



THE CALIFORNIA REPORT MAGAZINE

# The Forgotten Occupation of Catalina Island

LISTEN LISTEN

By [Ariella Markowitz](#) Aug 14

In August 1972, a Chicano-rights group called the Brown Berets camped out on Catalina Island for three weeks, demanding that its almost 42,000 acres of undeveloped land be turned into housing. I grew up on Catalina, but only recently learned about this slice of history.

I did know about this cliff overlooking the ocean, with enough space to pitch a few tents. It's beautiful in a down-to-earth way, with all this sparkly broken glass and carved initials in the breezy eucalyptus trees. Locals call the spot "Burrito Point," and I heard stories as a kid that there was an occupy movement that happened here in the '70s, but never anything more.



"Burrito Point" overlooking Avalon Harbor. (KQED)

Now, I'm back on the island in my hometown of Avalon, and I wanted to dig up some local scoops. I googled it, and stumbled upon this radical history that I never learned about in school.

Growing up, my town was conservative, defined by tourism — and it still is. It's still encouraging visitors during a pandemic. Most residents are Latino, but white people are the ones who run the local government, businesses and are the landowners.

In 1972, the mayor of Avalon wrote in a newspaper editorial that "Avalon's reputation on the mainland" is "a place of fun and recreation, not politics."

Yet politics found its way to Catalina Island.

"The Mexican Americans, OK. Those are the people that were shortchanged more than anybody. And we continue to get shortchanged," said David Sanchez, who still leads the Brown Berets full time. Sanchez founded the group, and he orchestrated the occupation. Growing up in South Central Los Angeles, he confronted gang violence, police brutality, racism and discrimination.

"I don't know how I survived it, but I did survive," Sanchez said. "It just made me aware that America was not the Disneyland that I thought it was supposed to be."

He wanted to create an alternative to joining a gang — an organization that champions cultural pride, unity, education and advocacy: the Brown Berets. The group was born in 1967 in an East L.A. coffee house that was hopping with radical activity called La Piranya. They started using it as a headquarters.

“The coffee wasn't very good,” Sanchez said. “Sometimes it was two days old. But nonetheless, our main point was to organize the community. That was our hidden agenda.” And that they did. They recruited members from local universities, local neighborhoods and even from gangs like Primera Flats.



From left to right: Fred Lopez, David Sanchez, Carlos Montes and Ralph Ramirez in Los Angeles, who were leaders of the Brown Berets in 1968. (Courtesy of UCLA's LA Times Photographic Archives Collection)

A lot of people joined the movement, and chapters of the Brown Berets started popping up across the country. Sanchez estimates they had about 5,000 members nationally in 1972.

A **student film** called “Chicano Moratorium” chronicled the movement in the streets of L.A. The Brown Berets helped organize mass protests against the disproportionate number of Chicanos dying in the Vietnam War. They were known for direct action against police violence, showing up outside police departments whenever a cop killed or brutalized someone.



Brown Berets march in the Chicano Moratorium movement in August 1970. (Courtesy of "Chicano Moratorium")

One fateful weekend, Sanchez decided to hop on the SS Catalina — strictly for vacation.

“It was just very beautiful. You had the beaches, the ocean, you had the hills, the sky, the flying fish ... it's really a really, really nice place to go,” Sanchez said. “I’d like to retire there some day.”

Something about the island stuck with him. He rented an apartment.

“On the weekends, I would go out there and I just really got to know the people and the people from Tremont,” he said. “And I’d party with the locals.”

Tremont is Catalina’s only public housing option. His new friends told him about how hard it was to afford housing on the island. They said the city council had passed a measure that limited household sizes to five people. Alongside discrimination and high rents, folks struggled to make a living. So Sanchez had an idea: to occupy the island.

He was inspired by the **Occupation of Alcatraz** that happened just three years earlier, but also by **the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo**. The treaty ended the war with Mexico in 1848 and gave a huge chunk of land to America. To Sanchez, the treaty is proof Indigenous and Mexican people were systematically disenfranchised and stripped of their land rights.

To top it off, neither Catalina Island nor the Channel Islands were explicitly mentioned in the treaty.

Though the Mexican government ended up discrediting their claims, Sanchez said the idea was: This land should belong to the people, not the landowners.

**The Occupation**

On Aug. 30, local newspaper The Catalina Islander reported that "a group of young Brown Berets were

discovered encamped on the bluff above the Casino, on Santa Catalina Island Company property."

The Brown Berets decided to camp on this elevated point overlooking the ocean, which Sanchez planned as a strategic location.



The Brown Berets salute at their camp on Catalina Island. (Maria Marquez Sanchez, La Raza photograph collection. Courtesy of UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center)

“They always say ‘take the high land!’ It fortifies you from people who want to harm you,” Sanchez said.

They put up the Mexican flag, and called the spot “Campo Tecolote.” They didn’t have the resources to stay long — but Sanchez figured he’d wing it.



The Brown Berets pitch tents on 'Campo Tecolote.' (Maria Marquez Sanchez, La Raza photograph collection. Courtesy of UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center)

“I went over there with \$800. That's all I had for the whole operation,” Sanchez said. In total, 26 Brown Berets came for the occupation. “We bought food and, you know, a lot of the Mexican American girls came to our camp, they would bring us enchiladas and beans.” And burritos.

That’s one version of how “Burrito Point” got its name. John Regalado Jr. remembers a racist version of the origin story. He said that "The way I remember 'Burrito Point' getting it's name was because the locals began calling the occupiers the 'Brown Burritos' instead of the Brown Berets."

Locals like Maria Lopez were the ones bringing them food. She was a teenager that summer, working at the local beach stand.

"So many townspeople were going crazy, but I got to talk to them. I got to know David (Sanchez) ... Being part of that on a small island was pretty cool. Though we did get a lot of backlash from all the white people here."

The Brown Berets were technically squatting on private property, but the mayor of Avalon, Ray Rydell, didn't get law enforcement involved for the first few weeks. He wrote that "a mass arrest would have a very poor effect on Labor Day weekend," and that "they wanted to be arrested ... their ACLU attorneys would be ready to defend them."

Many white locals did not see the Brown Berets as guests. The mayor referred to the occupation as "an invasion." He accused them of "using the Big Lie propaganda techniques of Nazi Germany — fabricating a big story that fits your purpose" regarding the Brown Beret's treaty claim. He wrote that "in the real democratic community of Avalon, there are no hyphenated Americans — no Irish-Americans, no Norwegian-Americans, no Mexican Americans — just Americans ... Don't let these racist Brown Berets confuse you."



Maria Lopez and David Sanchez reunite after 20 years when Sanchez visited Catalina Island this August. (Ariella Markowitz/KQED)

I posted about the occupation in the local Facebook community discussion forum. A handful of people nostalgically remember bringing the Brown Berets food and hanging out at Burrito Point. But others remember plotted violence against the outsiders from East L.A. As the Facebook comments detail, some residents felt like the Brown Berets overstayed their welcome and wanted to take matters into their own hands.

Bob Schatan wrote: *"The Brown Berets were an early version of the ANTIFA/BLM gangs of today. They camped out up there with no toilets, water, etc. and soon developed strong body odor. It was awful standing*

*anywhere near them in the grocery store line. What really pissed off the local fathers was when they started talking up local girls with romantic revolutionary garbage. By then it had been a couple weeks or longer and everyone was sick of them. I don't remember what it was that set off the locals but a bunch of the men in town met up at the golf course with baseball bats, golf clubs and such and were all ready to go up and pound the idiots."*

Chris Clayson wrote: *"It was a big deal in a tiny town there was no violence. I never felt threatened."*

Pas Lopez wrote: *"I was bummed that some of Our 'Good Citizens' were armed with handguns, intent on raiding a camp of unwitting Young People."*

The Catalina Islander reported that the mob, which consisted of anonymous residents, had even "brought a chartered boat for the purpose of transporting the Brown Berets to the mainland." They met at the country club. That "vigilante-type" meeting — which Mayor Rydell attended and wrote about — didn't end in violence. According to the local paper, Sheriff Jack Vaughn told the mob to bide their time and to let law enforcement handle the situation.

But David Sanchez said someone tried to come and take down their Mexican flag.

"He got stuck in the cactus bush," Sanchez said. "We were defended by nature."

After three weeks, on Sept. 22, Los Angeles County policemen arrived to enforce an illegal zoning ordinance. Since the Brown Berets were rooted in principles of nonviolence, they didn't resist and were escorted off the island.



The Brown Berets are escorted off the island by the LA Sheriff's Department. (Courtesy of the National Brown Beret's Website)

Mayor Rydell wrote that "the departure of the Brown Berets was observed by most residents of the Island. Cabrillo Mole was packed with islanders obviously relieved to see the group leave. While the departing group chanted 'Chicano Power,' those on the shore sang 'God Bless America.' " No islanders I spoke to confirmed that this happened.

Rydell also wrote, "living in the same town with these soggy, chocolate soldiers for three weeks was not pleasant for anybody," which reflects the casual, unchecked racism of the time.

The occupation didn't end with more housing on Catalina, it left my community divided, but it made national news. So I asked Sanchez: Do you see it as a success?

"It was a success because it marked history," he said. "The problem was that the police began to attack the organization on the mainland."

Sanchez says the FBI's **COINTELPRO** targeted the group, attacked their supply lines and caused chaos within the organization. Sanchez disbanded the Brown Berets in 1973 for the members' protection.

Occupying Catalina Island was their last act, for a long time. So Sanchez switched gears. He got his Ph.D. in communications and became a teacher and a drug and alcohol counselor. "I think I've done what I had to do and I continue to, to stand for the rights of the people," he said.



David Sanchez in 2020, visiting Catalina Island. (Courtesy of David Sanchez)

Sanchez started the Brown Berets up again in the mid-1990s. These days, they organize vigils and demand justice for victims of police violence in Los Angeles, and have protested outside the Los Angeles County District Attorney’s Office during the recent Black Lives Matter protests. And they're going to be gathering for the 50th anniversary of the Chicano Moratorium protests later this August.

What Sanchez and the Brown Berets did 50 years ago on Catalina Island lives on in the impact it made on people’s lives. The story that stuck with me the most was Ana Meza Araiza’s.

Meza lives in Ukiah, but she immigrated to Catalina Island with her family from Juarez, Mexico, when she was 4.



Ana Meza Araiza in the 1960s at Burrito Point, with her dad, grandmother and brother. (Courtesy of Ana Meza Araiza)

She was a teenager when the Brown Berets came to the island. She remembers her white classmates talking about wanting to “kick the Brown Berets off the Hill.”

Even though she called the island home, she says she felt invisible. There was no Chicano pride.

“It wasn’t OK be Mexican. Mexican was like a dirty word,” Meza said. “You had to be white. But to me, I belonged there.”

She recalls meeting one of the members of the Brown Berets and spending the afternoon with her. And that moment stuck with Meza, even after her protective dad forbid her from talking to them again.

Years later, she left the island and had a long career organizing farmworkers and helping domestic violence survivors. She credits her life trajectory to those seeds planted by the Brown Berets.

*An earlier version of this story was reported for KCRW's radio race and was co-produced by Carly Sabicer.*

