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OPINION

Carlos Aguilar: Homegrown history in the San Gabriel Valley



The City of West Covina hosts its 3rd Annual Spring Festival on South Glendora Avenue in Historic Downtown on Saturday March 9, 2024. (Photo by Keith Durflinger, Contributing Photographer)

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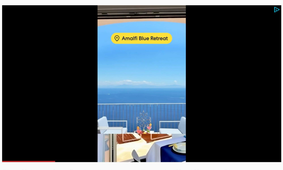
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Several months ago, I had the opportunity to share local history on MySGV, a podcast highlighting the people and places of the San Gabriel Valley. It wasn't an exhaustive academic treatise, just a well-documented creation myth celebrated by locals to the region. To my surprise, the clip resonated widely. People argued, reminisced, provided additional "details" (often mistaken) and added their own stories.

As it turns out, people don't just want to learn history. They want to make it, shape it and claim it as their own. That's good for all of us.

My experience going viral coincided with my growing recognition of the booming landscape of social media historians — folks leveraging social media to research, preserve and share hyper-local and regional history. Intrigued, I organized a gathering at Chismosa Café in downtown Covina, bringing together some of the most engaged contributors in this space. Among them were locals best known by their Instagram handles: @californiography, @retandoesla, @barrioarcheology, @hoodhistorian562, @swapmeet_chronicles — to name but a few. The event reflected a convergence of diverse voices, all dedicated to ensuring that local history remains dynamic and accessible.

Javier Servin (AKA Foo Howser) has a master's degree in moving image archive studies from UCLA and when he's not working as an archivist in Hollywood, he's producing local history for his online audiences. His popular videos cover fascinating local landmarks like La Puente's Donut Hole, El Monte's Lion Farm and Rubel Castle. As a formally trained academic, Servin brings certified archival skills to his work as a digital historian.



Qlone Holmes, a Long Beach native known online as the "Hood Historian," has carved out a unique role as an online chronicler of local history. Growing up in Long Beach during the 1980s and '90s, Holmes developed a passion for local stories, also finding inspiration in KCET's Huell Howser. Unlike Servin, Holmes is largely self-taught, driven by his deep connection to his 'hood.

Holmes' content covers diverse aspects of Long Beach's heritage, from small businesses and architecture to crime stories and everything in between. What makes his work especially meaningful is how his audience connects with his content, often commenting, "I remember him" or "I grew up in that neighborhood," proof people can see themselves in history. Holmes recently won the Long Beach Heritage Education/Outreach for Media and Programs Award.

These handmade historians come from varied backgrounds, Servin with formal academic training and Holmes as a self-taught community researcher. Their methodologies range from rigorous archival work to oral storytelling, yet they all share a common goal: to democratize historical knowledge. Rather than allowing these narratives to languish in inaccessible texts, they bring history into the public sphere, making it relevant and engaging for online audiences.

This grassroots historical movement is particularly vital in regions like the San Gabriel Valley, where our past and our shaping of it go unrecognized. Without these digital historians, many of these stories risk fading into obscurity. Instead, they are actively documented, debated and preserved, whether through Instagram posts, TikTok documentaries or debates over a cup of café de olla at Chismosa Cafe..

Of course, this decentralized approach to history is not without its challenges. Not all content adheres to rigorous research standards, and nostalgia can distort historical accuracy. Yet, on balance, this movement represents an advancement. By amplifying underrepresented voices and fostering public engagement with history, it cultivates a more inclusive and participatory historical discourse.

The popularity of this homemade history signals a shift in who gets to tell the story. And in places like the San Gabriel Valley, where popular media and academic texts never quite capture the full picture, that shift isn't just dope. It's necessary.

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