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Sunnyvale recognizes history of Yugoslavian orchardists





Photograph by Keith Tharp

Barbara Mardesich stands in front of the newly unveiled panels at the Sunnyvale Orchard Heritage Park Interpretive Exhibit. She was the driving force to get the panels in place commemorating early Yugoslav orchardists in Sunnyvale

By **VICTORIA KEZRA** | vkezra@bayareanewsgroup.com | Bay Area News Group

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When Barbara and Nick Mardesich attended the opening of an exhibit at Orchard Heritage Park in 2001, they were disappointed that so few Slavic names were displayed and there was no information about their place in Sunnyvale's agricultural history.

The couple intended to fix that.

After more than three years' worth of research by Barbara Mardesich, two informational panels were added to the Orchard Heritage Park's interpretive exhibit, documenting the 62 Yugoslavian orchard families and their contribution to the city.

A ceremony was held at the park on Sunday, with Mayor Glenn Hendricks and Councilman Michael Goldman on hand. The mayor emphasized the need to preserve city history.

"The new panels show the names of Yugoslav families and help to tell the important story of the contribution they've made in the growth and history of our city," Hendricks said. "Sunnyvale's history has been one of growth and innovation, and the agricultural history of Sunnyvale remains important for us to remember even as we move into our new digital age."

In 1994 the city preserved 10 acres of apricot trees to recognize the city's agrarian past. It was officially designated as the Orchard Heritage Park in 1997. An "interpretive exhibit" was built next to the orchard in 2001 and features informational panels.

In February, the council approved the addition recognizing the city's Slavic history.

Mardesich undertook the project in part to honor her husband, who died a few years ago, and his heritage.

She conducted research, reaching out to families for information about the Slavs who came to the area in the early 20th century. She was assisted by the Sunnyvale Historical Society as well as Slavic groups Am-Slav and Napredak. The panels were designed by the historical society.

The former Yugoslavia came into existence following World War I in 1918 and included parts of Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Slovenia. According to Mardesich, many of the 62 Slavic families in Sunnyvale came to the city during World War I to avoid fighting, with roughly 80 percent of those families hailing from the small island of Vis, off the coast of Croatia.

Many families had worked in vineyards on Vis, according to Mardesich, so it was a smooth transition once they arrived.

“There were big wineries on the island. They were used to working the land,” said Mardesich.

According to her research, Slavs were a large part of the agricultural community, growing apricots, cherries and prunes, with a few also growing pears and walnuts. Mardesich believes the Slavic influence began to be overlooked once farming in the city started to wane in the 1950s.

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