



Beloved Land: An Oral History of Mexican Americans in Southern Arizona

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Doña Ramona Benítez Franco was born in 1902 on her parents' Arizona ranch and celebrated her hundredth birthday with family and friends in 2002, still living in her family's century-old adobe house. Doña Ramona witnessed many changes in the intervening years, but her memories of the land and customs she knew as a child are indelible. For Doña Ramona as well as for countless generations of Mexican Americans, memories of rural life recall *la querida tierra*, the beloved land. Through good times and bad, the land provided sustenance. Today, many of those homesteads and ranches have succumbed to bulldozers that have brought housing projects and strip malls in their wake.

Now a writer and a photographer who have long been intimately involved with Arizona's Hispanic community have preserved the voices and images of men and women who are descendants of pioneer ranching and farming families in southern Arizona. Ranging from Tucson to the San Rafael Valley and points in between, this book documents the contributions of Mexican American families whose history and culture are intertwined with the lifestyle of the contemporary Southwest. These were hardy, self-reliant pioneers who settled in what were then remote areas. Their stories tell of love affairs with the land and a way of life that is rapidly disappearing. Through oral histories and a captivating array of historic and contemporary photos, *Beloved Land* records a vibrant and resourceful way of life that has contributed so much to the region. Individuals like Doña Ramona tell stories about rural life, farming, ranching, and vaquero culture that enrich our knowledge of settlement, culinary practices, religious traditions, arts, and education of Hispanic settlers of Arizona. They talk frankly about how the land changed hands—not always by legal means—and tell how they feel about modern society and the disappearance of the rural lifestyle.

"Our ranch homes and fields, our chapels and corrals may have been bulldozed by progress or renovated into spas and guest ranches that never whisper our ancestors' names," writes Patricia Preciado Martin. "The story of our beautiful and resilient heritage will never be silenced . . . as long as we always remember to run our fingers through the nourishing and nurturing soil of our history." *Beloved Land* works that soil as it revitalizes that history for the generations to come.

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