

MISSION VALLEY OF SAN ANTONIO RIVER CRADLED MANY TEXAS HEROES

San Antonio Express Newspaper
Sunday, May 21, 1933

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To most of us Highway 16 is only a means of getting from San Antonio with its atmosphere of bygone days to the coast, with its lure of the Spanish Main. We ride over its smooth surface regretful, perhaps, to leave the one, but eagerly awaiting the thrill of mystery that the other promises us.

All the time we are rushing through a country teeming with romance and history. The Mission Valley of the San Antonio River through Wilson County has its ancient landmarks and romantic stories too.

The battles, fought up and down the old river's twisting banks were fought with the branding-iron and the plow, but were none the less battles for that. The musket had its place, true, but its use was only incidental in the greater war of an ill-equipped people against a wild and ruthless country.

The Floreses, Calvillos, Arochas, Seguins, and many others took up the fight more than two centuries ago. That these old Spanish pioneers were fighting a battle against heavy odds was admitted to by Morfi* in 1761, but he seems to have considered them the conquered, rather than the conquerors. He did not see the singleness of purpose that urged these men and women to establish their homes on their own land, even at the cost of their lives. Not understanding, he held them in utter scorn.

Here is what he says of them in his chronicle: "The ranches are of such little consideration and so miserable, all the way to Santa Cruz on the banks of the Arroyo del Cibolo, along the San Antonio River, that I would not mention them, the fertile region of this unfortunate province. In all they maintain 85 souls who live in such dread and eminent risk of their lives, even within their poor huts, that not a one of these ranches deserves the name of establishment, but they only aspire to independence and not to have witness to their conduct. They aspire to call themselves masters of extensive properties from which they derive no benefit; this is their passion and their character, and in order to indulge it they disregard all danger."

* Juan Agustín Morfi, The Handbook of Texas Online
<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/MM/fmo45.html>

The landmarks and the legends left by these "miserable" people make Highway 16 a road into the past. History, taking its cue from Morfi, does not mention them. It is only by going through the old land records and talking to the old settlers who remember the stories their fathers and grandfathers told them, that one can reconstruct the country and the people as they were a century or more ago.

The land records, of necessity, give only the barest outlines of the country and its people. The legends, on the other hand, are the stories handed down from father to son because of their romantic quality; in short, because they are good stories.

Among the land records of Wilson County one may find a petition from Francisco Flores to the Mexican Government which recites that his father, and himself after his father's death, "having occupied and possessed in good faith the land on the west side of the river at the place called Challopines, he asks that he be granted four leagues." His father, according to Rodriguez, was the son of Don Francisco Flores de Abrego who was in Texas even before the Canary Islanders came. The town of Floresville was named for that family of Flores.

In 1855 Don Francisco II makes a deed of gift to his son, Francisco Jose, of his ranch, "taking in the church and all improvements of said property."

Till this day, one can still see these improvements on the old Flores Ranch. Turn off the Corpus highway at LaBatte, three miles south of Calaveras, cross the bridge, and on top of the hill to the left is a big white house of double brick. According to Mr. Villareal, a native of Wilson County and 88 years old, the Flores house was an old place when he was a child. It must have been built at the very latest, during the days of the republic. The church has long since been destroyed. Only the foundation stones have been left. Of the old burial ground, remain only a few slabs with dates and names almost obliterated.

The ranch house is still there, the embodiment of the dream that made bearable the miserable life that Morfi held in such scorn. As sturdy as the oak under whose shadow it stands, it will be there for another century, or so.

Built to withstand the ferocious attacks of a people fighting for their hunting grounds, it was naturally the focus of many Indian fights. Mr. Villareal says that as a very young child, he remembers being taken there to escape the Indians. The roof, he goes on to explain, was covered with oak logs on which had been put several feet of dirt. A trick the original Don Francisco had probably learned when he had lived in a dug-out on the bank of the river.

On the occasion which Mr. Villareal remembers, the Indians had succeeded in getting up to the house. Finding they could not get in or set fire to it, they got on the roof and tried to dig through. One of the defenders in the small stone fort at the corner of the house managed to kill several and so discouraged them from further attack. The corner forts, of which there were three, are no longer there. They, along with the dirt covered roof, have long since out-served their usefulness and have vanished. A wide porch and a small kitchen have been added in more recent years, but the well in the back and the rest of the house are substantially the same as they were a hundred years ago.

Of the two Francisco Floreses themselves, what they looked like, and of the little things, good and bad, that made them individuals, nothing now is known but from the two stories Mr. Villareal tells one can guess a lot.

The Floreses, besides cultivating the rich valley lands, owned thousands of cattle. Once another ranchman living at some distance from Challopines took up some cattle and claimed them as his own. They were branded, but not with a brand recognized by anyone in the country. However, when Don Francisco saw them he said they were his, branded with his brand, like all the old Spanish brands, was an elaborate interlacing of hooks and curves.

A serious dispute arose which finally got into the courts. At the trial, Don Francisco, when asked to prove his contention, stood up before the court and demanded,

"Who Am I?"

"Francisco Flores," was the answer.

Without so much as an apology to the court, he stretched out on the floor on his back and again demanded, "Who Am I?"

"Francisco Flores," came the surprised answer for the second time.

Then throwing his feet into the air and all but standing on his head, he demanded for the third time, "Who Am I?"

"Francisco Flores," came the inevitable reply.

"All right," the old man said, jumping to his feet, "I am Francisco Flores whether I stand on my feet, lie on my back, or stand on my head. It is the same with the brand. The brand on those cows is put on upside down, but it is still the brand of Francisco Flores."

The cows were adjudged his without further ado.

Don Francisco was not without imagination and some historic ability, it appears.

Here is another story. It was told to Mr. Villareal by his father who heard it from another old man who witnessed the incident. It, along with the other, must come under the head of legends. Half the charm is lost in the writing, however, because Mr. Villareal, displaying no lack of historic ability himself, accompanies them with the proper dramatics or gestures.

It seems that Don Roque Garre (or Garret) was a very rich and eccentric man who owned and accompanied a cart train carrying on a prosperous trade between Mexico and her provinces. He drove 18 mules to a cart and did a flourishing business.

Once the train encamped close to the Flores rancho. A big fiesta was in progress and Don Francisco, being a hospitable soul (and being influenced by Don Roque's well-known affluence, perhaps), went over to the camp to invite him to the celebration. He did not know Don Roque personally, so was at a loss as to whom to address. However, on looking around he saw two men standing by one of the carts; one small and dapper, dressed in the finest fashion, and the other, huge and black bearded, dressed in rough buck-skin with a big hat on his tousled hair and holding a vicious looking bullwhip in his hand.

With no hesitation Don Francisco walked over to the younger man, and, with many sonorous compliments and fine phrases, invited him to the fiesta. In some confusion the young man admitted that he was only the mule-captain, explaining that his companion was Don Roque.

With profuse apologies Don Francisco turned to Don Roque and offered his hospitality. At first Don Roque refused, saying that his mule-keeper was the one to go since he was really the one who was invited. Finally Don Francisco's insistence prevailed and Don Roque promised to come.

That evening the fiesta was in full swing and only Don Roque's arrival was awaited before the dancing and the cock fighting were abandoned for the cabrito (goats meat) and other fine meats sizzling on the coals.

With a clatter of hoofs Don Roque rode up the road at a full gallop. With one motion he pulled his mount to a full stop and dismounted with a flourish like the Caballero he was. Dressed in the softest doe-skin breeches and satin shirt with a scarlet sash around his waist, he was a fine sight. His sombrero was heavy with silver and a hundred-dollar watch dangled from a massive gold chain.

Mission Valley Of San Antonio River Cradled Many Texas Heroes

Being the guest of honor, he was seated next to Don Francisco where all could see him. The savory meats were brought to him, and the calabasa and the dulces. He took generous portions of everything offered him but did not at once begin to eat.

To every one's amazement he rubbed the food over his fine clothes, stuffed his pockets full, and even put a choice cut of Cabrito into his hat!

Don Francisco, completely forgetting his manners, remonstrated, "But Don Roque," he said, "you have ruined your fine clothes. And your beautiful sombrero! See the gravy is coming through!"

"Bueno. That is good." Don Roque replied in high good humor, "Since it was really fine clothes that were invited to the fiesta, it is only right that they should be served first."

Mr. Villareal vows that his father told him that the old man told him that Don Roque and Don Francisco were firm friends for many years after, but the fact cannot be documented.

Regretful it is that one cannot follow Don Roque back through the years as he took his train up and down the old road, "the very, very old road, the one used in the muy antigua" (old, old) as Mr. Villareal explains, crossed the Medina before it empties into the San Antonio and came through Graytown close to the west of the Flores place and on down the river to a mile or so below the Calvillo place and the old Mission Las Cabras, where it turned west and angled across the country to Tordilla and then across the prairie to Matamoros.

As Don Roque traveled south on it he must have known the other early settlers of the valley.

The Arochas, Simon and Juan, (brothers, owners of the land where Floresville now stands) were in possession of eight leagues of land on the east side of the river as early as 1776. Highway 16 runs through the S. & J. Arocha grant for over 10 miles from Calaveras Creek to about a mile from Floresville.

In 1832, Ygnacio Arocha asks for a new survey of the land possessed by his ancestors, Juan and Simon, whose parents came to Bexar from the Canary Islands. He offers as evidence, a petition made by Simon Arocha sometimes around 1776. Prior to that time Simon and his brother Juan had maintained a stock ranch at San Rafael, and at that time they were asking that formal possession be given them. In 1782 their plea was granted "in appreciation of the fact that Simon was Commandant of the Milicia of the village of Bexar, as well as the merits of his brother, Juan, who by reason of giving his family a Christian education due those

families from the Canary Islands to settle this country." Ygnacio de Arocha, grand-nephew of the two brothers, receives a favorable reply to his plea in 1832 to have the land surveyed, and that same year the survey was made.

It located several houses not identified by name as well as the house of the Arochas and that of Erasmo. Both have long since been destroyed. Even the site of the Arocha house is lost, but one knows approximately where the "house of Erasmo" stood. That old surveyor paid Don Erasmo Seguin a pretty compliment when he considered it unnecessary to say more than the house of Erasmo."

According to a letter from his only surviving grandson, don Santiago M. Seguin who was born in 1840, the "old house" was located on the river bank about three quarters of mile from the "new house," which was built in the early fifties.

There Don Erasmo lived for many years and there he died. His grave is somewhere along the brush-covered banks of the river, unmarked and unknown.

The "new house," now 80 years old, was built by his son, Juan N. Seguin, and still stands on top of a small rise only a short way from Seguin Branch on the west side of the highway.

Don Santiago tells that it was built from stone quarried from one of the small hills to the east, and laid with lime made on the Salado. The timbers, just of which are still sound, were cut on the ranch.

There it stands yet, warm in the sun, its red sandstone walls as strong and as true as the day they were built. In the early days it must have been the most pretentious of all the ranch houses. The old settlers still tell of the beautiful frescoes on the walls of the north room. They have long since been obliterated, though vivid recollections of the spirited drawings of dashing caballeros and lovely ladies still remain.

The Seguins, both Juan and Erasmo, played important parts in Texas history. Don Erasmo, from the earliest days in San Fernando, served in some public capacity.

Perhaps the most enjoyable was his term as "wine tester" during the latter part of the 18th Century. "Wine tester" was easily transposed into "wine taster," and, according to reports (of the committee) now in the Bexar Archives in Austin, tasting was the best method to employ, though "the test of fire" was resorted to on occasions, presumably only after the sense of taste had been dulled by over use.

In 1875 he was appointed by Governor Martinez to notify Steven F. Austin of his grant, and to see that the conditions

were properly carried out. With that memorable journey begun his real service to Texas. He and Austin became fast friends on the long trip back from Nachitoches.

From that time on the flame of Erasmo Seguin, as true a patriot as Texas ever had, is linked with her history.

In 1824 he was Texas Deputy to the National congress. Service in that capacity must have been prompted by his loyalty and patriotism, since it surely was not for any personal gain. Six hundred and forty bushels of corn were subscribed by the colonists of his district to pay him for his efforts in their behalf. Six hundred and fifty bushels of corn, particularly in the light of the present price of 20 cents, was not exactly a munificent salary for the long, arduous journey to Mexico and the doubtful honor and privilege of partaking in the dangerous intrigues of the national government.

On Oct. 13, 1834, the first strictly revolutionary meeting was held in Bexar, and as a result, Don Erasmo called a convention for Nov. 15, but the provinces failed to respond due to the shortness of time, and the movement failed.

During the next 10 years the Seguins along with their fellow Texans, bore every hardship of the revolution and reorganization. The ranch itself, along with every other ranch up and down the river, was depleted of stock. The cattle went to feed the hungry Texas army; the horses to mount it.

The little old house on the bank of the river must have seen some stirring times. From it Juan, Don Erasmo's son, rode to the aid of Travis and acted as one of the scouts from the Alamo. By a lucky chance he had been sent on an expedition before the massacre, and lived to ride out once more at the head of his small company of rancheros to play a gallant part in the battle of San Jacinto; later to represent his district in the first congress of the new republic. Truly the old Seguin ranch house would have stories to tell!

Stories, not only of the family, but of the neighboring ranch owners as well. Gossip knows no time and no place, and it is not hard to picture the half-admiring glances and discreet chuckles of the men, and the scandalized sniffs of the women as another story about Dona Maria Carmen del Calvillo goes the rounds.

Dona Maria's ranch was next below the Flores' on the west side of the river. Her petition made in 1828 recites that for many years she has populated a certain land, that she is ignorant of the number of leagues of which it is composed because the deeds which she had of her deceased father, together with the

chest, were taken from her during time of the Spanish government, and so on.

Six years later the order was given for a survey to be made for "Citizen Calvillo" to be put in possession and given title. Let us look at the report of that procedure signed by Padilla and witnessed by Thomas Chambers and Jose Pedro Carralez.

"At the Calvillo ranch. Having established myself in this place with the surveyor, assistant witnesses, petitioner and adjoining neighbor, who is citizen Francisco Flores, for the purpose of placing the petitioner in possession of two sitios of land granted to her by the supreme government by decreed dated 19 November last, I ordered the surveyor to measure off a chain of fifty varas, which, having been verified in the presence of the witnesses and the petitioner, was begun a survey of the two sitios (8,956.8 acres) of land as follows, to-wit: The boundary line of this land begins between the ancient Goat Mission and the ruined sheep ranch at a place where a deep ravine enters the Rio de Bexar, where was marked on oak tree... Ant having taken the hand of Maria Carmen del Calvillo, placed her in actual personal possession of said sitios of land in the name of the supreme government of the States of Texas and Coahuila, with boundaries and dimensions as above mentioned, which she formally accepted and as a sign of actual, quiet and peaceful possession, threw stones, pulled up herbs, drew water and poured it out, and did other acts of actual possession and ordered that no person despoil her of them without first being cited, heard and conquered by judgment, in like manner she declared that said two sitios of land were correspondingly one-half classed as tillable land and the other held as pasture land..."

Note that the survey was made in the presence of the petitioner. Dona Maria, if we can believe the stories still told about her, was not one to mind the long tedious hours astride a horse while she saw to it that her interests were properly looked after. A man would think twice before attempting to despoil her of her acres, even after she had been "conquered by judgment."

Dona Maria was without a doubt, a modern in spirit. She was probably the Valley's first feminist. Jacobo Cruz, her twice great nephew, tells us that she dressed like a man, and could ride and rope and shoot like one. And, indeed, she must have been able to do all of that and more, for she managed her ranch herself. At one time about 20 families lived at Las Cabras, maintained by one of the finest herds in the Valley.

A law unto herself, she braved the anger of her neighbors by the way she treated the Indians. When they were slaughtering and driving off great herds from them, Dona Maria gave them anything they wanted, from beeves to powder and shot. From them

she bought her protection in this way. Racketeering seems to have been an old Indian custom, even in those days!

Mr. Villareal tells a story told him by his father, which substantiates the above.

Once the Indians made a raid down the river with the sole idea of harassing the settlers. Warnings were sent to the Calvillo ranch, and the 20 families living there gathered at the main ranch house. When the Indians came in sight, about 200 of them, Dona Maria called for her horse and saddle, her pistol and carbine, and fearlessly rode out alone to meet them. The chief met her about half way. Both had white rags tied to their guns. After talking a moment, she turned in her saddle and waved to those in the house. Six cowboys rode out to her and she told them to go to the Picoso (creek) and bring back 20 beeves for the Indians. In a short while they returned and the Indians killed six of the steers on the spot. Each one cut out a chunk about 12 inches square, and roasted it, with the hide still on, over a big fire that they had built.

They spent the night on the ranch, and the next morning went peaceably away, driving the 14 remaining beeves, but disturbing nothing else.

Raising cattle and sheep was not Dona Maria's only source of income, however. One of her relatives carried on a flourishing trade in contraband from Louisiana, and the Calvillo ranch, being on two main roads, served as an excellent base for such operations. And it was rumored that Dona Maria herself made a very agreeable silent partner.

But the revolution came and it was not long until the herds that were so secure from the Indians fell prey to the invading Mexican armies and the Texas troops. Nevertheless, when she died at the age of 94. Dona Maria still had enough property for her surviving nieces and nephews to fight over.

Of the ranch itself, nothing remains except the original survey lines on the county map, and the ruins of the "ancient Goat Mission."

The crumbling walls of Mission Las Cobras are only three miles from Floresville and are easily accessible from the highway.

Its history is lost. For many years speculation has run rife as to its origin. Could it really have been a mission, one of those early ones, established and abandoned within a few years and leaving behind no records?

Or was it a ranch home built by one of the San Antonio missions and maintained by it? Certain documents found among the archives would lead us to think so. Espada owned a stone ranch house somewhere in that locality; but so did San Jose. In 1776 San Juan Capistrano had ranch lands directly across the river. It is entirely possible that the Mission Las Cabras is no mission at all, but a ranch house dating from the prosperous years between 1730 and 1770.

Priests probably made the day's journey by horseback from time to time, to hold services in the little chapel for the Indians and vaqueros from up and down the river.

It was so small shelter, however, but was quite a pretentious establishment. The house itself is 90 feet long and contained three large rooms and a chapel. The remnant of the enclosure wall can yet be traced in an approximate square of about a hundred feet. At two corners were towers built, probably for protection.

Many legends center about its crumbling ruin. Lonely ghosts go about their ever unfinished tasks; hollow voices speak to those who have ears to hear; lights flicker and go out; spirit bells ring, calling a spirit flock to worship.

But man has braved all these phenomena in an endless hunt for treasure. The hilltop is pock-marked with his holes, and it is not uncommon, as we sit on our front porch on a summer's evening, to see lanterns bobbing about as men try once more to unearth hidden Spanish gold. There are no records, no legends even, of hidden treasure, but those ancient walls invite speculation. And such speculation can end only in digging.

God? Those old pioneers had little opportunity to amass it, and certainly no desire to bury it.

But treasure? That is different. The whole country from San Antonio to the coast is full of the buried treasures of history and romance; treasure that is buried, in musty records and the memories of old men.