

MONTEREY COUNTY  
people



PHOTO BY SCOTT MACDONALD/THE SALINAS CALIFORNIAN

# Cultural heritage stems from many backgrounds

*Each ethnic group that settled here challenged the status quo while adding its contributions*

Monterey County is rich in cultural diversity from all corners of the globe. The Spanish were the first European colonists in California, and Monterey was the capital of the province of Alta California in the Spanish and Mexican periods through 1846.

**T**hey come from faraway places with strange-sounding names, names like Guanajuato, Pawhuska and Lugano. Not in dribs and drabs but as social tsunamis, each crashing in their time onto the shores of an established order.

Always more a stew pot than melting pot, Monterey County owes its amazingly rich diversity to those powerful forces.

The Spaniards were the first Europeans to explore and settle the Valley. But thousands

of years before there was a Europe, a thriving indigenous population lived here. In 1810, the region became Mexican territory.

Then came the waves. The region was acquired by the United States after the Mexican War (1846-48), and settlers from all points east poured in. At the head of the Salinas Valley, a new settlement — Salinas — was rising with dreams of becoming “the Chicago of the West,” populated by Americans from the upper South and Midwest.

They were followed by Chinese railroad workers, Danish wheat farmers, Swiss-Italian dairymen, French farmers, Japanese flower growers and Filipino field hands. In the 1930s, Americans by the hundreds of thousands left the Dust Bowl for work and a second chance in the Salinas Valley. “Okies,” they were called.

The latter half of the 20th century saw an influx of farm workers and their families from Mexico in a wave bigger than the Okie splash.

— Jim Albanese

