San Buenaventura Conservancy, a historic preservation group, were more concerned with saving Western-themed memorabilia and Bud Smith’s legacy. Legal battles ensued but their efforts failed in 2011 the Wagon Wheel Motel and Restaurant was demolished.

In early January 2014, Attorney Barbara Macri Ortiz, and community activist Enedina Rivera, representing the Wagon Wheel Residents Committee approached Pilar Pacheco, Director of the Center for Community Engagement about enlisting faculty and students to document the history and struggle of trailer home residents. Pilar approached Professor José Alamillo about a potential community service-learning project in Spring semester. After meeting with community partners, Professor Alamillo created a three-semester community-based research course, “Place Matters: Memory and Community in Oxnard Wagon Wheel Community” whereby students will

provide research as a service to the community partner. A total of fourteen students met monthly with the community partner and conducted qualitative research (archival, newspaper, photo documentation and 20 oral history interviews) with Wagon Wheel's Trailer Lodge residents. This research report is the final product of a year-long process of documenting the history of a forgotten mobile home Latino community in Ventura County.

A Brief History of Wagon Wheel Junction

In 1946, Oxnard real estate developer Martin V. Smith purchased 46 acres between Oxnard Boulevard and 101 Ventura Freeway in North Oxnard. This area became known as Wagon Wheel Junction. A year later, Smith opened a restaurant and a motel with a large neon sign "Wagon Wheel Restaurant & Motel" on top of a wagon driver and galloping horses (*See Figure 2*). Smith purchased several Navy barracks from Port Hueneme and acquired 42 sugar beet wagon wheels (including several from the American Sugar Beet Factory) for decoration (Paul, 1947). In 1952 Smith subdivided 40 acres into 53 parcels for lease by industry at \$25 per month. The *Oxnard Press Courier* reported that "It is the first time in Ventura County an industrial subdivision has been placed on the market" (June 7, 1952). A year later, Smith expanded to 64 acres for a mobile home park, industrial units and a commercial retail area that included a roller-skating rink and a bowling alley. These were all located on streets with Wild West theme names such as Petticoat Lane, Winchester Drive, Cactus Street, Saddle Ave, Surrey Circle and Spur Drive (Chawkins, 2009). On September 6th the new bowling alley opened with equipment transported from the old Green Mill bowling alley in downtown Ventura (Beyer, 1953). The bowling alley became a popular destination for bowling teams that competed in the Annual Wagon Wheel Bowling Tournament.

In 1953, ten acres were allocated for 171 single-wide and double-wide homes and recreational vehicles (RVs) on 900 Wagon Wheel Road that became known as Wagon Wheel

Trailer Lodge. Trailer sales ranged from 3,000 to 5,000 depending on the size and amenities (See Figure 2). In 1958, Ventura County Planning Commission conducted public hearings at Oxnard City Hall to consider a special permit application “to construct an addition to their present trailer park, The Wagon Wheel Trailer Lodge” (March 1, 1958). The application was approved and two years later the owners sold the Wagon Wheel Trailer Lodge to Mr. & Mrs. H. Epple and Mr. & Mrs. Kleinschmidt of Los Angeles and they opened more trailer spaces to families with children. By 1963 two trailer courts that comprised Wagon Wheel Trailer Lodge housed 200 people on 10 acres and were ready for annexation to the city of Oxnard (*Ventura County Star-Free Press*, July 4, 1963). A special election for the 70 registered voters at Wagon Wheel Trailer Lodge were asked if they wanted annexation to the city of Oxnard and water services from the Calleguas Municipal Water District. The voters approved annexation by a simple majority.

With the termination of the Bracero Program in 1964 county farm growers became desperate for labor so they turned to farm labor contractors to recruit labor from Mexico. This demand spurred an undocumented labor migration from Mexico into Ventura County. Some of these workers found affordable housing in labor camps and mobile home parks throughout Ventura County (Barajas, 2021). Some of the first Mexican residents found a room to rent and eventually saved enough money to purchase a mobile home unit in Wagon Wheel Trailer Lodge. Raul Tellez arrived in Oxnard in the early 1970 to work in the lemon orchards and eventually purchased a mobile home for his family at Wagon Wheel. He encouraged his friends to follow in his footsteps and years later became neighbors. “It’s like little Mexico,” Tellez told a *Ventura County Star* reporter (Levin, 2006). The increased migration of Mexicans to the county during the 1970s ignited nativist fears and attracted racist organizations like Knights of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK). On Sunday February 19, 1978, Tom Metzger, state organizer of the KKK arrived at the Wagon Wheel Motel claiming that he received a “tremendous amount of mail from the people in the

Oxnard area who support the Klan” (Devol,1978). Metzger spoke against “undocumented aliens” and “any culture that comes into any area and forces out white culture” (Devol, 1978). Metzger’s presence attracted police officers and 30 peaceful protesters who picketed outside the motel. Protest leader Gabriel Serrano of La Raza Unida Party, told the news reporter that “Metzger’s appearance represents a resurgence of former Klan activity in the county and is a threat to minority communities” (Devol, 1978). Despite Metzger’s attempt to recruit white Oxnard residents and instill fear among Black and Latino residents, the KKK left the Wagon Wheel Motel empty handed.

During the 1980s, Latinos accounted for one of every four residents in Ventura County, but by 2000, they had become the county’s largest minority group, about one of every three residents (Alvarez, 2001). The increased growth of the Latino population in these decades, due to a combination of legal immigration, high birth rates, and influx of new residents from L.A. County, meant there was more demand for affordable housing. When county voters passed the Save Open-Space and Agricultural Resources (SOAR) initiative in 1995 it curtailed urban sprawl and prevented the development of new housing on agricultural land. This restriction prompted land developers to purchase existing industrial and commercial retail property that had fallen into disrepair, like Wagon Wheel Junction. During the early 1990s Martin v. Smith & Associates proposed a \$250 million renovation plan for Wagon Wheel but four of Oxnard’s five city council members expressed concerns about crowding (Breuer, 1992).

Wagon Wheel Trailer Lodge & Wagon Wheel Residents Committee

Behind the skating rink was the 169-space Wagon Wheel Trailer Lodge that included 80 recreational vehicles and 171 conventional mobile home units (*See Figure 3*). The recreational vehicles remain for a few months, whereas those in mobile homes have lived there for several

decades Although mobile homes had small yards, residents cultivated gardens and fruit trees that fed their families and neighbors (*See Figure 4*). Approximately 306 adults and 134 children resided in 171 homes with the majority owning their mobile home. The average tenancy of 11 years, with the longest tenancy of 46 years and the shortest of four months. 41% of the residents lived in the neighborhood for over ten years, 27% have lived in the neighborhood between ten and five years, and 32% lived in the neighborhood for less than five years (Star Management, 2015). Most of the residents were low-income families, seniors and disabled. There were 26 elderly residents and 19 with special needs. Within the families living in the mobile homes there were individuals who were raised in the neighborhood and now had families of their own. One third of residents were farm workers who lived in the neighborhood for over forty years and found beauty in their community gardens where they farmed fruit and vegetables for the entire neighborhood (Rivera, 2012).

In 2003, Martin V. Smith and Associates sold the 64-acre Wagon Wheel property to Messenger Investment Co. of Newport Beach (renamed Oxnard Village Investments LLC) and planned to build a mixed-use community of apartments, condominiums and townhomes condominiums and retail stores (Griggs, 2007). The new owner decided to close the mobile home park neighborhood because they were old and dilapidated. Most mobile home parks built in the 1950s and 1960s as short-term, with an economic life of 20 to 30 years. Thus, the new owner began the closure process to redevelop the property as a residential community of condominiums and town homes with some commercial space (Star Management, 2015). Their plans were to evict the residents of Wagon Wheel by relocating their mobile home to other park within a 150-mile radius, place residents in alternative housing (apartment, senior housing, Section 8 housing) or buying their homes for a lower cost with six months of free rent (Star Management, 2015). The surrounding mobile home parks, however, refused to accept Wagon Wheel mobile homes. The age

and conditions of many of these homes became a problem. It is almost impossible to relocate them without damaging them in the process. Buying a new home was out of the question for many residents. Very few in the community have sufficient income to afford to rent or buy a home in Oxnard or Ventura. Consequently, the waiting lists for affordable housing apartments are very long. All these barriers left the Wagon Wheel residents without any housing options (Rivera, 2012).

In 2004 the Wagon Wheel Residents Committee contacted attorney Barbara Macri-Ortiz to help defend their rights. Macri-Ortiz informed them that by law, the new owner could not evict them and would need to help relocate them. She advised the Committee to engage in civic engagement and political activism at the city level. In 2005, residents lobbied support from Oxnard city council members since the mobile park could not be demolished without permission from the city planning commission. Committee were registered voters, so they used their political capital to lobby city council officials. They received strong support from Councilman Tim Flynn who promised them that the new developer will have to commit to the relocation “in writing” before he approved the closer permit (Levin, 2006). Essentially, the residents of the Wagon Wheel Community are not powerless, rather they were politically aware and acted on behalf of their community’s best interests. Committee members attended numerous public hearings and petitioned the city for help explaining that they could not sell their mobile homes and find vacant spaces in Ventura County’s mobile home parks. No buyer would even consider purchasing their mobile homes knowing that the Wagon Wheel Junction was in the process of being demolished.

On October 2, 2008, the Wagon Wheel Residents Committee achieved a small victory when their demands were incorporated in the Mobile Home Park Closure Permit approved by the Oxnard Planning Commission. The permit guaranteed replacement low-income housing units for residents of Wagon Wheel Trailer Lodge. They also received a fair compensation for the loss of

their mobile homes. Most importantly the Closure Permit guaranteed that they would be allowed to continue living in the mobile homes until the new affordable housing unit was completed (Star Management, 2015). Initially, the new owner promised to give residents \$2,500 to move their trailer elsewhere. This was a ridiculous offer, according to Enedina Rivera, “because mobile home parks would not allow older trailers to be moved into their park” (Rivera, 2014). Because of the advocacy of the Wagon Wheel Residents Committee, they secured relocation rights to the low-income apartments and each family received a minimum of \$38,000 to purchase the mobile trailer. Although some residents wanted to continue to fight their eviction, the Committee understood that it was best to negotiate a good deal rather than continue fighting.

During the three years of negotiation, the San Buenaventura Conservancy, a historical preservation non-profit organization, sued the city of Oxnard to stop the demolition of the Wagon Wheel Motel and Restaurant because they declared the building a historical landmark (Hadly, 2009a). The Conservancy received support from the Ventura County Cultural Heritage Board, Los Angeles Conservancy and the Friends of Old Oxnard who wrote letters of support for the landmark designation. The Conservancy did not want to stop development, rather they requested “A small parcel containing the Motel and Restaurant could become a shining example of mid-century, themed, roadside Americana and the entrepreneurial spirit of Martin V. Smith, Oxnard’s most significant developer” (Schaf, 2008). The San Buenaventura Conservancy never approached the residents about their feelings towards the restaurant and motel. Attorney Barbara Macri Ortiz and the Wagon Wheel Residents Committee disagreed with the Conservancy about the historical landmark designation. The Western theme motel and restaurant was problematic to mobile home residents because the cowboy was racialized as Anglo and gloried the oppression of Native people. Ultimately, the city declined to make it an official landmark and the lawsuit failed when another lower-court judge ruled that preserving the roadside restaurant and motel was not financially

feasible (Hadly, 2009b).

Housing, Redevelopment and Latino Communities

Before collecting oral history interviews, students read secondary literature on housing, redevelopment, displacement, and eviction battles in Mexican American neighborhoods throughout California and Southwest. The most notorious example of displacement and removal in California was the eviction of 1,100 families from Palo Verde, Bishop, and La Loma neighborhoods, commonly known as Chavez Ravine. This tight-knit community consisted of housing, schools, churches, stores, and playgrounds, considered by the Los Angeles Housing Authority as “blighted” and “slums.” When city officials informed residents that their homes would be torn down for the construction of a public housing project, they organized a resistance campaign. This resistance was broadcasted in television in 1959 when police carried Aurora Vargas as she kicked and screamed, while the bulldozers destroyed her home. Eventually, the city dropped the housing project and sold the land to the Brooklyn Dodgers owner who built a modern concrete stadium on top of Chavez Ravine. The controversial history of Chavez Ravine community has been a popular subject among photographers, journalists, artists, playwrights, musicians, and scholars (Hines, 1982; Parson, 1993; Normark, 1999; Lopez II, 2009; Cooper, 2005, *Culture Clash*, 2003).

While Chicano/a and Latino/a scholars have emphasized the displacement and forced removal of Chavez Ravine residents, Tara Yosso and David Garcia (2007) take a different approach by focusing on the “community cultural wealth” of Chavez Ravine. Using a critical race theory approach, Yosso and Garcia (2007) analyzed the theater play, *Chavez Ravine* performed by Culture Clash to uncover the cultural assets, strengths and resources that sustained the neighborhood residents and nurtured individual and collective forms of resistance. The theater play

offers a critical historical account of institutional racism and community resistance and community resistance but also the cultural wealth that sustained them through their struggle to maintain their homes and community.

After reviewing the literature on Chavez Ravine, we asked ourselves whether there were similar neighborhoods displaced because of public housing, urban renewal, and freeway construction projects in Ventura County. We found one example of a multi-ethnic neighborhood known as Tortilla Flats, located in between Ventura River and Palm Street, in downtown Ventura and was displaced in the 1950s by the 101 Ventura Freeway. Tortilla Flats neighborhood originated from a Chumash village "Shisholop " before the Spaniards arrived followed by Mexicans, Anglos, Asians, and African Americans. Because the neighborhood was flat and prone to flooding during heavy rains, housing was more affordable thus attracting working class families who worked in the walnut, apricot and citrus orchards and packinghouses (Johnson, 2013; Olney, 2015). During the 1920s and 1930s the neighborhood grew with more residents, businesses including Las Palmas Chile factory, Bennie's Market and the Green Mill Ballroom. It was in 1942 with the movie premiere of John Steinbeck's Tortilla Flat that residents started calling their neighborhood "Tortilla Flats." In the 1950s, the building of the Casitas Dam reduced the Ventura River to a trickle and in 1958 the State of California's Department of Transportation condemned all the homes and properties to create space for the construction of the 101 Ventura Freeway. From 1958 to 1963, residents received eminent domain notices and were forced to move out of the neighborhood. Like Chavez Ravine in Los Angeles, Tortilla Flats residents were forced to relocate with family and friends or rent a home in nearby communities. Many residents moved to the new Westview Apartments owned by Ventura Housing Authority in Ventura Avenue or to East Ventura and Saticoy where house prices were more affordable. The history of this close-knit neighborhood was preserved by a local historian, Moses Mora and artist, M.B. Hanrahan, who collected oral

histories, photographs and painted two large murals under the 101 Freeway overpass on South Figueroa Street (Garza, 2008).

The second example was Cabrillo Village located in Saticoy (named after Sa'aqtik'oy, a Chumash village,) that housed Mexican citrus workers from the 1930s until they were threatened with eviction in the 1970s for organizing a United Farm Workers union. Worker residents successfully resisted their eviction from the Saticoy Lemon Association and purchased the land on which their homes resided. Cabrillo Village began as a labor camp in 1936, when the Saticoy Lemons Growers Association built 100 dormitories for its unattached Mexican male workers who worked in the orchards and packinghouses (Bandy, 1992). By the late 1930s families started to move into cramped housing quarters and enduring poor living conditions. By the onset of World War II, the Association built additional housing to accommodate workers from Mexico as part of the Bracero Program. In 1974 worker-residents were fed up with poor working and living conditions, so they walked out of their job and launched a strike with the help of the United Farm Workers (Cornwell, 1975). Growers refused workers' demands and began to serve them eviction notices claiming that their homes were in violation of multiple codes and regulations. According to an Oxnard activist who supported the residents. "The Lemon Association denies that the UFW support had anything to do with the eviction notice and decision to demolish the camp. The Cabrillo Village thinks the opposite is true" (Gutierrez, 1976). They refused to vacate their homes. As the bulldozers arrived on November 24, 1975, workers and their family members linked arms to form a human chain and the standoff remained until finally the bulldozers backed down. 80 families joined together to pool their money and bought their homes and land beneath them for \$80,000. With help from outside organizations, residents formed a non-profit Cabrillo Improvement Association (CIA) to help residents purchase their homes, rehabilitate, and expand housing units. This was considered the first time that farm workers fought and succeeded in

purchasing their own labor camp (MacGregor, 1997). Journalists Neal Peirce and Robert Gukind (1993) described Cabrillo Village as an example of a “self-help” housing project that was transformed by farm worker activism from a “shanty town” to a more attractive low-income community. This remarkable achievement was due to families who refused to obey eviction notice and instead decided to fight for housing justice.

Unlike Cabrillo Village, Wagon Wheel Trailer Lodge was a smaller community with more limited resources available to fight back and purchase the land. Both neighborhoods had many farm worker families with children who attended local public schools and relied on extended family members for support. Similarly, residents launched a campaign to resist eviction and displacement. Like Cabrillo Village residents, Wagon Wheel residents advocated for housing rights through the Wagon Wheel Residents Committee and demanded to be treated fairly by the new owner and city officials. After ten years of court battles and lobbying the Oxnard City Council, residents of Wagon Wheel were partially successful in their efforts, with some relocating to the Wagon Wheel Family Apartments in summer 2014, but others struggled to find a home in one of the least affordable housing markets in the United States.

Methodology

The initial task for students was reading and discussing the long history of housing, redevelopment, and displacement of Latino communities in southern California. Then, students participated in a two-hour walking tour of Wagon Wheel Trailer Lodge led by Enedina Rivera, member of the Wagon Wheel Residents Committee and attorney Barbara Macri-Ortiz (*See Figure 5*). A week after the walking tour, we invited Wagon Wheel Residents Committee members to visit CSUCI campus and meet to discuss the shared goals of the community-based research project. We developed five main goals: (1) Document the Wagon Wheel Trailer Lodge’s history (2)

Interview current and former residents of Wagon Wheel Trailer Lodge (3) Take photographs of Wagon Wheel Trailer Lodge residents, mobile homes, and gardens (4) Present findings to community partner and campus audience (5) Develop a community archive and exhibit for the Wagon Wheel Family Apartments Community Center. We wanted to share these five goals with all residents of Wagon Wheel Trailer Lodge, so students organized a community potluck (*See Figure 6*). Taking time to get to know each other as people and building *confianza* (trust/confidence) together is key toward any successful partnership. This was important because many residents already distrusted outsiders who made promises to them about affordable housing options that were never realized.

After our community-based research project received approval from CSUCI Institutional Review Board and Wagon Wheel residents, students used three qualitative methods to collect data: (1) oral histories (2) photo documentation (3) newspaper and archival research. The first method was oral history interviews. Students read about the use of oral history interviews to uncover the power of place in Latino communities (Alamillo 2013). They also read Nancy Mirabal's a community oral history project on San Francisco's Mission District undergoing gentrification and displacement. According to Mirabal "Oral history gave us the tools to understand what people thought, felt, and experienced while their communities were being gentrified--difficult emotions such as fear, longing, desire, regret and anger" (Mirabal, 2013). Students develop an interview guide with 40 questions in Spanish and English asking about hometown, family, immigration, work experience, education, community, city politics, housing options and feelings about displacement. Each student conducted two interviews with two separate individuals. Students were allowed to choose the person to be interviewed if they already made a connection at the community potluck or ask the instructor to assign them. During the community potluck students asked attendees to sign up if they were interested in being interviewed and then developed an

Interview Schedule spreadsheet with name, address, and contact information. Students conducted a total of 20 personal interviews (in both English and Spanish) of residents of Wagon Wheel Trailer Lodge.

The second method was photo documentation. This method uses photography as a tool to create images that document and answer specific research questions, they are asking their research topic (Rose, 2011). Students were provided with cameras to photograph important images selected by the interviewee. After conducting the oral history interview, each student asked the interviewee: What is something you would like for me to photograph that has important meaning to your family and community? The students were then required to write captions on the image to explain why they were meaningful. The use of photo documentation can provide rich insight into how communities feel about how issues of housing, redevelopment and gentrification were affecting them.

The third method was newspaper and archival research. Students researched for articles on Wagon Wheel Junction in *Los Angeles Times*, *Oxnard Press Courier*, and *Ventura County Star* newspapers from 1940 to 2015. Because we found limited information on Wagon Wheel's mobile home community in the newspapers, we decided to visit the Research Library in the Museum of Ventura County and Oxnard Public Library's local history room. At both libraries, there were few archival sources in the newspaper vertical files, ephemeral files, and manuscript collections.

Main Findings

From the 20 oral history interviews of Wagon Wheel Trailer Lodge residents, each had a unique and personalized story, but they all shared common themes. The **first theme** was difficulty finding affordable housing. Wagon Wheel residents expected to remain in the mobile home park for the rest of their lives. Because the great majority of residents earned low wages and the temporary

nature of farm work creates great difficulty acquiring low-income housing. Although residents fought to have priority for the low-income apartment complex built next to the mobile home park, they still must qualify at 60% of the medium income. There were many families who fell between 60% and 80% because their children worked and contributed to the household income, thus they had to find other options. When they tried selling their mobile home, they had no buyers because of redevelopment plans. Enrique Centeno, for example, struggled to find housing options for his family. Born and raised in Michoacan, Mexico in 1951, Centeno migrated to the United States at the age of 22 in 1972 and worked in the strawberry fields for many years. “Now we’re stuck in the middle” he told the student interviewer (Centeno, 2014). Although residents received priority to move into the Wagon Wheel Family Apartments, the rooms were small with a tiny kitchen and dining area. Another problem was that residents do not have a stable income. The application for the low-income housing requires previous income which varied depending on the jobs worked by the residents. So, if they are not working as much this current year, they will still be charged according to last year’s earnings. Also, even though they were renting the space in which their trailer home was located, they still had a sense of owning private property. The residents that moved to the low-income apartments will no longer have the privilege of living a private life. Centeno admitted that “I don’t know what I will do, I cannot find new trailers in Ventura and when I do, they are too expensive” (Centeno, 2014). Some residents opted to return to Mexico and gave away their mobile home to those that could move it elsewhere. Still others had to scramble and move in with family relatives or friends until they could find permanent housing.

A **second theme** was residents' previous experience in farmworker organizing. Residents worked in agriculture for many years and had advocated for better working conditions and higher pay by joining the United Farm Workers (UFW) union. The UFW has a long history organizing farmworkers in Ventura County (Barajas, 2012). These former UFW members were empowered

to fight their eviction. They joined the Wagon Wheel Residents Committee and kept members united throughout the entire legal process. According to attorney Barbara Macri Ortiz “The reason why we were effective is that we had a lot of ‘Chavistas’ at Wagon Wheel. The developer tried to buy up the leadership of the committee, but he failed. I like to compare our leadership to asparagus. You know how asparagus grows from the ground up, and once you cut it, more asparagus keep growing. So, like asparagus we had old and new leadership for over ten years” (Ortiz, 2014). The term “Chavistas” referred to supporters of Cesar Chavez, longtime leader of the farmworker movement in the United States. Don Raul Tellez lived at the Wagon Wheel Trailer Lodge for over 40 years and was involved in farm worker organizing in Ventura County (*See Figure 7*). He picked every fruit throughout California, Oregon, and Washington state until he settled in Ventura County in 1961. He remembered being treated badly by the Ventura Coastal Growers Association, a labor contracting agency. He recalled, “I did not like the low wages that I was receiving, and I complained to the supervisor, and they forced me out” (Tellez, 2014). This motivated him to join the United Farm Workers union. Tellez recalled that “Cesar Chavez really helped us a lot here in Ventura County...I knew Cesar when he visited La Colonia several times to help us organize the strawberry fields” (Tellez, 2014). He added that “Chavez helped us increase our wages by forcing ranchers to pay more for boxes and for us to get unemployment compensation” (Tellez, 2014). Tellez brought this organizing experience with the UFW to the Wagon Wheel Residents Committee and helped to fight for social justice in Ventura County.

A **third theme** was the “community cultural wealth” that helped sustain Wagon Wheel Trailer Lodge residents in the struggle to save their community. Tara Yosso developed the concept of “community cultural wealth” to shift the focus from a deficit view of communities of color and instead focus on the array of knowledges, skills, abilities, and networks possessed and used by communities of color to survive and resist racism and other forms of oppression (Yosso, 2005).

She identified six forms of capitals that communities of color possess--aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational and resistance capital. All these capitals were found in the oral history interviews, but the most dominant was “familial capital” defined as the cultural knowledges nurtured among familia (includes extended family and chosen family) that carry a sense of community history, memory, and cultural intuition (Yosso, 2005). “Everybody knows everybody,” recalled Sylvia Rodriguez who shared a mobile home with her husband and their three children. “I feel like my neighbor is my sister. It’s very sentimental to think it’s falling apart.” (Rodriguez, 2014). Another resident, Rosa Campos, who recently moved to River Park apartments in Oxnard, recalled that “We all treated each other like family and got along very well” (Campos, 2014). Rosa expressed how comfortable she felt living at Wagon Wheel especially when she felt ill, her neighbors would bring comfort food or tea remedy to share.

Oral history interviews also revealed two new capitals that help expand the community cultural wealth model—Gardens and Religious Traditions. Longtime resident Don Raul Tafoya expressed loss and despair, not about his old mobile home, but his backyard garden. Raul Tafoya had built a garden filled with lush green vegetable plants, vibrant flowers, and stooping trees with fruit (*See Figure 8*). Tafoya expressed that “Of all the things that I will miss from Wagon Wheel, is my *milpa* because it keeps me active and I get to see people who pass by” (Tafoya, 2025). A network of plants, usually of corn, beans and chili pepper growing together is known as “milpa” (a word from the indigenous Nahuatl language) that provides a balanced healthy diet. For Don Raul, his garden has nurtured his cultural identity and foodways traditions from Mexico as well as helped him create bonds with neighbors, exchange seeds with other gardeners, and to feed his family. These community gardening practices helped decrease grocery bills and strengthen community ties.

We also found a new form of community cultural wealth based on the residents’ Catholic

religious faith. *Las Posadas* and *Novenario* were popular traditions at the Wagon Wheel Trailer Lodge. *Las Posadas* is a Christmas tradition held throughout Mexico that tells the Nativity story of travelers singing songs from house to house until one designated house allows them to enter and offers festive foods to share. The *Novenario* was organized by residents, in which family and friends came together with their rosaries to pray for nine days during a death in the neighborhood. Another popular tradition was honoring the Day of the Virgin of Guadalupe on December 12th, considered the day when Virgin Mary appeared in front of Juan Diego an indigenous Indian man on the Hill of Tepeyac in 1531. On this day 15 year resident Marta Saldaña brought women together to walk around the neighborhood carrying a statue of Virgen de Guadalupe (*See Figure 9*). Religion was very important to Marta while she faced eviction. Marta identified as Catholic although she admitted that did not attend church as often she prayed every day to save her community from being torn apart (Saldaña, 2014). These Mexican religious traditions served an important coping function for residents who felt hopelessness and uncertainty about their future during the redevelopment and displacement process.

A **fourth theme** was a strong emphasis on education. A majority viewed education in a positive light even though many adult residents struggled to continue their education in Mexico. Parents also revealed how they made demands on the local Oxnard School District to add a bus stop at Wagon Wheel for their children. This was important for Nancy Morfin who also disclosed how she would seek help with homework from neighbors. Some were enrolled in community college, while others attended and graduated from California State Universities and University of California. In addition, Marta Saldana went to Adult Education classes at night to learn English as well. Many of the older residents have also tried to achieve other forms of education in addition to their occupation. Maura Avalos proudly stated how her two daughters were enrolled in community college and one daughter in high school (*See Figure 10*). As Avalos stated: “Without Education

one cannot progress and move forward in life” (Avalos, 2014). Despite their belief in education, many residents were concerned about moving their children out of the Oxnard Elementary School district once they moved out.

Conclusion & Recommendations

For three semesters, CSUCI students achieved four of the five goals of the community-based research project. They documented the rich history of the Wagon Wheel Trailer Lodge community through oral history interviews, photographs and archival research. Students designed a poster about the community-based research project and presented it at 2015 Celebration of Service and invited community partners, Enedina Rivera and Barbara Macri-Ortiz to attend the event (*See Figure 11*). Plans to present to our community partner at Wagon Wheel Family Apartments did not materialize because of lack of space in their community room. Unfortunately, we could not secure funding to develop a community archive and exhibit for the Wagon Wheel Family Apartments Community Center. We recommend that Cabrillo Economic Development Corporation consider a partnership with CSUCI students to design an exhibit of Wagon Wheel Trailer Lodge in the near future. In 2012, Dr. Alamillo and his students designed and installed an exhibit of Piru Labor Camp at Valle Naranjal Community Center built by Cabrillo Economic Development Corporation (Synder 2012). The Community Center could help create a sense of family and camaraderie among the displaced residents of Wagon Wheel. An exhibition will provide former residents a chance to reminisce on their past and give newcomers an opportunity to learn about the community cultural wealth that existed at Wagon Wheel Trailer Lodge.

Although residents of the Wagon Wheel mobile home park did not save their community, they achieved a partial victory of having their demands incorporated into the Mobile Home Park Closure Permit that was approved by the Oxnard Planning Commission. They demanded first

priority in one of the 225 affordable units at Wagon Wheel Family Apartments complex and fair cash compensation for their mobile home. These agreements did not guarantee that they would find affordable housing options and community gardens or open space for home gardening. Although the new apartments are smaller, they hope to continue the community bonds they established at Trailer Lodge. The destruction of the community will undoubtedly cause hardships and destroy relationships forged over decades. The troubling part of the whole ordeal is that the destruction of Wagon Wheel is to pave new land for urban redevelopment that will increase home prices. Actions like these give the notion that situated lives and communities are of lesser importance than economic growth. Wheel Trailer Lodge residents expressed feelings that their “sense of community” was least important, and the developer cared more about profit. It is imperative that the larger public comprehend what has occurred at the Wagon Wheel, so in the future working-class communities of color are not ignored or mistreated.

Ventura County is one of the most expensive housing markets in the nation with few affordable housing options for hardworking families and farmworkers who are struggling to make ends meet. Housing is a human rights issue, so we recommend that people get involved with housing advocacy groups to demand more affordable housing options. It is important to understand the battle to save the Wagon Wheel community because it is part of a much larger struggle of communities of color fighting for affordable housing and social justice.

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APPENDIX



Figure 1: Map of the Wagon Wheel Junction, 2005



Figure 2: Wagon Wheel Motel and Restaurant, 2005



Figure 3: Wagon Wheel Trailer Lodge Sign with Sugar Beet Wagon, 2004



Figure 4: Wagon Wheel Trailer Lodge Mobile Home with Garden, 2014



Figure 5: Walking Tour of CSUCI Students, 2015



Figure 6: Community Potluck with CSUCI Students, 2015



Figure 7: Don Raul Tellez looking at his mobile home.



Figure 8: Don Juan Tafoya and his beautiful green garden



Figure 9: Virgen de Guadalupe Shrine at Marta Saldaña Home



Figure 10: CSUCI Student Andrea Estrada with Maura Avalos



Figure 11: CSUCI Students at Celebration of Service with their Poster and Community Partners, Enedina Rivera and Barbara Macri-Ortiz, April 2014