A new traveling exhibit, “Telling Stories of Mexican California: Real Life and Myth Making” has arrived at the Tuolumne County Museum on Bradford Avenue, and it opens to the public Sunday.
The exhibit focuses on the years 1822 to 1846, as California transitioned from secular mission-oriented Spanish territory to a non-secular land of huge, sprawling cattle ranchos, looming statehood, and ground zero for the impending Gold Rush.

“Due to the rich history of Mexican culture in our area prior to California’s entrance into the union in 1850, our museum was chosen to be the first in the state to be awarded this traveling exhibit,” Tuolumne County Museum and Historical Society staff said in a recent announcement.

The exhibition was conceived and produced by the California Historical Society in San Francisco, Erin Garcia, the exhibit curator, said Friday in a phone interview.

“We wanted to consider the Mexican period in California, which does not get a lot of attention,” Garcia said. “It was relatively brief — lasting less than three decades — and it was also before photography. So it can be hard to do an exhibition about this period using our collections. I decided to focus on how the Mexican period in California was portrayed in the years immediately following the U.S. takeover. After statehood, many people wanted to tell the story of Mexican California.”

The exhibit was researched by Garcia, Jessica Hough of the Thought Projects, and Debra Kaufman of the California Historical Society, and designed by Carole Jeung. Garcia said the exhibition was also reviewed by four historians: William Deverell, Rose Marie Beebe, Robert Senkewicz, and Margie Brown-Colonel.

“The overall story that emerges is that there were many different voices writing, documenting, or in some way telling both factual and fictional versions of California’s history that served different ends,” Garcia said.

“Some of these narratives painted a romantic picture of an idyllic bygone era — the Spanish fantasy past — which was largely promoted by white Americans. Spanish-speaking Californians sometimes also embraced the Spanish fantasy past as a way of maintaining authority over their history. Others used narratives of California’s history to emphasize contributions of Mexican people or to rail against the values of U.S. society.”
The exhibit is funded by the Henry Mayo Newhall Foundation of San Francisco. With that support the state historical society was able to select three sponsored venues to host the show for free, Garcia said.

“We picked Tuolumne as the Northern California venue based on their application,” Garcia said. “Our partner, Exhibit Envoy, worked with them to arrange the dates and scheduled them first so that the show would be on view during Cinco de Mayo celebrations, which originated in the area.”

Here in Tuolumne County, the Historical Society board of directors learned about the exhibit as it was being conceived, researched, and designed, and they applied for one of the three grants being offered by the state historical society to host the exhibit.

Chuck Holland, president of the Tuolumne County Historical Society for four years, said he got an email in early November from the state historical society, inviting them to apply for a competitive grant for small museums to be the first to host the new exhibit.

“We applied,” Holland said, “and at the end of November we were told we were selected.”

Holland and others with the society made a compelling case in their application that the county’s Latino Gold Rush heritage, already on display in the museum, would complement the “Telling Stories of Mexican California” exhibit, according to the state historical society.

Sonora was founded by people from Mexico, and the museum’s display reflecting local Latino history includes pictures and descriptions of Latino pioneers, their families and businesses, as well as a banner from the Mexican Benevolent Society.

There was a coordinated effort by local historians here in the Mother Lode to bring the exhibit here to Tuolumne County first because it overlaps with the recent discovery that the very first Cinco de Mayo celebrations in the U.S. occurred in Columbia.
Miners in Columbia from Mexico, Chile and Argentina received news in May 1862 of the Mexican defeat of the Second French Empire’s forces sent by Napoleon III in the Battle of Puebla and immediately recognized the significance of the young nation of Mexico defeating a European monarchy.

Columbia connections to Cinco de Mayo were established in a 2008 article originally published in CHISPA, the quarterly publication of the Tuolumne County Historical Society, by Dr. David Hayes-Bautista, a professor of Latino health and culture at the University of California, Los Angeles. He learned Columbia was the location of history’s first known Cinco de Mayo celebration while researching Spanish-language newspapers from the Gold Rush era. His CHISPA article later became part of the basis for his 2012 book, “El Cinco de Mayo: An American Tradition.”
People who come to see the exhibit at the Tuolumne County Museum may be surprised that though parts of the exhibit pertain to Northern California, “there really is not content specifically related to Calaveras or Tuolumne” counties, Garcia said.

Linda Emerson, a spokesperson for the Tuolumne County Museum and Historical Society, said she hopes the exhibit will help people remember and realize the obvious — that California, including the Central Valley and the Central Sierra, was all once part of Mexico, and Mexican American people were here in California before the Mexican-American War of 1846 to 1848.

Though Spanish exploration and dominance of California spanned centuries, from the 1540s to the early 1800s, and California’s Mexican period lasted less than three decades, the years 1822 to 1846 helped profoundly shape distributions of land, wealth, and power when California officially entered the union in 1850.

“Telling Stories of Mexican California reflects on this past, and how romanticized retellings made lasting impacts on the state’s culture and popular understandings of its history,” the state historical society said.

Details of the exhibit include a hand-drawn map that dates to 1841, titled “Diseño del Sanjon de Santa Rita,” maker unknown, that shows property in today’s Merced County near the San Joaquin River. The Spanish-Mexican map intends to show physical boundaries of land granted to Mexican citizens in California.

There’s a photo of Antonio Francisco Coronel, a Californio politician and ranchero, a mayor of Los Angeles and a California State Treasurer, from the 1880s. Coronel was considered one of the first preservationists in Los Angeles.

And there’s another 1880s map showing part of Rancho Jumal, an 8,926-acre Mexican land grant in present-day San Diego County, given in 1829 by Mexican Governor José María de Echeandía to Pío Pico.

Two hundred years ago, changes came rapidly to California, the state historical society said. In the span of eight decades, California had been the territory of Native Americans, Spain, Mexico, and ultimately the United States.
“People from different backgrounds sought to record and disseminate their accounts of California's past,” the state historical society said. “Of course, the creators of books, plays, promotional campaigns, family albums, and other media viewed California's history through the lenses of their own experiences and chose to present narratives that suited their purposes.”

The Tuolumne County Museum will be open to the public for viewing of the new exhibit this Tuesday. The Tuolumne County Historical Society plans to host a private reception and preview of the new exhibit this Thursday.

“Telling Stories of Mexican California: Real Life and Myth Making” will be on display this Sunday through June 2. The Tuolumne County Museum, at 158 Bradford Ave., Sonora, will be open 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Sunday, April 7, and staff hope to keep the museum open Sundays through June 2. The museum is also open to the public 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesdays through Fridays and 10 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. on Saturdays. It's closed Mondays.

The exhibit will also be on display June 23 to Aug. 18 in Santa Monica; Sept. 8 to Nov. 3 in Petaluma.


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