

Tom Lea, Ex-Mayor, Dies At 67



TOM LEA

El Paso lost one of its most brilliant and colorful figures at 7:30 p. m. Thursday with the passing of Thomas C. Lea, 67, who died of a heart attack in Southwestern General Hospital after a brief illness.

A veteran criminal lawyer, Mr. Lea was conspicuous through the pages of El Paso history for more than 40 years. Born in President Harry Truman's home town of Independence, Mo., he came west in 1901 to become a pioneer Southwesterner.

He was born Oct. 29, 1877. His grandfather, one of the first settlers in western Missouri, fought with Gen. Sterling Price under the Stars and Bars of the Confederacy. His father was surveyor of Jackson County, Mo., for more than 30 years.

After graduating from the Independence public schools, young Tom immediately decided to become a lawyer. He taught one year in the Jackson schools, and then the Spanish-American War interrupted his dreams for the future.

He volunteered with a state regiment and served one year. When he was mustered out, the tyro criminal lawyer began law study at Kansas City University, where he took his degree. He first practiced law in Independence, where he had known President Truman as a boy, but in 1901 came west to visit his uncle, Joe Lea, first white settler in Roswell, N. M.

CAME HERE IN 1902

Mr. Lea came to El Paso in the early spring of 1902. He made several mining trips into Mexico, but always returned to the roaring border town beside the Rio Grande. Colorful figures were a dime a dozen in El Paso in those days, but Mr. Lea early stood a boot heel higher than most of the others.

He started law practice in 1904. He was elected county chairman of the Democratic Party and not long after, police judge. In 1906, he was married to Miss Zola Utt.

Tom Lea, Jr., Thursday night recalled a favorite story of his father about the days when he was judge. It seems that on the day Tom, Jr., was born the proud father released every prisoner brought before him.

In 1915, Mr. Lea was elected mayor of El Paso, and served one term, until 1917. A man of vision, the new mayor realized that one of the greatest projects for this city would be the removal of the railroad tracks. He pioneered this movement, and in 1916 had drawn up a plan with the railroads to have

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the tracks moved, but after he left office, the agreement was discarded.

During his term as mayor, Pancho Villa, notorious Mexican revolutionist, was running loose along the border and had publicly announced that he intended to come over and subdue El Paso. Mr. Lea personally patrolled the streets along the river all one night waiting for the threatened visit, which never materialized.

During his career Mr. Lea once represented Victoriano Huerta, former Mexican president who fled to this side of the river when things got hot in Mexico. Huerta was imprisoned here, and not long after died.

WAS BRILLIANT DEFENSE LAWYER

A brilliant defense lawyer, Mr. Lea served as council in some of El Paso's most famous murder cases. His lanky figure, usually clothed in a purplish tan suit and topped off by a broadbrimmed black Stetson, was a familiar one in El Paso courtrooms. He almost always had a cigar between his teeth when pondering a case.

A member of the Bar Association for over 40 years, he was for many years associated with Congressman R. E. Thomason in law practice here.

Mr. Lea held an illustrious record in Masonry. He was a 32nd Degree Mason, a Knight Templar, Past Worshipful Master of Masonic Lodge 130, and Past Potentate of El Maida Shrine. He also was a Past Exalted Ruler of the Elks.

Mr. Lea was a member of the First Baptist Church. His home was at 1400 East Nevada Street, where he had many paintings by his famous son, Tom Lea, Jr.

Mrs. Zola Lea died in 1936. There were three sons, Tom, Jr., Joe, and Richard C., by this marriage. In 1939, he married Mrs. Rosario Parida Archer, who survives him.

Tom Lea, Jr., has recently been away from El Paso painting battle scenes that have gained fame all over the United States. Lt. Col. Joe Lea is stationed in Newark, N. J., with the Office of Dependency Benefits, and the youngest son, Richard, is in his first year at West Point.

Besides his wife and his sons, Mr. Lea is survived by a stepdaughter, Mrs. Bertha Archer Schaer; a son-in-law, Sgt. Arthur Schaer, who has recently returned from the China-Burma-India Theater, and by a sister, Lucy Lea of Roswell, N. M.

Funeral arrangements were pending with Hagedorn-Harding Funeral Home until the arrival of Colonel Lea from New Jersey.