

Sabbatical Report for Professor Susan Kinkella

History Department

Moorpark College

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My sabbatical leave was devoted to conducting original research and writing for publication on a local historical figure named Maria “Espiritu” Chijulla Leonis. Espiritu Leonis was a Chumash woman who lived during times of great transition and upheaval in 19<sup>th</sup> century Calabasas, California. Her unique and fascinating story illustrates the difficulties that Native American women experienced as they negotiated within and beyond the “appropriate” roles of race and gender in California during the last years of Mexican rule and early American statehood. A comprehensive work on Espiritu Leonis has never been published before, as historians and writers have focused instead on the history of her infamous husband Miguel Leonis, namesake of the Leonis Adobe Museum (The Leonis Adobe Museum was designated Los Angeles Historical Cultural Monument #1 in 1962).

Feeling that Espiritu deserved to have a “voice” of her own, I set out to produce a work that could bring her exceptional story to the public. To this end, I have already given three public talks about my work on Espiritu Leonis. My book on Espiritu Leonis will be carried at the Leonis Adobe Museum and may also serve as a supplemental

reading assignment for the classes I teach at Moorpark College. These classes include American History, Women in American History, and Native American History.

Writing the story of Espiritu Leonis presented many difficulties as she was not literate and therefore left no first hand written primary source accounts of her life or perspectives. Reconstructing her life has been immensely challenging and immensely rewarding. My sabbatical leave offered me the opportunity to spend hundreds of hours doing research with the holdings of the Leonis Adobe Museum's archives, utilizing records written by Espiritu Leonis's friends and relatives, legal documents, historic newspaper articles and numerous secondary sources in California History.

In addition to my historical research at Leonis Adobe Museum's holdings, I worked with several primary source collections related to my project. For example, I applied for and was granted approval to do research to with rare documents, historical court cases and manuscripts at the Huntington Library in San Marino, CA. Using the collections at the Huntington Library was a true privilege which provided me with valuable insights about Espiritu's legal battles during the 19th century. Other collections that I found to be of great value were explored at the Los Angeles County Archives where I utilized birth, death, and marriage records as well as crucial census records for Los Angeles in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century (a list of locations where I conducted historical research is on the last page of this report). Additionally, I conducted oral history interviews with individuals related to my project, such as one of the descendants of the Miguel Leonis family and one of the last descendants of an original homestead family in Topanga Canyon.

My research for this project was also supplemented by studying the original research notes of anthropologist J.P. Harrington who worked with Juan Menendez, the son of Espiritu Leonis, in 1917. Harrington and his wife Carobeth Laird worked with Menendez at Espiritu's Calabasas home recording important ethnohistoric information. Menendez also took Harrington to some of the most important sacred Chumash sites in the western San Fernando Valley and shared Chumash oral narratives that had been passed on to him by his mother Espiritu. I was quite fortunate to have been able to visit some of these same Chumash sites (which are not open to the public) as I was granted access by professional archaeologist Albert Knight. Knight has worked in this area for many years and meeting with him and discussing the archaeological and ethnohistoric significance of these sites was a valuable experience.

All of my research will benefit the students at Moorpark College in many ways. For example, I have developed and incorporated new curriculum into my American History, Native American History and Women in American History courses. In April I gave a presentation on Espiritu Leonis for Multicultural Day at Moorpark College which was well attended, in fact there were not enough seats to accommodate all those hoping to attend. The student response to my presentation was highly favorable (a sample student summary and evaluation of my presentation is included at the end of this report).

Another way my sabbatical project was a benefit to my students was in my Honors Women in American History class where I was able to share constructive information with my students about historical research methods, such as identifying and evaluating primary and secondary sources of various types, and how to locate reliable electronic databases and archival information. I found my students were impressed to see

that I have recent experience working with archival collections at exclusive locations such as the Huntington Library and they were extremely interested in my research project on Espiritu Leonis. I believe it is important for our students to see that their professors at Moorpark College are committed to intellectual inquiry outside of the classroom and that they stay current in their discipline in a variety of ways.

While working on this research project during my sabbatical, I have made valuable connections within the community. These connections have not only been beneficial for me but also reflect positively on Moorpark College and the Ventura County Community College District. For example, while I was doing research in the fall at the Santa Monica Mountains National Park Service, I met Sheila Braden, the director of public programs. After discussing my project with me, Ms. Braden invited me to participate in the National Park Service public lecture series program for the following year. I made this presentation in March 2012 for Women's History Month. My presentation was very well received, and also led to another invitation to give a presentation for the Teledyne Corporation in Thousand Oaks. After hearing favorable information about my presentation from one of her employees, the director of Human Resources for Teledyne then contacted me and invited me to present at their annual Diversity Week in May 2012.

Making these presentations has been rewarding for me in many ways. Primarily it has been a great thrill for me to share the story of Espiritu Leonis and the history of the Chumash people with the public. It has also been fantastically rewarding to receive the positive feedback from the public that I have. I have already received emails from people that attended my talk inquiring about my work and when I will be speaking again. This

would not have been possible for me if I hadn't been given the opportunity to do this research during a sabbatical leave. It is through these kinds of programs and opportunities that Moorpark College continues to distinguish itself from other community colleges as a leader in teaching and learning.

## **Research Location Sites Visited during Sabbatical Leave**

### **Fall 2011**

Leonis Adobe Museum Archives (Calabasas)

Huntington Library and Museum Archives (San Marino)

Calabasas Historical Society Archives (Calabasas)

Los Angeles County Hall of Records- Archives- (Los Angeles)

Santa Barbara Natural History Museum Archives (Santa Barbara)

Los Angeles County Hall of Records- (Norwalk Branch)

Chumash Indian Museum (Thousand Oaks)

Santa Monica Mountains National Park Service (Thousand Oaks)

Burrow Flats (Chatsworth)

Archeological Sites related to project (LAN 357, VEN 149)

Los Angeles Public Library (Woodland Hills Branch)

San Fernando Mission (Mission Hills)

Oakwood Memorial Park (Chatsworth)

Oral History Interviews with descendants conducted in person in Woodland Hills, CA , Topanga Canyon, CA and by teleconference.

**Public Presentations Given by Susan Kinkella on  
Espiritu Leonis and California History**

Santa Monica Mountains National Park Service, Thousand Oaks

March 2012

Teledyne Corporation- Thousand Oaks- Presentation for Diversity Week

May 2012

Moorpark College Multicultural Day

April 2012

**Upcoming Scheduled Speaking Engagements**

Moorpark College- Faculty Development-scheduled for August 2012

Santa Susana Historical Society- Chatsworth -scheduled for October  
2012