New lesson plan teaches 3rd-graders city's history

Former elementary school teacher designed the program.

BY LUKE RAMSETH
ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

Who were the American Indians who lived along Aliso Creek? How long did Juan Avila own Rancho Niguel? What is Laguna Niguel's official tree?

In an effort to better teach third-graders about local history, the Laguna Niguel Historical Society answered those questions and others in a detailed lesson plan distributed to teachers last month.

The lesson takes students through Laguna Niguel's past, from the Niguili Indian village along Aliso Creek – members of the Acjachemen tribe – to the Mexican rancho era and up to the city's incorporation in 1989.

Two Historical Society members – Paul Whitelock and Orange County Supervisor Pat Bates, who served as Laguna Niguel's first mayor – presented the lesson plan to the City Council last week. It was taught for the first time to students at George White Elementary School on Friday.

"This is a tremendous gift you've given to this generation and future generations," current Mayor Robert Ming said after the presentation, which included historical intricacies of the city seal, details about Laguna Niguel's past as a working ranch, and an overview of a coloring-book portion of the lesson plan.

Carole Allen, a former elementary school teacher, wrote the 16-page lesson and 10-page coloring book. She said it took about a year to put together. It's the first big project the 2-year-old Historical Society has taken on, member Jeanette Krembas said.

Last week, Allen completed her last day of substituting, wrapping up nearly a half-century of teaching at Laguna Niguel-area schools. Most of that was as a fourth-grade teacher at Crown Valley Elementary School.

In her fourth-grade classes, Allen found her history lesson plan to be fairly straightforward. It had to broadly cover California history, on which she could find plenty of classroom resources. But she said she heard a need from her colleagues in the third grade, who were charged with piecing together a more localized history lesson each year.

"(Third-grade) teachers would always say, 'There's no material,'" Allen said.

So last summer, she set out to write out a plan to help them. As a local resident since 1966, she knew some of the history, but the research and writing nevertheless took her the better part of the summer. She has published books for teachers before, on Japan, India and Mexico.

Allen decided a good way to teach Laguna Niguel's history was to pick apart the city's seal, which includes various symbols intended to represent the past. There's a whale skull, representing the area's ancient underwater origins. There's an Acjachemen tribal member and a cattle brand similar to that of Juan Avila, who became the area's first private landowner in 1842.

There's a house with a red tile roof and arched doorways, representing a style of the California missions, plus the modern design of the city's current tract housing.

The greenery represents the coastal sage, California sycamore and coastal live oak. And "Sea Country" is the motto first coined by the Laguna Niguel Corp. in 1959.

Allen said not much surprised her as she put the materials together. "But I wasn't aware of the landowners, like Lewis Moulton," she said. "I didn't really know the dates of everything, like when it transferred from Mexican ownership."

Local teachers and students now have easy access to those details.

MACKENZIE REISS, ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

Paul Whitelock of the Laguna Niguel Historical Society watches as third-graders color pictures of the Laguna Niguel city seal, part of a new lesson plan on city history.

Fun facts about Laguna Niguel

- Fossils of sea turtles, sea cows, dolphins and baleen whales have been discovered there.
- The name Laguna Niguel comes from "Laguna," meaning lagoon, and "Niguili," or "Niguiti," an Indian village on Aliso Creek.
- The city plant is the bougainvillea, with a blue-pink color.
- The city tree is the jacaranda, which has lavender-colored flowers.

Source: Laguna Niguel Historical Society