

Blossoms Into Gold

By [Good times Author](#)

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Authors explore the untold story Croatians in the Pajaro Valley

If you've never heard the story of Croatian immigrants in South County, you're not alone. Their history has been kept fairly secret—until now. Seeking a better life in the United States, some

settled in San Francisco, and discovered that they could create business opportunities by transporting apples from the Pajaro Valley to the big city in the late 1880s.

Now, two Santa Cruz-based authors, Donna Mekis and her sister, Kathryn Mekis Miller, tell the story in a compelling historical book titled, “Blossoms into Gold, The Croatians in the Pajaro Valley.” The book is published by George Ow, Jr.’s local publishing house, Capitola Book Company. (The publishing company also published the recent autobiography of Donna’s husband, the local poet, Morton Marcus.) Additionally, Ow’s company also published a similarly-themed book years ago about the immigration and story of Chinese people in the Santa Cruz area, called “Chinatown Dreams.”

Both women will be speaking about their book during two upcoming events: April 11 at the Henry Mello Center in Watsonville and April 21 at the Museum of Art & History in downtown Santa Cruz. The events will also feature slideshow presentations featuring photos that appear in their book of the Croatian people in the Pajaro Valley.

How they stumbled across this undocumented history starts right at home. The women’s paternal grandparents came here from Croatia, specifically from an area called the Dubrovnik Republic. According to the women, immigrants came here because in 1808 Napoleon wiped out much of Croatia, and life there was on severe decline. There was little work, little trade, famine and disease were taking over—and then people heard about gold in America. Around 1850 the first group of Croatians came to New Orleans and San Francisco. By 1876 two men had begun apple trading from the Pajaro Valley to San Francisco, and that began the Croatian immigration to our South County neighborhood. By 1920, the Mekis sisters claim that 20 percent of the population in the Pajaro Valley was Croatian.

Nowadays? It’s hard to tell. The Mexican population is clearly in the majority, but according to the sisters, there are still many Croatians left in the Watsonville area. And in fact, the area holds a four times per year dinner where several hundred local Croatians come to gather and enjoy their community.

This book documents their story. Yet it was a long time in the making. Donna, a friend of local historian Sandy Lydon, had been told numerous times by Lydon that the Croatian story needed to be told. Turns out, she and her sister were the ones to tell that story. With the last five years dedicated to unbelievably detailed and extensive research, the women took trips to their homeland overseas, they interviewed Croatians, and rifled through old articles at the Watsonville Pajaronian newspaper so as to understand the story there were about to tell. “It was almost lost,” the sisters say in regard to a history that few knew about and could easily have disappeared forever.

The results of their labor have turned into 309 pages of fascinating stories. The book begins with an introduction on general Pajaro Valley immigration, and then melds into the Croatian people that arrived here. It then takes a look at “Their Glorious Past, The Dubrovnik Republic.” This chapter discusses the region that the Mekis sisters’ family came from, how that republic came to be and a look at its culture. It includes an artistic look at the republic by way of paintings and photographs. The book then merges into a fundamental chapter “Why They Came and Why They Stayed,” which provides explanations for how the Croatian people came to be here. It then segues into the illustrious tale of the Croatian apple trade in the Pajaro Valley. Building upon that, we continue to learn more and more about their lives here with a crescendo in chapter seven, “Becoming American.”

The sisters have done a beautiful job turning this rich history into an equally rich text. While the book is historical in nature through and through, it doesn’t read like a classroom textbook, rather it feels like a portrait through time, the telling of the immigration of an ethnic group.

Ultimately, “I want the story to be told for our community,” Donna says. “For our children and grandchildren.”

Donna Mekis and Kathryn Mekis Miller, authors of “Blossoms into Gold, The Croatians in the Pajaro Valley,” will be speaking at 2 p.m. Saturday, April 11 at the Henry Mello Center, 250 East Beach St., Watsonville, and at 6 p.m. on Tuesday, April 21 at the Museum of Art & History, 705 Front St., Santa Cruz. Admission for both events is free. For more information, visit blossomsintogold.com.

