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Ella Rodriguez, American Indian monitor, activist

By Sukhjit Purewal
Knight Ridder

MONTEREY - When they erected the Holiday Inn in downtown San Jose, Ella Rodriguez stood atop a heap of rubble and watched.

A Salinas resident, Ms. Rodriguez was a trailblazer, one of the earliest monitors who looked out for American Indian burial remains during construction projects.

"She was one of the kind they don't make anymore," said Gary Breschini, a Salinas-based archaeologist who worked alongside Rodriguez through the soil sifting and recovery of human remains on the hotel project.

Breschini described Ms. Rodriguez as dedicated, stubborn, determined.

Ms. Rodriguez died Dec. 22 following a yearlong battle with cancer. She was 73.

From her elementary school years in Watsonville, to her work as a monitor and consultant on local Indian history, Ms. Rodriguez would not allow her culture to be ridiculed or forgotten, as she described in a one-page autobiographical narrative.

"I was always defending my Indian side against the school and other kids," she wrote. "I fought back the best I could; clothes were ripped and teeth flew."

Thus would go her first six or seven years in school.

The Pajaro Valley Unified School Board finally sent her off to the Stewart Nevada Indian Trade School, just outside Carson City, Nev., where she attended school. Ms. Rodriguez estimated that she was about 13 at the time.

Born in the foothills near Mount Madonna in Watsonville in 1932, Ms. Rodriguez returned to the Central Coast after what she called her "forced" relocation to Nevada.

Reared as an Ohlone Costanoan, Ms. Rodriguez said that she learned late in her life that she also had an equal amount of Esselen ancestry.

She spent her early adult life working in agricultural fields and canneries. That was before she was called to service by her ancestors. In 1975, she set upon a construction site in Watsonville where a burial site was said to exist. The developer was against preservation.

After rallying members of the American Indian Movement, Ms. Rodriguez and the group occupied the site for three months. They were successful in preserving a small portion of the burial ground. It was then that Ms. Rodriguez decided to dedicate her life to preserving American Indian remains. Two years later she descended on the Holiday Inn site. As Breschini explained, Ms. Rodriguez's actions were controversial because it was one of the first occasions Native Americans had asserted their rights to burial sites.

"She wanted the heritage to be found out and passed on," he said.

Among her last jobs was monitoring improvements at the Pebble Beach Co. golf courses and several power plant projects in Santa Clara County. Despite her defense of the burial sites, Ms. Rodriguez's own words also demonstrate a gritty pragmatism and a recognition that cooperation was necessary. "It is sad that human remains have to be disturbed, but progress is a very aggressive force and we often have to compromise," she had said.

Breschini and his wife and research partner, Trudy Haversat, relied heavily on Ms. Rodriguez's experience and knowledge when they wrote their book, "The Esselen Indians of the Big Sur Country" last year. "I could never be what she was," said her sister Clara Ortiz, who cared for Ms. Rodriguez in her last year of life.

Ella Rodrigues

Born: July, 5, 1932, Watsonville

Died: Dec. 2, 2005, Elkhorn

Survived by: Her sister, Clara Ortiz of Roseburg, Ore., and brother, Joe Williams of Roseburg.

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