

## The Pacific Electric Labor Camp in Culver City

Carlos Valverde, CC Equity and Human Relations Advisory Committee

The Pacific Electric Labor Camp in Culver City was located south of the Ivy Substation, in an area that today includes the Metro Expo Station and Howard Industries. Although no visible traces of the camp remain, it once played an important role in the city's early history.

The labor camp was part of the Pacific Electric Railway system, a vast network of railways throughout Los Angeles begun by Henry R. Huntington in 1901. Operating and maintaining this expanding system required large numbers of unskilled laborers. In the early twentieth century, railroad workers came from diverse backgrounds, including Chinese, European, African American, and Mexican communities. Mexican workers, known as *traqueros*, laid more than half of the railroad tracks in the western United States (Garcialazo 1).

The term *traqueros* refers to Mexican and Mexican American railroad workers who helped build and expand the U.S. railroad system in the Southwest from the mid-1800s to the mid-1900s. The word comes from an Anglicized Spanish term related to "track," reflecting their work as track layers and maintenance workers.

To build and maintain his railways and resorts, Huntington actively recruited Mexican immigrants, whom he viewed as dependable and low-cost laborers. The Pacific Electric Railway Company (PERC) provided housing for many of these workers at no cost, placing them in labor camps throughout Southern California. These included camps in Culver City, South Pasadena, and near the San Gabriel Mountains. While the company promoted an image of caring for its workers, many camps consisted of overcrowded section houses or converted boxcars with limited sanitation and harsh living conditions.

PERC later began allowing workers' families to live in the camps after realizing that employees were more motivated when their families were nearby. The company maintained a strongly paternalistic attitude toward the *traqueros*. For example, one PERC newsletter describes efforts to teach *traquero* wives basic hygiene and gardening. At the same time, *traqueros* were segregated from white workers by the company.

Daily life in the camps reveals the strong culture and sense of community that existed among Culver City's *traquero* families. The camps were home to both single workers and families with children. Men and women together built lives centered on work, family, and shared responsibility.

A central feature of camp life was the social network formed through baptism and the tradition of *compadrazgo*. Families selected close friends to serve as godparents (*compadres*) to their children. These relationships carried significant responsibility and were often regarded as equal to family ties. Through these bonds, families supported one another by sharing food, water, childcare, and household labor.

Although Mexican women rarely worked directly for the railroad, many supported their families through what is known as an “informal economy.” They earned income by doing laundry, sewing, preparing and selling food, selling small items door to door, or working as maids in nearby households. These efforts were essential to family survival and community stability.

The existence of the Culver City labor camp came to light in 2021, when resident Amanda Chacon shared a birth certificate with the Culver City Historical Foundation showing that her father, Efren Rinaldo Heredia, also known as “Fred,” was born at the camp. Based on her father’s memories, Chacon and her aunts, Rosie Soto and Irma Ramos, later gave an interview to the Culver City Historical Society describing life in the camp.

According to their account, the camp included a large, U-shaped, barracks-style building, along with shared outdoor bathrooms and showers. Many labor camps also had gardens where residents grew food. Chacon’s great-grandparents arrived from Mexico around 1917 and were assigned a small two-room living space, where they built a simple kitchen. Because there was no indoor plumbing, residents obtained water from outdoor tanks or wells. As the family grew, they were given additional space to accommodate more relatives. Ultimately, four generations of the Heredia family lived at the Pacific Electric Camp from approximately 1917 through 1953.

The exact address of the camp has not been confirmed. However, Chacon and her relatives recall that it was located on the block bounded by Washington Boulevard, Robertson Boulevard, Venice Boulevard, and National Boulevard—an area that is now home to Howard Industries.

Chacon’s aunt Irma recalled that as a child she felt embarrassed giving the camp’s address at school because, unlike her classmates at St. Augustine, her address was a P.O. Box. When she explained this to her brother Fred, he suggested using the address of a nearby car lot and adding “½” to it. This small detail reflects both the informal nature of the camp and the social challenges faced by its residents.

Although the Pacific Electric Labor Camp in Culver City has long since disappeared, its history remains an important part of the city’s past. The stories of the *traquero* workers and their families highlight the contributions, resilience, and community bonds that helped shape Culver City in its early years. Preserving and sharing this history ensures that their experiences are remembered and recognized as part of the city’s shared heritage.

(Revised 1/15/26)