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Villegas Family Honored at Annual Fred T. Perris Day



Perris Mayor Daryl Busch reads a proclamation honoring the Villegas family during the Jan. 31 Fred T. Perris Day while Barry Busch, representing Riverside County Supervisor Marion Ashley, holds a plaque to present to the family. At right, family members Benny and Louie Villegas look on.

Through six generations and nearly 100 years, the Villegas family has played a vital role in the economic, social and cultural life of the Perris Valley.

The story begins when Marcelino and Maria Bernal Villegas emigrated from their home in Mexico and eventually settled into a house at Third and C Streets in Downtown Perris, where they raised their seven children. The family found work in the region's agricultural industry, laboring to harvest the annual bounty of potatoes that helped feed a nation. The Villegas children attended Perris schools, earned extra money by cleaning local businesses and served the military.

Though the family has migrated throughout California, Perris retains a special place in their hearts and memories. More than 100 members of the Villegas family gathered at the historic Depot building on Jan. 31 to commemorate their selection as the 2015 Perris Pioneer Family. The celebration was part of the City's annual Fred T. Perris Day, an event named after the railroad engineer who laid out Perris.

Mayor Daryl Busch and City Councilman Julio Rodriguez joined the family in the ceremony, congratulating the Villegas' for their contributions to the City. Busch presented a plaque to the family on behalf of the City and the Perris Valley Historical and Museum Association. Riverside County Supervisor Marion Ashley's office also honored the Villegas family.



Perris City Councilman Julio Rodriguez speaks to the audience during the ceremony to honor the family of Perris pioneers Marcelino and Maria Villegas while Perris historian Katie Keyes watches..

"I am proud to be part of the City of Perris as we honor and recognize one of our pioneer families," Busch said. "It's a pleasure to be here to honor their history. It's important to know where you come from. It tells you where you are going."

Rodriguez said he was pleased to represent the City at an event that "remembers one of our oldest families."

"I always look forward to this event every year," he told the crowd. "Thanks for being part of Perris' history." Perris Valley historian Katie Keyes said Marcelino and Maria Villegas came from humble roots—arriving in Perris in 1924--but instilled in their children and grandchildren the values that led to their ultimate success: hard work, dedication and loyalty.

"Today the family enjoys success in the fields of corporate business, medical, education, military, law enforcement, engineering and other endeavors," Keyes said. "The Villegas family will always be one of the best families to ever come to Perris."

After arriving in Perris, Marcelino Villegas harvested potatoes for Harry Hughes, a well-known and respected farmer in Perris Valley.

The family also harvested watermelons and cantaloupes. Like many other farming families, the Villegas traveled to Utah and Arizona to harvest potatoes when those crops came due. In between potato farming, the Villegas children earned extra money by cleaning the Southern Hotel and Harry Schroeder's machine shop. They hunted ducks in Winchester. Marcelino Villegas was part of the team that planted eucalyptus trees used as railroad ties to keep the freight moving. Later, he and his brother, Delfino, helped relocate the Perris Valley Cemetery to its current location on Perris Boulevard.

Marcelino Villegas died in 1956. Maria died in 1975. Both are interred at the Perris Valley Cemetery.

"We feel honored and special to be able to tell our story," said Benny Villegas, a grandson of the pioneer couple who lives in Perris. "When you talk about the pioneers in Perris and your family gets selected, it's overwhelming."

Benny Villegas described a childhood short on wealth and material items but long on love and loyalty and friendship. The family residence was a welcoming place for not only the Villegas children but for their cousins and friends.

For fun, Benny Villegas and his siblings and cousins drove a 1948 Willys Jeep around town. They could shop at the Peoples' Store on D Street, where a handshake and a promise to pay for goods was as good as cash. For entertainment, they could attend the art deco theatre on D Street and go nearby to the soda fountain and buy a burger and shake for 35 cents.

"We will never lost sight of the values passed on to us from Marcelino and Maria," he told the audience. "We thank you. We love you, now and forever."

Louie Villegas, another grandson of the pioneers who lives in Corona, said the hard work, simple living and close-knit family ties made for an idyllic childhood.

"It will never come back," he said. "It was the best."

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