

'Old-timers' still in Superior -
even as next generations leave

Isabel and Joe Ybarra are typical of couples in Superior who married young, saved where they could, raised a large family and sent their children off to bigger and better things while they remained in a town where—like the television show jingle—“everybody knows your name.”

Like many other long-term residents who put roots down in Superior in the 1930s and '40s, the Ybarras see no reason to leave. They still live in the home that Joe built in the south part of town, when three-bedroom homes were selling for \$15,000. They still have friends and siblings living in town. Isabel is an active volunteer in the community and Joe, a retired mine worker, likes to do odd jobs around the house and for friends and family members.

And yet these couples, who came through the Depression, survived World War II and rode out the boom and the bust of Superior's mining industry, never expected their children to follow in their footsteps. Their children, more often than not, would not lay down their own roots in this small town where many “old timers” admit whatever changes have been wrought over the years have not been for the better.

Isabel was born in a small community near Cottonwood that no longer exists. She and her eight brothers and sisters moved to Superior in 1938 to live with an uncle and his wife after her parents died. The younger children, like Isabel, were allowed to go to school, but the older ones had to go to work in order to help support such a large combined family.

Joe was born in Miami, Ariz., in 1927. When the Depression hit, Joe's father moved the family back to Mexico where there was still work to be found, and the children could still attend school.

Joe's father returned to the states after the job market stabilized and in 1934, he brought the rest of the family back to Arizona—but this time, they settled in Superior.

Joe dropped out of school when he was a junior at Superior High School. He knew that once he turned 18, he'd be drafted. In January 1945 he began working for Magma Copper Co. in the mine yard, since he was too young to get an underground job. At that time, the company was hiring as fast as it could, because it was losing workers to the draft at an astounding pace.

“They needed workers pretty bad,” Joe says. “Anybody who came in needed the job, and regardless of what training you had, they needed the personnel.”

By April that year, Joe received his draft notice and he was off to the service. He was sent to Germany, after most of the fighting was over, to be a part of the Army's occupation forces. He stayed 10 months and despite being offered a commission to stay longer, Joe chose to come back home to Superior and to the mining job he knew was waiting for him, thanks to a government guarantee.

In October 1946, Joe went back to work at Magma, although being not-yet 21 years old, he still couldn't work underground.

“When I got back, my job was already filled, so they tried to squeeze us into whatever phase of the mining operation that was available,” he explains. He spent time in the mill, at the smelter and on a crew that replaced cracked railroad ties that led to Magma Station, where the mine’s lumber was offloaded.

The year he returned, Isabel was a junior at Superior High School. They married in July 1948 after she graduated. Isabel stayed home to raise their children—three boys and a girl—while Joe continued to toil in the mines.

When Joe was finally able to work underground—where the real money was to be made—he started out as a mucker and eventually made his way up the ladder to level boss. He quit once and was fired once, but in the end he spent nearly 33 years of his life working for the Magma Copper Co., until the mine closed in 1982.

“I was very lucky, in a way, that I had a job. After the war ended, jobs were hard to get,” he points out. “Here in the mine, you got good pay and steady work. And it didn’t matter what the weather was like outside; the mine was always the same climate: hot and dirty.”

When asked what job for the mine he liked the most, Joe laughs and says, “Whatever job paid the best.”

When he first started working in the yard in 1945, Joe was paid \$5.35 a day. When he got back from his military service, that same job was paying \$7.32 a day. After the union was formed in 1959 and the first strike was held, the mine started paying by the hour. By the time the mine shut down in 1982, miners were making \$10 to \$12 an hour. When he went underground, Joe made \$9.76 a day as a mucker, and miners were making \$10.88 a day.

Many miners counted themselves lucky to have made it that far. A frightening majority of them were killed in accidents or, more commonly, died from miner’s consumption. Joe’s father, who started working in the mines of Mexico when he was 15, died when he was only 49.

“In my dad’s day, and early on for me, safety and health were not a major concern,” Joe says. “Miners didn’t wear gloves or masks, and they were drilling dry and breathing in a lot of dust every day.”

Magma built a hospital in town, staffed by company doctors. It became a place of sadness and joy, where ailing miners left the world even as their offspring were brought into it.

There used to be community-building activities every weekend, whether it was a movie or a boxing match at the Magma Club, a dance at the VFW Post 3584, a small fiesta at one of the local Catholic churches, or a card game at the Los Reyes Club.

“We created our own entertainment,” says Joe, adding that, “in Superior, we had about 13 bars.”

Everybody in town knew everybody, and a good percentage of the population was related to each other. Joe’s two surviving brothers still live in town. Like Joe, all three worked in the mines.

Everybody still knows everybody in town; that much hasn’t changed, Isabel says. But what has changed is that vitality and activity that made the town

come alive. Without that buzz of energy, there was little to attract the younger generations ... little to make them want to stay.

Three of the Ybarras' four children graduated from college, and one went into the field of sales. Those children are now raising their own children in the Valley. They often visit Joe and Isabel in Superior, but there is little, if any, thought about staying. Joe and Isabel would like to see younger families come back to Superior, but acknowledge that this will only happen when they are given a reason to come, and to stay.

Until then, the "old timers" will continue to chat about the old days, catching up with news about each other's children and grandchildren, talking about the weather, and dreaming that their town will once again become a place bustling with diverse shops, entertainment venues, medical facilities—and the people who will use them.