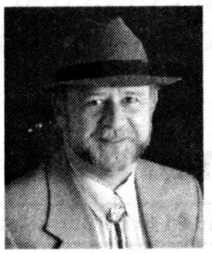
This land is whose land?



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Special to The Pinnacle

In our family there are no harrowing immigration stories. Nobody got out of Europe a whisker ahead of Nazi jackboots. Nobody escaped the Tsar's, or Stalin's, goons.

We settled freely in the Massachusetts wilderness 375 years ago, so that now our European roots are at best diluted. After the family got off to a rocky start – my first native-born forebear became a judge at the Salem witch trials – my ancestors couldn't put the past behind them quickly enough.

The result is a family closet full of ghosts and skeletons.

But the past isn't dead – it isn't, to complete Faulkner, even past, and our ghosts, some the fallen angels of our lesser natures, continue to walk among us.

In California and throughout the Southwest, history is at the root of the current uproar over Latino immigration. This isn't just about "immigration" – it's a bitter tectonic clash between two long-competing American identities, full of dramatic immigration tales.

The problem can be dated from the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, signed by the U.S. and Mexico in 1848 at the conclusion of the Mexican war. Article 8 guaranteed the right of Mexicans living in territories annexed to the U.S. to keep their land and enjoy all the advantages of citizenship.

In the freshly minted state of California, a Board of Land Commissioners was set up to clarify property titles. But in the succeeding decades, Mexican landowners were systematically stripped of their holdings.

Burned into the psyches of many Mexican Americans today are the indignities their ancestors suffered. To them the U.S. is more than a place they come to looking for work. It's their ancestral home. Wednesday at an immigration rally at CSU-Monterey Bay, Dolores Huerta, co-founder of the United Farm Workers Union, put it this way: "If they tell us to go back where we came from, well, we are where we came from!"

That story needs a little tweaking. At the time of the treaty, some 200 Californian families of Mexican heritage, of a total Hispanic population of 4,000, owned 14 million acres of the state. When Huerta also said "We are the indigenous people of this continent," she conflated oligarchs with the very indigenous peoples their grandfathers subdued.

Hordes of gold seekers armed with the doctrine of Manifest Destiny broke up the great ranchos and murdered the Indians, leading to feelings of disenfranchisement among Mexican Americans and of entitlement among Anglos. To this day nationalists harbor lingering suspicions that Mexicans might try to take it all back. To the more paranoid, that is exactly what is going on now. There's even an expression for it: The Reconquista.

That paranoia found a perfect dance partner in the war on terror. Leaders of the Minuteman Project and others insinuate that al Qaeda members are crossing the Sonoran desert, making immigrants a kind of fifth column, the border a front line and the Mexican government culpable.

All the talk about tougher border control may have increased the flow of immigrants trying to get here before the gates slam shut, but there's no evidence of a specific national security threat. No matter. When war is perpetual and the enemy invisible, the fearful see hostile ghosts everywhere.

The first stage in sorting all this out is to stop making specious comparisons with overseas immigration. Does anyone really believe that the rest of the world's poor would wait for the niceties of visas if they didn't have an ocean to cross to get here? In a region where a land border makes migration easy, one-size-fits-all immigration laws simply make no sense.

A path to legal residency combined with a guest worker program, one that guarantees decent wages and working conditions, would ensure that the majority of Mexicans who come here to work but who want to continue to live in Mexico do so without fear of losing their jobs.

In California and the Southwest, where racial disharmony has long been on a slow burn for 160 years, the culture clash over criminalizing immigration pits competing visions of the past and future against each other. Getting anywhere will require moving beyond identity politics and melding our cultures and economies in ways that benefit both sides of the border. The South endured a civil war that forced it to look closer at relations between blacks and whites. It is time to pay attention to the history of racial tension underlying this conflict.

To do that, we will all have to give up ghosts.

To view John Yewell's blog, including a collection of columns, visit: http://homepage.mac.com/jyewell/iblog/B1798028183/index.html