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UCSB Historian Discusses Wild Yams and 20th-Century Pharmaceuticals

In the 1940's, rheumatoid arthritis afflicted more Americans than cancer, polio, and tuberculosis combined. No apparent cure existed, and while research with steroid hormones had yielded some remarkable results, synthesizing steroids in commercial quantities was nearly impossible. During that same time period, however, an American chemist working in Mexico identified chemical components in Mexican wild yams that actually mimicked human steroids. This finding revolutionized patented medications and pharmaceutical research and resulted in treatments for many diseases and conditions. It also paved the way for oral contraception.

In a talk titled "The Pill Comes From Mexico? Wild Yams, Steroids, and the Global Quest for Pharmaceuticals," Gabriela Soto Laveaga, an assistant professor of history at UC Santa Barbara, will discuss how researchers in Mexico studying the wild yams also laid the groundwork for the development of the first oral contraceptive, which was produced in Mexico but patented in the United States. She will also address the social consequences of the global search for medicinal plants by focusing on the thousands of Mexican people who assisted in the research by gathering the wild yams.

Sponsored by the UCSB History Associates, Soto Laveaga's talk will take place Saturday, April 26, at 1:30 p.m. at UCSB in 4020 Humanities and Social Sciences Building. Part of the Second Annual All Gaucho Reunion Weekend, the event is free and open to the public. In addition, campus parking is free courtesy of the UCSB

Alumni Association.

Soto Laveaga joined the faculty at UCSB in 2003 after completing a UC President's postdoctoral fellowship at the School of Medicine at UC San Francisco. Her forthcoming book, "Jungle Laboratories: Mexican Peasants, National Projects, and the Making of Steroid Hormones," will be published by Duke University Press in 2009. The recipient of numerous fellowships and grants, Laveaga was a visiting assistant professor in the Department of History of Medicine and Bioethics at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 2006-07.

For more information, visit www.ia.ucsb.edu/comrel/events.shtml

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.