

When Latino veterans and decorated heroes of World War II came home to Phoenix, they knew they had yet another mission: To change patterns of discrimination against Latinos in Arizona.

Pete Dimas, a history professor at Phoenix College, chronicled the story of these Latinos in his documentary, *Los Veteranos of World War II: A Mission for Social Change in Central Arizona*.

In *Veteranos*, nine founding members of American Legion Post 41 in central Phoenix recount the transformation of themselves – and of Phoenix – as a result of their experiences serving in the war. The veterans formed their own post because they weren't allowed to join other American Legions, and they challenged barriers to Hispanics in politics, housing, health and education.

Now Dimas is experiencing his own transformation and new mission: He's retired from full-time teaching to begin a series of documentaries on veterans and the history of Latinos in Phoenix. He'll focus on the indispensable roles they played in shaping Valley society.

"The critical mass for the formation of this town we call Phoenix, it comes from the *Mexicanos*. Jack Swilling (often called Phoenix's founder) came from Wickenburg," Dimas says. "From the 1890s on, you have the movement of the *Mexicanos* through the river valley, bringing community and traditions and all those things. When it comes to labor, let's face it, this community was built on back of Mexican labor."

Dimas is a trained historian, and has written on the preservation of Sacred Heart Church (see *Saving Our Sacred Heart*, September 2006 *Latino Perspectives*). He also is a consultant on a survey of Latino historical structures in Phoenix. The professor also has contributed his expertise to a Latino history being compiled by the Phoenix

To purchase a copy of *Los Veteranos of World War II: A Mission for Social Change in Central Arizona*, contact Pete Dimas at dimas.pete@cox.net



PHOTO: MIKE MAEZ

Former history professor Pete Dimas: "The critical mass for the formation of this town we call Phoenix, it comes from the *Mexicanos*."

Historical Society, and on episodes on Valley Latino veterans produced by KAET Channel 8 and set to air in September.

He filmed *Veteranos* using a hand-held camera and edited it on a laptop. Recently, Dimas invested in a high-definition camera and other film equipment. The proceeds from sales of the *Veteranos* video go back into a fund to finance the next documentaries, Dimas says. In addition, books based on the films will be forthcoming to tell the stories of Arizona Latinos.

Dimas says true accounts of Latino contributions and accomplishments in Arizona are often left out of history books.

"Our history has been blotted out because there was big money based on real estate speculation," he says. "So they wanted to ignore the Mexicans. Arizona was advertised as an all-American city with a primordial desert and plenty of resources, which is a fat lie."

He adds, "The history has been told by the ones who made the money, not by the ones who have made the money-making possible."

Dimas' ultimate goal is to establish a Latino cultural center and historical museum in the former Sacred Heart church, off 16th Street and Buckeye Road.

The historian and a group of former residents of the Golden Gate barrio have submitted proposals to City of Phoenix to create a center. However, Dimas says, "There's no real commitment from the city."

One option that he is now working on is a Web site that would be a "virtual museum," Dimas says. But that will take funding and technical expertise, something he'll have to go out and find. Contributors and volunteers to the historical project can contact him at dimas.pete@cox.net.

Dimas says he hopes his historical project can contribute to a greater understanding of the Arizona Latino culture.

"When you reflect on the Latino history of Phoenix, it also reflects on the history of our country at this time," he says. "We are the fifth largest city in the nation."