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Notorious Narcotic Traffickers and Dealers in El Paso During the "Roaring Twenties"

By Bob Chessey

The 1920s was a thriving era in El Paso's history. World War I, the "War to End All Wars," was over. The post-war economy provided jobs and opportunities nationally and locally. The Jazz Age was in full swing and captivating the youth of the United States. But the city of El Paso was also bedeviled by two pieces of federal legislation that had become law before the decade began, causing significant enforcement and legal concerns.

The older of these two federal laws was the Harrison Narcotic Act. It became effective March 1, 1915, and was a sweeping reform enacted by the United States government that had significant implications for El Paso. The Harrison Narcotic Act made it illegal to possess opiates or cocaine unless prescribed by a licensed physician and dispensed by a licensed pharmacist. Moreover, the physician and pharmacist were required to pay a tax to the federal government for this privilege. The second and better known of the two federal laws was the Volstead Act, which initiated "The Noble Experiment" in Prohibition, a nation-wide ban on alcohol. El Paso, prior to most of the nation, had been forced to institute Prohibition on April 15, 1918 due to Texas' "Ten Mile Zone" law, a law that prohibited alcohol sales, gambling, and prostitution around training camps for U.S. military personnel.¹ However, when the Volstead Act became effective on January 17, 1919, El Paso had to wrestle with the resulting violence from attempting to enforce the law nationally: it was a border city, located on the banks of the Rio Grande, across from Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, which had more lax narcotic laws, and no alcohol prohibition.

This essay will focus on the first piece of federal legislation, the Harrison Narcotics Act, in part because it is less known, but mostly because it created the volatile setting that would detonate during Prohibition. One of the most important unintended consequence of the Harrison Narcotic Act was that drug peddlers and drug addicts began gravitating to the perimeter of the United States, mostly to the country's ports and border cities, where drugs could be most easily smuggled in. Some of those addicts and smugglers found El Paso to be an attractive destination and began moving to and around the town to take advantage of the availability of narcotics in Ciudad Juárez. El Paso and Ciudad Juárez possessed a particularly desirable resource—a dense international railroad network—that facilitated narcotic smugglers and drug traffickers (the same resource,

incidentally, that had introduced Chinese workers and opium dens to the region back in the 1880s). The railroads allowed Ciudad Juárez to receive illicit products from Mexican ports, just as it allowed El Paso to distribute those same products across the U.S., and gave ample opportunities to evade border inspections.

For El Pasoans, the Roaring Twenties were defined by the huge demand for illegal narcotics in the interior of the United States and by the dense railway network that made El Paso a smuggling haven. Four high profile narcotic cases of the 1920s can serve to highlight El Paso's geographic vulnerabilities.

The "Niftiest Packages"

In March 1921 a German veterinarian, Dr. W. J. E. Ruppenstein, traveled to the United States via Veracruz, Mexico, then crossed into the US at El Paso by way of Ciudad Juárez.² Sometime after arriving in El Paso, Ruppenstein presented a letter of introduction to El Paso resident Gus Momsen, who resided at 1501 Magoffin Avenue and was president of a wholesale plumbing supply, along with letters from friends of Momsen's in Germany. Ruppenstein explained to Momsen that he was en route to Los Angeles, California. He then borrowed \$35 and asked if it was possible for him to leave two suitcases, with the understanding that he would send for them later. Momsen graciously agreed to store both bags for his new acquaintance.³



Figure 1. Leavenworth mug shot of Dr. W. J. E. Ruppenstein. Courtesy of National Archives at Kansas City, Record Group 129.

Several weeks later, while housecleaning, it became necessary for Momsen to move the stored luggage. One of the two suitcases, old and constructed of inferior material, accidentally tore several inches in the process. Attracting Momsen's attention was not the damaging of property entrusted to his care by a friend, but the revelation of the bag's contents. The torn area revealed packages of morphine, labeled in German script.⁴

Grasping the ramification of the situation, and the position this placed him in due to the narcotics being on his premises, Momsen immediately went to El Paso's downtown Federal Building and informed John A. Toomey, Acting Director of the local Prohibition Bureau, which at that time handled narcotic violations, of his discovery. Toomey sent narcotic agent A. L. Rathel to investigate and Rathel found 158 separate packages, each displaying the seal of the German Army Veterinary Corps. Each package contained 10 ampules of morphine hermetically sealed in a thin glass tube. The ampules contained four grains of high-grade morphine dissolved in one-third ounce of sterile water, the solution ready for use with a hypodermic.

Agent Rathel quickly grasped the purpose of the packaging: "Pinch off the tip, take a shot and use at convenience. Where the ordinary package is peddled on the street at a dollar a grain, put up in this fashion these ampouls (sic) should bring a much higher price. Of course, the ordinary street customer cannot pay more, but this stuff can be sold to the ones with money, and there are many such (customers)." In the middle of the glass tip was a small ridge. The ridge allowed the ampules to be opened using a small saw, leaving a reinforced neck to which a diminutive stopper could be applied if the contents were not used up in one time. Rathel described the efficacy of the ampules' packaging as the "niftiest packages" of morphine he had ever seen.⁵

Based on Agent Rathel's assessment, Acting Supervisor Toomey contacted law enforcement personnel in Los Angeles, and on May 19 Dr. Ruppenstein was arrested in California. The arresting officers found 480 ampules of morphine in Ruppenstein's possession.⁶ After comparing the strengths and weaknesses of the cases in each city it was agreed El Paso had the stronger case for conviction, and so on May 30, it was announced that he would be extradited to Texas and tried for violation of the Harrison Narcotic Act in El Paso. Dr. Ruppenstein arrived under guard in El Paso on Monday, June 6, 1921, where he was tried and convicted.⁷

Before his conviction, Ruppenstein granted an interview with a reporter from the *El Paso Times* and claimed to be a victim of mistaken intent. "I had just arrived in the States from Germany when I bought the stuff for use only in my veterinary practice. It was a German-made drug, which I have not seen anywhere in the States put up so satisfactorily for use of a veterinary. I came here to form a partnership with another veterinary surgeon and I got the dope for that purpose. I was in California in connection with this partnership when arrested." He added: "I have never had any connection

with dope addicts or dope peddlers and no one can show any such connection on my part. When I was a student in the University of Cincinnati I had a government license to buy morphine. I never bought a grain of it. If I had wanted to sell it or use for myself I would have bought it then."⁸

He also discussed being "interned" during the World War I "on the statement of a lying man at the very time that my application to enlist in the American army was rejected" into both the veterinary unit of the army and the medical corps. Reflecting on his probable conviction, he mused, "If it's a choice of going to the penitentiary for two years or being exiled out of the country, I will take the first, I haven't much money and what I have is European money, worth very little in the world exchange market. I have a wife and a child to support. Lawyers cost lots of money. I've got to take care of my wife and child. If I can't pay a sufficient fee to carry the case through I'll have to go to the penitentiary, I suppose, for I can't let my wife and child starve."⁹

As Dr. Ruppenstein's case was coming to a close, a new case, also involving a European, was emerging.

The Silent Spaniard

On Friday, May 20, 1921 a quiet man traveling with two companions was constantly fidgeting while waiting for his train at El Paso's Union Station, never letting go, even for a moment, his grip on his suitcase's handle. The man's obvious nervousness, coupled with his persistent grip on his suitcase, caught the attention of two Immigration Officers working the downtown train station. Their suspicions aroused, the officers approached the man asking for identification. When he was unable to produce credentials or a passport, he was taken into custody. A telephone call was placed requesting a search warrant to examine the contents of his suitcase as the man was escorted to the immigration station. After arrival at the immigration station the search warrant was executed. Examination of his suitcase revealed "20 one-ounce packages of morphine and 10 bottles containing 250 grams of cocaine, or approximately eight ounces." Value of the confiscated narcotics was estimated to be \$1000 (\$13,087.10 in 2014).

While the man was being questioned by the two officers, his two traveling companions boarded a train and departed before they also could be detained. The nervous man, now under custody of the authorities, refused to reveal their names. Though efforts were made to arrest his two companions on the train they had boarded, their arrest eluded law enforcement.

The nervous narcotic smuggler was a Spaniard named Antonio Saenz. It was suspected that the destination of the narcotics was an unidentified small town in New Mexico. Within three weeks Antonio Saenz pleaded guilty to "purchasing not in the original stamped packages" the narcotics discovered in his suit case, and was sentenced to a prison term of two years



Figure 2. Leavenworth mug shot of Antonio Saenz. Courtesy of National Archives at Kansas City, Record Group 129.

and six months. On the night of June 7, 1921, Antonio Saenz, along with six other prisoners from El Paso sentenced for violations of the Harrison Narcotic Act, left El Paso by train under the custody of Deputy U. S. Marshal P. M. Jacobs bound for the Federal Penitentiary at Leavenworth, Kansas.¹⁰

This was a straightforward case of an arrest and conviction for violating the Harrison Narcotic Act, even if the arresting officers failed to nab the accomplices. Law enforcement, however, did not always request a search warrant while performing narcotic investigations.

Warrantless Searches

On Thursday, August 28, 1924, the right of narcotic agents to stop and search a person, without a search warrant, was challenged in El Paso's District Court. The legal motion was initiated from an August 25th arrest made in front of the Lincoln Park School. The arresting officer was a narcotic agent, accompanied by local detectives, searching for Adolfo Villagomez. The agent and detectives located Villagomez at the school, where he was arrested and searched. Inside a locket attached to Villagomez's watch chain authorities discovered two grains of heroin.

Three days later Villagomez's preliminary hearing was held. His attorneys, Frank J. Lyons and Herbert D. Oppenheimer, submitted to the District Court a legal brief with citations of previous decisions in U. S. District Courts supporting their motion to exclude the evidence due to the arresting officers not obtaining a search warrant. The submitted legal brief



Figure 3. Leavenworth mug shot of Adolfo Villagomez. Courtesy of National Archives at Kansas City, Record Group 129.

was the first challenge in the history of El Paso's District Court to a federal narcotic officer's right to search a person, and the objects that person had in his or her possession, without a search warrant. Should the motion be upheld, it would be a major setback to a narcotic agent's ability to perform his duties fully and efficiently.¹¹

On Friday, August 29, 1924 when the gavel of the law descended in Commissioner A. J. W. Schmid's Court the decision overruled Villagomez's attorneys' motion to exclude the evidence discovered from the narcotic agent's search, allowing the evidence in his trial. The ruling ensured the right of federal narcotic agents to implement searches of persons and their portable possessions without a search warrant and to seek prosecution based upon the evidence.¹²

An Honorable Exchange

In late February 1930, as El Paso was leaving the 1920s behind, federal narcotic agents were determined to prove a large scale narcotic ring operated in the Val Verde area of the city. The agents plan to prove this to the courts ran noticeably awry.

The plan to reveal the significance of the ring hinged upon the ability of undercover narcotic agent Frank Slaughter to complete a pair of narcotic buys from the suspected ring leader, Eleno Rojas. The first transaction occurred February 11, 1930 with agent Slaughter purchasing six packages of narcotics. The bigger deal took place on February 27 with Slaughter



Figure 4. Leavenworth mug shot of Eleno Rojas. Courtesy of National Archives at Kansas City, Record Group 129.

purchasing a substantial quantity of heroin—five ounces. The negotiated price with Eleno Rojas for the transaction was \$500 (\$7,005.23 in 2014), a large sum for the era. The \$500 was made up of all marked bills to prove the purchase was made by Slaughter and was not other money in Eleno Rojas' possession.¹³

On the night of February 27 agent Slaughter arrived at Rojas' Val Verde home to purchase the heroin. Aside from Rojas, three other people were present: Maria Luisa Rojas, Eleno's wife; Juan Rojas, Eleno's brother-in-law; and Simon Ferra. Frank Slaughter also surrounded himself with people he knew and trusted. Law enforcement officers were stationed around the neighborhood to prevent escape, to arrest those selling the heroin, and to guarantee the recovery of the government's front money to ensure the purchase. Agent Slaughter, after entering Eleno Rojas' home and paying for the narcotics, watched Eleno's wife, Maria Luisa, remove the heroin from their baby's carriage. Agent Slaughter described what happened next: "I had made the deal for five ounces of heroin previously and was counting out the \$500 in Rojas house. I went outside and gave the signal but when the other officers came up (Eleno) Rojas and the money had disappeared."¹⁴

After exchanging the heroin for the government's cash, Eleno Rojas exited his back door, vanishing into the night with the \$500. Officers reported he had fled to Mexico.¹⁵ Maria Luisa Rojas, Juan Rojas and Simon Ferra were arrested. Agent Slaughter was able to seize the heroin and capture most of the narcotic ring, but its leader, Eleno Rojas, had escaped justice—and most embarrassingly, the \$500 purchase money had disappeared with him. It

was not known at the time if any local dealer of narcotics had ever previously managed to escape with federal purchase money; and the local agents did not know if they would be responsible for reimbursing the lost funds.¹⁶

As it turned out, the local agents learned on March 6 that they would not have to refund the lost \$500 from the Rojas arrest, for which they were grateful. Not feeling so grateful were Eleno Rojas' three associates arrested at the raid—Simon Ferra, Maria Luisa Rojas and Juan Rojas—who were brought before a grand jury, each under a \$1000 bond.¹⁷

On Thursday, March 20 the narcotic agents working the case received a surprising break. El Paso Police Department Detective Sergeant Robert E. Dawson, an honest and fair man earning the respect of the poor Hispanics living in South El Paso, received word from Eleno Rojas that he would surrender to El Paso authorities if certain conditions were met. Rojas agreed to turn himself into the custody of US law enforcement if his wife and the other arrested suspects were released and all charges against them were dropped. Sgt. Dawson relayed Rojas' offer to the local federal narcotic office. The federal agents agreed to his conditions. An agreement was then made and shortly thereafter Rojas crossed the Santa Fe bridge and surrendered himself to Sgt. Dawson. When taken into custody Rojas explained to Sgt. Dawson and the narcotic officers that he had spent the marked money on an attorney to handle his case. However, once his wife was released she would be able to provide \$500 to reimburse the US government.¹⁸

The Federal Grand Jury indicted Eleno Rojas on a charge of possession and sale of \$500 worth of heroin on Tuesday, April 9, 1930. Rojas' wife, Maria Luisa Rojas, who had been released on personal recognizance, was not indicted on any charge. By law she was still vulnerable to indictment if the grand jury had desired pressing charges. Respecting Eleno Rojas' sacrifice of his freedom, no indictment was decreed for her charges.¹⁹

On Tuesday, April 22, Rojas stood in court to hear the verdict in his narcotic trial. His young wife Maria Luisa wept and clutched their new baby when the jury declared her husband "guilty." Judge Charles A. Boynton sentenced Eleno Rojas to two years and six months at Leavenworth Federal Penitentiary.²⁰

Conclusion

El Paso residents are often inclined to believe their city became a focal point for drug smuggling with the rise of marijuana use in the 1960s and cocaine use in the 1970s. But as the cases discussed in this article attest, the El Paso/Ciudad Juárez area cut its teeth and carved its reputation decades before.

In the decades that have passed since the 1920s, easy access to the United States interstate highway system via I-10 has been added to the

lure of the El Paso area, supplementing the historical importance of the national railway system for smuggling narcotics and other contraband.

Narcotic issues that were relevant in the twenties include exploitation by "friends" and diversion of narcotics from their intended manufacturing, such as the Ruppenstein case; the question of a suspect's rights regarding search warrants, as can be seen in the case of Adolfo Villagomez; and federal narcotic agents losing control of their drug busts, as documented with the Rojas' incident. The enactment of the Harrison Narcotic Act, and subsequent regional trafficking of narcotics, helped establish El Paso and Ciudad Juárez's historic role in narcotic smuggling.

Bob Chessey lives in El Paso. This article is an excerpt from his book in progress, El Paso and Juárez in the Time of La Nacha.

Endnotes

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12. "Search Without Warrant Upheld," *El Paso Times* (August, 30, 1924), p. 12.
13. "Federal Agents Lose \$500 Cash," *El Paso Evening Post* (March 3, 1930), p. 1; "U. S. Agent Tells of Losing \$500 Buying Drugs," *El Paso Evening Post* (March 11, 1930), p. 10; and "Continue Rojas Trial," *El Paso Times* (April 22, 1930), p. 4.
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16. *El Paso Evening Post* (March 3, 1930).
17. *El Paso Evening Post* (March 11, 1930).
18. *El Paso Times* (March 21, 1930).
19. "Elano (sic) Rojas Gives Self Up," *El Paso Times* (April 9, 1930), p. 6; and "Respect Sacrifice of Man for Wife," *El Paso Evening Post* (April 9, 1930), p. 14.
20. "Wife Weeps When Husband Sentenced," *El Paso Herald* (April 23, 1930), p. 7.

The Ponsford Family of El Paso

By Mary Jo Ponsford Melby

On the last day of March in 1897, the first of the Ponsford family came to El Paso. As Henry Thomas ("H.T.") Ponsford, my grandfather, stepped off the train on a beautiful warm day, and breathed the fresh desert air, he exclaimed, "This is the place for me!" His destination had been Las Cruces, but he liked what he saw in El Paso. He walked around and met some nice people, including B.M.G. Williams, who had recently arrived from England and was working as desk clerk at the Pierson Hotel, where H.T. stayed during that first visit. Later on, of course, the Rev. B.M.G. Williams served St. Clements Episcopal Church for many years. Like so many others, H.T. Ponsford had come to the Southwest for health reasons. At home in St. Thomas, Ontario, Canada, his doctor had warned him that, although he was still a very young man at age 31, he would not last the winter unless he moved to a warm and dry climate because of his severe chronic asthma.

Incidentally, 1897 was also the year that there were two major floods in El Paso. There was an unusually large amount of melting snow in Colorado, and since that was before Elephant Butte Dam, there was nothing to stop those floodwaters from rushing down the Rio Grande and inundating downtown El Paso. But this did not deter H.T. in choosing El Paso as home. I'm just glad that we weren't having one of our infamous March windstorms the day my grandfather stepped off the train here.

So it happened that H.T. moved his wife Kate and their first three children, Harry, Walter, and Pearl, to our city in August 1897, a few months after his arrival (see Figure 1). Kate immediately joined Trinity Methodist Church, which at that time was located on the corner of Texas and Stanton Streets. She had been active in the Methodist Church all her life and was thrilled to find such a fine one in her new home town. The Ponsford's first home in El Paso was at the corner of Montana and Oregon (facing Montana) where Trinity's Resler Hall is located today. There were two small red brick houses that were eventually bought by our church for Sunday School space and I remember going to Sunday School in both of these houses. When Resler Hall was built in 1963 these two houses were, of course, torn down.

The Ponsford lineage has been traced back to 1469. "Ford House" in Drewsteignton, Exeter (in the southwestern part of England) was the family's ancestral home on their estate of 2,000 acres, with deeds dating back to the time of Queen Elizabeth I. The first ambassador from Great Britain to the United States was Lord Paunceforte (the French spelling of our name.) In those days families often spelled their names the way they sounded, which resulted in a variety of spellings. Lord Paunceforte was a

descendant of our same Ponsford family who lived at Ford House in Exeter.

Most of the Ponsford men have been associated with the building profession since the 1500's. H.T.'s father was a younger son of that landed family in Exeter – and as you know with primogeniture you did not inherit unless you were the eldest son. So H.T.'s family moved to Canada, which offered (they hoped) many more opportunities. H.T. was born in November 1866, the ninth of fifteen children. His family had settled in St. Thomas, Ontario, Canada, and quite a few Ponsfords still live there. H.T. eventually joined the other men in the family contracting business, Ponsford Brothers, in St. Thomas.

My grandmother Kate was born in Whistable-by-the-Sea, Kent, England. I have visited Whitstable twice and really just fell in love with it. It is a typical charming English village with a beautiful castle on the North Sea about seven miles from Canterbury. Kate's father, George Jordan, was an English sea captain who sailed between England and Canada. I think I would have liked him very much because he took Kate and her sister to Paris every year to buy clothes – my kind of father!! Captain Jordan eventually moved his family to St. Thomas, Ontario, Canada, where Kate met H.T. Ponsford and they were married on Christmas day in 1890.

What was El Paso like in 1897 when Kate and H.T. along with their first three children arrived on that hot August day? It has been written that El Paso was one of the four "sin cities" of that period. Along with New York City, New Orleans, and San Francisco, El Paso really epitomized the "wild wild West"! Most of us know a lot about this era because we've seen it documented in movies and on television many times. We've read books about the wild West and heard stories about ministers preaching with a revolver next to the Bible on their pulpit.

At this point, a brief history of Trinity Methodist Church is necessary because the Ponsford family was such an important part of its history. On Thanksgiving Day in 1881 (16 years before the Ponsfords arrived), the cornerstone for Trinity Methodist was laid on the southwest corner of Texas and Stanton Streets. The money for this new church was given in large part by Major and Mrs. W. J. Fewel, who believed that "a town without a Methodist church was like a ship without a port."

In his book, "Methodism Comes to the Pass," Vernon Adams quotes Rev. A. H. Sutherland about the founding years: "El Paso's Trinity Methodist Church was built under my administration as presiding elder and of Rev. John R. Carter as pastor, and was dedicated by me in the summer of 1884, some time after it was built. It was the first church built of any denomination." This was really important because the various Protestant churches had been sharing a large tent for services and even church people tend to have disagreements and jealousy and competition so it was best that everybody have their own church. Soon after Trinity Methodist was built in 1881, other Protestant denominations followed, including the



Figure 1. Ponsford Family in 1897 Upon Arrival in El Paso. This photo shows Henry Thomas (H.T.) Ponsford and his wife Kate Jordan Ponsford with their three children. Henry is in the back. Pearl is on her mother's lap. Walter is in front.

Presbyterians and Episcopalians.

That first Trinity Methodist building could seat 360 people and, as was mentioned, the pastor was Rev. John Carter, who also declared Trinity Methodist as the first Protestant edifice built in El Paso. That same year, 1881, saw the first railroads come to El Paso. While I'm sure that there were some fine people arriving here, there were many unsavory types as well. One historian described these railroad arrivals this way: "The bad ones came in all grades and sizes – little crooks and big crooks, high-grade and low-grade fancy women, tin horns, and big-time gamblers."

Throughout this era, Trinity Methodist continued to lead the way in attacking the sins of society. The Methodist Church was widely recognized as the driving force behind the Temperance Movement. They held a series of Temperance meetings and the newspaper described one of them as a Temperance Rally with the battle cry, "Hold the Fort." Three preachers spoke to a crowd of over 100 people and Mrs. Hearty played the melodeon with songs that included "Where Oh Where is My Boy Tonight?" The rally was very successful and 20 people signed the pledge.

By the 1890's there was a change in attitude of many El Pasoans toward life in their town. No longer did they accept unbridled vice and raw violence. And they were being heard. In the words of historian C.L. Sonnichson, "The reform movement of the 90's was a matter of the voices of the good women (yes, and a few men) and those of the preachers at last being heard

above the clink of glasses, the clink of poker chips, and the seductive notes of the daughters of joy."

So this was the El Paso that H. T. and Kate found when they moved here in 1897. Living right here where Trinity Methodist now stands, they began their life that would change the city in many ways. They would eventually have nine children (of which my father, George, was the youngest). There were five boys and four girls, all lifelong residents of El Paso. Just think about it – all nine children lived their whole lives here – amazing! In today's world we have so many more options that this would seem unlikely. H. T. began building and selling houses which laid the foundation (literally) for the family's construction business. Incidentally, H.T. was the first builder in El Paso to permit monthly house payments.

Kate and H.T.'s eldest child, Harry, was 21 and a student at Columbia University in New York when my father was born, so there was a span of 21 years between the children. Although many of the siblings were out of the house by the time my father came along in 1911, he remembered that there were often friends joining the family for meals. He especially recalled the many batches of biscuits Kate would bake each morning. She always kept two maids to help her, but I often think of the different life she led here in El Paso when it really was the "wild wild West." Coming from a small, English village to the rigors of the desert must have been challenging. But she seemed to love it and even wanted to have more children after my father was born – but H.T. declined! Even in those days educating nine children was expensive – and all of them except one graduated from college.

After college the brothers eventually joined their father in the family contracting firm and the girls became teachers. I'm sure that many of you come from large families where the sons went into the family business but this practice is certainly less prevalent today.

Let me tell you a little about the Ponsford children because they all contributed in different ways to our community. Harry, the eldest, was a typical first child – very responsible and very serious. It used to amaze me that, although the brothers worked together five and a half days a week, on Sunday they would greet each other shaking hands, "Good to see you, George." So formal, so British. Harry later became the estimator for H.T. Ponsford and Sons as the firm was then called. After Harry graduated from Columbia (where he later received the Dean's Award) he returned to El Paso and married Marbry Henning. Their daughter, also named Marbry, was a set designer for MGM in Hollywood for many years and their son Henry was an aerospace engineer. Henry graduated from Stanford with the highest grades made there up to that time, setting the bar way too high for the rest of us in the family! Henry went on to design parts for many of NASA's missions, including the Apollo mission to the moon.

Walter was next in line. His daughter, Kopy Koehler, told the story of her father being sent downtown as a young boy for the horses to pull the



Figure 2. Ponsford Bros. Contractors Office Building circa 1910-1915. H.T. (on the right) is in the Model T with his brother John.

family's carriage. Walter had to walk down San Francisco Street to fetch these horses and had to pass many saloons along the way. In those days the dead bodies of those killed in the saloons the night before were put out by the street to be picked up by the funeral cart the next morning. One morning the young Walter counted five dead bodies. The wild wild West? You bet!

The historic meeting of US President William Howard Taft and Mexican President Porfirio Díaz took place in El Paso in October 1909, and H.T. was a member of the welcoming committee for the occasion. He attended the formal dinner given by President Díaz in Juarez which was the highlight of the ceremonies. That night the lucky invited guests ate on Maximilian's golden plates. H.T.'s sons Harry and Walter both attended some of the ceremonies as school boys. Walter remembered being very impressed with the speech given by President Taft. This historical event is noteworthy because it marked the first time a United States president traveled outside our country while in office.

Harry and Walter hunted quail, dove, and rabbits just east of Cotton St., where the railroad tracks cross Montana Ave. When the trains entered El Paso, the dining cars disposed of all their leftover food at that crossing, because it was outside the city limits. This, of course, attracted many birds and animals so it made good hunting grounds. Refrigeration was poor in those days so the trains would restock in El Paso.

Harry and Walter were among the high school boys in the Tuckebatchee Club, which was part of Sunday School at Trinity Methodist from 1908-1910. Tuckebatchee is an Indian word meaning "to add to and stick

together." During these years the church basketball and baseball leagues were organized and Trinity Methodist won league championships in both sports. College years broke up the Tuckebatchee Club but it's interesting to note that the classroom where they met later housed the equipment for radio broadcasts – Trinity Methodist was the first church to broadcast their Sunday services in the Southwest and possible the first church to broadcast weekly church services in the nation.

In 1921, two young men employed at Mine & Smelter Supply Company had taken up experimental broadcasting with the call letters WDAH. The next year Congressman Claude Hudspeth obtained a station license for our church and those call letters were transferred to Trinity Methodist. The equipment was paid for by individuals on the Board of Stewards, among them H.T. Ponsford. The church later sold its interest in the station to KTSM which continued to broadcast our Sunday morning services until 1965.

Walter volunteered to serve in WWI. He was stationed in England near Southhampton at Romsey, and was with a construction battalion that built hospitals. Before the war Walter had fallen in love with Dorothy Congdon and on his return declined college studies to marry Dorothy. He could have gone to college, he was very smart, but chose instead to marry and start a family. Walter and Dorothy would have four children – Florence, Marian, (Maya), Kathryn (Kopy) and Frank (Pancho).

And then there was Pearl – Dr. Pearl Olive Ponsford (who I knew as "Aunt Pearl"). Pearl was the firstborn girl - the darling golden-hair (many say) favorite of her father's. In a home of nine children Pearl insisted on her own room and her own bottle of milk, which as you can imagine did not sit well with the others. Pearl never married – many felt it was due to a heart broken by a particular young man. After graduating from Wellesley, Pearl taught English at El Paso High School and later at Texas Western but her passion was traveling! She circled the globe 13 separate times plus she took many, many other trips. She always traveled alone but as she did she built an exciting network of friends. When she met someone and they would say, "When you are in India look up so-and-so," she would.

Because of her huge circle of acquaintances, Pearl would often stay with the leader of the remote countries she loved – sometimes in their palace. Among her friends were Lord and Lady Astor and Madame Chiang Kai-shek, who had been a classmate at Wellesley. Pearl wrote a book, *My Favorite World*, and really was an intrepid traveler. Once when she attempted to enter a remote country in the middle of Africa and was turned down because she was a woman traveling alone, she simply went to the other side of the country and got in! In typical form, Pearl served as National President of the National Society of Arts & Letters (NSAL) and Texas State President of the American Association of University Women (AAUW).

Emanuel Edgar (my beloved "Uncle Mannie") was the first of the



Figure 3. Ponsford Family circa 1920. Back row from left to right: Albert, Harry, Sara, Mannie, Ruby, Walter. Front row from left to right: Pearl, H.T., George, Kate, Lucile.

nine to be born in El Paso. Mannie was an outstanding athlete who was inducted into El Paso's Sports Hall of Fame in 1960. I want to highlight a Ray Sanchez column from February 9, 1955 (see Figure 5). I called Ray Sanchez to tell him about finding his column from February 9, 1955, about Mannie. He remembered the event and confirmed that to his knowledge Mannie Ponsford's 24-hour fete has never been repeated. Ray Sanchez recently wrote a book on the history of sports in El Paso, so look for it at your local book store. Mannie played basketball at El Paso High School when they were beating university and college teams of the Southwest. The University of Arizona Wildcats had not lost a home game in eight years until the El Paso High Tigers went to Tucson and beat them. El Paso High also beat the New Mexico State University Aggies. After completing his education at the University of Texas at Austin, Mannie was approached by six major league baseball teams who wanted to sign him as a pitcher, but H.T. would not hear of it – he was to be a contractor like the other sons! Uncle Mannie's sports triumphs would astound you! Truly jaw-dropping!

Mannie and his wife Louise were very special to me. I spent many hours in their home on Blacker Street, and when I became engaged to Willie Melby I asked for their blessing as well as my parents. Mannie's wife, Louise, was a fabulous cook and gave equally fabulous parties – especially at holiday time! I was her shadow and followed her everywhere. Their

two sons, Mannie Jr. and John, were so much fun to be with. Mannie, Sr. had a police radio and when his sons heard about a wreck or fire or other dramatic event we would all jump in the car, race to the location, take photos, rush back to their house where there was a dark room, develop the photos and then rush down to the newspaper to sell those photos. We were living LARGE!! John became a doctor and practiced in El Paso for many years and had a lifelong love of planes and flying. I recently found a clipping from Washington DC, reporting that John won the national Distinguished Rifleman's medal, putting him in the top 1% of the country's youth – he was 18 at the time. He taught me to shoot and I did OK – at Carey's Ranch Camp anyway.

Next in line was Ruby Ponsford Tapper. Everyone says that my sweet Aunt Ruby was most like her mother Kate. My grandmother Kate actually died before my parents married so I never knew her... nor H.T. After graduating from Wellesley, Ruby taught Chemistry at El Paso High and one of her students was Leila Oliver who years later would be my Chemistry teacher there. Ruby later taught typing at Austin High School for many years and was married to Ben Tapper, who taught shop at El Paso High. I spent many hours at their house listening to Uncle Wiggley books and later learning to type so that I could work at Ponsford Brothers during the summer months for three years. I did get a few kicks out of it...when someone would call and ask for Mr. Ponsford I would go through all five names after which they would often say, "just give me the boss." So I would say, "That would be George!" Well, even though he was the youngest, he was my dad so that made him MY boss!!

Number six child, Sara Ponsford Wilson, lived longer than the rest of the nine, dying at age 100. Most of the children lived long lives but Aunt Sara, with her determination lasted longest. As a young woman she married Bennett Wilson, who was a detective here in El Paso. Bennett loved horses and owned a stable south of Montana Street on Radford. I used to love to ride my horse there. Sara had graduated from the Lewis Institute of Chicago with a degree in Home Economics and became the first Area Supervisor of Home Economics in Texas. She taught a food-handler's course for years, so going to restaurants with Sara meant special treatment from her former students. I had her funeral in my home thinking that there couldn't be many attendees at age 100, but I had forgotten that as a past president of the Woman's Club many members attended: 64 people squeezed into my house for the occasion!

Albert, the fourth son, was very quiet and shy until you got to know him and discovered his great sense of humor. He graduated from the University of Texas in Austin as his brother Mannie had before him. While he was at the university he became engaged to Elsie Stiles who lived in the Scottish Rite Dormitory (as I later did as well as my two daughters). It was really a lovely southern mansion with beautiful antiques and its own ballroom.

Albert later served on the Board of the Scottish Rite Dorm and was extremely active along with his father and brothers in the Scottish Rite Bodies of El Paso. Albert also served on the board of the Texas Scottish Rite Hospital for Crippled Children in Dallas. Albert became the bookkeeper for the Ponsford Brothers contracting firm.

When my grandfather, H.T. Ponsford, arrived in El Paso, his contracting company was named just for him. When his brother, John joined him here in El Paso for a time the company was called Ponsford Brothers. John returned to Canada after a few years and as H. T.'s five sons joined the firm one by one they became known as H.T. Ponsford & Sons. Then when H.T. died in 1942, the business again was called Ponsford Brothers.

An interesting aside: as far back as we can determine, the Ponsfords have always been contractors. They have been building both commercial and residential structures for countless generations. Although I cannot prove it conclusively, I would not be surprised if my ancient Ponsford forefathers were among the very first stone masons to band together to form the fraternal organization known today as the United Grand Lodge of England. Certainly, my grandfather, father, and uncles were proud Masons, and it is easy to imagine an unbroken line of Ponsford men passing down their skills from father to son, down through the centuries.

Lucile was the fourth and youngest of the daughters. She enjoyed being the baby of the family for five years before my father was born. She survived falling off the roof of the family home on Kansas Street - she had climbed out to her favorite get-away for some alone time and leaned too far out. She was hurt badly, as you can imagine, but was a tough little cookie and survived. Because they were the two youngest children, Lucile and George often travelled with their mother Kate during El Paso's hot summers. They would usually go to Cloudcroft in the cool mountains of New Mexico or to Long Beach, California. Lucile attended the University of Missouri and graduated from Texas College of Mines in 1932, the first class that included women. She married J. Harold Tillman, the namesake of El Paso's Tillman Health Center, and was the only sister to have children, two daughters, Kay Tillman Peyton and Sara Louise Tillman.

This brings us to the ninth child, George - my father. He must have



Figure 4. Dr. Pearl Olive Ponsford in 1969 with the Rani of Hunza, a member of the royal family of Hunza (now known as Gilgit-Baltistan), Pakistan.



Figure 5. Ray Sanchez's Article in the El Paso Herald-Post of February 9, 1955 on Mannie Ponsford's Athletic Accomplishments.

been quite a handful. When he was a little boy he got kicked out of YMCA camp in Cloudcroft for fighting, so he took the train home. But because his dad had been one of the organizers of the YMCA in 1905, and was currently serving as president, H. T. made sure his son was sent back to camp! Don't you know that had to be a tough go? I remember one time when I was charging something to my father at the Popular Dry Goods, an elderly woman asked (rather horrified), "Are you George Ponsford's daughter?" I answered, "Yes ma'am" and she said, "He was such a bad little boy." And I said, "Well, he's a terrific father!" George joined his eight brothers and sisters as members of Trinity Methodist Church. He came home from church one Sunday and confessed to his mother that he had gotten in the wrong line and had joined the church before he was supposed to – I guess Kate was pretty relaxed by the ninth child and didn't blink an eye!

Daddy played basketball at both El Paso High and the University of Arizona and loved all sports. Along with his brother Mannie, he would buy season tickets to the University of Texas Longhorn games in Austin and make it to most of them. After my father married my mother, Libby Ponsford, and after I was born, he was called back into the army, so we left El Paso and basically followed my father until he was sent overseas. He served four years in the Corps of Engineers, leaving with the rank of major. In Europe he was with the 20th Armored Division when it liberated Dachau. He only spoke about it one time.

One of the most amazing true stories I've ever heard was that my father was a Battalion Commander (as a major) and at one point, his Battalion took over a German Battalion and daddy (acting all this out very dramatically) took the Iron Cross and Luger from this German officer. Well, the really amazing part of the story was that one day, as daddy was having coffee with his buddies at Denny's on North Mesa, this officer walked in and both men 50 years later and then in their 80's immediately recognized one another. The German officer walked up to daddy and said, "I believe we've met" and daddy told him that if he would come to Denny's the next day at the same time he would return his Iron Cross (he didn't mention the Luger). But the German businessman was going back to Frankfurt the next day. What are the odds of these two men ever being in the same place again?

We returned to El Paso after WWII and my father built our home on College Avenue next door to Lily and John Williams and their beautiful daughter Betty Ruth. I'll never forget the night we moved in. Many of our new neighbors came over to welcome us, including many lovely Jewish families. I remember one of them asking hopefully, "and your name is Ponsberg?"

I mentioned earlier that H.T. Ponsford was involved in founding a permanent home for the YMCA in 1905, which provided the boys of El Paso their first swimming pool. He also was one of the organizers of the Southwestern Children's Home and served as its president for many years.

H.T. also served as director of the El Paso School for Girls, later Radford School. The El Paso Country Club was originally located in Woodlawn Park on the present site of Washington Park and H.T. and Kate were charter members. In 1980, H.T. was inducted in the Hall of Honor of the El Paso County Historical Society.

Kate joined Trinity Methodist in November 1897, when the church still occupied a brick building at Texas and Stanton and Rev. J.C. French was pastor. At that time Harry and Walter started going to Sunday School and were enthralled with the stories their teacher, Mrs. James E. Terry, told. Her husband had been a stagecoach driver on the San Antonio-El Paso line and Mrs. Terry relayed his exciting adventures to her class.

In 1907, the church moved to its present location at Mesa and Yandell (then called Boulevard). H.T. did the brick, stone and concrete work for the new building, which was a red-brick Kansas Gothic design. H.T. joined Trinity Methodist during the pastorate of Rev. Percy Knickerbacher, a real hell, fire, damnation kind of minister, who filled the church each week. My Aunt Pearl remembered riding on a bus approaching our church one day as two young men sitting behind her were discussing Rev. Knickerbacher. Nearing the church one of the men said "someday that minister is going to knock the church down with his preaching" just as they passed a pile of red bricks where the church should be. It was being torn down in preparation of our present Sanctuary! Stunned silence followed between the two bus riders.

The Ponsford firm built all three of the church's current buildings as well as the previous red brick sanctuary. H. T. didn't believe in making money when building churches so none of the family took a salary for Trinity's four buildings nor any other church. I am very proud of the family's contribution. Both our Sanctuary building and Trinity Hall are designed by the well-known architect, Henry Trost.

The two blue Reredos stained glass windows behind the choir loft on either side of the large middle window in our Sanctuary are dedicated to the Ponsford family. The upper medallion of the window on the left represents the Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the End, This is the One True God. The middle medallion shows the Crown over the Cross, representing victory over the trials of life. The lower medallion shows the Ten Commandments, the guide to true life without regrets. The upper medallion of the blue window on the right side shows the Harvest. It stands for diligence and is a reward of the Faithful. The middle medallion represents Instruction. Let the Bible and the Cross be our guide. The lower medallion stands for Responsibility. Those who have the keys to the Kingdom must be faithful to their trust. The lessons of life must be passed on from generation to generation.

Ironically, the family's first home in 1897 was on the corner of Montana and Oregon, where Resler Hall is today so when I'm in the church parlor



Figure 6. Dedication Ceremony for the H.T. Ponsford Park in 1975. George Ponsford is second to the left.

I am exactly where it all started for the family in El Paso. Ponsfords also did the stone work for the present St. Clements Sanctuary building and constructed the First Presbyterian Church on Murchison, along with many other churches in our area.

When El Paso attorney, Millard Patterson, decided to build a school for the teaching of Mexican youth as a memorial to his wife, Lydia, he called H.T. Ponsford. Mr. Patterson said that he was going to California for the summer but that he had hired Trost & Trost and when the design was ready to build the school, H.T. was instructed to withdraw funds as needed from Mr. Patterson's account at the State National Bank. And that was what doing business was like in the good 'ol days!!

H.T. Ponsford was one of the Masons who bought the Ralston Hospital at Five Points and named it the Masonic Hospital around 1920. I was born in that hospital, as were many other El Pasoans. In its 24-year history this hospital was a first in many contributions to our city. It was the first local hospital to meet the standards for approval by the American College of Surgeons. It was the first to have a regular staff of physicians, the first to have a nurse's training school, and the first to recognize the value of footprints in identifying babies. The Hospital was sold to the Sears Roebuck Company in 1944, and the Masons donated the entire amount of the sale to the building fund for the new Providence Hospital.

The Ponsfords were the contractors for many El Paso landmarks, including the Plaza Theatre. I have many interesting stories and

information about the building of the Plaza. I wasn't born yet when the Plaza was built during 1929-30, but some of my older cousins remember going there to watch as Italian artisans applied the gold leaf. A few years earlier H.T. Ponsford built the beautiful Woman's Club of El Paso in 1916, which was the first Woman's Club building in the State of Texas. Plans are being made for the 100th anniversary of this historic building.

As I mentioned before, in 1897 the Ponsfords lived in one of the two red brick houses on the corner of Montana and Oregon and the other house belonged to W.W. and Iva Turney. They became good friends and when the Turneys built their mansion farther down Montana Avenue, H.T. was one of the builders. In 1940 the Turney home became the El Paso Museum of Art and today it is the International Museum of the Visual Arts. Ponsford also built the Dr. Turner residence across Brown Street from the museum, which is now the home of the El Paso County Medical Society. They built the original buildings for the Standard Oil Co. of Texas, the buildings for Phelps-Dodge refinery, and the current Sun Bowl stadium. The original tickets to the Sun Bowl stadium were all sold as fifty-yard line seats because they all faced the center of the field. That, of course, meant that the seats were at different angles. Building it drove my father, George, into such a nervous state that he had to retire after the stadium was finished.

Among the schools the Ponsford firm built were Ysleta High, the original Bowie High, Radford, Cadwallader, Coldwell and the first Zach White. They also constructed buildings at the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP).

The family also constructed buildings at Ft. Bliss, White Sands Proving Ground, William Beaumont Hospital, and Holloman Air Force base. At Holloman they built a High-Speed Rocket Sled Test Track, which had to be accurate within the thickness of a cigarette paper. Col. James Stapp was the first person to run the test. Remember him? *Time* magazine named Col. Stapp as the fastest man in the world and the Air Force's #1 hero! The Ponsfords were obviously building a lot of government structures during this time and when President Roosevelt asked for contractors making over a certain amount on government contracts to send in the excess dollars, the Ponsfords did.

The family also built hotels throughout the Southwest, such as the Gage Hotel in Marathon and the Holland in Alpine. They built many homes, including the one I live in that was originally built for A.B. Poe, Dick Poe's grandfather, the first Chrysler dealer in Texas.

H.T.'s relations with unions were always good. When the International Bricklayers' Union decided to build a brick plant in El Paso (one of only two in the US), H.T. was invited to become a director. In 1927, this union honored H.T. with the third gold membership card in its history and honored him at a dinner at the Hotel Cortez, attended by 300 of El Paso's leading citizens. There were many tributes to him that night, including from Mayor R.E. Thomason. It is wonderful to be honored during you



Figure 7. The Ponsford Brothers in 1961. From left to right: Harry, Walter, Manny, George, Frank (Walter's son), Albert.

lifetime. H.T. died on May 6, 1942.

In 1975, Mayor Fred Hervey dedicated the H.T. Ponsford Park at DeLeon and Marcena near the Sunland Park Mall. H.T. had helped Fred Hervey get started in business and the mayor was always very grateful to him. Mayor Hervey was quoted as saying that his dealings with Mr. Ponsford were the “foundation of my business experience.” Mayor Hervey also presented my grandfather for membership in the El Paso County Historical Society’s Hall of Honor in 1980. I later served as President of this Historical Society from January 2011 through December 2012.

As I dug deep into my family history, I discovered so many new connections and fascinating stories that really made me proud. I was actually surprised to find out so much new information because I thought that I knew most of what there was to know – but in retrospect perhaps I shouldn’t be surprised. The Ponsfords, like many other El Paso families, were very low-key and not ones to blow their own horn. I am not low-key and am both grateful and delighted for this opportunity to tell you about my family. The Ponsford family’s impact on the landscape, the culture and the long history of this city was significant.

So the next time you take in El Paso’s beautiful skyline, or cheer on the Miners in the Sun Bowl or watch a movie in the Plaza Theatre, take a minute and imagine a young H.T. Ponsford on a beautiful March day in 1897, as he stepped off the train here and exclaimed, “This is the place for me.”

Mary Jo Ponsford Melby wrote this piece, originally entitled “The Ponsford Family of El Paso,” in 2013, and presented it to five different organizations in El Paso between 2013 and 2014. Slight changes have been made to prepare it for publication.

2015 Hall of Honor

Dee Margo

2015 Hall of Honor Inductee

Dee Margo moved to El Paso in 1977, six months after marrying Adair at age 25, to work for John D. Williams Insurance Company as a straight commission salesman – a second-generation firm run by C.W. “Wake” Wakefield, his father-in-law. He rose to meet the challenge, buying the five-employee firm from his mother-in-law. Over thirty years the firm grew to be the largest El Paso insurance firm, and among the top 150 in the United States. In 2013 the firm sold to HUB International of Chicago, which wanted to replicate the culture Dee had nourished.



While building a company, Dee also helped build El Paso - starting the Fellowship of Christian Athletes in 1977 with a UTEP football coach. In seeking to become a better president, he joined the Young President's Organization, gaining experience from the presidents of worldwide companies. In 1989 Dee helped found the El Paso-Juarez chapter, becoming its first Chapter Chair and — after joining the International Board of YPO - he was named Chairman of the Executive Committee of YPO International. He has also brought resources, founding the Border Fund with friend Dick Behrenhausen, who headed the McCormick Tribune Foundation in Chicago. Over thirteen years, the Border Fund provided over \$26 million in charitable grants to local not for profit groups. Dee continues Operation Noel in partnership with HUB International Insurance, the El Paso Times, KVIA Channel 7, and MattressFirm - providing 20,000 coats and 18,000 pairs of shoes to needy El Paso children from toddlers to 12 years old at Christmas time. Dee was also involved in numerous other El Paso civic organizations such as Rotary, United Way, EP City-County Board of Health, Greater EP Chamber of Commerce (Chair 2005), Symphony, Boy Scouts, Junior Achievement (named to their Business Hall of Fame with his wife Adair), and other groups.

Dee was appointed by Senator Phil Gramm as Civilian Aide to the Secretary of the Army, serving as a liaison between El Paso and Fort Bliss from 1990 – 1998. He also played an instrumental role in El Paso's advocacy for Fort Bliss during BRAC (Base Realignment and Closure) in

2005, resulting in its exponential growth.

In 2010, Dee was elected to the Texas House of Representatives, District 78, serving on the House Appropriations Committee and Land and Resource Committee. The skills he demonstrated uniquely qualified him to be Chairman of the Board of Managers for the El Paso Independent School District when it was roiled in scandal in 2013, forcing the State of Texas to step in. Texas Gov. Abbott appointed Dee to the Oversight Committee of the Cancer Prevention and Research Institute of TX (CPRIT) overseeing \$300 million in grants annually.

Dee and Adair have two sons, Wake and Don, a daughter-in-law, Elizabeth, and two granddaughters, Lilliana and Emma. They also have "adopted" daughter, Monica Gonzalez, and her three girls: Sophia, Anna and Camilla.

Mary and Ernest Ponce

2015 Hall of Honor Inductees

*Ernest (1913-2002) and
Mary Ponce (19W-2009)*

Ernest Ponce was born in Chihuahua, Chih., Mexico on July 25, 1913. His father was an accountant for the Terrazas family, who at the time were one of the largest cattle barons in the country. In October of 1913, three month old Ernst Ponce and his family were forced to leave their home when Pancho Villa and his men attacked the Terrazas family compound. The family moved to El Paso, TX. Ernest loved El Paso and its people. He devoted countless volunteer hours to improve the quality of life in his beloved city. In 1951 he became the first Hispanic city councilman. Ernie's services to his community included working as the director of the Valley Bank of El Paso. He served as a member of the Downtown Rotary Club, director of the Chamber of Commerce, president of Defense Supply Association, Commissioner of the North Texas-Oklahoma Export Expansion Council, Trustee with the City of El Paso Employee's Pension Board, the League of Texas Municipalities, director of the YMCA, the United Fund, the Optimist Club, Selective Service Board, National Conference of Christians and Jews, Our Lady's Youth Center, and the International Good Neighbor Council.

In the early 1960s Mr. Ponce played a key role in the negotiations and translations involving both the Chamizal Tract and Cordova Island. Ernie Ponce was the owner and operator of R-F Macaroni Co., Inc. which he sold in 1978. He was the El Paso YMCA Handball Champion from 1938-1951.



Due to WWII the sport was inactive from 1942-1945. In 1946 Ernie was the YMCA Singles Champion until 1951 when he retired his position. In appreciation to the YMCA for helping him excel in sports as a young boy, Ernie succeeded in raising funds to build the YMCA located on Montana St. An avid sportsman, Ernie was also inducted into the Golf Hall of Fame in 1997, an honor he greatly cherished. He also served as president of the El Paso Country Club, the West Texas-New Mexico Senior Golf Association, and the Inner City Group. Ernie Ponce played and promoted sports and displayed good sportsmanship since he was a young boy and continued to do so until his death.

Mary S. Ponce was born in New York City. In her early teens her family moved to El Paso and made it their permanent home. She was also a tireless civic leader and is remembered for her outstanding contributions to the city and county of El Paso. For more than 55 years Mary volunteered her time and energy in humanitarian and civic affairs. She was the director of the Woman's Department of the Greater El Paso Chamber of Commerce. She was also president of the El Paso Council of Garden Clubs. Mary served as a member of the advisory committees for three former El Paso Mayors and directorships on numerous boards committed to the El Paso community. In 1967 she was voted El Paso Woman of the Year. She was also recognized in 1980 with the highest award given by the City of El Paso: the "Conquistador Scroll." In addition to her civic activities, Mary served as Executive Regional Director of the El Paso Chapter of the National Conference of Christians and Jews. In 1980 Mary and several Hispanic businessmen formed the Paso Del Norte Broadcasting Corporation. They served as owners and operators of El Paso's only Hispanic television station Channel 26, KINT-TV, KSVE AM Radio, and KINT FM Radio. Mary was recognized as a founding partner in the El Paso Hispanic Endowment Fund established in 1995 for the University of Texas at El Paso.

Bill Rakocy

2015 Hall of Honor Inductee

William Rakocy was born in Youngstown, Ohio on April 14, 1924. His interest in art sparked early. When he was a boy, not older than 7, a teacher gave him a note to deliver to his mother. It suggested she send him to art classes. His mother, Anna Mae, sent him to the Butler Art Institute where he studied well into his teens.



In 1943, William was drafted into the Navy and spent three years enlisted, including some time in the Philippines. He worked on recruitment training murals with historically based themes and sketched thousands of portraits of his fellow soldiers while overseas.

After returning stateside, he enrolled at the Kansas City Art Institute where he received both his bachelors of arts and masters of fine arts. While in school, he met Gloria Canterbury who soon became his wife, and they went on to have five children.

Over the next six decades, Rakocy worked for advertising agencies, as a film set designer, published an art newspaper, was fine arts chairman at the College of Artesia, New Mexico, taught art classes, including in El Paso and New Mexico, wrote twelve books about the southwest, settled and built an art studio in West El Paso, was Curator of Education at the El Paso Museum of Art, worked on the El Paso Museum of History and Wilderness Park Museum, worked with local artists such as Mario Parra and Manny Acosta, and participated in a variety of art shows in the southwest and throughout several states.

Art was Rakocy's life, and he shared his life with others through his work. He was eager to show people his work and to teach up and coming students. He was adamant about sharing the southwest to people all over the country.

Nestor Valencia

2015 Hall of Honor Inductee

Nestor Valencia is a native El Pasoan who knows what it means to improve and give back to a city. He was born and raised in Ysleta and graduated with a BA degree in Art, and later an M.A. in political science from the University of Texas at El Paso. Prior to this, he spent four years in the Air Force.

In 1958, Nestor began working for the city of El Paso. As a trained urban planner, he was instrumental in bringing about the Chamizal Settlement, the refurbishing of the Plaza Theater, and the Wyler Aerial Tramway. He is also a staunch advocate of the street car system, being fascinated with them since he and his mother traveled to Juarez in them in the 70s. He served as Vice President for Planning for the El Paso Community Foundation as well.

He retired as Director of Planning for the City of El Paso and continues his work in art these days with his wife, Xochitil. He is a member of the Portrait Society of America and owns the Valencia Art Studio on 2113 W. O'Hara Road, Anthony, New Mexico.



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ORGANIZED MARCH 18, 1954

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