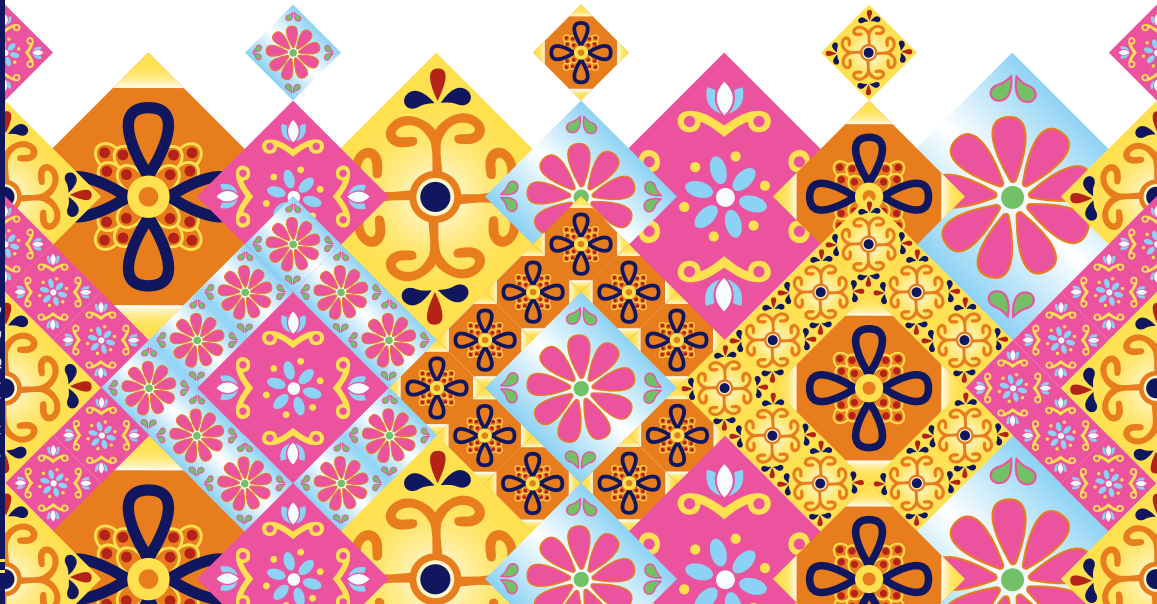
ARIZONA LATINA TRAILBLAZERS

Our history

Our story

Stories of Courage, Hope & Determination

Vol II



Arizona Latina Trailblazers

Stories of Courage, Hope & Determination

By Dr. Christine Marin

Copyright @ 2010
by Latino Perspectives Media and Raul H. Castro Institute

Phoenix, Arizona

Edited by: Maria Enciso, Micaela Rios, Michelle Klinger / Phoenix College

Designed by: J. Alfredo Hernández / Phoenix College

All rights reserved, including the right of reproduction in whole or in part in any form. The publishers grant permission to individual teachers to reproduce the contents of this book for educational purposes and classroom use.

Limit of Liability/ Disclaimer of Warranty: While the author and the publishers have used their best efforts in preparing this publication, they make no representations or warranties with respect to the accuracy or completeness of its contents and specifically disclaim any intent to defame or slight any people, places or organizations.

Printed in the United States of America
April 2010

ARIZONA LATINA TRAILBLAZERS

Our history

Our story

Stories of Courage, Hope & Determination

Vol II

By
Christine Marin, Ph.D.

Published by
Latino Perspectives Media
and
Raul H. Castro Institute

INTRODUCTION

As educators, social workers, labor leaders, entrepreneurs, scholars, judicial representatives, homemakers, nurses, ranch wives, or political representatives, Latinas and Hispanas have not been strangers in Arizona's history. It is important that their stories be recalled and remembered, and that we recognize their long-standing contributions to the development of our state as we approach Arizona's 100th anniversary of statehood in 2012. After all, these women are among the state's "trailblazers," women who established a strong social, cultural, and political presence prior to Arizona's statehood.

They are women from the families of Tomás de Belderrain, Mariano Urrera, Manuel de León, and Manuel Ygnacio de Arvizu—men who served as military officers in their Spanish presidio in Tubac in the 1750s. They are women whose families established large ranches as early as 1821 in southern Arizona—families like those of Francisco and Leopoldo Carrillo and Manuel Amado. We should know about Latinas like Pancha Acuña and her daughter Faustina, who were already in the Arizona Territory in 1863, accompanied by family members who came to the Prescott area to join in the gold rush. Or Juanita Bachichia, who established a boarding house for gold miners in 1864 on Lynx Creek in central Arizona's gold district. We know about Mexican women like Trinidad Mejía Escalante Swilling, the "Mother of Phoenix," who came to the Salt River Valley in 1867 and made her first home in Wickenburg. And we know that Anson P. K. Safford, who served as Arizona's territorial governor from 1869 to 1877, met and married two Mexican women: Margarita Grijalva of Tucson, who died in 1880, and Soledad Bonillas, and made them representatives who oversaw the governor's official territorial home. And we must not overlook the women who, along with their families, settled in the rough and tumultuous copper-mining areas like Clifton-Morenci, Globe-Miami, and the Bisbee area by the early 1900s.

The trailblazers that we honor in 2010 have established their own unique presence in Arizona's modern history. Their collective voices give meaning to our lives because their own lives shed light on the power of women's work and value. The power of their actions resolved matters of injustice, racism, poverty, inequality, school segregation, and unionism. And so we honor them and all that they represent as women, as heroines, as leaders, and as sisters. We must not forget the names of Julia Cecilia Cuesta Soto Zozaya, Plácida Elvira García Smith, Dora Ocampo Quesada, Alicia Otilia Ocampo Quesada, Anna Marie Ochoa O'Leary, Carmela Ramírez, and Barbara Rodríguez Mundell—Latina Trailblazers.

Plácida Elvira García Smith

"A Good American Name. A Good Mexican Name."

The Great Depression of 1929 to 1939 is remembered as the most crucial turning point in Arizona's history. For Mexicans and Mexican Americans in Phoenix, it is remembered as a dramatic time full of heroes (President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the New Deal) and Latina heroine Plácida Elvira García Smith. Her place in the annals of Phoenix is linked to the post-World War I history of the Phoenix Americanization Committee and the history of Friendly House, established in 1920 and directed by Carrie Ferris Green, Plácida's mentor.

From 1910 to 1920, the population of Phoenix more than doubled, increasing from 11,134 to 29,053. The reason for this dramatic change was the construction of the nation's first major water reclamation project, the Theodore Roosevelt Dam northeast of Phoenix. Construction of the dam began in 1903 and was completed in 1911. Its purpose was to provide water storage for the Salt River Project and flood control throughout the Salt River Valley, which boosted the agricultural economy in the Phoenix area and made the cotton industry essential in meeting the demands of World War I. Thousands of workers from Mexico were brought to the Salt River Valley to pick and harvest the much-needed cotton. They joined other immigrants already living in the Valley who forged their livelihoods in and around central Phoenix.

During the 1920s, an Americanization movement began to take hold in Arizona. In the

Courtesy of Sharon Sullivan

Plácida García Smith and Graciela Gil Olivarez

Salt River Valley, the Phoenix Americanization Committee was its tool to teach the language, customs, manners, laws, and ideals of America to immigrants, or the "foreign born." The idea of maintaining a "community house" or a "settlement house" or a "friendly house" in a Mexican neighborhood south of the city's railroad tracks that would serve as a facility for Americanization programs became a reality. In 1920, Friendly House, sometimes called Friendly Settlement House, was established. It was a small, wood-frame house located at 9 West Sherman Street. In 1928, the Phoenix Americanization Committee purchased a new wood-frame house at 862 South First Street, directly across from the original Friendly House, and Carrie F. Green was the first director. It served as a center for Americanization classes, job-training programs for men and women, citizenship classes, home-making and hygiene classes, and neighborhood meetings for Mexican and Mexican American organizations.

Plácida was born on August 7, 1896, in Conejos, Colorado, the state's county seat and the historic site of Spanish colonization, located in the San Luis Valley in south central Colorado. Plácida's paternal grandfather founded Conejos, and her father served as its sheriff and probate judge. Her mother's family, the Espinosas, came from New Mexico and settled in the area. The family was very politically prominent. As a young girl, Plácida was influenced by her father's legal work; she became conscious of the disparity between the rich and the poor, and she learned about the conditions of the working class. The differences disturbed her.

Courtesy of Friendly House

Portrait of Plácida Elvira García Smith holding a copy of the U.S. Constitution

Plácida attended elementary school in Conejos and continued her education at Loretto Academy, a Catholic religious institution in Pueblo,

Colorado, graduating as class valedictorian in 1915. She received her teacher's certificate and taught second grade at an elementary school in Antonito, not far from Conejos. Plácida obtained a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Utah in 1927 with a major in Spanish and a minor in sociology. She later completed graduate work in sociology at the University of California at Berkeley, and her love for education led her to study in the summers at Greeley State Teachers College and at the University of Mexico in Mexico City.

Plácida married Reginald G. Smith in 1928 and arrived in Phoenix in 1929. She began substitute teaching at local elementary and high schools. Their son, Reginald, was born in 1930. Disturbed by the poverty and racism she witnessed within the Mexican and Mexican American community in South Phoenix, Plácida soon became a volunteer social worker for Friendly House, working closely with its director to provide essential social services to those in need. But the work took its toll on Carrie F. Green, and poor health forced her to resign the directorship of Friendly House, leaving Plácida to become its director in 1931. Plácida quickly engaged herself in her full-time work, using her English-Spanish bilingual skills to teach classes on the U.S. Constitution and the English language, encouraging immigrants to seek American citizenship. Her favorite self-introduction for classes she taught was: "My name is Plácida García Smith. A good American name. A good Mexican name."

Early in the Great Depression, the federal government had no social programs in Phoenix to meet the needs created by the economic crisis. Plácida worked with private social service agencies and changed that. With New Deal funds, she established job training and hygiene programs for adults, and enabled her staff to work with the U.S. Public Health Department to establish "well-baby" and pre-natal clinics for Spanish-speaking families. Under Plácida's direction, Friendly House acquired federal relief funds to provide essential programs and services for

Courtesy of Sharon Sullivan

Plácida García Smith and her son, Reginald

the community, making it a major relief center in Phoenix. In addition, Friendly House was a major distribution center, working closely with the Red Cross to distribute food commodities to people and families in need. Hungry people received flour, lard, cornmeal, and occasionally milk and butter when they were available.

In 1940, Plácida and her friend, journalist María A. García, founded the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) Council #110, the first in Phoenix. They knew about the impoverished living conditions of Mexican immigrants in Phoenix and believed that many became easy targets of derision and discrimination. The women became convinced that they could raise the standard of living of underprivileged Mexican families by forming a LULAC council and working with national leaders to solve the problem. Plácida served as the first president of LULAC Council #110, which held its first meeting at Friendly House. In efforts to encourage American citizenship, LULAC Council #110 and Friendly House co-sponsored a series of lectures on citizens' rights and responsibilities. In 1941, LULAC's state convention was held at Friendly House, drawing delegates from the copper-mining towns of Clifton, Superior, Globe, and Miami. The convention marked the first time that Mexican Americans from mining-town communities shared their concerns about political issues with their compatriots in an urban setting.

Courtesy of Francisco A. Gallegos

Plácida García Smith; high school graduation

Wartime challenges in the 1940s offered new avenues for Plácida to continue to help others. She served on the board of directors of the United Service Organizations (USO), created to serve the educational and religious needs of the men and women in the armed forces. In 1945, Plácida spent time as a social worker at the Gila River Japanese Relocation Center, helping former Japanese American internees rebuild their lives after the war.

In 1956, Plácida was appointed to the Phoenix Parks and Recreation Board and was often recognized for her long-time work in the Valley. She received the Daughters of the American

Revolution Award of Merit in 1953 and was named the Phoenix Advertising Club's Woman of the Year in 1961. During that same year, Friendly House realized a goal it had been working toward for many years: it moved into a new building constructed at the site of the original Friendly House. The old wood-frame structure Friendly House occupied for more than 30 years was dismantled and moved to Surprise, Arizona, for use as a church. Plácida served as director of Friendly House from 1931 to 1963. She became its director at age 35 and dedicated 32 years of her life to the organization.

Plácida's dedication to Friendly House was strong, but her dedication to her family was stronger. As a widow, she raised her son while continuing her Friendly House directorship, and Reggie accompanied her to work on many occasions. Those who knew Plácida then have fond memories of seeing her son at her side. She was a dedicated, loving mother, and then a loving grandmother. After her death in 1981, Plácida's accomplishments were described in a local newspaper as having "helped 1,400 people to learn English and to become American citizens." Her legacy lives through her work and through her family.

In 1982, Plácida was admitted to the Arizona Women's Hall of Fame. The number of people she touched and her contributions to the community affected generations of not only Mexicans and Mexican Americans, but all immigrants who walked through the doors of Friendly House. She dedicated her life to those less fortunate, not only giving her time, but building a community of support, a community that would help people better themselves by teaching them independence and self-sufficiency. Today, nine decades later, Friendly House continues with many of the original programs and services, and it continues Plácida's legacy of serving the community she was so passionate about.

Courtesy of Sharon Sullivan

Plácida García Smith

As educators, social workers, labor leaders, entrepreneurs, homemakers, nurses, ranch wives, or political representatives, Latinas and Hispanas have long been at the forefront of Arizona's history. It is important that we recognize the impact of their individual contributions and imperative that their collective stories be recalled and shared, especially as we approach Arizona's 100th anniversary of statehood.

The life journeys of these women are filled with compelling stories that reflect the strength of their vision, their courageous actions, and their thoughtful advocacy. Their outstanding leadership formed strong cultural cornerstones, laying the foundation for women in leadership roles today.

And so we honor them and all that they represent, pioneers who forged our rich cultural heritage and strong role models.

Raul H. Castro Institute
PUBLIC POLICY | EDUCATION | LEADERSHIP

MARICOPA COMMUNITY COLLEGES
PHOENIX COLLEGE
ASU Center for Community Development and Civil Rights
ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

Latino Perspectives magazine