

Immigration bill sparks anger

by Bill Butler/OCN

The following set of articles are the last in a series. The first part on June 13 focused on the visual characteristics of the old barrio and the history of its name. Last week's articles focused on city and county use of federal funds in the area and further identified the nature of El Modena today.

This week's series concentrates on past and present racial issues: present day illegal immigrants and the community's past problems with discrimination.

The recent passage of the controversial Simpson-Mazzoli immigration bill in the House, combined with reports that local officials are planning to relocate the large gathering of Latinos in Orange, has sparked renewed interest and controversy in the east Orange community of El Modena.

For several years men and boys have used the corner of Chapman Avenue and Hewes Street as a common gathering place to be picked up for day work by local construction contractors, growers or just residents needing help for gardening or other odd work.

Of late the number of people has grown so much that merchants in the area and some residents began complaining to the Orange Police Department.

Because many of these Hispanics are believed to be here illegally, the question of what to do with them has become a political hot potato for local officials and a source of controversy for El Modenans near the El Modena Center

which is one possible location being considered for the gathering.

Presently the matter of relocating the workers, known to average 50 to 70 in number, who gather each morning, is being handled by the Orange County Human Relations Commission.

It was contacted by officials at the Orange Police Department, and is surveying residents in El Modena concerning where to relocate the men.

"There's places like this all over the area," said Jean Forbath, board director at the commission. "It's just a cultural thing that the men gather at street corners for work. The problem in El Modena is that too many are gathering in a small area."

The commission is considering several locations, such as the El Modena Center, El Modena Park and Yorba Park. They are also considering certain restrictions on the men, such as limiting the hours they gather, according to one official. Facilities for the men are also desired, such as restrooms.

The solutions sought after in the case of the men gathering in El Modena came at the height of national attention on the flood of illegal immigrants entering the U.S. across the border from Mexico.

While El Modenans were reacting to news of the relocation, the nation and particularly the Hispanic community was reacting to passage of the Simpson-Mazzoli bill.

At a Thursday press conference held at the Federal Building in Santa Ana, several community

leaders spoke out harshly against the immigration bill.

Father Alan Deck from the Roman Catholic Diocese of Orange said the provisions of the final bill should make naturalization of undocumented workers "as simple as possible."

"It's probable," he said of the present bill, "that the workers will find it too confusing to come forward to be naturalized. They'll probably stay in hiding as they have in the past."

Representatives of the American GI Forum were also present to speak out against the legislation.

National Chairman Jake Alarid said the immigration bill passed by the House is "anti-Hispanic."

Mario Mareno Lopez, president of the local Mexican Brotherhood, related a personal story of being arrested and taken to the Mexican border - despite his pleas. "They did not listen to my complaints," said Father Beck, who interpreted for Lopez. "They did not try to find out if I was a citizen or not, they just took me to the border."

Leo Avila, also of the GI Forum, said that the attempts to relocate the El Modena men "is a movement to the advantage of the business community - the workers provide cheap labor to the area."

Plans for the well-being of the workers, merchants and the community began to take shape about one month ago when a gathering of local leaders took place.

A second meeting was held and attended by Orange Police Chief Norm Traub, Tom Saenz, administrative assistant for special projects at the Orange Unified School District, Jim Whitaker, majority owner of the Save-On shopping center at Hewes and Chapman, Councilman