The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how the Mesa Southwest Museum, which I am associated with, intends to utilize its position as a respected cultural institution to examine the role of Latinos in central Arizona. It should be noted that this project is a work in progress.

The Mesa Southwest Museum is an educational institution operated by the City of Mesa in Mesa, Arizona (Figure 1). Mesa is the second largest city in Arizona and is part of the Phoenix metro area. The Museum strives for excellence in the collection, exhibition, interpretation, and preservation of the cultural and natural history of the Southwest for the education and benefit of our diverse audiences. The Museum features over 80,000 square feet in exhibition galleries that chronicles Arizona’s rich history (Figures 2 and 3). We also oversee Mesa Grande, a prehistoric Hohokam archaeological site (Figure 4), and the Sirrine House, a nineteenth-century historic house of a working-class Mormon family (Figure 5). Last year, we educated over 138,000 visitors.

The City of Mesa is a conservative town established by Mormons in the mid-nineteenth century (Figure 6). The City prides itself on hiring excellent people and providing excellent customer service. Hence, the City’s motto, “Great People, Quality Service!” (Figure 7) Mesa’s current population is almost 400,000 and 20% of the population is Latino. According to Census 2000, one in four Mesa residents is Hispanic. However, this Latino presence is not visible within the City. Clearly, two separate worlds coexist with little or no integration.
The Mesa Southwest Museum is the largest institution in the City’s Arts and Cultural Division. This division has eighty-five employees and thirty-five of these employees work at the Museum. Out of these eighty-five people, there are only four Latinos! And these four Latinos work at the Museum, and only two of us are in senior position.

Within the City of Mesa government, there are no Latino representatives on the City Council. In this year’s election, there were no Hispanic candidates. Nod did any of the candidates address concerns specifically relating to Latino issues. The Mesa Public School District is the largest school district in Arizona and there are no Hispanic representatives on the school board. Nor are there any Latino junior high or high school principals.

To illustrate Mesa’s lack of consideration and cultural understanding, this year Cinco de Mayo fell on a Sunday, but because of the alleged dominating Mormon influence, which forbids any activities other than attending church on Sundays, the City’s Cinco de Mayo celebrations were held on Friday, 3 May, and Saturday, 4 May. Whereas all of the surrounding cities had their celebrations on Sunday!

Mesa is indeed aware of their cultural deficiencies and want to change but not quite such how. The City has made some cultural strides, for example in February 2000, a Diversity Office was established (Figure 8) and in November 2001, the Mesa Southwest Museum had its first major exhibit that featured bilingual label text. Other cultural strides include: in January 2002, a Citywide Diversity Training began; in August 2002, the Mesa Southwest Museum’s name in Spanish was added to the façade; and in October 2002, the very First Annual Latino Town Hall Meeting was held in Mesa (Figure 9).
However, much more still needs to be done! The method in which I intend to address the role of Latinos in central Arizona is through an exhibit entitled, *Latinization: A Cultural History of Latinos’ Contributions to Central Arizona*. Why use an exhibit to address this pertinent issue? My reason is three-fold.

First, a museum must reflect its constituents, as a museum professional, I am a firm believer that a cultural institution, like the Mesa Southwest Museum, needs to present a forum for social issues that directly affect the audiences it represents. Most museums are no longer doing what is important to them, but what is important to their respective communities. Gurian’s (2001:97) statement perhaps best sums up museums’ new role within their community:

> All museums are important part of civic life. Whatever their overt role may be, museums have become an important agent in the creation of a more cohesive society.

Secondly, people who go to museums trust the information they are getting is factual and accurate. Last year, the American Association of Museums conducted a national survey that supported this high level of trust. This trust enhances a museum’s opportunity to educate the public.

Finally, any discussion on any ethnic groups, particularly on Latinos, is regarded as a “sensitive” issue and its examination will challenge conventional points of views. I think the most effective way of presenting this topic is through a structured and dynamic exhibit with the potential of reaching various audiences. This past summer at a city meeting on diversity, the director of the City’s Diversity Office announced that

> The most effective way to change the perceptions of the Latinos and to educate the perceptions of Latinos and to educate the public [in this area] is through an exhibit at the Mesa Southwest Museum.
She like, I, believe that museums play an important role in validating diverse cultures and discussing social issues. People can go to museums and learn at their own pace without anyone questioning their knowledge or telling them what they should know or not know.

The exhibit will feature four main sections and each section will focus on a specific theme or themes:

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<th>Exhibit Sections</th>
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<td>I. A Place Call Home</td>
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<td>II. Who Are We?</td>
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<td>III. I am-A Bridge Between Two Worlds</td>
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<td>IV. Our Heritage Continues</td>
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Latinization:
A Cultural History of Latinos’ Contributions to Central Arizona

One of the most difficult elements of developing any exhibitions, is the creation of the actual exhibit section topics. The specific section topics were a result of my many discussions with City of Mesa employees; Latino and non-Latino residents who live in central Arizona; museum visitors; and my own perceptions.

I spoke to fifty people that I met over a period of three months either at the Mesa Southwest Museum or out in the community. Each person was asked the same question, “What would you like for people in central Arizona to know about you as a Latino/Hispanic?” The majority of the people spoke to were Hispanics and either first or second generation Latinos living in Arizona. They represented a various socio-economic backgrounds and were between the ages of thirteen and ninety.
As a result of their responses, the exhibit section topics and preliminary content information were developed.

Each individual was told what his/her information was intended for and all but two people were thrilled with the idea of having any exhibit specifically on Latinos. However, except for those people under the age of twenty-seven, everyone else wished to remain anonymous. I was a bit surprised by this reaction, but I did respect their wishes.

The two main concepts of the exhibit are first to demonstrate that Latinos do indeed have a rich heritage in central Arizona and in many cases, generations longer than Anglos. And, secondly, to encourage an understanding and appreciation of cultural diversity.

To illustrate that Latinos do have a past history and a present history in central Arizona, the exhibit will incorporate a “Then and Now” structural approach. This method will exemplify a continuity of Latinos in central Arizona and will help validate the existence of Hispanics in this area.

The first exhibit section will be entitled “A Place Call Home” and will explore why Hispanics first came to this area in the nineteenth century and why they continue to come to this area even today. Like many place in Arizona, early Hispanics arrived in this area to escape social and economic unrest in northern Mexico and other parts of the American Southwest.

Many people in central Arizona are not aware that Hispanics are not newcomers to this area or indeed in North America. Unfortunately, many people still do not realize that Spain had arrived in North America forty-two years before the pilgrims arrived in Plymouth. Nor do many people realize that when the Guadalupe-Hidalgo Treaty was signed in 1848, people who
were living in this area became official residents of the United States. And late citizens when Arizona became a state in 1912.

According to historical records, Hispanics first arrived in Mesa by the mid-nineteenth century. And in the last ten years, the number of Latinos that have moved into this area has double. Therefore, Latinos have indeed been in central Arizona for well over a hundred years. Although if one were to visit downtown Mesa today, one would not see any physical evidence of Latino presence anywhere (Figure 10)!

However, as illustrated in the map in Figure 11, there is definitely a Latino presence in downtown Mesa. The star on the leftside is the Mesa Southwest Museum and directly to the front of it, a a dark green rectangle, which is downtown Mesa. Hispanic neighbourhoods literally surround downtown Mesa and these are the neighbourhoods where the majority of the Latinos live today (Figures 12 and 13).

The second exhibit entitled, “Who Are We?,” will explain that even though Latinos speak the same language, all Latinos are not the same. Many people in Mesa and the rest of Arizona must realize that Latinos do not represent one cultural identity. In this region, there are roughly three main groups of Latinos. The first group are the people those who have lived here for generations. The second group are the people who just arrived to this area primarily from Mexico and other Latin American countries. And the last group are the day labourers, who are also the majority of the undocumented residents in this area (Figure 14). Mesa is the oldest community in this region that has consistently utilized the day labour force for several decades (Figure 15). Their stories still need to be told. Even though Mesa continues to have a very large day labour force, the city has recently turn down the opportunity to have a community centre specifically for day labourers. People of Mesa and central Arizona need to
realize that there is indeed diversity with the Latino group and that the needs of each group are indeed different.

The third exhibit section entitled, “I am a Bridge Between to Worlds,” will explore biculturalism. All of the people I spoke to were adamant whey they said they were both American and Latino. To them, there is no separation, nor did they feel that they had to choose between one or the other. This dual identification and how a comfortable balance is maintained will be explored in this section.

Many of the Latino parents I spoke to felt strongly that their children should be bilingual and bicultural. They believed that their children’s success will depend on absorbing the best of America, while maintaining what is best in their own culture. It difficult for many people to understand biculturalism and cultural identity of oneself.

The final exhibit section entitled, “Our Heritage Continues,” will explore specific cultural traditions. Many Latino celebrations and foods have been assimilated into mainstream culture. This section will discuss the cultural attributes that were first brought here and how they were or were not assimilated into Anglo culture. Often it is the social customs of any culture that are the most revealing cultural elements of the assimilation of cultures.

Because of exhibit space constraints and the people I spoke to, the actual exhibit will include only the social traditions that are most well-known (such as Cinco de Mayo, the dances, the piñata), so that non-Latinos can easily recognized them as well.
It is my goal that this exhibit encourages the citizens and employees of Mesa and the Phoenix metro area to reevaluate their attitudes toward Latinos; challenge existing perceptions of Latinos; and see that we are indeed an integral part of central Arizona.

Angelica M. Docog
Mesa Southwest Museum