

NEWS

# Two native daughters tell the tale of the lasting influence of Croatians in the Pajaro Valley

By [WALLACE BAINE](#) | Santa Cruz Sentinel

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The decision to write the definitive history of Croatian immigrants in the Pajaro Valley came to Donna F. Mekis at a dinner party.

Across the table, businessman and philanthropist George Ow Jr. said, "If you write this story, I'll publish it." Next to her, her husband, the poet and film critic Morton Marcus said, "If you want to work on this story, I'll edit it." And then, her sister, Kathryn Mekis Miller, added, "If you want to work on this, I'll help you."

Absent that evening was the historian Sandy Lydon, who previously had applied the most pressure. "For literally 20 years," said Mekis, "every time I would see Sandy Lydon, he would say, So, when are you going to write that Croatian story?" For the first 15 years, I didn't take him seriously at all. I was working full time, raising my son."

But suddenly, at the dinner party, there was no reason to say no anymore.

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The result is the new book “Blossoms Into Gold: The Croatians in the Pajaro Valley,” authored by the Mekis sisters, themselves products of the once thriving Croatian community in Watsonville. Croatian immigrants from the former Dubrovnik Republic first starting arriving in the Pajaro Valley in the late 1800s, and for the first half of the 20th century, the Croatians – commonly called “Slavonians” – built a robust apple industry and a bustling subculture in Watsonville.

“In the 1920s and ’30s, everyone that we talked to said that you heard Croatian on Main Street of Watsonville as much as you heard English, just as today, you hear Spanish as well as English,” said Donna Mekis, a UC Santa Cruz alum who now directs the Honors Transfer Program at Cabrillo College.

The Mekis sisters’ own memories are tied up in the Croatian community of Watsonville. Their father, Andrew Mekis, to whom the book is dedicated, was born and raised in what was called the Croatian “colony” in Watsonville, a district just west of Main Street. Andrew Mekis opened an auto supply shop in Santa Cruz – Andy’s Auto Supply is still one of the oldest businesses on Pacific Avenue – and moved his wife and kids to the Westside of Santa Cruz. But every Sunday, the Mekis children would take the trip to Watsonville to visit their Croatian grandparents.

“On Sundays,” said Donna, “you’d walk into the house and everyone’s speaking the Croatian language. The food’s all Croatian food. You were definitely entering a different world than Westside Santa Cruz.”

While Donna researched the customs, the culture and the history, sister Kathryn – who with her husband Marshall Miller, run the Sun Shops group of businesses in Santa Cruz – investigated the apple industry dominated by the Croatians for decades in the Pajaro Valley.

“The apple business in Watsonville was a big business, and it was complicated,” said Kathryn Mekis. “I wanted to understand how it got that way. They were simple, hard-working people running a very complicated business structure.”

The Mekis sisters traveled back to the Croatian homeland of Dubrovnik on the Adriatic Sea in the nation of Croatia, and the book includes a significant back story of the Croatian people well before immigration to the U.S. What they found was a proud and rich history, but a culture deeply steeped in strict tradition. “My grandparents were born into and lived in a medieval world,” said Donna.

The deeply rooted emphasis on extended family was jarring to the Mekises. Donna was recognized on the street as part of her bloodline, just by her genetic features.

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“To think about the jump between that, and then my dad, who was the transitional generation growing up during World War II, and then us growing up on the Westside ... it’s just dizzying.”

“Blossoms” painstakingly chronicles the contributions of the some of the grandest family names of the Croatian community, names that still can be seen and heard today – Alaga, Scurich, Franich, Marinovich. Former Mayor Ann Soldo was part of the lineage, as is Nita Gizdich, who runs the favorite apple farm, Gizdich Ranch, east of Watsonville. Nita Gizdich is, in fact, the Mekis sisters’ first cousin. There’s even a long list of Croatian surnames with a history in the Pajaro Valley.

The Croatians have intermarried and dispersed, but still hold dinners as the Slavic American Cultural Association four times a year, an event that the Mekises always attend.

“Literally hundreds of people turn out for these events,” said Donna.

“Think of the courage it took to change,” said Kathryn of those original Croatian families settling in Watsonville. “It takes courage for us to change a little. But for those people, it turned their world upside down.”

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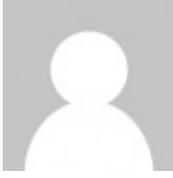


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## **Wallace Baine**

Wallace Baine covered the arts scene in Santa Cruz County for the Santa Cruz Sentinel until 2017.

