

Latino Legacy in Lafayette

A history of civil rights struggle



Santiago and Rose (Lavato) Lueras

Historical Background

Prior to Anglo-American Settlement, Colorado was heavily explored by parties affiliated with the Catholic Church of Old Mexico. Atanasio Dominguez and Silvestre Velez de Escalante explored areas lying within the borders of modern-day Arizona, New Mexico, and Colorado. This expansive territory would be claimed by Mexico after winning the war for independence against Spain in 1821.¹ This same territory would later fall under ownership of the United States at the end of the Mexican-American War (1846). The Arapaho Tribe made residence in the Lafayette area every winter. North of town, a large grove of Cottonwood trees offered shelter from the Colorado winters.

Treaty of Hidalgo

The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, officially titled the *Treaty of Peace, Friendship, Limits and Settlement between the United States of America and the Mexican Republic*, is the peace treaty signed on February 2, 1848, between the United States and Mexico that ended the Mexican–American War (1846–1848). The treaty went into effect on July 4, 1848.

Latinos living in the northern part of the Republic of Mexico were living on Mexican land that was sold to the United States of America.² In that treaty, those people were made to be US Citizens. This included California, Nevada, Utah, Arizona, New Mexico, Texas and most of Colorado.

Sand Creek Massacre

After months of tensions between pioneers and indigenous people, the Native Americans were offered a peaceful solution. A large group of people from Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes were camped at Sand Creek where they had been advised to go for their safety. The Cheyenne Chief Black Kettle flew an American flag and white flag above his tent.

U.S. Army Colonel John Chivington and 675 members of the Colorado U.S. Volunteer Cavalry gathered from all across the state. On November 29, 1864, they attacked the peacefully gathered group of Native Americans and killed over 230 women, children, and men who were predominately elders. Hundreds more were wounded and mutilated.³ Cavalry members from the Boulder County area (3rd Regiment, D Company) area were under the direction of Captain David H. Nichols, and included Granville J. Berkeley, Morse H. Coffin, Onsville C. Coffin, Williams H. Dickens, Lewis H. Dickson, Henry C. Foster, and George D. Harmon.⁴

On December 3, 2014, Colorado Governor John Hickenlooper formally apologized to descendants of Sand Creek massacre victims gathered in Denver to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the event. Hickenlooper stated:

*We should not be afraid to criticize and condemn that which is inexcusable. ... On behalf of the State of Colorado, I want to apologize. We will not run from this history.*⁵

White Settlers

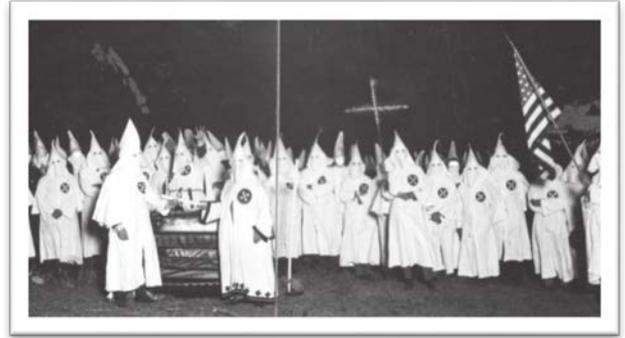
DeLafayette and Mary (Foote) Miller came to Colorado in 1863, as pioneers from Iowa. They settled in Boulder County, bringing the first thresher to the area. Miller was hired to do threshing for various farms including Morse H. Coffin, near Lyons, CO.

In 1888, Mary Miller founded the town of Lafayette, named after her late husband DeLafayette, who died of liver cirrhosis in 1878. Once the city was founded, she sought to develop Lafayette's wealth by creating the city's first bank. It is believed that she was the country's first female bank president.⁶ Known as the Mother of Lafayette, she was committed to bringing the community together through social clubs, community organizations, and religious institutions.⁷ The Millers had 6 children; Frank and Amelia died as children. Surviving children were George, James, Thomas, and Charles. George was a farmer. Thomas was the town's first Mayor and died in a mining accident.

Other family connections include, Lafayette's younger sister Sarah was married to George Church (of the Church Ranch area), James Foote, Mary's brother, settled the Rock Creek area with Dr. James Dow and Thomas Lindsey. Mary's uncle David Kerr settled the land now known as the Mayhoffer Farm, southwest of Lafayette. Lafayette's younger sister Alfaretta married Boulder lawyer Junius Berkely. Junius Berkely was son of Granville Berkely, a Boulder judge and founder of the Colorado Democratic Party.

Ku Klux Klan in Lafayette

The Klan was active across the country in the early 1900, and Lafayette is no exception. There are documented reports of 1000 members from around the region meeting and burning crosses in Lafayette. The local clan reportedly had 100-200 members including city council, the mayor, school board members, teachers, firemen, and church pastors.⁸ William Lafayette (Fey) Miller (grandson) of Mary and Lafayette Miller was a prominent member of the Klan and known to lead KKK marches, on his white horse.⁹



Ku Klux Klan gathering in Boulder County.

The Lafayette Fire Department invited Ben Stapleton, Colorado Klan leader, as a guest speaker for a celebration where 3000 gathered in the town park, later the site of the Lafayette Swimming Pool.¹⁰

While the Klan was said to die out in 1926, members of the Klan remained in the community in their roles as leaders. The Klan was seen publicly, again in 1934 when hundreds of white robed men marched from the site of the Lafayette Swimming Pool, south on Public Road and east on Geneseo.¹¹ The Klan burned crosses at various times across the community into the 1930s.

Rose Lueras's story

Santiago and Rose (Lovato) Lueras lived at 304 E. Chester Street in Lafayette. Santiago was a US Citizen who served in World War I with the U.S. Army and became a coal miner upon his return home.¹² They had two children, Leonard born in 1920, and Rosabelle born in 1922. Leonard died at the age of 10, from whooping cough.

Lafayette Swimming Pool

Construction for the Lafayette swimming pool began in 1933. It was modeled after Longmont's Sunset Municipal Pool. City funds to build the pool came up short and many people in town donated money or supplies. The Lueras family donated 10 sacks of cement.¹³



Sunset Pool in Longmont, similar to the Lafayette Pool

The swimming pool opened on July 31, 1934. The Lueras family and other families of Hispanic, Latino, and Mexican heritage were denied pool entrance after the sign stating "white trade only" was posted, and the gate was staffed by members of the Lafayette Fire Department. In a move to privatize the pool, built with public CWA funds, city funds and citizen contributions, the Lafayette City Council had signed the pool over to the (private) Lafayette Volunteer Fire Department.¹⁴

Civil Rights on Trial

Rose Lueras led the discrimination lawsuit against the City of Lafayette after she and her daughter, Rosabelle, were denied entrance to the pool. Twenty-five other families joined Rose Lueras's suit to fight for their 14th Amendment rights. Families who were part of the lawsuit included D.H. Lueras, D.C. Lueras, Santiago Lueras, Tony Sinsernos, L.B. Rodriguez, Mrs. Valdez, Cruz Gallegos, Jose Trujillo, Sam Roybal, Woberto Chavez, Abe Abeyeta, David Salazar, Louis Manzanares, Joe Manzanares, Mr. Gillen, Bill Manzanares, Louis Chavez, Jose Tafoya, Ramon Pena, Levi Riviera, Garfield Borrego, Don Tafoya, Jose Medrano, Pablo Rivera, and Eliseo Fernandez.¹⁵

A cross was burned on Rose and Santiago's lawn at 304 E. Chester Street.¹⁶ Rose and Rosabelle left Lafayette to stay in California, while awaiting the trial. They left, presumably, because of the hostile community.¹⁷ While waiting for the case to go to court, Rose was struck and killed by a car as she crossed the street in Santa Monica near the home where they were living, in June of 1935.¹⁸ Her daughter Rosabelle was a witness to her mother's death.¹⁹ Rosabelle returned home to live with her father Santiago on Chester Street.

On July 11, 1935, defense attorneys Hutchinson and Goss motioned to dismiss the case against the city, as the lead plaintiff had died. At the age of 13, Rosabelle testified on behalf of her deceased mother, Rose. There was extensive

testimony, including that of volunteer firemen, and Lafayette City Councilmen as well as members of the Latino community. The Judge was Claude C. Coffin. The following testimony is excerpted from the trial transcript.²⁰

TESTIMONY OF ROSABELL LUERAS²¹

Rosabell Lueras, called as a witness by plaintiffs, testified.

That she is the daughter of Rose Lueras, former plaintiff in this case; that she was present with her mother the third day of the opening of the pool.

“Q. (By Mr. Prentice) did you and your mother make any demand there on anyone for permission to swim in that pool?

A. Yes, sir.

Objection by Mr. Hutchinson: “We object, if the Court please, unless he ties it to these six plaintiffs.”

Overruled by the Court.

The witness testified that her mother talked to Zeke Baldick, who was at the gate; that her mother asked him where the gate was to pay admission’ that he, Zeke Baldick, answered, “I’m sorry, but I can’t let you in. You can go in to watch.” That her mother said, “Well why can’t we go in?”; that he said, “We don’t allow the Spanish-American or Mexicans to go in to swim.” That her mother asked that she, the daughter, be permitted to swim there; that she was refused. That at the time of the refusal there were people swimming in the pool. That she made no second demand to swim.

Cross-Examination by Mr. Hutchinson

Witness testified that Zeke Baldick was the man her mother asked to allow her to swim; that she did not know what day of the week it was. That she did not know whether the other people around the gate were members of the Fire Department. That Clyde Reed was there. That her mother did not expect to go in to swim and that she did not ask for herself, but that she asked for her, the witness.

TESTIMONY OF JOE MATHIAS²²

Joe Mathias, called as a witness by the plaintiffs, testified:

That he was a City Councilman during July and August of the year 1934, and a member of the Board of Trustees. That the Mayor suggested the pool be leased to the Firemen. That a motion was made to this effect at a Board meeting by Mr. Lewis and seconded by Joe Mathias

“Q. (by Mr. Prentice:) Was there any discussion of any reason for leasing it to the firemen at that time? A. Yes it was to keep all disputes down.

“Q. What? A. To keep all the troubles down.

“Q. What troubles? A. Well, in respect to the Mexican people, I guess, as I could get it

“Q. Was there anything said about doing that for the purpose of keeping the Mexicans from using the pool?

A. Yes, there was.

“Q. Who said that? A. Well, all of us said it. Not all, but three of four of us there.

“Q. The Mayor among them? A. Yes, sir.

“Q. And other members of the Council? A. Yes, sir.

That the witness Joe Mathias further testified that he saw the sign “Firemen’s Pool. We reserve all right to reject any or all persons without cause. White trade only. Lafayette Fire Department”; that he did not protest against the same. That a committee to take charge of the swimming pool was named a meeting of the Firemen’s Association prior to the opening of the pool consisting of, among other, Tommy Chapman, Jack Maxwell, George Schneider and Zeke Baldick. That no one protested to him about the use of the pool.

Boulder County District Court Judge C. C. Coffin ruled against the Latino families. The attorney for the plaintiffs, C.A. Prentice appealed. The lawsuit reached the Colorado Supreme Court, presided by Chief Justices Burke, Bakke, and Hillard. The upper court agreed that no violation of the 14th amendment was made and the ruling in favor of the defendants was upheld on March 8, 1937. The pool never reopened and was filled with dirt. The pool site is the current site of the swimming pool at the Bob L. Burger Recreation Center.

Rosabelle married Leo Vargas and moved to Fort Lupton where they raised their son Leonard, named after her brother. Rosabelle died in 1993. Santiago, Rose, their son Leonard, and Rosabelle are laid to rest in the Lafayette Cemetery.²³ The cemetery lies adjacent to the original location of the pool – now occupied by the Bob L. Burger Recreation Center

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