

Cultural Daily

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The Why of Foo Howser

Javier Servin AKA Foo Howser · Thursday, October 26th, 2023

I've often been asked:

What does Californiography mean?

Why "Foo Howser"?

Why do you do what you do?

I've briefly explained this before but it's finally time that I went more in depth into the "Why of Foo Howser."

"What does Californiography mean?"

It's a word I made up combining "California" and the suffix "-ography," which means both a field of study and to write about something. According to Wikipedia, Geography is the study of the lands, features, and inhabitants of Earth. The result of those studies are books, maps, articles, etc.

In that same vein, my dictionary entry for Californiography is:

Californiography: noun

Ca-li-for-ni-og-ra-phy (ka-l?-?f?r-ny?-?ä-gr?-f?)

The study and systematical documentation of the interesting stories of people and places in California.

That documentation results in videos and podcasts episodes.

I'm a dude that loves California and the rich and diverse history of its people, places, and plates.

From Joaquin Murrieta to Rudolph Hass, Cucunuchi to Biddy Mason.

From the Sears Building in Boyle Heights to the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco, from the San Geronio Pass to the Avenue of the Giants.

The cheeseburger to the Mission style burrito, the French dip sandwich to the Cobb salad, and everything in between.

I love California and its history, and I want to learn more about it and share it with anyone that'll watch or listen.

Why "Foo Howser?"

One of the first videos I made was largely based on the work of Gustavo Arellano in his book *Taco USA: How Mexican Food Conquered America*. In that book, Gustavo told the origin story of why there's so many taco shops with the suffix "-berto's" in California and the Southwest. That video went viral; it was shared by rapper Lil Rob and eventually made its way onto the "Foos Gone Wild" Instagram account. Somebody in the comment section called me "Foo Howser" and I had to run with it; it perfectly encapsulated me.

I grew up in the Southeast L.A. city of Huntington Park. Growing up all my friends used a lot of Chicano slang, words like *firme*, *chelas*, *vato* and *foo* were part of our vernacular. Being called a *foo* was another way of being called a *homie* or friend. I'm very proud of growing up where I did and even though I've mastered code-switching at work, I still talk like that kid that grew up in HP. I also like to think that I'm a very friendly dude, so I'm everybody's homie, so feel free to call me Foo.

And Howser, well, that is the homage to the GOAT, Huell Howser. I grew up watching his shows with my dad and Huell inspired that love of California and desire to explore it all. So, Foo Howser it is.



Huell Howser. Photo by Flickr user [Joits](#); used under CC BY-2.0

Why do you do what you do?

As I said before, I'm a dude that loves California history and want to share that love with anyone that'll watch or listen. I also hope that I inspire them to explore the history that's in their own backyard. I often say that for Californians, the whole state of California is "our" backyard, but if you're not able to travel too far out of your city or neighborhood, why not explore the history in that small part of our backyard? It's amazing how so much history is just hidden in plain sight; there's definitely something historic that happened where you live.

When I go about choosing topics to cover, I always select places that have some tangible connection to the history; a building, a plaque, a tree, a language, or even a dish you can eat. I do that because oftentimes when you talk about history, it's perceived as this abstract concept; something that happened a long time ago and has no connection to the present. Having something tangible helps to connect the past to the present—it helps to bring that history to life.

I get excited to be able to stand where the Battle of the Rio San Gabriel took place, to walk through Pio Pico's house, to eat a chili dog at the 1st Wienerschnitzel. The actual places where that history took place hold a special type of vibe or energy. I've been calling this "history of place," I don't know where I picked up that term, it's possible I'm misremembering or combining concepts from things I've read, but that's what gets me excited about history; to have something tangible to connect to the past and I know that others like the fact that they can go and visit the places I cover and feel that for themselves.

Visiting the actual places also feeds into the "Howser" component of Foo Howser. Huell always made the trek to all the places he covered, he was in The Lint Lady's living room in Long Beach and getting lost in Newberry Springs (my favorite Huell episode). Huell was there, in the midst of it all, he wasn't in some air-conditioned studio talking about a place he'd never been.

That's the philosophy that I've taken. I know that I could churn out a lot more videos if I just talked about places that I've never been, but I feel that it wouldn't be authentic to what I'm doing. Visiting the actual places serves 2 purposes: it shows people that live there that I was so interested in their history that I took the time to actually visit, and I feel it gives me more credibility to talk about a place having actually been there.

It goes back to a Nelson Algren quote I read in Mike Sonksen's book, *I am Alive in Los Angeles!*. Algren said, "before you earn the right to rap any sort of joint, you have to love it a little while." Of course, I research every place that I cover, but taking that step to actually visit—to eat and drink at local spots and breathe in the air, that allows me to love that place, even if just for a little while.

I want people to feel proud of their history, to be able to point to a video that I made and say, "Hey, that's my hometown!" and share it with others that aren't familiar with that history. My favorite thing is to have someone say, "thank you for sharing this, most of the time when our city is covered it's only something negative, it's nice to have something positive we can point to and feel proud." I also hope to inspire people to get out and explore the history that's in "our" own backyard, that we call California.

Aight, talk to ya soon.

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