A Photographic Portrait of the Mendez et al.
v. Westminster School District of Orange
County et al. Civil Rights Case

by David Andrews
Arthur Palomino at the Westminster Founders Day Parade 2011
This is the
FIRST PRINTING
of
A Photographic Portrait of the Mendez et al. v. Westminster School District of Orange County et al. Civil Rights Case

In September of 1944 Mr. Gonzalo Mendez and Mr. Thomas Estrada, who both had children in the Westminster Hoover School, attended the Westminster School Board meeting. They were accompanied by Manuel Viega, Cruz Barrios, and Hector Tarango, who belonged to a group that was known at the time as Latin American Voters Council. This group later became the League of United Latin American Citizens Council No. 147 (LULAC). At the meeting they presented a petition to the school board protesting the segregation of American children of Mexican descent and requested that the Hoover School be united with the all-white Westminster School. They were told by the school board that there was no money to do this and that things would have to stay the same as they were. A similar story was taking place in the city of Santa Ana where William Guzman protested the segregation of his son, in Garden Grove where Frank Palomino protested the segregation of his children, and in El Modeno where Lorenzo Ramirez made the same protest. All of the school boards denied the requests to allow Mexican children to attend integrated schools.

After first trying to work things out on their own, a lawyer in Los Angeles was consulted and a class action lawsuit was filed. At the beginning it was simply referred to as The School Case or The Orange County School Case. When it finally made its way to court it became officially known as Gonzalo Mendez, et al., Petitioners, vs. Westminster School District of Orange County, et al., Respondents. Throughout this book I will mostly call it Mendez et al. v. Westminster School District of Orange County et al. or simply Mendez et al. (et al. means “and others”). California public schools were integrated in 1947 thanks to the success of Mendez et al. Many people played a significant role in the success of the case. As you will see it had an impact far beyond the four Orange County School Districts that were involved. This study is presented as an educational tool and helpful resource to anyone interested in American history or the Civil Rights movement. All rights reserved.

DAVID ANDREWS
(714) 897-9246  (714) 454-4105  coolest_dad53@yahoo.com

ON THE COVER: 18-year-old trial witness Isabel Ayala.
I’ve been collecting autographs for over 30 years. My main interest is American history. I try to think of what’s happening today or people who are alive today who will stand the test of time. In my collection you don’t have to be famous but you have to be connected to something that I think is historically important. As time went by Civil Rights became more of an interest. It seemed like the perfect storm that I would be interested in historical autographs, live in Westminster, California, and this wonderful story all of a sudden becomes known. The *Mendez et al.* case was challenging for me because initially I didn’t know who anybody was. There were 5 families involved in the case and numerous family members. I needed to get organized. At first I only looked at things as an autograph collector. After a while I became more and more interested in the case in general. Sometimes I wrote down what people said and I even took a few photographs. My thinking was that this should be preserved. Some of the details of *Mendez et al.* have already faded into obscurity or are open to dispute. Basically I’ve tried to write the book that I would have enjoyed reading when I first became interested in the case. In it I try to answer things I’ve been curious about.

In 2018 the City of Westminster announced plans to memorialize the *Mendez et al.* case with a small park at the corner of Westminster Blvd. and Olive street near where the old Hoover School used to be. The City Council approved the park project and committed the funds necessary to convert the vacant lot into a pleasant spot of trees and benches. A bronze monument is planned and fundraising for that is underway. Groundbreaking for the park is scheduled for early 2019.

Your friendly autograph collector (that would be me) still lives in Westminster, is married, and has 4 children, a daughter-in-law, and 1 wonderful grandson. He is retiring from the Anaheim Post Office after 41 years.

Segregation on the basis of race was legal in the 1940’s in California and many people simply accepted discrimination as a fact of life in their communities. Shown above are braceros (a Spanish term meaning “manual laborer”) arriving to work in California in 1942. The first braceros came from Mexico in 1917.
Let's get started...

In 2007 the US Postal Service issued a stamp to commemorate equality in education and the historic civil rights case which occurred 60 years earlier. Public schools in California would be forever changed for the better. I attended the First Day Ceremony program for the stamp and invite you to join with me and learn more about the fascinating story behind it!

**From the US Postal Service:** “In 1945 a group of Hispanic parents in California filed suit to end segregation in their schools. The groundbreaking case, *Mendez et al. v. Westminster School District of Orange County et al.*, was decided in 1947 when the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that the school districts could not segregate on the basis of national origin, establishing an important legal precedent.”

Governor Earl Warren desegregated California as a result of the *Mendez et al.* case and later, as Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, wrote the decision in the case of *Brown v. Board of Education.*

*Mendez et al.* came seven years before *Brown.*

Bearing flags from both Mexico and the United States, this automobile with a League of United Latin American Citizens banner on the front participates in a Defense Day Parade on December 20, 1941. The civil rights group LULAC concentrated on reforming segregated schools through the courts and was party to the *Mendez et al.* case. The victory in *Mendez et al.* allowed LULAC to later pursue similar tactics against segregation in Texas schools.

**Thank you to the following people who made this book possible:**

Gonzalo Mendez Jr, Juan D'Lucas, Alice Mendez Vidaurre Anaya, Lyn Creswell, Akiko Munemitsu Nakauchi, Syria Estrada, Margie Aguirre of LULAC, Emilie Andrews, Dave Bridgewaters, author Philippa Strum, Mike Ramirez, Stephanie George of Chapman University, Greta Nagel and MOTAL- The Museum of Teaching and Learning, Sylvia Mendez, Beverly Guzman, Mary Helen Ramirez, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints Family History Center workers Nancy Carlberg, Diane Sargent, Paul Simpson, and Jim Keffer, my friends at Bill's Camera, and all of the people who gave me their autographs.
High school students Akiko (Aki) Munemitsu, Kazuko Munemitsu, and Alice Vidaurri, were seniors in the class of 1953 at Huntington Beach Union High School. Akiko and Kazuko preferred that their yearbook pictures not be used in my book.

This book began as a guide for autograph collectors but evolved into just telling the story. I apologize in advance for any mistakes or misspellings. The idea of doing the family pages was inspired by the wonderful exhibit “A Class Action” which was put on by MOTAL, the Museum of Teaching and Learning. This exhibit was installed at the Old Orange County Courthouse in Santa Ana and ran from September 2011 to June 2012. Gonzalo Mendez Jr. used his carpentry skills in helping put the award-winning exhibit together.

Gonzalo and Felicitas Mendez met and married in Westminster in 1935. Gonzalo called Felicitas “Fela”. Their daughter Sylvia humorously says that he “stole” her. Gonzalo said that he was taking her shopping and took Felicitas down to San Diego for a month. Then he brought her back and married her. In 1938 they bought a small bar and grill in Santa Ana, California, The Arizona, and began raising their children. When the family moved to Westminster they owned 3 houses and the tavern. They moved so they could lease a 40 acre farm from a Japanese family, the Munemitsu’s, who had been sent to a relocation camp in Poston, Arizona, (from May 17, 1942 to September 27, 1945) during World War II. After the surprise Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor President Roosevelt authorized the roundup and internment of American citizens of Japanese ancestry. At the time there were conflicting opinions on the constitutionality of the Japanese eviction order. Largely it was a popular decision and most politicians supported the president’s action. After the Munemitsu’s came back they lived with the workers for a while at the farm and let the Mendez family cash in on their final crop. Bank officer Mr. Monroe was the one who brought the two families together. The Mendez’s were able to make much more money from the farm than they were making from the cantina. Today, Finley Elementary and Johnson Intermediate Schools are built upon land that was once the Munemitsu/Mendez farm.
World War II had a profound effect on American society and the civil rights movement. Hundreds of thousands of Mexican-Americans served in the war fighting for their country. World War II, with its opposition to the racism of Hitler and Mussolini, benefited American minorities by creating a more sympathetic climate for opposing racism at home. The Hispanic community was aware of their rights as U.S. citizens and knew that the means for a better life for themselves and their children was through education.

In 1943 the three youngest Mendez children went with their father’s sister, Soledad Vidaurri, and her children to register for school in Westminster, California. The Mendez’s and the Vidaurri’s both lived together on the farm. The date that this happened has been lost to history. It is possible that it was later than the normal registration time because of the work being done on the farm and the fact that they were registering for the first time. School might have already started. I asked Gonzalo and he can’t remember. During this time the Mendez children’s older half-brother Victor lived with his grandmother in Los Angeles, so he did not go with them to register and was not involved. Victor did, however, come down on weekends to help work on the farm. The Mendez children who went to register were Sylvia, Gonzalo Jr, and Jerome. The Vidaurri children who went were Virginia and Alice.

Gonzalo told me he remembers his cousin, Edward Vidaurri, being with them that day. I asked Sylvia about this and she said that Edward was in the hospital. Jerome told me that he was too young at the time to remember. Edward’s sister Alice said that Edward was sick around that time, but she can’t remember if he was sick enough to miss school. She added that if he was sick on that day that he would have been at home, not in the hospital. These are the only people alive today who were actually there. Edward is now deceased. So it is a gray area. If Edward was with them the group would have consisted of:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soledad Mendez</th>
<th>Mother of the Vidaurris, and aunt to the Mendez kids.</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vidaurri</td>
<td>Known as Aunt Sally. And the children:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edward Vidaurri</td>
<td>Born Oct. 25, 1930</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Died Feb. 10, 1989</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virginia Vidaurri</td>
<td>Born Mar. 4, 1933</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Died Oct. 2, 1972</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alice Vidaurri</td>
<td>Born Sept. 18, 1934</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sylvia F. Mendez</td>
<td>Born June 7, 1936</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jerome Mendez</td>
<td>Born Nov. 9, 1938</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Alice remembers the children getting ready for school and bringing their brown lunch bags and being dressed up, wearing home-made crocheted dresses which their mother had made. They got ready for school and went to
the closest school to where they lived. They walked up the steps to the beautiful Westminster Main elementary school in Westminster. There was a secretary or school teacher right behind the counter.

“\[\text{I’ve come to register the children},\] said Mrs. Vidaurri.

The lady looked at the children, not at mama.

“\[\text{Your children can go here. And they’re Mendez, they have to go to the Mexican school}\].”

“\[\text{Well, no. We all live together},\] said Mrs. Vidaurri. “\[\text{I won’t hear of it, would you repeat that, please}\].”

“\[\text{Your children can go here, but they have to go to the Mexican school}\].”

Then Mrs. Vidaurri said, “\[\text{I brought all the children to register. You’ll be hearing from us!}\],” and angrily pointed her finger. She put her arm around the children like they were baby chicks and got all of them back in the car and drove home. Gonzalo was surprised to see them return to the farm. “\[\text{What are you doing here?}\]” he said. None of the children were registered for school that day.

Felicitas Mendez remembered her brother-in-law Frank Vidaurri who was helping run the farm say that if the school wouldn’t take the Mendez children then he wouldn’t send his kids to school either. Gonzalo told his sister Soledad, “\[\text{You do what you want to do}\].” Soledad made the decision to enroll all the children at Hoover School rather than have them miss out on school completely. Mr. and Mrs. Mendez talked to the school

Soledad Mendez Vidaurri circa 1934. She was living in San Diego and would have been about 24 years old at the time this picture was taken. She married Frank Vidaurri in Santa Barbara in 1929 when she was 19 years old and he was 25.

administration but got nowhere. They thought that this was such an injustice and both sets of parents were mad.

There had been grassroots efforts to end segregation in Southern California many times before. Los Angeles-based attorney David C. Marcus had recently won an important case, Lopez v. Seccombe, involving Mexican
Americans having the right to use the San Bernardino swimming pool. Before that he won Doss v. Bernal, a fair housing case involving Mexicans being allowed to live in the Sunnyside neighborhood in Fullerton. David Marcus had experience in civil rights lawsuits and had helped the Latino community before. He was affiliated with the Mexican Consulate. Mr. and Mrs. Mendez decided that they needed some help. Sylvia Mendez said that Henry Rivera, the man who drove the produce truck from their farm in Westminster to Los Angeles, was the one who suggested that they hire David Marcus. She said that earlier her father had contacted a group for help and that they refused to help him. Marcus wanted to make it a class action suit representing 5,000 Mexican-American children and also decided to file in federal court. The point was that if he won in state court the state could quickly change the law to allow segregation of Mexican children. At the time state law allowed for the segregation of Asian or Native American children, but not Hispanic children.

The Mendez’s looked for other families to help them sue the school districts. Quickly five families came together: Mendez, Ramirez, Guzman, Palomino, and Estrada. There was already a connection between some of the families. Gonzalo Mendez and Frank Palomino grew up together in Westminster. Frank’s brother worked on the farm for Mr. Mendez. Delia Pena, a LULAC member, had attended schoolboard meetings with Gonzalo. One of her daughters, Sophia, married Gonzalo’s brother Dolores. Another daughter, Mary Louise, married Thomas Estrada. That meant Gonzalo also knew the Estrada’s. They were more or less part of the family and they also lived in Westminster. Gonzalo knew William Guzman from the tavern. Mr. Guzman attended meetings at the tavern to discuss forming a group. “You have to fight for your education”, he would say. Guzman was friends with both Mendez and Palomino.

The Ramirez’s of El Modeno were the final family to join the lawsuit. Lorenzo Ramirez who was born in Mexico was soft spoken and not a U.S. citizen. But his son Mike remembers his father saying that he refused to live on his knees in white America. He was active in union politics and involved in Mexican-rights organizations like the Bracero Program. The Bracero Program was an agreement between the United States and Mexico guaranteeing decent living conditions for manual laborers. It’s likely that he already knew who David Marcus was. Mr. Ramirez believed in the importance of education and highly valued teaching his children to read at home. His children could read by the time they were in the first grade. Much of El Modeno was annexed by the city of Orange in the 1960’s and 1970’s. Funding for the lawsuit was initially paid for by the Mendez family and more money was raised to help pay expenses. All of the families contributed. Dances were held and refrigerators were raffled. Supported by the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) it was a community effort. Gonzalo Mendez himself was said to have been an active member of LULAC. The title of the case took the name of Mendez. Mr. Mendez was self-employed and took time off to work on the case while his wife ran the farm.

The school districts claimed they were only separating Mexican children because of their language abilities and that it was for the benefit of all. But the fact that they continued the practice through the eighth grade left room for doubt. The plaintiffs argued that in most cases the children were not even tested to see if they were fluent in English and that the separate schools violated the equal-protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. At some point the Westminster School District offered to make an exception and allow the three Mendez kids to attend Westminster Elementary school but not the other Hispanic children. The Mendez family declined. The same offer was made to the Guzmans by Franklin Elementary and they also declined. In 1946 when the case was won the Santa Ana and the El Modeno Districts resisted reform and the decision was appealed. It was unknown what the Appeals Court would say. The culture of the times and the fact that there was no legal precedent made it a complicated problem. David Marcus asked attorney William Strong to join him for the appeal which was titled Westminster School District of Orange County vs. Gonzalo Mendez et al.
In the United States in the 1940’s pretty much everything was segregated and the schools were no exception. Mexican children were routinely placed into their own schools. Orange County was no different from most other areas of the Southwest. By 1930 there were 15 Mexican schools distributed throughout the county. Some of these schools were wooden fire hazards with little light or ventilation while the “White” schools were made out of brick or other safe building materials. Such segregation was officially legal as long as the schools were “equal”. Besides the four school districts being sued in the Mendez et al. case there were separate Mexican schools in the cities of Anaheim, Placentia, La Habra, Costa Mesa, and Orange, among other places. One study found that between 80% to 90% of the school districts segregated their students.

Pictured below, actors portray the Lemon Grove School Board as they meet to discuss building a separate school for the Mexican children in their district. “The Lemon Grove Incident” as it came to be known, was the United States’ first successful school desegregation case. These events occurred in 1930 and 1931 in Lemon Grove, California, and although successful, the case did not affect other schools in the state. That didn’t happen until after Mendez et al. was won.
Pictured is the segregated Mexican Hoover School where the Mendez children attended. The school opened in 1929 and the picture is from 1944. At Hoover the children were taught a different curriculum than was taught in the white schools and the supplies were not new. It is possible the crayons and books came used from the white schools. The instruction was not meant to prepare the Latino children for college or for high paying jobs. In 1944 a petition letter was signed by 37 Mexican-American parents to draw attention to these problems and delivered to the Westminster Board of Trustees.

Farm pictures courtesy of Aki Munemitsu

Seima Munemitsu and his son Seiko work on their farm after returning from the internment camp
I want to tell you a story...

Julio G. Mendez (Aug 4, 1892-Sept 8, 1943) was the older brother of Gonzalo Mendez Sr. and Soledad Vidaurri. For a while he was Pancho Villa’s secretary. Not everybody back then could read and write. One day Villa told him to write down a list of names. As he was writing down the names Julio asked, “Why am I writing these names down?” and Villa answered, “These are the people I’m going to hang.” This scared him and was the reason why he came to California. He told his mother what Pancho Villa said and his mother convinced Julio, who didn’t want to kill anybody, to move to the United States. Julio may have gone back and forth across the border more than once. He filled out a draft registration card in El Paso, Texas. He was in the United States at least by World War I. At this time he was single with two young children. Julio was an uncle to Sylvia Mendez, Gonzalo Mendez, Jr., Jerome Mendez, and Alice Vidaurri. I first heard this story from Sylvia in a talk she gave at the LDS History Center in Orange in 2016 and later confirmed it with both Alice and Gonzalo Jr. Julio died at age 51 of coronary insufficiency/ coronary atherosclerosis. He lived in the United States for the last 24 years of his life.

There was a large migration of Mexicans to the United States following the Mexican Revolution of 1910. Many Mexican laborers were imported during these years. By the 1920's there was a growing need for farm workers. The Mendez family owned property in the state of Chihuahua, Mexico, including a successful ranch. Julio was the first Mendez family member to come. After a few months he sent for his other family members to join him. Gonzalo Mendez Sr., who was born in Mexico, arrived at El Paso, Texas, when he was 6 years old with his mother, his brother Dolores, (14yrs), brother Clemente (16yrs), and sister Soledad, (age 9). Soledad places the date the Mendez family arrived in Westminster as September 1919.

Jerome Herman Mendez (November 9, 1938) was born at home in Santa Ana during a storm with rain coming down. Soledad was helping Felicita and the electricity went out. There was no time to get to the hospital. Soledad ran outside and flagged down a police car which happened to be passing by. The officers came in and delivered the baby by flashlight. One of the officers was named Jerome and one was named Herman. The baby was named Jerome Herman Mendez. Jerome also likes being called Jerry or Geronimo. As an adult Jerome served his country as a Green Beret.
Here is lead plaintiff Gonzalo Mendez with his wife Felicitas Gomez. Felicitas was born an American citizen in Juncos, Puerto Rico on Feb. 5, 1916. She came to the United States when she was 10 years old.

“We had about 30 workers... and then we had packers and all that. And I had to see to it, you know, cooking for the children, taking care of the family. It was pretty hard for me, you know.”

**FELICITAS G. MENDEZ**

Gonzalo Mendez was one of 7 children born to Jose Dolores Mendez and Josefa Gallardo Mendez. In order of oldest to youngest they are Julio (b.1892), Clemente (b.1901), Dolores (b.1905), Maria Eva (b.1910), Soledad (b.1910), Gonzalo (b.1912), and Ruth (b.1920). Maria and Soledad were twins and Maria died at 2 months old.

At the cemetery where Gonzalo Mendez (born Jan. 10, 1912- died May 19, 1964) is buried there are four other family member headstones next to him on the right. First is his brother Clemente G. Mendez (Nov. 23, 1901 to Aug. 27, 1977), then Ernest Pena Jr. (the brother of Dolores’s wife, World War II Purple Heart, April 17, 1918 to Oct. 2, 1999), Gonzalo’s brother Dolores Gallardo Mendez (1905 to 1987) and his wife, Sophia Pena Mendez (1915 to 1999), both buried together, and then Ernest Frank Mendez (January 29, 1943 to November 12, 2008), the son of Dolores and Sophia. These graves belonged to Sophia. She owned them. Julio G. Mendez is buried on the other side of the cemetery. Julio’s last wife, Rayo Mendez, is buried nearby, and about eleven headstones over from him is buried Jennie G. Fernandez, daughter of Joe (or Jose) Fernandez and Felicitas Gomez. She died at 10 years old from tuberculous meningitis. Frank and Irene Palomino are also buried in the same cemetery.
Would not register children- led to lawsuit

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Born</th>
<th>Died</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alice Hope Vidaurri Anaya</td>
<td>Sept. 18, 1934</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olivia Naomi Vidaurri Romero</td>
<td>Mar. 29, 1947</td>
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Nationwide from 1897 to 1954 “separate but equal” was the law of the land, upheld by the landmark 1896 Supreme Court decision *Plessy v. Ferguson*. On June 7, 1892, light-skinned African-American train passenger Homer A. Plessy refused to sit in a car for blacks and the U.S. Supreme Court ruled against him, thus creating the doctrine of “separate but equal”. A crisis was bound to come sooner or later over legalized, state-enforced segregation of schoolchildren. In *Mendez et al.* Judge Paul J. McCormick ruled that “separate” wasn’t really “equal”. This was the first time that a federal judge had made such a decision. On appeal, part of the decision was upheld and part was overturned. The result was a ruling that California school districts could not segregate based on national origin. *Mendez et al.* provided a legal precedent and inspired similar class action lawsuits throughout the southwest United States. When Soledad Vidaurri (May 28, 1910- January 2, 1998) was born her name was suggested by her oldest brother, Julio. Soledad means “solitude” or “one”. The stand she took at the school registration counter started a chain of events which eventually led to the federal court decision against the school districts.

[Image of a black and white photograph of three children: Alice, Edward, and Virginia]
Sisters Alice Vidaurri (left) and Olivia Vidaurri (right) are shown in the above photograph taken at San Luis Obispo in August of 2012. One day Olivia’s grandson Joel was taking a tour of the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles with his school class. When the group passed by a display of the Mendez et al. Orange County school case he surprised his teachers by exclaiming, “My grandma has that picture in her house!” After Alice and Olivia’s father passed away in 1968 the parent’s home was sold and their mom went to live with daughter Olivia and her husband Arthur Charles Romero (known as Charlie). Charlie worked for PG&E for all of his life. Soledad Vidaurri lived with Olivia and Charlie until her death in 1998.

After the court decision in 1947 both Alice and her cousin Sylvia briefly attended the Westminster Main School (the nice school). Alice moved to Kern County and married Frank (or Francis) Robert Anaya who had been a medic in the Korean War. The couple had four children, John, Ronald, Sally, and Sylvia. Alice was hired by the Bakersfield City School District as a community liaison and then served as a teacher’s aide. She retired in 1996.

There are many variations of Alice Vidaurri’s name. Anaya is her married name and Vidaurri her family name. Mendez is her mom’s maiden name. She was known as Alicia before Alice. Alice started using “Hope” as her middle name because the Mexican school didn’t want her using the name “Esperanza”. It was just easier or smoother to have an Americanized name. When she went to the Mexican school she doesn’t remember having to be registered, they just went.
This is the federal building that housed the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of California in downtown Los Angeles. It was here that *Mendez et al.* lawyer David Marcus filed suit on March 2, 1945. The five day trial began Thursday, July 5, 1945 at 10 AM and lasted through Wednesday, July 11th. The five plaintiff families were not the first ones to challenge segregation in the courts. There had been many efforts by the Mexican-American community before. Once again a wide variety of individuals and groups came out in support. LULAC members Manuel Veiga Jr., Hector Tarango, Cruz Barrios, and Delia Pena helped bring the five families together and recruited others to attend the trial. Many people besides the plaintiffs volunteered to testify, including parents and students.

The petitioners were the five fathers, Gonzalo Mendez, Lorenzo Ramirez, William Guzman, Frank Palomino, and Thomas Estrada. And their 15 children: Sylvia Mendez, Gonzalo Mendez Jr., Jerome Mendez, Ignacio Ramirez, Silvino Ramirez, Jose Ramirez, Billy Guzman, Arthur Palomino, Sally Palomino, Clara Estrada, Robert Estrada, Frank Estrada, Syria Estrada, Danny Estrada, and Evelyn Estrada.
Meet the five families that sued the school districts:

**MENDEZ**  Sued the Westminster School District  
**RAMIREZ**  Sued the El Modena School District  
**GUZMAN**  Sued City of Santa Ana schools  
**PALOMINO**  Sued the Garden Grove School District  
**ESTRADA**  Sued the Westminster School District

The photo above is from one of the “A Class Action” special events and took place outside the Old County Courthouse in Santa Ana, Calif. In the dark suit 2nd from the right (front row) is Gonzalo Mendez Jr. The three women around him are from the Ramirez family. To the far right is Teresa (black dress), & standing next to Gonzalo in the blue dress is Mary Helen. Behind Mary is her sister Phyllis (dark glasses). Silvino (Jim) Ramirez is in the upper right back (light tan jacket). Mrs. Beverly Guzman Gallagos (Virginia Guzman’s daughter) is 2nd from the left, and her mother is the white haired lady with the dark top and necklace two spaces over in the front. The lady roughly in the middle with the white top and dark colored pants is Syria Estrada.

In the 1940s in Westminster, the Hoover school was known as the Mexican school and Westminster Main School (also known as 17th Street School) was the integrated school. In El Modeno, Lincoln school was the Mexican school and Roosevelt school was the integrated school. In Santa Ana, the Fremont school was the Mexican school and Franklin Elementary school was the integrated school. And in Garden Grove, the Hoover school was the Mexican school and Lincoln Elementary was the integrated school.
GONZALO MENDEZ & FELICITAS GOMEZ MENDEZ

Sued the Westminster School District

Jennie G. Fernandez Born May 15, 1930. Died June 22, 1940. (half sister)

Victor (or Victoriano) G. Fernandez Born Mar. 23, 1932 (half brother)

Sylvia Francis Mendez Born June 7, 1936


Jerome Herman Mendez Born Nov. 9, 1938

Phillip Mendez Born May 17, 1947

Sandra Jean Mendez Duran Born Dec. 31, 1950

Pictured left to right at the First Day Stamp Ceremony in 2007 are Jerome Mendez, Sylvia Mendez, Sandra Mendez, Gonzalo Mendez Jr., and Phillip Mendez. Gonzalo is married to Mary Helen Verdugo Mendez. She goes by “Helen”. They have 4 daughters- Julie, Phyllis, Suzan (Suzi), and Jeanie. Phyllis has a birthday the same day the stamp was issued, September 14th. Their daughter Julie was named after the American actress and singer Julie London. Helen was 20 years old when she married Gonzalo. She lived across the street from him when they were little kids. Gonzalo’s nickname is Beanie from the children’s cartoon show Beanie and Cecil. All of his friends had nicknames too, but his was the only one that stuck.
Sylvia Mendez graduated from Santa Ana High School in 1955. Here is her senior picture. She wanted to be a telephone operator and say “Number please!”. Her mom wanted her to be a nurse. Sylvia used her education to earn degrees in nursing and became the Assistant Nursing Director of the Pediatric Pavilion at the University of Southern California Medical Center in Los Angeles. She was 56 years old when she retired to take care of her mother.

From the 1956 Santa Ana High School yearbook here is senior Gonzalo Mendez (Jr) with his friend, underclassman Bill Medley. In high school Gonzalo wanted to be a draftsman and as an adult he went on to become a master carpenter. Bill Medley was never heard from again (other than that ‘Rock and Roll Hall of Fame’ thing).

One time I was talking to Gonzalo and he told me his memory of what the school secretary said when his Aunt Sally tried to register the children for school: “We’ll take your kids because their last name is Vidaurri and they don’t look Mexican. But we won’t take the Mendez’s because they’re Mexican and they have to go to the Mexican school.”
LORENZO AMEZCUA & JOSEFINA SOTO RAMIREZ

Sued the El Modena School District

Ignacio
Born July 31, 1933
Died April 17, 2018

Silvio (or Jim)
The court called him Silverio (we don’t know why)
Born Jan. 11, 1935
Died 1936

Ruth*
Born July 6, 1936

Jose (or Joe)
Born July 31, 1937

In 1923 Lorenzo A. Ramirez was 13 years old when he immigrated with his parents from Jalisco, Mexico to El Modeno, California. Lorenzo was fluent in both English and Spanish. He graduated Roosevelt School in 1927. Lorenzo met his wife Josefina Soto and they lived in Whittier, California with their sons, Ignacio, Jimmy, and Joe, but returned to El Modeno in 1944. Mr. Ramirez was friends with civil rights advocates in El Modena and Santa Ana. Mike Ramirez says back then his father would go to Woolworths and order food saying, “Let’s take our hamburgers and eat outside”. The children thought it was a fun thing to eat outdoors not realizing that they weren’t allowed to eat inside. Shown below is a photo I took at the Lorenzo A. Ramirez Library Naming Celebration and Sculpture Installation at Santiago Canyon College in 2016. The children wanted to honor their father by having a library named after him rather than in any other way because of how much he valued the importance of reading. Phyllis said of her father, “He wasn’t a boastful man. He didn’t think he needed to celebrate the ruling. He just went on with his business.” Pictured in the flowered dress is the daughter of the sculptor. The Ramirez children pictured around her from left to right are Mike, Henry, Phyllis, Mary Helen, and Lorenzo Jr. Phyllis Soto Ramirez Zepepa was one of the speakers at the event. ( *= Died as a baby).

Mary Helen
Born Aug. 17, 1939

Refugio*

Lorenzo Ramirez Jr.
Born 1940
Died 1940
(or Larry)

Phyllis Soto Ramirez

Antonio (or Tony)

Teresa
(or Teresita)

Henry

Ramon*

Mike

Monica
William and Virginia Guzman met in Santa Ana, California. During the 1940’s William worked at Manuel Veiga’s funeral home in Santa Ana and his co-workers included several founding members of a civil rights organization known as Latin American Voters League, including Hector Tarango. Manuel Veiga Jr. from the funeral home knew the lawyer David Marcus because he and his father had been in the mortuary business in Los Angeles. Mr. Guzman had a pin in his leg from a car accident and couldn’t go to war. Beverly Guzman said, “My father worked for the Hod Carrier Union and after work they would meet at Mr. Mendez’s tavern and so many agreed that they should step out and do something and since they were all in agreement they formed a group.” Mr. Guzman was the first one represented by an attorney before the Santa Ana School Board (Attorney Charles Martin). Guzman was friends with Mr. Palomino and Mr. Mendez. William Guzman worked at Disneyland and helped put fake cement snow on the Matterhorn as did Mr. Ramirez and Mr. Palomino. Walt Disney used to have meals with them at the Carnation restaurant inside Disneyland. Beverly’s brother Billy worked at Disneyland, too. Mr. Guzman’s personality was very outspoken. He had a temper and loved boxing. Mr. Palomino had a very similar personality. They loved their culture and their people. Mr. and Mrs. Guzman were very active in the Catholic Church. Pictured below are parents William and Virginia Guzman.
Frank Palomino married Irene Perez on Nov. 18, 1932 and they lived in Santa Ana with their children, Arthur, Sally, and Frank Jr. The Palominos and the Guzmans were close friends. Irene died in 2006. Irene said in an interview that she and her husband didn’t want to send their first child, Arthur, to a Mexican school because it was so far from where they lived. When they tried to enroll him in Franklin Elementary School they were turned down. In a newspaper article in the Orange County Register in 2017, Arthur’s children Annette and Andrew said that their father liked telling a story about once sneaking onto the “white bus” to take him home from his segregated school when he was about 8 years old. He had become impatient waiting for the much-later bus for the Latino children. Andrew said, “I don’t think he realized the magnitude of the case and the impact it had. To him it was just the life he lived.”

Arthur knew Gonzalo Jr. from when they were children. Arthur lived in Westminster near where the Founders Day Parade took place and had a paper route there. His father was born in Kansas and his mother was born in Mexico. On Oct. 8, 1962 Arthur married Beatrice Hernandez and they lived in Santa Ana where they raised their three children. Arthur worked for the California Umbrella Company for over 25 years and later retired from Flexible Metal Hose. Former World Welterweight champion boxer Carlos Palomino was Arthur’s cousin. Pictured are parents Frank and Irene.
Like Gonzalo Mendez, Thomas (or Tomas) Estrada was born in Mexico and became a naturalized citizen of the United States. Thomas married Mary Louise Pena. She was the daughter of Ernesto and Delia Pena. Mary’s sister Sophia married Dolores Mendez, the brother of Gonzalo Mendez. I met Syria Estrada in 2018 and she told me that her father had been a driver, hauling sugar beets, watermelons, etc. She humorously said, “We used to be fruit tramps.” Right after the court case was won the Estrada family left Westminster and moved to Brawley. There was a school 4 blocks away but ironically Syria was bussed to the barrio. Syria’s husband Ralph (or Rafael) worked for the railroad for 35 years and she was a nurse’s aide at Eisenhower Medical Center in Rancho Mirage. The children who were named in the petition filed by David Marcus are underlined, and all of the kids are listed from oldest to youngest on each family page.

L-R: Thomas Estrada & children Clara, Robert, Frank, and Syria. Sitting in the front is Daniel.
Above right is Mendez et al. plaintiff attorney **David Clarence Marcus** (born May 24, 1904 - died Dec. 5, 1982). His family came from the former Soviet Republic of Georgia, which is now part of Poland. On the first day of the case he asked Judge McCormick to allow two members of the Mexican Consulate to join him as a courtesy to the Mexican government. David Marcus was born May 24, 1904 to Ben Marcus and Mary Cohn. A Delayed Birth Certificate was filed January 29, 1940, almost 36 years after he was born. Often this was done to get into Social Security. In 1926 he married Esther Rosenthal. They had one child, Marvin Marcus, and the marriage lasted 2 years. David Marcus was Jewish and faced anti-Semitism while attending USC Law School where he earned his law degree in 1927. His second wife, Maria Yrma Davila, was Hispanic and an immigrant from Mexico. They married November 29, 1933 and had three daughters and one son. David and Maria raised their children to be bilingual. He began his career working on legal cases for the Mexican Consulate and travelled to Mexico as part of his job. He learned to speak Spanish and could translate for his non-English speaking clients. Marcus became known as the “Mexican Lawyer”. He took on a wide variety of cases.

**Hector Tarango**, one of the founding members of Santa Ana LULAC Council No. 147 said in an interview, “We formally of the Latin American Voters League and founders of Santa Ana LULAC Council No. 147 organized the class action lawsuit after we, Manuel Veiga Jr., myself, and Cruz Barrios, and another person consulted David Marcus in Los Angeles. Mendez volunteered to be a representative plaintiff.” The League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) was formed in 1929 as a result of several groups merging together. Their goal was to promote fairness for Mexican-Americans and they’ve been compared to the NAACP. Who actually contacted David Marcus first, or suggested contacting him first, might be another detail that is lost to history.
Hector G. Godinez, another early LULAC member in Santa Ana and former LULAC president, said in an interview, “Our work and success on the Mendez case was what formed the Santa Ana LULAC Council.” I knew of Mr. Godinez when he was the Southern California District Manager for the U.S. Postal service in Santa Ana. Earlier in his career he had been Orange County’s first Latino postmaster. While writing this book I found out about his role in the Civil Rights movement, and that he had been a tank commander in Germany during World War II. Godinez High School in Santa Ana is named after Mr. Godinez.

Pictured below, Isabel Ayala was very friendly when I met her. Back in the 1940’s Isabel had three little sisters, Cora, Annie, and Jeannie. Isabel was eighteen years old when she testified at the trial on Wednesday July 11, 1945 as the first rebuttal witness against the Garden Grove School District. The family moved to Garden Grove in 1943 and lived much closer to Lincoln Elementary than Hoover Elementary. However, when Isabel took two of her sisters to Lincoln Elementary to register them for school she was told that they couldn’t enroll there. From a recorded interview with Isabel Ayala:

“I went to see Mr. Kent… and asked him if I could have my little sisters in the Lincoln school. And he said, ‘No, I am sorry… All children of Mexican ancestry have to go to the Hoover school.’ And I asked him why… ‘Well,’ he says, ‘in the first place they don’t speak very good English…’ I said, ‘My little sisters speak English. They speak very good English, all of them.’ He said, well he couldn’t do very much about it.”

This picture of Isabel Ayala Ruiz was a gift from the Ayala family to Chapman University. A portion of the photograph is used as the cover of this book. Here’s how the picture looks after I had it restored.

Isabel died in 2011.
In keeping with the custom of the time...

In California in the 1940’s school segregation was legal for Asian-American and Native-American children. Mexican schoolchildren were considered part of the white race and there was no law requiring them to be segregated. Following the advice of their attorney the plaintiff group first sought an administrative remedy but were unable to reach an agreement with the school districts. Before the trial began David Marcus and defense attorney James Holden stipulated that race was not an issue in the case. The claim of improper segregation was argued on ethnicity (or heritage), not race. James L. Kent, superintendent of the Garden Grove school district, believed that Hispanic children could not keep up with Anglo-Saxon children in class and that they lacked morals and cleanliness. At the trial Kent testified of his belief that having separate schools was the correct solution for both groups of children. His testimony was contradicted by two important rebuttal witnesses- Ralph L. Beals (anthropologist) and Marie H. Hughes (education expert). They testified that there was a negative psychological effect on segregated children and that immersion with fluent English-speaking children provided the best results.

The plaintiffs did not argue that the Mexican schools were not as good as the integrated schools. They argued that segregation of children of Mexican heritage was unfair and Judge Paul J. McCormick agreed. McCormick wrote, “The equal protection of the laws’ pertaining to the public school system in California is not provided by furnishing in separate schools the same technical facilities, text books and courses of instruction to children of Mexican ancestry that are available to the other public school children regardless of their ancestry.” This was a direct assault on the Plessy Supreme Court Decision of 1896. After hearing the appeal, the final decision of the Ninth U.S. Circuit Court was that the school districts had violated California law, but they did not say that segregation itself was illegal. For now, Plessey remained in effect. Mr. Kent’s college yearbook photos from 1932 are shown below. He became school superintendent in 1941.

In her wonderful book MENDEZ v. WESTMINSTER: SCHOOL DESEGREGATION AND MEXICAN-AMERICAN RIGHTS Philippa Strum talks about the life of Judge McCormick and how he and his wife were involved in society. Strum writes that they often appeared on the society page of the LA Times. She says, “Mrs. McCormick’s name appeared there frequently in the years that followed- always in keeping with the custom of the time, as ‘Mrs. Paul J. McCormick’. ” What was her first name?

At the trial Supervisor Kent (above) denied discrimination.


I took my question to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints History Center in Anaheim near where I work and spoke to Nancy Carlsberg and Diane Sargent. They went to work on the computer and came up with the answer. From the 1913 WHO’S WHO ON THE PACIFIC COAST: A BIOGRAPHICAL COMPILATION OF NOTABLE LIVING CONTEMPORARIES WEST OF THE ROCKY MOUNTAINS we learn that her name was Mary Josephine Redmond. She was born in May of 1878 in Capetown (Cape John), Nova Scotia, Canada and died June 14, 1962. Her father was Irish and her mother was Scottish. No children are listed for the couple. Her marriage certificate says that her wedding was on the 25th, not the 26th, and that Mary Josephine was 28 years old when she got married. Her husband was 29.
This photograph from 1925 shows (from left to right) Federal Judge Paul J. McCormick of the Los Angeles District of California, Secretary of the Navy Curtis Dwight Wilbur (1867-1954), and Mary Josephine Redmond McCormick leaving the White House after Wilbur's introduction of the McCormicks to President Coolidge. Interestingly, Curtis Dwight Wilbur later served on the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals, but only from 1929 to 1945, so he wasn't there when the Menendez et al. appeal was being decided. Another thing to note is that McCormick and Wilber occupied the same seat on the federal bench. Before he became Secretary of the Navy, Curtis Dwight Wilbur served as the 19th Chief Justice of California (1923-1924) and was succeeded by Louis W. Myers- the man who wrote the letter to Judge McCormick illustrated on the next page.
Dear Paul,

Just a note to tell you how much I have enjoyed your letter. It is evident you have been working very hard, and you are doing a fine job. I am pleased to hear that you will be moving to a new position. I hope things work out well for you.

I am sorry to hear about your father's illness. I hope he will recover soon.

I am attempting to get in touch with the President about an important matter. It is all very confidential.

I am looking forward to hearing from you again soon.

Sincerely,

Louis Myers

Louis W. Myers

The 20th Chief Justice of California from 1924 to 1926, Louis Wescott Myers (1872-1960) was formerly a Superior Court Judge and apparently a good personal friend of Judge McCormick. Myers wrote to congratulate Judge McCormick on being chosen to serve on the Wickersham Commission. It was indeed an honor to be selected by President Hoover to serve on a commission comprising some of the most distinguished lawyers and jurists in the nation. He closes the letter this way: “If Blanche (Myer’s wife) were here she would join me with love and congratulations- and best wishes always, to Mary Josie and yourself.” The letter is dated May 21, 1929. (Letter from the author’s collection).
The Wickersham Commission 1929

Here is a picture of The Wickersham Commission that’s mentioned in the letter on the previous page. They were gathered in Washington DC to receive instructions from the president. The 11 members of the Commission made the first national study of crime and law enforcement in U.S. history. One of its main tasks was to study the important issue of Prohibition and what should be done about it. That’s Judge Paul J. McCormick standing in the second row, third from the left. President Herbert Hoover is seated in the front row, third from the right. On the right of the president is the man with the mustache and the light colored hat and suit- George W. Wickersham. He was previously attorney general in the Taft administration. To the left of the president is William D. Mitchell, Hoover’s attorney general, not a committee member.

Three years later in 1932 Federal District Judge Paul J. McCormick was considered a possible appointee to the United States Supreme Court to fill the place vacated by the resignation of Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes. In a speech while he was a member of the Wickersham crime investigating committee, Judge McCormick reaffirmed the doctrine of a man’s home being his castle and described search and seizure without warrants as a gross misuse of authority.

Judge McCormick handled some interesting cases. In 1939 he had actor Charlie Chaplin in his courtroom to testify in a suit brought against him by Michael I. Kustoff, who charged Chaplin with lifting the plot for one of his movies, “Modern Times”, from a book that Kustoff had written. Kustoff demanded an accounting of all profits. Chaplin testified as to the origin for the plot of the film and McCormick ruled in Chaplin’s favor.
Sandra A. Membrila as she was known then. Senior class of 1976, Westminster High School.

*Mendez et al. v. Westminster School District et al.* was largely forgotten until Sandra Robbie made a short film about it, “Mendez vs. Westminster: For all the Children/Par todos Los Ninos”. This 2003 PBS documentary film-written, directed, and produced by Robbie- won an Emmy Award. As a senior at Westminster High School Sandra had been voted “Friendliest” and “Best Personality” and her enthusiasm and hard work is one of the main reasons why this story is becoming better known.

Sandra Robbie: “We talk about our histories as if they don’t touch each other. And what was so exciting for me about the *Mendez* history is here we have a Latino family- a Mexican and a Puerto Rican family because Mrs. Mendez was Puerto Rican and Mr. Mendez was Mexican- we have them leasing land from a Japanese family, an argument being fought by a Jewish lawyer who married a Latino, in front of an Irish-Catholic judge involving, eventually, Thurgood Marshall and the NAACP.”

A 3”x5” card signed by Cheryl Brown Henderson and Gonzalo Mendez Jr.
When the *Mendez et al.* case was won it attracted national attention. The ruling shocked and offended the school districts. During the appeal the NAACP submitted an amicus curiae (friend of the court) brief supporting the judge's decision. **ROBERT L. CARTER** (above 1947) the Assistant Special Counsel of the NAACP is credited as being the main writer of the brief, along with some help from **LOREN MILLER**. Other groups also filed supporting briefs such as the American Jewish Congress, the Japanese American Citizens League, California Attorney General Robert Kenny, and the ACLU. Sandra Robbie interviewed Mr. Carter and he told her that his brief in the *Mendez et al.* case served as the model for the NAACP's later argument in *Brown v. Board of Education.*
A. L. Wirin

Civil Rights lawyer A.L. Wirin (1900-1978) was an attorney for the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) working in Southern California. He was also chief counsel for the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL) and participated in many landmark civil rights cases. Both the ACLU and the JACL entered the Mendez et al. case at the appeals level as an amicus. Wirin and his law partner Saburo Kido, president of the Japanese American Citizen League, participated in the oral arguments on behalf of the JACL, which was the only group other than the parties to present its case before the Appeals Court. Mr. Wirin greatly admired Loren Miller for drafting the majority of the briefs in Brown v. Board of Education and for his involvement in challenging the relocation of Japanese-Americans during World War II.

Robert W. Kenny

Robert Walker Kenny (1901-1976) served as Attorney General of California from 1943 to 1947. An early advocate for civil rights in California, he later served as a Superior Court Judge in Los Angeles. As Attorney General he filed an amicus brief for the state of California in the Mendez et al. appeal arguing that any segregation occurring in California schools was not constitutional. It is unclear if Governor Earl Warren participated in the filing of the brief, but he must have been well aware of what was going on and signed The Anderson Bill on June 14, 1947, ending segregated education in the state. (Above photographs are from the author’s collection).
Future Supreme Court justice Thurgood Marshall (1908-1993) in his office in Washington D.C. In 1940 Mr. Marshall became the NAACP's special counsel. With good reason Marshall did not believe the timing was right for an all-out attack on segregation in 1945 and the NAACP did not know about the Mendez et al. case until after it was over. Thurgood Marshall's name is on the NAACP's amicus and he approved it, but didn't have much to do with the appeal because he was recovering from an illness. Although Mendez et al. was never mentioned in Brown v. Board of Education, the same expert testimony regarding the negative social effects of segregation on children that was used to win Mendez et al. was also used to win Brown.
THE NINTH U.S. CIRCUIT COURT OF APPEALS

History was made in 1947 when the Ninth U.S. Circuit Court, the second highest tribunal in the land, upheld the verdict in *Mendez et al. v. Westminster School District of Orange County et al.* The school districts decided not to appeal the case further to the U.S. Supreme Court. Perhaps they thought they would lose, or maybe they knew that the California legislature was already working on changing state law and that segregated schools would soon no longer be legal in California. Shown at the bench in this 1937 photo, left to right, are Justices Albert Lee Stephens (who wrote the decision), Frances A. Garrecht, Curtis Dwight Wilbur, Clifton Mathews and Bert E. Haney. Judge William Healy, at the time the newest appointee to the court, and Judge William Denman (shown on the next page) were not present when the picture was taken. By 1947 Wilbur and Haney were no longer on the court, but Stephens, Garrecht, and Mathews were. Judge Stephens served on the U.S. court of appeals from 1937 until his death in 1965.

The San Francisco-based Ninth Circuit is the nation’s largest federal appeals court and hears cases from nine Western states. In 1947 when the Mendez et al. case was being decided the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals consisted of seven men—Francis Arthur Garrecht, William Denman, Clifton Mathews, Albert Lee Stephens Sr., William Healy, Homer T. Bone (replacing Bert E. Haney, deceased), and William Edwin Orr (replacing Curtis Dwight Wilbur). Their decision was unanimous. (Photo from the author’s collection).
Pictured above right, WILLIAM DENMAN (1872-1959), a tall, white-haired legal veteran launches a new career. He is being sworn in by Paul P. O’Brien, the court clerk, to a life-long seat on the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals. The judgeship for which Denman was nominated by President Franklin D. Roosevelt had been created at the previous session of congress. Denman was confirmed by the United States Senate on January 29, and received his commission on February 1, 1935. Judge Denman was married and had no children. He had graduated Harvard Law School in 1897 and entered private practice in San Francisco in 1898. When Denman was sworn in there were 4 judges on the federal appellate bench. Denman was joined on the court in 1937 by 55-year-old William Healy, a prominent Boise, Idaho attorney, and Albert Lee Stephens, who had previously served on the California Court of Appeals.

Although the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals upheld Judge McCormick’s decision, it did not embrace all of his reasoning and made its’ ruling on narrower grounds. The majority opinion written by Judge Albert Lee Stephens left intact two racist California codes which allowed for segregation of Native American Indian children and children of “Chinese, Japanese, or Mongolian parentage.” This stopped short of overturning the Plessy v. Ferguson principle of “Separate but equal”. Because the decision was not appealed to the Supreme Court the ruling only affected California. In each case that is heard any judge can write his own opinion, either agreeing with the majority or dissenting from it. Not a believer in segregation, Justice William Denman wrote an opinion that made it clear that he would have preferred the end of segregated education, and that he was angered by the behavior of the school boards. Denman served on the Appeals Court until his death in 1969. (Photo from the author’s collection).
Appeals Judge Albert Lee Stephens Sr.

January 25, 1874- January 15, 1965

"By enforcing the segregation of school children of Mexican descent against their will and contrary to the laws of California respondents have violated the federal law as provided in the Fourteenth Amendment to the Federal Constitution." Judge Albert Lee Stephens Sr.
SEIMA MUNEMITSU & MASAKO MORIEKA MUNEMITSU

Leased their farm to the Mendez family

Seiko Lincoln Munemitsu (nickname “Tad”)  Born Feb. 13, 1922  Died April 22, 1997
Seiro Munemitsu  (His English spelling is “Saylo”)  Born May 14, 1923
Kazuko Munemitsu  Born May 23, 1935
Akiko (Aki) Munemitsu Nakauchi  Born May 23, 1935

Masako Munemitsu and her children, Seiko, Seiro, Kazuko, and Akiko (Aki) were sent to the Japanese internment camp called Colorado River Relocation Center located at Poston, Arizona, during World War II. Her husband Seima had earlier been forced to go to the Department of Justice Camp at Santa Fe, New Mexico. He joined them at Poston about a year before they were released. Before leaving they leased their farm in Westminster to the Mendez family. The ones who put the lease together with the banker Mr. Monroe were Seima Munemitsu, his oldest son Seiko, and Gonzalo Mendez. Mr. Monroe’s first name possibly was Frank, but we’re not sure. Seiko, who spoke both Japanese and English, used to go fishing with Victor Mendez when they were young. Masako lived a long life and was 93 years old when she passed away.

This picture was probably taken in 1922 or 1923. Masako Morieka Munemitsu is the lady in the white dress at the bottom left corner. Her husband Seima Munemitsu is standing at the far upper right. The toddler putting his hand to his mouth in the back row 3rd from the left is Seiko Lincoln Munemitsu and he is being held by his grand-father. The names of the other people are unknown. They all came to America at the same time and were friends. Seima and Masako were single when they immigrated and got married after they came to the United States.
In 1947 Governor Earl Warren (1891-1974) made California the first state in the nation to end school segregation.

Mr. Warren said in his memoirs that he deeply regretted supporting the internment of 120,000 Japanese Americans while he was the state attorney general in 1942. Although he didn’t believe in segregation, he thought, as many did at the time, that there was a danger to the country that justified Japanese Americans being sent to relocation camps during World War II. In June of 1947 Gov. Warren signed the Anderson Bill, a measure that repealed all California school codes mandating segregation. By September of that year Mexican-American children were able to attend integrated schools in Orange County.
Above, left to right, George E.C. Hayes, Thurgood Marshall, and James M. Nabrit in 1954 congratulate each other following the Supreme Court decision in the landmark Brown v. Board of Education case. GEORGE EDWARD CHALMER HAYES (1894-1968) was one of the lead counsels on Bolling v. Sharpe, the companion case to Brown. JAMES MADISON NABRIT JR. (1900-1997) won several important arguments before the U.S. Supreme Court and was also involved in winning Bolling v. Sharpe. In that companion case they argued that the constitution prohibits segregated schools in the District of Columbia. Five cases had been combined into Brown v. Board of Education. Chief Justice Earl Warren wrote in his Brown opinion that separating children by race led to a feeling of inferiority in the hearts and minds of the segregated children.
Opposition and progress...

Until 1954 the Supreme Court had upheld the Plessy decree that racial segregation did not in itself constitute inequality. The Brown decision changed that. Alabama Governor George Wallace promised "segregation today, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever" and gained national attention by standing in a schoolhouse door at the University of Alabama blocking the admission of two black students. Civil Rights workers were murdered. Racial terrorism occurred throughout much of the South in the 1950s and 1960s. It is not always easy to accept court decisions. But realistically the choice came down to recognition of the law of the land or no public schools at all. Many Southerners, perhaps a majority, favored segregation but did not want to see their public school system destroyed. It was an emotional issue and involved resistance from extremists. Change came very slowly.

Some writers say that Mendez et al. paved the way for the later success of Brown v. Board of Education. Other writers deny this, saying that the two cases had their own two different sets of facts. What's true is that some of the same legal staff involved in Mendez et al. was also involved in Brown. Governor Earl Warren had become the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. Thurgood Marshall was now knowledgeable about the case history of Mendez, et al. At the least, the experience gained by the NAACP in 1947 proved to be very beneficial in 1954. Knowing what had worked before helped the NAACP make some good strategic decisions. Testimony regarding the psychological damage done to children placed in segregated schools no doubt played a role in winning Brown. This successful strategy had earlier been used in Mendez et al. v. Westminster School District of Orange County et al. The five Mexican-American families who filed the 1940s lawsuit were part of a movement for social justice and a source of hope and encouragement.
The author with Helen and Gonzalo Mendez. This book wouldn’t have been possible without the inspiration of Juan D'Lucas and the kindness of Gonzalo Mendez Jr. Juan gave me the idea of writing this book. He said encouragingly more than once, “Dave, you should do something!” Gonzalo was always very generous with his time and autograph and answering questions. We would be at an event and he would quietly point out somebody and tell me who they were. He also gave me copies of some of the pictures used in this book. Thank you, my friends!

I had another opportunity to learn more about the case at an event titled “Memories of Mexican Schools” held at the California Welcome Center for Orange County in Buena Park. This exhibit was sponsored by MOTAL, the Museum of Teaching and Learning. The opening of this show was September 15, 2012. Gonzalo spoke a little bit and answered some questions. He said that when these events were taking place he didn’t really understand the importance of it. He was in 4th, 5th, 6th grade and too young to know what was going on. He just did what he was told. He said his teachers were very nice both in his Mexican school and later in his new school. He didn’t really understand the importance of things until he was older, maybe 18 or 20. When Gonzalo went to the new school his white classmates treated him well and throughout the rest of his school years everybody knew who he was because of the case. Some Hispanic parents were skeptical about integration, but overall the transition went much more peacefully than they thought it would. There were a couple of times Gonzalo got bothered on the schoolyard, a couple of schoolyard fights, but he was big for his age and able to take care of himself. Later he became friends with those boys, and everybody else was nice.

At this event Gonzalo said that he just had his 56th High School Reunion and all of the white guys remember him and they are still friends. Bill Medley of the Righteous Brothers was two classes behind him in high school
and they were friends. In his working career he has picked oranges, worked at the Naval Station munitions site in Seal Beach, and, of course, done carpentry. Because he had a good education and had studied drafting and math in school he could read blueprints and became a foreman in his 30’s. One of the things that he didn’t like about his job was the travel. One time he was sent to Tennessee for three months to work. At various times his family owned between one and three cantinas - The Arizona in Santa Ana, The Mendez Café in Midway City, and The Palms in Santa Ana. He said because of the money his father made on the farm his family was able to finance the lawsuit against the school districts and that when the case was finally over they were “broke.”

Once Gonzalo was a special guest at an elementary school. At an assembly he stayed in the back offstage while a teacher told the kids about Mendez et al. v. Westminster School District of Orange County et al. When he came out from behind the curtain the kids were so excited they started clapping and screaming and he said he felt like one of The Beatles!

About 6 months before this event Art Palomino passed away and Gonzalo Jr. went to his funeral.

Gonzalo Sr. is buried at Westminster Memorial Park on Beach Blvd.

Gonzalo: “A lot of kids I met when I first went to the white school are still my friends. The white children were not prejudiced- maybe some of their parents, maybe all the parents- but not the majority of the children.”
Judge Paul J. McCormick: “A paramount requisite in the American system of public education is social equality. It must be open to all children by unified school association regardless of lineage.”

Sylvia Mendez: (About speaking at colleges and high schools) “They don’t believe there was segregation. They just can’t believe that at one time we were segregated just like the blacks in the South.”

Gonzalo Mendez Jr: (On his philosophy to live by) “Be happy!!”

Hector R. Tarango of the Orange County LULAC Council No. 147: “Gonzalo Mendez was willing to volunteer to be a representative plaintiff because he was disturbed by what happened to his family.”

“We helped organize the lawsuit before the case was filed, all the way to the end, including the appeal.”

Alice Vidaurri: “Had mom not taken a stand at the school counter that day there would be no Mendez vs. Westminster history, but she did. I am very proud sharing my mother’s history and she specifically asked us ‘to tell the story’.”

Earl Warren: “Does segregation of children in public schools solely on the basis of race, even though the physical facilities and other “tangible” factors may be equal, deprive the children of the minority group of equal education opportunities? We believe that it does.”

Dr. Philippa Strum: “Mendez v. Westminster was a turning point in U.S. history. It was the first time a federal court ever declared that “separate but equal” schools were not equal at all. The five families who brought the case were true American heroes.”

Syria Estrada Pemintel: “My dad would tell me, ‘No matter what you do, even if you put a button on a shirt, do your best. Do your best all the time’.”

Beverly Guzman Gallegos: “I would like to think of Mendez et al. vs. Westminster et al. civil lawsuit as one of the building blocks that has made this country what it is today. These families overcame so many obstacles so that all children could have an equal opportunity for a better education. We must continue to keep their legacy alive by telling others about how schools were segregated in the 40’s. It amazes me to know how many have never heard or will never hear their story unless they are told ‘yes this did happen’. So we must continue to keep this landmark case alive.”

Annette Palomino Diogostine (Arthur Palomino’s daughter): “My father never wrote anything about the case. He never mentioned anything about the case to us until we were adults. I think he started to realize its importance when people started interviewing him. That would be around the time he mentioned it to us I guess… My dad was so proud of his family’s part in this landmark case.”

Lorenzo A. Ramirez: “…we live in a country where everybody is equal.”

Phyllis Ramirez: “One person can create change. And you can be that person.”
Judge Paul John McCormick

April 23, 1879 - December 2, 1960
The test for each of us is how we respond to what happens to us in life. Virginia Guzman graduated from mortality on June 15, 2017. She liked helping others. Raised Catholic and active in the church, Virginia made a positive impact on the lives of those around her. She was usually quiet but also had an outspoken side. Virginia was smart and lived a long and productive life.
Virginia Guzman at the Westminster Founders Day Parade 2011
Mendez et al. v. Westminster School District of Orange County et al. played an important role in advancing the Civil Rights movement.

As a result of the Mendez et al. case the California legislature passed the Anderson Bill (1947), a measure that repealed all California school codes mandating segregation. It was signed by Earl Warren who was then governor of California. After the case was won it became much easier to fight discrimination in other areas such as employment, housing, hotels, parks, restaurants, and public swimming pools. Mendez et al. v. Westminster School District et al. effectively ended segregation as a matter of law in California.