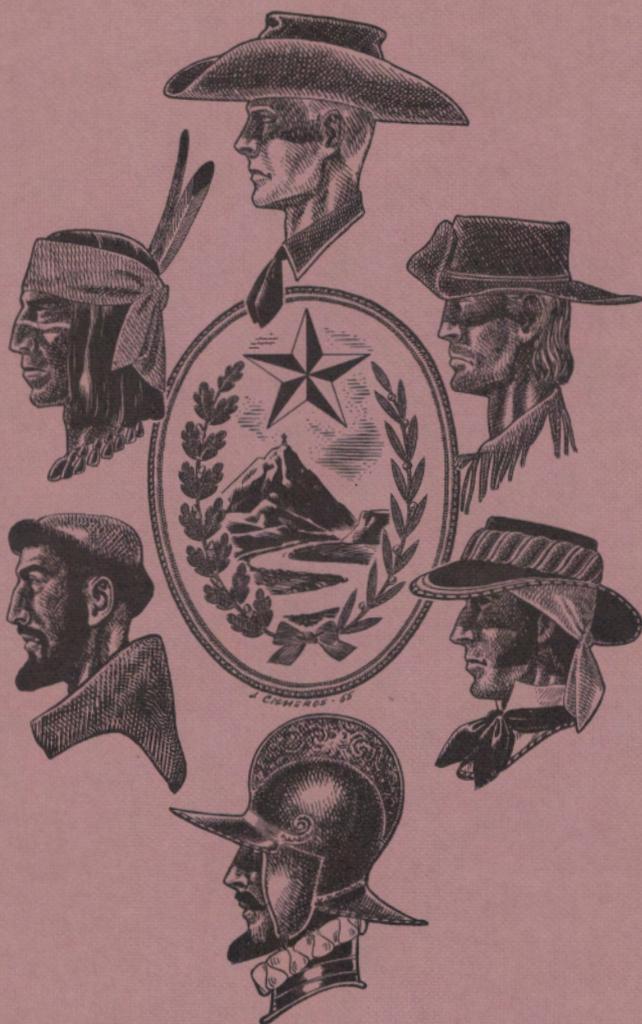


# PASSWORD



THE EL PASO COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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# PASSWORD

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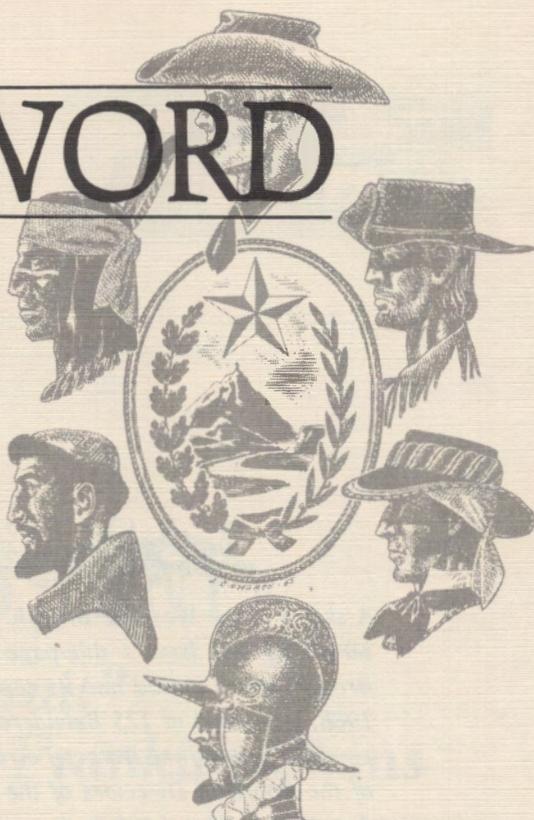
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*A sketch of the Westside Branch, El Paso Public Library, serves as this issue's title-page insignia. The Westside Branch, which moved into its new facility in December of 1988, is located at 125 Belvidere on land donated to the city by the late Jane Burges Perrenot, a longtime member of the Board of Directors of the El Paso Public Library Association. The sketch is the work of Paul DuMonde.*

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# LETTERS to JENNY

## A “Self-Portrait” of Benjamin Franklin Coons

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*by Myra McLarey*

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“Had fortune...been a little less cruel, and allowed me to rise, or even shown me a sky less dark than that which hovered over me for five long years—I feel I should have become one amongst the few whose destiny it is to command the...attention of the world.”

—Benjamin Franklin Coons  
April 27, 1853

**I**T IS IRONIC THAT BENJAMIN FRANKLIN COONS HAS essentially slipped through the hands of history, considering El Paso was called Franklin, after him, for the first ten or more years of its existence. Many histories of the area omit Coons altogether. A few mention him, but usually very briefly. They note that he was a Santa Fe trader, that he owned one of the first settlements in what is now El Paso, that he leased his land to the government as the site for the area's first military post, that he suffered financial reverses in 1850, sending him to California to look for greener pastures, literally, and that

he made his final exit from the Southwest accompanied by 50 hired men and 1400 sheep, leaving behind him his uncertain place in history and "the billowing dust cut from the desert floor by thousands of flinty hooves—dust and the acrid reek of sweaty sheep."<sup>1</sup>

According to Rex W. Strickland, the author of the only extended study of Coons, "One of the most persistent myths of our frontier has to do with the activities of Benjamin Franklin Coons, sometime Santa Fe trader, freight contractor for the United States Army, commission merchant, and first business failure of El Paso." To Frank Coons belongs the legend of being "the first important person to scandalize the little community, for he left the place between sun and sun under the suspicion of breach of trust." Strickland concludes, however, that Coons' failure was the result of ill fortune, not fraud, and that he proved to be a man of integrity when "he returned to the scene of his insolvency and paid his creditors in full."<sup>2</sup>

Still, the cloud of suspicion hung over Coons' name; and Anson Mills, in a less than modest tone, claimed the honor of changing the name of the town from Franklin to El Paso in 1858. "Franklin Coontz [sic] turned out an undesirable citizen and it was suggested I rename the city.... I suggested...El Paso."<sup>3</sup>

The prolific correspondence Coons maintained with his younger sister, Jenny, was discovered at an estate sale in St. Louis in the fall of 1987. He once told Jenny, "I think your real character can be easily discovered by what you write."<sup>4</sup> Thus it seems fitting that his letters have emerged from the past to give the first intimate portrait of a young man in search of his place in the West.

Frank Coons was not one of the illiterate Missouri poor who saw the West as an escape from their hardscrabble lives. He was socially refined and college educated. In 1845, he was in Philadelphia attending parties and learning the polka ("I can dance it pretty well. You see, I will be ahead of the young gentlemen and ladies in St. Louis"). In the daytime he often went to the Franklin Library, "where I spend most of my time reading." He loved theatre, he quoted Byron, Scott, and Shakespeare with ease. To Frank Coons, a thunderstorm evoked "unearthly and unhallowed scenes. Macbeth must be again communing with the weird sisters, or poor Lear seeking to hide himself from his unnatural daughters."<sup>5</sup>

Frank Coons was not only sophisticated and well-read, he was well-

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*Myra McLarey, a native of Arkansas, holds a Master of Arts degree in history from Central Missouri State University at Warrensburg. She currently teaches expository writing at Harvard University.*

fixed. He was the son of David Coons, a prosperous wholesale and retail dry goods and grocery merchant, who, at his death at age 46 in 1842, was proclaimed "one of [St. Louis'] most respected and useful citizens." Frank inherited an elegant brick home in what was then the most fashionable neighborhood in St. Louis, a quarter share of other valuable property, several slaves, shares in various insurance and business companies, and a sizeable amount of cash.<sup>6</sup>

Neither did he heed the call to Manifest Destiny—never once did he allude to the glories of expanding the American flag to the newly conquered land. His references to the war seem almost an afterthought. "As to news, there is none of great importance. 1800 men are to start for Chihuahua next week under the command of Col. Ralls. Reports of rebellion reach us every day. The Mexicans say a large force is coming up from below. I do not think the Mexicans are such fools as to commence another outbreak—yet at present they seem very much dissatisfied." He was chagrined by a patriotic call to serve on the grand jury. "I swore I was not 21—but it was no go—after some deliberation the Honorable Judge said I was old enough—and of course I took my seat in the box....on account of the summons-knockdown-pocket picking Judge."<sup>7</sup>

Coons did not go West to escape an affliction of the heart, but he was amused that the St. Louisans were sure his departure must have had something to do with women, and one in particular: "As to the report she is said to have created at home about my 'proposal' and other such nonsense—it is all HUMBBUG—for upon my soul, I never gave her to understand by word, action, or deed, that I was 'stuck.' Bah! what on earth would I do with such a 'horse load of human flesh.' It would cost as much to clothe her alone as it would take to maintain a moderate sized family.... I always was fond of playing with merry beings (and expect to remain so). I do not care hanker for any of them. And my heart is as free from the tender infection as any mortal on earth."<sup>8</sup>

No doubt Coons' impulsive nature responded to the challenge and adventure promised by such an undertaking. According to family legend, when Frank Coons was a young lad, he had "borrowed" a steamboat one night and had taken it on a joy ride to another town and back just to prove he could. In his settled years, he supposedly drove a herd of turkeys to California "on a dare from his card-playing buddies." He supposedly was gone two days before he sent word to his family of his venture, lest their protests change his mind. He supposedly made it. And the turkeys did too.<sup>9</sup>

No doubt, too, Frank Coons was drawn to the image of the rugged

individual—a man not bound by the constraints of society. “You know, I never was very subservient to the dictates of the gay world, and always delighted in acting contrary to any set of prescribed rules marked out by some or other vain-glorious, mad-cap, half-witted clique, before whom the votaries of fashion are ever so ready to bow.”<sup>10</sup>

Possibly Coons had something to prove only to himself—a slim, dark-haired, dapper young man whose constant references to his stature suggest one who protests too much: “I think I'd make a first rate ‘Gomez’” that is, were I a few inches taller. A hero only five feet, seven inches is so unromantic.” And in defense of shortness: “Tall houses seldom have anything but rubbish and cobwebs in the upper story.”<sup>11</sup>

Mostly, though, Benjamin Franklin Coons was part of what one historian has called “a conquest of merchants.” The promise of immense wealth, waiting for the taking, that is the myth Frank Coons bought when—at the age of 20—he headed for Santa Fe.<sup>12</sup>

Benjamin Franklin Coons took to the West—lace handkerchiefs, blankets, women's Morocco shoes, blue jeans, silk and woolen shawls. He took to the West—hoes, spades, nails, saws, pistols, hatchets, hammers. He took to the West—French and American brandy, New England rum, Irish whiskey, Holland gin, Old Madeira and Port wine, oysters, brandy cherries by the box. And catsup.<sup>13</sup> He took remarkable physical and mental energy, as well as a sardonic and self-deprecating sense of humor. He took an artist's eye for detail and a willingness to embrace an alien culture. And he took a poet's plaintive search for meaning. These intangibles shaped Coons' image of both the Southwest and himself.

The Southwest took from his naivete and his youth. But it did not take from him his determination to follow his destiny to its ultimate conclusion: “Mine is not a mind that can quietly sink and decay from Disappointment's cold and chilly blast.”<sup>14</sup>

Coons led his first wagon train to the Southwest in the fall of 1846. He arrived in Santa Fe in October with \$6,000 worth of stock, which he had expected to sell in a matter of days. He was still there in December. “Ever since I have been here I have been...endeavoring to sell out...but all to no purpose... I trade my goods for almost anything—such as mules, robes, serapes (Mex. blankets) and furs of any kind. I have no trouble in getting rid of these articles here, as they are in great demand. The Lord

---

*Editor's note:* Lieutenant W. H. C. Whiting in the journal of his 1849 road-blazing expedition mentioned an Indian chief, “Gomez, by name” as “the terror of Chihuahua and a byword in Mexico.” Very probably Coons was referring to this chief, also described by Whiting as “a well-made fellow.”

only knows when I shall get back."<sup>15</sup>

Coons did get back (to St. Louis), making a hazardous journey in the dead of winter, a trip he vowed never to repeat. ("One winter's trip is enough for one's lifetime.")<sup>16</sup> Undaunted, he returned to Santa Fe the next September (1847) with what he advertised as "the largest and most thoroughly assorted stock of staple and fancy dry goods ever heretofore brought to this country."<sup>17</sup> In April of 1848, he set out from Independence with "the largest train for this season, and next to the largest ever taken out," announcing in the *Santa Fe Republican* of July 6 that he would arrive within a few days with "\$100,000 worth...of the largest and best assortment of new and fashionable goods ever brought to this market, as I have the advantage of all other merchants in laying in my stock of goods... I will not be undersold."

By September of 1848, Coons was situated in El Paso del Norte with stores in both Santa Fe and Chihuahua. The Mexican tariff law was playing havoc with his business. "Many have bribed the customs house officer here, but the foul play has been discovered.... I get my goods in honestly and at one third the regular duties.... I have sold here (El Paso del Norte) about \$12,000 worth of goods. I sold the Mexican government nearly \$3,000 more."<sup>18</sup>

By 1849, Coons was, to all appearances, a successful man. He hobnobbed with the Governor and his cabinet in Chihuahua. He had acquired an impressive ranch on the left bank of the Rio Grande, directly opposite El Paso del Norte. It was a "pretentious one story adobe building around which were clustered several smaller houses. This group of buildings, which was destined to become the nucleus of a great city, constituted what was know as Coontz's [sic] ranch." The United States government was leasing his property for its military post. "I have the largest store in town and am looked upon as the richest foreigner in the state [of Chihuahua]," Coons wrote his sister. Then he added, "But they do not know everything.... When I have settled all my duties, they will reach over \$30,000. Without paying these duties I should have made 10 or 15 thousand dollars."<sup>19</sup>

In the spring of 1850 Coons undertook the transporting of a large order of military supplies from Indianola, Texas, to the "camp opposite El Paso." The expedition was one long series of disasters—drought, then torrential rains, broken wagons, trouble among the crew, and a mutinous military escort. On reaching Franklin with the first contingent of his trains, Coons received the final blow: he had been swindled by Parker H. French.<sup>20</sup>

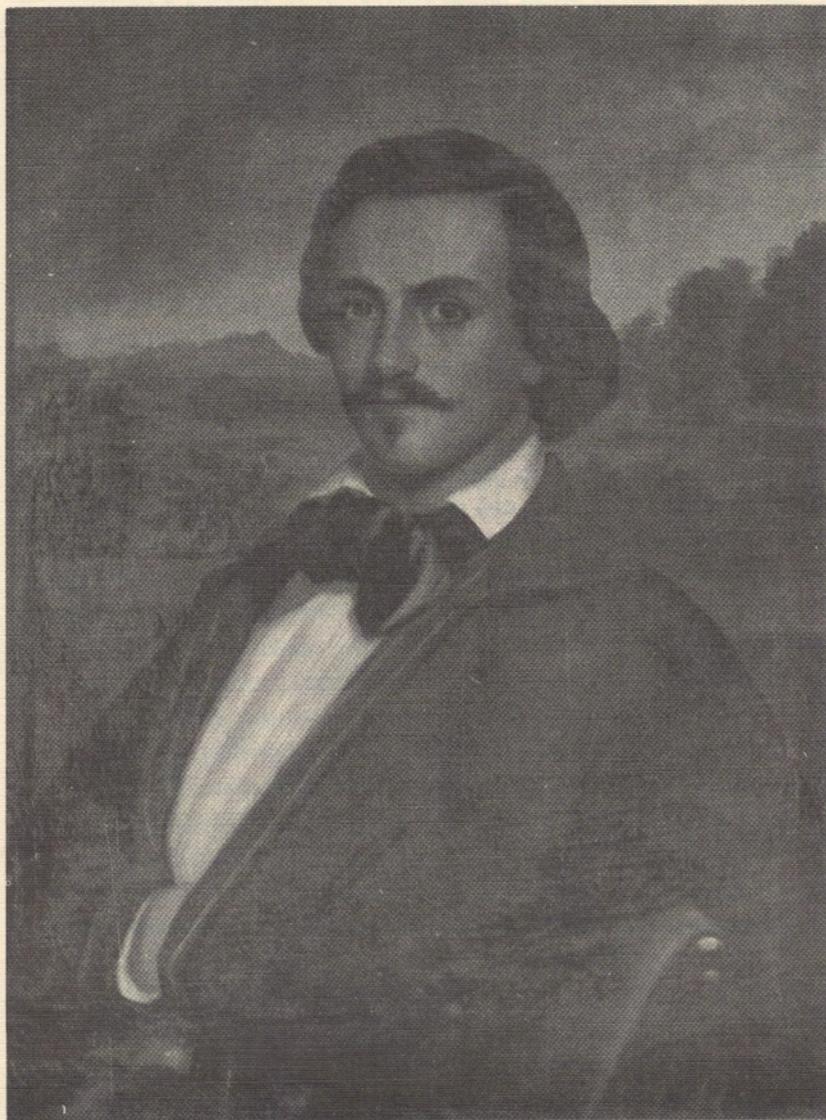
Coons made his exit from Franklin and went to California via Durango and Mazatlán. California seemed waiting for men with ideas, and he was one of those men. He would herd thousands of sheep from Mexico to help feed the influx of goldseekers. He returned to Franklin ("taking the steamer to Mazatlán thence over the Nevada Mountains to Durango and...northward to Chihuahua & El Paso")<sup>21</sup> and spent several months there paying off his debt and putting his finances in order. He then went to the Durango region and began to assemble an immense herd of sheep. In early 1852, he set out for California—leaving behind a country he both loved and despised.

If Coons had any desire to prove himself the "rugged individual," he got his chance. The ill-fated drive of the spring and summer of 1850 would test any man—short or tall. On May 14, he wrote to Jenny from his camp on Rio Chocolate, Texas: "For two months previous to my starting my trains, there had been no rains here, but to the very day I dispatched my first wagons, showers commenced. During the past ten days I have seen more water fall than I ever witnessed.... I am heartily sick and tired of knocking about amongst oxen and mules, of prying wagons out of mudholes, and eating beef and crackers. My feet are now as wet as they can be and so they have been for the past week."

On July 16, he wrote from his camp on Devils River, Texas: "The poor cattle suffered much from being so tenderfooted. The sharp flint rock soon ruins their hoofs and wherever they go a trail of blood is left behind. I lost in this day and night of travel over 40 head of oxen and only because they could not stand up to go on."

And if broken wagons and dying animals weren't enough, violence broke out among his crew. "I...found a man stretched near the side of a wagon, and close by him a pool of blood.... A quarrel had ensued between two of the men and during a scuffle that followed, one thrust his butcher knife into the breast of the other. Fortunately the knife entered the right side and only poked about two inches 'within.' I soon cleansed and draped the wound, had the poor fellow carried and put in my tent. The scamp who had used the knife I had tied securely and made fast behind a wagon.... He is bold and desperate, I believe he will kill the fellow as soon as I let him loose.... The two men have their friends on the train, which places me in an unpleasant situation. However, to avoid all trouble, I have turned the prisoner over to the military officers in command of my escort."<sup>22</sup>

What was proving to be a series of disasters continued as the soldiers composing the rear guard stole a keg of liquor from Coons' baggage wagon. "At daylight...everyone of them was beastly drunk. The Lieu-



**Benjamin Franklin Coons, c. 1853.** *(Photo reproduced from a portrait in the Collection of Philip and Amy Alfield, Alton, Illinois)*

tenant in command did not know what to do.... As fast as they became sober, he commenced to tie them to trees and behind wagons. Mutiny was the consequence and in my presence several of the men threatened to shoot the officer if he did not release them.... A court martial is to be convened at once to try the scoundrels." And what did Coons make of this mutiny and mayhem? "There seems to be something in the air of Texas—very well adapted to the growth of rascality and meanness."<sup>23</sup>

If it were adventure Coons sought, he had enough encounters with Indians to satisfy his thirst. He had neither sympathy nor animosity for the Indian. Despite his repeated clashes with them, he continued to view them as an accepted nuisance whose bloodthirstiness has been blown out of proportion. In December of 1849, Soloman Perry Sublette, another St. Louisan, wrote to his wife: "Coons...and some 5 others...were about 5 miles ahead of the wagons when about 40 Indians attacked him, killed two of his men and his mule. He made his escape by jumping on a horse behind another man and returned to the wagons."<sup>24</sup> A year later to the month, Coons matter-of-factly reported another episode: "We had...an engagement with a party of Apaches and whipped them, taking over 80 head of mules and horses, with the loss of but one man. On reaching 'Al rancho del Salto' we found the Indians had taken their animals from a party of Mexicans—then on their way to Durango. We at once gave up the animals and continued on our way." Then he reminded Jenny, "Remember, you must not believe me dead until I write home to that effect."<sup>25</sup>

There was more adventure with the Indians in store for Coons. On November 3, 1851, Coons saddled his best horse and, with one of his hired men accompanying him, left his camp (of 10,000 sheep) near Durango and headed for Chihuahua to attend to some important business. He was beginning a trip to write home about. "It immediately got off to a bad start. I had no moon and got lost in a large swamp. After bogging down various times, I managed to find a small hut on a hill and there put up till morning." He took a cut-off to get to the main Durango-Chihuahua commercial road, despite many warnings not to— "You know my nature. I would have my own way." By traveling at night, he avoided meeting up with Indians and reached Concepción, 250 miles south of Chihuahua. Once again rumors abounded, but "indians or no indians, I had to go on." Coons reasoned that he had a good horse and was resolved to exercise "hubristic valor in case misfortune led us upon a troop of Apaches." He was about a mile out of the village when "a party of some 15 Apaches now showed themselves on the ridge about a mile from us; shouting and whirling their bows and arrows over their heads." Now was his chance

to exercise his hubristic valor—"I soon concluded to return to Conception and attempt a passage of the prairie ahead under cover of darkness."

He had no more trouble until he was only 20 miles out of Chihuahua. There, the hired man's horse could not keep the pace Coons had set, and Coons, assuming they were out of danger, left him and rode on toward the city. Near "Massali," a ranch 12 miles from Chihuahua, he looked behind him to see "about twenty horsemen emerging from the hills half a league behind me, and coming direct upon the road toward me at full speed." Since Frank and Jenny Coons both loved the theater, he did not miss this opportunity to stage his real-life drama for her: "My spy glass soon revealed the hideous figures of a party of Apaches, making every possible exertion to increase the speed of their horses. As it was too soon in the morning for me to receive company, and having other important business on hand, my spurs soon communicated the fact to my horse, who now hearing the yelling of the savages, increased his speed to a full run and quickly convinced 'Mr. Ingen' of the folly of an attempt at pursuit...."

San Francisco June 26, 1853

Dearest Jenny—  
 With a heart as light and  
 spirit as joyous as a boy of sixteen and  
 I dead at my feet to commend with the only

On June 26, 1853, Frank Coons begins a letter to "Dearest Jenny."  
 (Photocopy of letter courtesy Myra McLarey)

In spite of his close call, Coons maintained his cavalier attitude toward the Indians. Upon arriving at the Fonda American in Chihuahua, he was happily greeted by friends who thought him dead (from a previous fight near Parral). "By these reports, myself and party were all murdered, the train lost and \$40,000 in money captured by the indians. How very strange it is that encounters with indians by the whites are always so tinged with the marvelous.... I wonder when the indians will cease killing your good brother."

Even though Coons made light of his brushes with the Indians, he was not so foolhardy as to underestimate the dangers they could present to his forthcoming sheep drive to California: "I shall be very much exposed but as I have a party of 50 men with me, I am greatly in hopes I may pass the Colorado in safety" and "never again rove through the country of these barbarians."<sup>26</sup>

Coons' response to Mexico was similar in one respect to those of other Americans when they first confronted this different culture. Cecil Robinson says, "It was the Mexican women who showed to advantage in their accounts." C. C. Cox, who kept a diary of his journey from Texas to California in 1849, bitterly denounced most things Mexican, then added: "But in justice to the women, I will qualify my remarks and admit that they have many redeeming traits. I have found them kind, warm hearted and generous, even to a fault." John Russell Bartlett credited them with having "a natural gracefulness of manner, which has been observed by all travelers." According to Robinson, "the glow of their sexual vitality immediately struck the first Anglo-American men to enter the Southwest."<sup>27</sup> Coons was one of those so struck.

Coons enjoyed Texas women, but a tad of St. Louis snobbery emerges in his description: "The girls of Texas would make excellent wives—for men of a humble nature. They are not brilliant, nor overstocked with wit and intellect, but they have good honest hearts."<sup>28</sup>

But it was the Mexican women who beguiled him. Less ethnocentric than many of his contemporaries, Coons was convinced that part of the charm had to do with the "beauty and grace in the Spanish.... Were I monarch of the world, I should make it the universal language. For all legal and business transactions perhaps the English or French tongue is best—there is something naturally sordid and avaricious in our mother language. But for love, for courtship, for friendly intercourse, for persuasive purposes, give me the Spanish."<sup>29</sup> To Coons, the large, dark eyes of a Mexican *señorita* had "expressions to be seen alone on the canvas of Guido or Rafael." He proclaimed Saltillo to be "remarkable for the beauty of its *Señoritas*." It was there he fell in love with a "dark-eyed angel" sitting near him at a bullfight. But then, he fell in love often in Mexico. "How many love affairs have I had during the past five years. It would require an especial Secretary to keep account of them.... To talk of love to a pretty girl, especially a Mexican, comes as natural to me as to converse with a merchant on the state of the market."<sup>30</sup>

Near the end of his years in Mexico—when he was most disillusioned, he looked upon its women as being "the only redeeming objects found in

the Mexican country.... During my sojourn and rambling in this degenerate land, I have passed some happy hours, but always in the company of the fair sex."<sup>31</sup>

Coons did not always find Mexico to be a degenerate land. At the beginning of the dreadful wagon train journey of 1850, he called it "'home'—my Mexican home, my free home."<sup>32</sup> He was sometimes shocked, often amused, but decidedly enamored by his encounters with the strange customs of this new land. His amusement was evident as he described an early episode to his young sister. Coons had sworn off fandangos, having lost his hat at one. Then two young ladies persuaded him to attend one at their home. Soon he was dancing "'the Cuna'—which somewhat resembles a reel or contre dance.... About half way down the room I discovered a table, covered with a white cloth.... I thought refreshments must be beneath.... After the dance I said to a young green horn American like myself, 'Let's go and take some refreshments....' I took hold of one corner of the cloth and gave it a sling so as to uncover the eatables. Zounds!... To our greatest astonishment there was presented to our sight a young child, now a corpse."

Such was the young greenhorn Coons' first encounter with the Mexican funeral—a celebration of the deceased's entrance into heaven. Coons was amazed, not derogatory. "One sees some strange sights now and then in this queer portion of the globe."<sup>33</sup>

In Coons' era, Americans who witnessed bullfights saw them as "just another example of Mexican savagery."<sup>34</sup> Bartlett refused to go to the arena in Chihuahua: "having once witnessed one of these cruel sights in

*I do not write more - for I still hope  
you will be here - long ere this reaches, from  
Tulle or Holman's,  
Good by Jenny and write often to  
your brother  
B. Frank C.*

Coons often signed his letters to Jenny "B Frank C," as in this sample.  
(Courtesy Myra McLarey)

El Paso, I had no desire to be present at another."<sup>35</sup> Coons, while expressing sympathy for the animal, was drawn to the bullfights time and time again. Anticipating a negative reaction from his sister, he attempted a justification. "I went to a Bullfight in the afternoon and a Chicken Pit during the evening. You will blow me up for this—but you know 'When in Turkey, we must do as Turkeys do.' Everybody, even the Governor and his lady were present." On another occasion he wrote, "So your scruples would not have permitted you to attend a bullfight on Sunday. That is only on account of the instruction the youthful ones receive at home in the Sunday schools, here it is not considered sin." Coons delighted in staging a play-by-play detail to Jenny. "To conclude the first part of the show, one of their bravest and most intrepid of the footmen seizes a flower, resembling a dahlia through which is thrust a large steel pin. With this in hand he advances upon the bull. The bull backs a few paces to give impetus to his charge, this man moves slowly toward him. At last, the maddened bull comes full forced—head lowered and will directed—toward the Toreador, who, stepping quickly to one side, plants the flower in the very center of the beast's forehead, while the poor bull... is now relieved from his torment."<sup>36</sup>

The cock pit held no less fascination for young Coons. "It is astonishing what delight these people take in worshipping such trifling exhibitions as these. The pit is just like our circus tents with a large ring covered with sawdust in the center, around the ring are seats for the men, and farther back, boxes for the ladies and children." He then described the betting, the music, and what he called "the procession of the chickens" Then the battle began. "The gaffs, steel spurs, are laced on, the chickens pitted—that is, thrown into the ring.... At once that same excitement and interest is felt to run through the assembly as Scott so beautifully describes as being attendant upon the exhibitions of old—the tilting and the tournaments of the chivalrous knights in the days of Ivanhoe and Richard Coeur de Leon.... They approach, they draw back, they make sham thrusts, they crow as if bantering each other and then as quick as lightning they make towards one another.... The head is the principal aim of each blow and nine out of [the] ten chickens are killed by the gaff entering the eye or piercing the brain.... Now you laugh at the idea of chicken seeking the life of his fellow chicken, but such is the case."<sup>37</sup>

It was not the ritualized savagery that repulsed Frank Coons. He was far too aware of the barbarities of civilized societies to be shocked by such extravaganzas. It was the grinding poverty of the Mexican people that appalled him. Coons was not one of those Americans who took a load

of puritanical baggage with them. He maintained, "A thinking man is rarely bettered by what he sees or hears in church." Still, he agreed with many United States observers who blamed the Catholic Church for the woes of Mexico. He believed indolence and ignorance to be responsible for the suffering of the poor; he believed the Catholic Church to be responsible for the ignorance and indolence. "Occupations of an intellectual nature are not to be encountered in the Republic. Only in a few of the older states can such a luxury as a library be found and why—because the church will not permit them to exist.... To [the priesthood] this blinded, grace forsaken country owes its ignorance."<sup>38</sup>

Coons continued to release his venom. "The sins of this country will never be placed to the account of the poor-ignorant-beguiled creatures who compose the mass of the population. Those darkly robed-black-hearted, serpent-tongued, Satanic agents emmissaries of his Holiness the Pope, the raven colored, shave-pated, latin stuffed ministers of the Catholic church—to them must be ascribed the sins of poor, ignorant, priest-ridden Mexico."<sup>39</sup>

Coons, unlike most writers, reserved some of his venom for his fellow Americans whose actions were a source of remorse and soul-searching for Coons. "I feel ashamed of my countrymen...while I think of their selfishness and their great love of wealth...how many sins, faults, errors, does riches hide.... Who, I ask, cares for the poor man. Who thinks of poverty's victim? None, none." Outraged by the treatment the Mexicans received by the hordes of Americans passing through on their rush to California, Coons complained, "At El Paso the Americans turn their animals into the fields of the poor Mexicans and dozens of the latter people have been knocked down and basely beaten for driving the animals out of their fields."<sup>40</sup>

Even though Coons remained haunted by the inequities in society caused by man's greed, he was determined to be among the wealthy. "I am resolved, though I do sometimes become gloomy and misanthropodal, to die a wealthy man."<sup>41</sup>

Benjamin Franklin Coons left the Southwest knowing it had robbed him of his youth. "Every day I pluck out grey hairs from my nice dark locks, and at night when I seek my rest, come most painful sensations in every bone, telling of my past exposures and endurances... I ever thought that time could not affect me, that I would always retain my health, and vigor, but my eyes have been rudely opened by experience."<sup>42</sup>

He left with the knowledge that he was forever changed by the harsh

reality and the rugged land, and could never, in essence, go home again. "How I should amuse the fashionable and exquisite young ladies at home, by discoursing upon the natures and habits of mules, horses, and oxen, or explaining to them the art of cultivating the grape, or telling them about the harmony in which mexicans, hogs, donkeys, fleas, and dogs all live together in the same mud hovel.... What a glorius [sic] time you...will have in training such a mustang as your good brother."<sup>43</sup>

He left the Southwest knowing the dream that possessed him would not bring him contentment or peace of mind. "If I should some day soon stand forth as one of the nabobs of the West, would'nt [sic] you be proud of me. Of course you would. But would I be proud of myself. I fear not. I can never learn to use wealth as the rich and aristocratic man uses it. I could not trample upon the poor and forget the world in dreaming of self."<sup>44</sup>

He left for California knowing that he had, ironically, become the victim of his own desire. "Ambition has been my erring guide. T'was ambition I followed, but now...I remain an exile seeking the fate that shall lead me honorably and victoriously back to my childhood's home."<sup>45</sup>

Yet, the Southwest, which had been spoiler and teacher to Coons, did not destroy his vision of the myth he had followed. On the eve of his final departure from Mexico, he wrote, "When I remember how little real happiness I have met with in my career, I cannot but think that there is still recorded for me—a day of triumph, a day when I can from my sorely-tired heart, exclaim, 'Eureka, I have found it!'"<sup>46</sup>

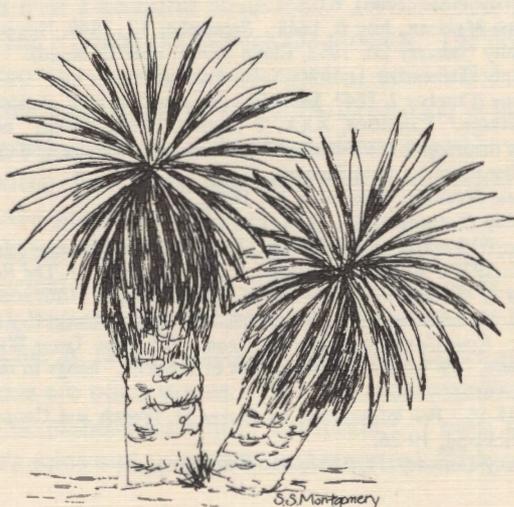
Frank Coons found his fortune in California—several times. He bought "the prettiest place in the state, only 20 minutes from the Plaza [in San Francisco] and over a beautiful plank road." Willow and laurel covered his five acres, and a rivulet ran through the grounds. The house itself was "a splendid two story cottage, with stables, cow and hen houses all attached after the most approved styles. A large pond is in the yard and I have ducks, geese, chickens, and turkeys plenty, together with a pet elk, pet bear, six sheep, four goats, four canary birds, over 100 pigeons, and lots of plants and grape vines."<sup>47</sup>

Coons' longing for his family drew him back to St. Louis in 1856. In 1859 he married young Sophie Delor, from one of St. Louis' oldest families. The ceremony was conducted by Father Michael McFaul, the parish priest of the St. Louis Cathedral.<sup>48</sup> No doubt Coons appreciated the irony. But those are other stories. This one ends with Franklin Coons' own words as he planned his trip to California: "I must begin to draw tight my muse's reins and prepare to make my exit."<sup>49</sup>☆

## NOTES

1. Some historians who have dealt with certain aspects of Coons' time in the Southwest and in Mexico are Ralph P. Bieber, Robert W. Frazier, Mabel E. Martin, Grace Long, and Rex W. Strickland. Their primary sources (other than newspapers and government documents) are John Russell Bartlett, *Personal Narrative of Explorations and Incidents in Texas, New Mexico, California, Sonora, and Chihuahua*, 2 vols. (New York: Appleton and Company, 1854); George Rutledge Gibson's journal, *Over the Chihuahua and Santa Fe Trails, 1847-1848* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1981); Anson Mills, *My Story* (Washington, D. C.: Byron S. Adams, 1921). Quotation from Strickland, *Six Who Came to El Paso, Pioneers of the 1840's*, *Southwestern Studies*, No. 3 (El Paso: Texas Western Press, 1963). For particulars on Coons' leasing of his ranch as a military post, see Strickland, 18. Most of Strickland's assertions and speculations about Coons are upheld. Exceptions: Coons was born in 1826, not 1820. He arrived in Santa Fe in 1846, not earlier. He was doing business in El Paso by September, 1848. Strickland's theory that Coons might be the one and the same who encountered Mark Twain at a mining camp is a highly implausible one.
2. Strickland, 13.
3. Mills, 54.
4. Ben Franklin Coons, Letters to Virginia E. (Jenny) Coons, 1845-1848 (Missouri Historical Society), April 28, 1853, San Francisco. Hereafter cited: Letter to Jenny, (date, place).
5. Coons mentioned having a college education. His great grand-nephew, Jack Kiburz, thinks that Coons attended either Princeton or Harvard (interview with Jack Kiburz, March 20, 1988); Letter to Jenny (September 13, 1845, Philadelphia); Letter to Jenny (November 25, 1852, Los Angeles).
6. Jenny received \$20,000 on her 11th birthday as part of her share. Estate file, No. 1721, Recorder's Office, Civil Court Building, St. Louis; Obituary, *St. Louis Republican*, January 3, 1842; Book of Wills, Recorder's Office, St. Louis, Vol II, 419.
7. Letter to Jenny (October 2, 1847, Santa Fe); Letter to Jenny (December 1, 1846, Santa Fe).
8. Letter to Jenny (December 1, 1846, Santa Fe).
9. Interview with Jack Kilburz, March 20, 1988.
10. Letter to Jenny (May 5, 1851, Franklin—now El Paso).
11. Letter to Jenny (March 24, 1849, Chihuahua); Letter to Jenny, (April 7, 1852, San Francisco).
12. Howard Lamar, *The Far Southwest, 1846-1912, A Territorial History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), 63.
13. *Santa Fe New Mexican*, July 6, 1848; September 17, 1849; November 28, 1849.
14. Letter to Jenny (January 20, 1852, Camp Sestin, near Durango).
15. Letter to Jenny (December 1, 1846, Santa Fe).
16. Letter to Jenny (October 2, 1847, Santa Fe). See also Wayne R. Austerman, "Ben Coons' Santa Fe Passage," *Password*, XXX, 1 (Spring, 1985), 41-42; note, however, that Austerman is incorrect in his statement "...Coons had been engaged in the Santa Fe trade for nearly five years by [late January, 1847]."
17. *Santa Fe New Mexican*, September 17, 1847.
18. Letter to Jenny (September 18, 1848, El Paso del Norte).
19. Owen Payne White, *Out of the Desert: The Historical Romance of El Paso* (El Paso: McMath Co., 1923), 40; Robert Frazier, *Forts and Supplies, The Role of the Army in the Economy of the Southwest, 1846-1861* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1983), 39; Letter to Jenny (March 24, 1849, Chihuahua); C. L. Sonnichsen, *Pass of the North: Four Centuries on the Rio Grande* (El Paso: Texas Western Press, 1968), 127. A picture, "the earliest representation of Franklin," hangs in the Texas Memorial Museum in Austin.
20. Strickland, 15-16. For information on Parker H. French and Coons' association with him, see Strickland, 19-26.
21. Letter to Jenny (January 31, 1851, San Francisco).

22. Letter to Jenny (July 16, 1850, Camp on Devils River).
23. *Ibid.*
24. Solomon Perry Sublette to wife (Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis), December 5, 1849.
25. Letter to Jenny (December 23, 1850, Mazatlan).
26. Letter to Jenny (January 20, 1852, Camp Sestin, near Durango).
27. Cecil Robinson, *Mexico and the Hispanic Southwest in American Literature* (Tuscon: University of Arizona Press, 1977), 42, 87; Mabel Eppard Martin, "From Texas to California in 1849; The Diary of C. C. Cox," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, XXIX (1925-1926), 131; Bartlett, II, 173.
28. Letter to Jenny (May 14, 1850, Rio Chocolate, Texas).
29. Letter to Jenny (December 23, 1850, Mazatlan).
30. Letter to Jenny (January 20, 1852, near Durango).
31. *Ibid.*
32. Letter to Jenny (April 12, 1850, Victoria, Texas).
33. Letter to Jenny (December 1, 1846, Santa Fe).
34. Robinson, 63.
35. Bartlett, II, 435.
36. Letter to Jenny (July 25, 1849, Chihuahua); Letter to Jenny (January 20, 1849, Chihuahua).
37. Letter to Jenny (December 5, 1850, Durango).
38. Letter to Jenny (October 30, 1853, San Francisco); Letter to Jenny (January 20, 1852, near Durango).
39. Letter to Jenny (December 23, 1850, Mazatlan).
40. Robinson says that American writers of that era seldom discussed the manners of Americans toward Mexicans, 43; Letter to Jenny (June 18, 1849, Valverde); Letter to Jenny (July 25, 1849, Chihuahua).
41. Letter to Jenny (December 5, 1850, Durango).
42. Letter to Jenny (January 31, 1851, San Francisco).
43. Letter to Jenny (May 4-5, Franklin-El Paso).
44. *Ibid.*
45. *Ibid.*
46. Letter to Jenny (January 20, 1852, near Durango).
47. Letter to Jenny (February 15, 1854, San Francisco).
48. Marriage Records, City Hall, St. Louis.
49. Letter to Jenny (December 23, 1850, Mazatlan).





# COURTING MOTHER EARTH

## *A Brief History of the Sunset Heights Garden Club*

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*by Lea Vail*

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**I**N 1922, ON A FINE MORNING IN THE MONTH OF MAY, a small group of women met at the home of Mrs. Fred W. Norton, 519 Porfirio Diaz. Mrs. Norton had heard of the garden club movement across the country, and she brought neighbors and friends together to talk about gardening. They were looking for inspiration and courage in their efforts to court Mother Earth, never dreaming that their informal gathering would turn out to be the nucleus of the garden clubs of El Paso.

Mrs. Norton was born Clara Mulliken in Nickerson, Nebraska. A graduate of the University of Nebraska and the Albany Library School, she had come to El Paso in 1908 as Librarian of the Public Library. When Fred Norton went to the library looking for information, he found Miss Mulliken. They were married soon afterwards, and later moved into the beautiful home that she designed, the same home that would become the birthplace of the Sunset Heights Garden Club.

The pioneer circle meeting that day with Mrs. Norton included Mrs. J. C. Wilmarth and very probably Mrs. C. E. Kelly, Mrs. Albion Jones,

Mrs. H. V. Wiggins and Mrs. T. A. Thurston. The group elected Mrs. Norton president and chose the name "The Garden Club." The early meetings were exchanges of ideas and plants and the establishing of fellowship in a neighborhood circle of women who wanted to cultivate beauty in their gardens.

Years later, in "Reminiscences of Past Presidents," Mrs. Norton described the early beginnings:

We were a hum-drum lot, and we should be side-splittingly funny to behold in these present days of "Minutes-of-the-last-meeting," "Reports of Committees," "Visits to the City Council," and a desire to be heard as a voice in the city's affairs. The pioneer circle of our garden club was an amazingly complacent, unambitious lot. We knew nothing of saving sick shrubs by using Copperas, nor Vigoros, nor Permanganate of Potash.

We sat in a rear garden under a scrubby tree (a tree that likely was much in need of spraying). The choice yellow-bells of the desert, the lovely mallows, and the serrated dasylyrian of the mesas were beneath our lordly notice.

We were on our way, but we didn't know where we were going. We were six or seven—we who tried to live closely to "Good Mother Earth."

Mrs. J. C. Wilmarth had come to El Paso as a child in 1898. A true lover of nature, she was delighted with the flora and fauna of the El Paso region—the fields of wild flowers, the horned toads, lizards and strange birds. She always insisted that her finest education had come from exploring Mount Franklin and from her teachers in the early grades at Bailey School, dismissing her Columbia University and University of Chicago days along with her years of study in Europe.

Mrs. C. E. Kelly had come to El Paso from her native Mississippi as Miss Willie Word in 1892. One day the young school teacher saw a recipe in the newspaper for a face lotion made with cucumbers, a recipe which prompted a trip to the drug store. There she met the druggist who was to become her husband. She missed the rich, fertile land of Mississippi, and in time she wrote and asked a relative to send her some violets and cotton seed. The violets thrived in flower beds prepared with river silt, and her cotton growing in the front yard of her home at 900 North Mesa was quite a novelty.

Another member of that pioneer group, Fern W. Thurston, was a widely known artist, exhibiting in many shows in and around El Paso. She

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*Lea Vail, an active member of the Sunset Heights Garden Club, enjoys story telling, public speaking, and writing stories for children, young and old. She and her husband, architect Samuel U. Vail, have resided in El Paso since 1961.*

Mrs. Fred W. Norton, c. 1938,  
*(Photo reproduced from a pastel, courtesy  
 Mr. and Mrs. Fred W. Norton, Jr.)*



had a great love for gardens and often painted flowers and landscapes.

Following Mrs. Norton as president of the club was Mrs. Fred Woodworth, who served 1923-1924 and who in turn was followed by Mrs. Kelly (1924-1925). At the November meeting in 1925, Mrs. Albion Jones was elected president; Mrs. William Dunsavage, vice-president; Mrs. James Hudson, recording secretary; and Mrs. Ralph W. Still, treasurer.

On April 27, 1926, Mrs. Jones reviewed the Flower Show being held at Liberty Hall, a show which had been inspired by the Garden Club. She was pleased to report that seven hundred dahlias were being exhibited by Mr. Howle and Frances Warnock. The Club program that day included a talk by Mrs. Wilmarth on El Paso birds and an announcement that school children were to enter a contest in building bird houses and baths. The minutes of that meeting also tell us that the members of the Club agreed formally to encourage evergreen planting in El Paso.

Mrs. H. V. Wiggins served as president 1927-1929, and during her tenure the Garden Club took a giant step forward. On November 10, 1928, representatives from the then nine garden clubs in Texas met in Dallas and formulated plans for a State Federation of Garden Clubs. Mrs. Wiggins was present at the meeting. When the Garden Club joined the newly organized State Federation of Garden Clubs, El Paso was separated into neighborhood groups. At this time "The Garden Club" became "The Sunset Heights Garden Club."

When the Sunset Heights group met in September, 1930, again at the home of Mrs. Norton, Mrs. Otto Nordwald was elected president, serving 1930-1932. Rose Nordwald had come to El Paso in 1920 as a bride from Norwich, Connecticut. Her outstanding work in a host of organizations made her one of the city's most capable and talented leaders. Among those present at that meeting was Hedwig (Mrs. Maurice) Schwartz, a new member who would be with the club until her death in 1981. Other Sunset

Heights women who worked actively in the club at this time included Mrs. W. D. Howe, Mrs. G. B. Jackson, Mrs. D. R. Wilkes, and Mrs. O. N. Rogers.

As the gardeners moved through the depression years, they took up the motto "Selfless Service." They sponsored living-Christmas-tree and outdoor-lighting contests, yard- and garden-beautification projects, fall and spring flower shows. One of the most enjoyable and rewarding of their projects was the plant exchange at Houston Square.

Elsie McElroy Slater, the wife of H. D. Slater, publisher of the *El Paso Herald* during the early decades of this century, greatly enjoyed entertaining the Sunset Heights Garden Club. And the members equally enjoyed her gracious hospitality and her enchanting garden, surely one of the most pleasant in El Paso at the time. It was described in the Fall 1978 *Password* as a place where western flowers, cacti, and ferns grew luxuriantly and bloomed nine or ten months of the year," a place "with winding paths, shady seats, hidden corners" and "always color and surprise."

Elsie Slater was as talented a writer as she was a gardener. Among her many published works, for example, is this passage on the art of gardening:

Once in a while, you will see a garden without any imagination in it. Not often, for it is difficult to keep a garden from having its own way, at least some of the time. When Sun and Earth and seeds and fruits, each after its own kind, get together, there is bound to be imagination in the brewing.... Fancies, surprises, quick and complete changes, hitherto impossibilities, becoming ordinary happenings, and ordinary happenings, rare tricks.

It breaks the heart of a garden to have to mind by inches and live by a pattern some human imposes. Some discipline there must be or there is no garden.... Gardens can be trained to set patterns as clear as print. Many public parks plantings are so. But they are costly and they have to be...watched all the time. Turn your back on them for a day, and they begin to jump and blur the pattern, and break the rules. And other plants come into the beds and impudent weeds spring up in the night.

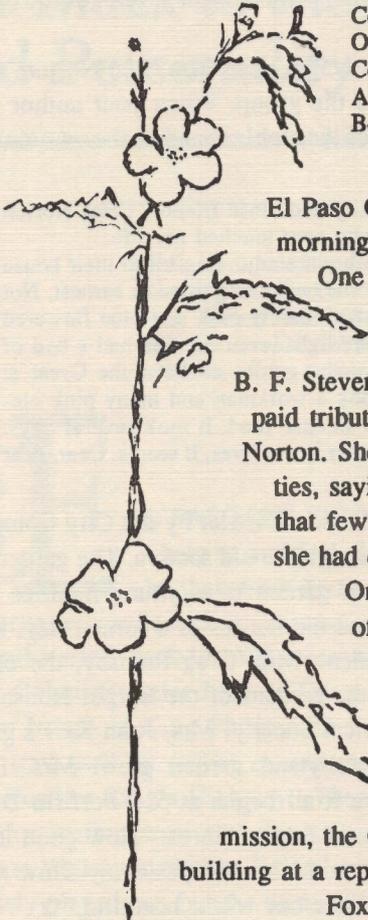
Roses, being exceedingly temperamental, nobody ever sees a rose garden kept for long to any line or rule. On the other hand, geraniums are so terribly servile that there is no fun working with them. A hollyhock is impudence itself. In an El Paso garden you are continually pulling them up and continually setting them out. You can't enjoy a garden without their cretonne splendor, and you won't have anything else if you give hollyhocks their way....

But that is where the enjoyment of gardening comes in. You play it with spirits of thousands of generations. Sometimes you win. Sometimes the larkspur or rose, or the winds or frosts get the game. You play with giants, the Wind and the Sun, and you play with bees and ants, toads, red dragonflies, humming birds, and Cochineal Bugs...

## COURTING MOTHER EARTH

During World War II, the gardeners cultivated Victory gardens. They had plantings at Fort Bliss in Logan Heights, "Bundles," plants for the USO; and at meetings, they made tray decorations for patients at Beaumont Hospital. They gave to the Red Cross Emergency Fund and helped with furnishings at the Gentle Folks Home. When funds permitted, they bought saving stamps and defense bonds which were given to the Garden Club Council toward the building of a garden center. Additionally, they sponsored a large, profitable Flower Show and a successful Art Show—two projects which enabled them to present the Council with a check for one thousand dollars, said to be the Council's first large gift.

When the club was 25 years of age, Mrs. E. F. Flores served as president and produced the first club yearbook. The Copper Mallow was named club flower and inspired Mrs. Slater to pen—



Copper Mallow, Dusty Citizen,  
Owner of Mesa Holdings,  
Cousin of money-maker Cotton;  
Advertising native Copper,  
Beautiful, dutiful, gay Mallow!

Mrs. Fred Norton, founder of the El Paso Garden Clubs, died on Wednesday morning, November 9, 1949, at her home.

One week later, at the regular meeting of the Sunset Heights Garden Club, held in the home of Mrs. B. F. Stevens, charter member Mrs. Wilmath paid tribute to the memory of beloved Clara Norton. She enumerated Clara's many activities, saying that Clara had been so modest that few of her friends realized how much she had done for El Paso.

One of the biggest accomplishments of the 1950s was the completion of the Garden Center at 3105 Grant in Memorial Park. With the approval of the City Council and City Park and Recreation Commission, the Garden Club Council financed the building at a reported cost of \$27,727.00. Chris P. Fox was Master of Ceremonies at the

open house in October of 1953.

Under the leadership of Mrs. L. A. Velarde and Mrs. Paul Heisig, Jr., the club established a recreation center at Vilas School with the help of the El Paso School Board and the City, which installed floodlights and fences. Vacant lots were cleaned and some alleys cleared of debris and made passable at the request of club members to the City Council. Also, the members worked to transform their own alleys into garden spots.

In May, 1972, a Founders' Day Luncheon marked the 50th anniversary of the club. Longtime members Mrs. Enrique F. Flores, Mrs. B. F. Stevens, and Mrs. Maruice Schwartz were joined by Mrs. John Karr and Mrs. Samuel U. Vail in making arrangements for the affair at the Coronado Country Club. Mrs. Vail presented a short history entitled "Fifty Golden Years." She paid tribute to Mrs. Flores, whose foresight in preserving old papers and whose ability to recall conversations with several of the pioneer group made for a true accounting.

After the garden club marked its 50th year, Mrs. Ben Norton, sister-in-law of Mrs. Fred Norton, joined the group. When your author asked Ruth Norton for a personal glimpse of the club's founder, she was rewarded with these remarks:

Called "Bunch" by her family and close friends, Clara Norton was the most cultured person who ever touched my life.

One year her husband gave her the adjoining lot to their house for her birthday.... Immediately she began to garden in earnest. Not with roses or hardy plants, but with dainty pink and blue flowered things, and yellows. Her iris were light lavender. She had a bed of tall white spuria iris—the kind in the garden of Peter the Great at Peterhof.... Another year she took a workman and many pink oleanders and planted them on the smelter road. It took several days.

Flowers and friends go together in our lives, it seems. Dear, dear Bunch!

Sunset Heights was named a Historic District by the City Council in 1984, and a renewed pride swept through the old section. The garden club finds itself with a new generation of gardeners as young families move into the neighborhood restoring grand old houses of a former day. Under the leadership of the current president, Mrs. Greg Ramsey, the club is looking forward to helping restore the gardens of the Burges House, new home of the El Paso County Historical Society. Mrs. John Karr's garden is presently where Mrs. Slater's fairyland garden grew. Mrs. Felipe Hernandez enjoys her garden where it all began at 519 Porfirio Diaz.

We close with the gentle words of Lucita Flores: "How good it is to take a backward look to our dreams and labors of yesterday. How nice it is to know we cared and tried to make our world beautiful."☆



# STREET NAMES

## An Index to the History and Personality of El Paso

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by Lurline H. Coltharp

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Editor's Note: *The following article appeared originally in the El Paso Herald-Post on September 21, 1978, under the title "Street Names Reflect El Paso's History and Personality." It is reprinted, in a slightly edited form, with the permission of the author and the El Paso Herald-Post.*

**E**

L PASOANS WHO DIG A BIT OF THE PAST ARE likely to find part of the city's history literally running by their front doors. Virtually every facet of El Paso's

rich heritage is reflected in its street names.

It all started back in 1598 when northward emigration to New Spain began. Colonists under Juan de Oñate crossed the river and claimed the land on behalf of King Philip with much pomp and ceremony. An old Indian trail used by earlier *conquistadores* became a "Camino Real," a Royal Road or King's Highway. Theoretically, a road so designated got funds for maintenance and protection from the royal treasury, as our Interstate Highways receive Federal support. The king's highway budget obviously played out, but the name still crops up on El Paso's street map

in the approximate location of the old road. Centuries later, real estate developers got around to doing honor to the leader of those first colonists with Onate Way, a tiny street in the Lower Valley.

Settlement of the new land quickened and commerce began. Travelers often camped by "El Paso del Norte" south of the river to wait for floods to subside or Indians to be repelled, and a community grew. It was more than two centuries before a scattering of Americans came down the Camino Real from the other direction, the first in 1806.

Later, the Mexican War brought United States troops, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hildago established the river as a boundary, and businessmen and traders came to the left bank. They lived in patches, settlements called after those who lived there: "Smithville," "Coons' Ranch," "Hart's Mill," and "Magoffinsville."

### **First Plat of El Paso**

With the discovery of gold in California, the settlements attracted goldseekers, traders, the Butterfield Overland Mail and its stagedrivers, rumors of a railroad, outlaws, saloon-keepers, and real estate promoters. Six of the latter hired Anson Mills, a surveyor, to draw up a "Plat of the Town of El Paso." Completed in 1859, the job took two months and specified 20 street names.

As was common with stagecoach towns, streets leading out of the village were named for the destinations of the stagecoach lines. Decorative illustrations on Mills' map indicated the nature of the traffic on such streets as San Francisco and San Antonio. Appropriately enough for the times, a sketch of an oxcart on El Paso Street pointed toward the ferry to the Mexican town of El Paso del Norte across the river.

In 1859, the town-to-be had little history to commemorate in street names. Juan María Ponce de León had formerly owned much of the land occupied by the new town plat. His memory was kept green by Ponce and Leon streets. Most of the remainder of the original 20 street names were after political subdivisions in Mexico and the United States. Eight of those original names were Spanish-language designations.

Street names had little practical value in a place where everybody

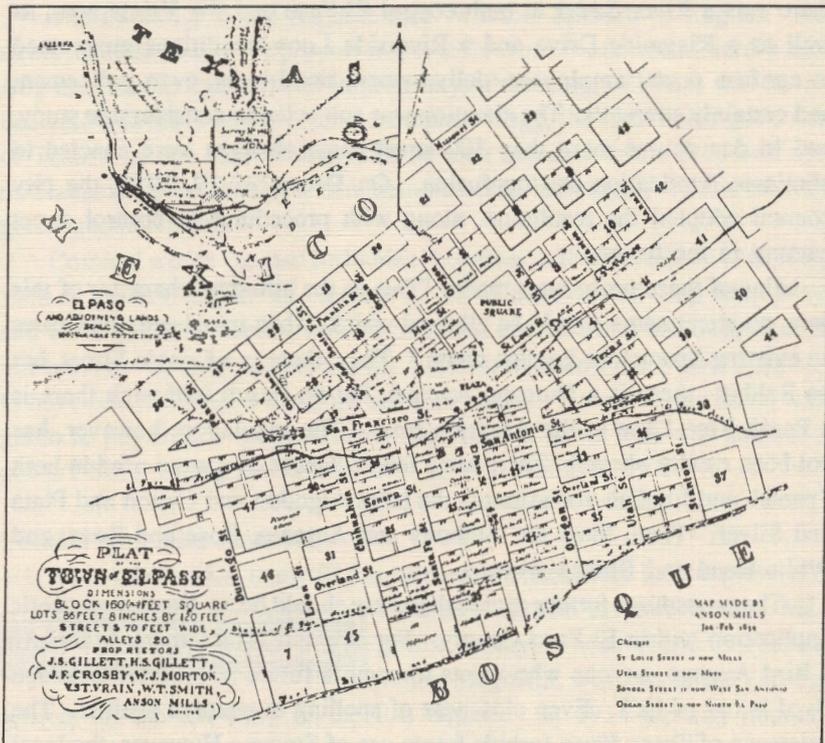
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*Dr. Lurline H. Coltharp, Professor Emerita of Linguistics and English at The University of Texas at El Paso, is the author of The Tongue of the Tirilones: A Linguistic Study of a Criminal Argot (University of Alabama Press, 1965) and numerous articles on the dialect used in South El Paso, the classification of place names, and the teaching of English as a foreign language. She has lectured in England, Bulgaria, Japan, Singapore, the Philippines, and Mexico, as well as extensively in the United States.*

knew where everything was. As W. W. Mills wrote in his *Forty Years at El Paso, 1858-1898*, "The business houses, with one exception, were on El Paso Street and around the little plaza.... The post office was on the west side of El Paso Street, facing the head of San Antonio Street, and in this same large room there was also a whiskey saloon, a billiard table, and several gaming tables."

By 1881, the need for street addresses had not increased measurably. In Volume I, Number 1 of the *El Paso Times* on April 2, 1881, only five of the nineteen advertisers thought it necessary to state their street addresses. Nine used the simple designation "El Paso, Texas," while some located themselves by relation to a building, reference to some other commercial establishment, or adjacency to the plaza.

### PLAT OF THE TOWN OF EL PASO BY ANSON MILLS—1859



### How Street Names Are Chosen

At present, street names in El Paso are assigned under rules administered by the City Planning Board. For the most part, they are first presented by developers and promoters during the planning of a new subdivision. Anyone who wishes to honor a person or an event with a commemorative street name usually begins the procedure by petitioning a developer. Sometimes, however, action is taken directly by the city council. For example, when Lee Trevino Day was promoted to honor El



Paso's golfing hero—1971 winner of the U. S., Canadian, and British Opens—the city council named a soon-to-be-completed street Lee Trevino Drive for the occasion.

By 1957 there had been almost a century of street naming, and considerable confusion had developed. Outlying areas had been annexed, bringing streets with duplicating names into the city. To cite one example, there was a River Street in both central El Paso and the Ysleta area, as well as a Riverside Drive and a Riverside Loop—conditions guaranteed to confuse postal employees, deliverymen, taxidriviers, even policemen, and certainly strangers. The situation was subjected to considerable study, and in due course more than 300 street-name changes were enacted to eliminate duplication and confusion. On December 19, 1957, the city council adopted the resolution, along with procedures to control street naming in the future.

One of these procedures reads: "Due to the bilingual character of this area, no street name should be allowed which, when translated, duplicates an existing Spanish or English name." Thus, there is a Conejo Street, but no Rabbit; there is a Durazno Avenue, but no Peach (although there is a Peach Tree Lane in the Ascarate area). The regulation, however, has not been rigidly obeyed. There are a few instances of a word used in both Spanish and English—for example the pairs Algodon and Cotton and Plata and Silver. Then, there are Anthony and Antonio, Rose and Rosa, and White Road and Blanco Avenue.

The procedures further decree that there should be no direct or phonetic duplication within El Paso County. For example, since there is already a Bird Avenue, anyone who wants to name a future street after Grandpa Byrd is out of luck. Even closeness of spelling is guarded against. The existence of Tracy Place forbids future use of Stacey. However, the local zip code directory lists an Oreilly and an O'Riley Lane.

The city council's resolution of 1957 standardized terms to be used for various kinds of thoroughfares. The designations "street," "avenue,"

“road,” and “drive” were reserved for long streets. “Place,” “court,” “way,” “lane,” and “circle” are to be applied to short streets. A short street was defined as approximately 1,000 feet or less in length. Streets and Places run north and south; Avenues and Courts run east and west. Roads and Ways are to be used for diagonals; and curving streets are called Lanes, Drives, or Circles.

Letter designations are reserved for alleys, which run from Alley A through Alley R. However, El Paso also has an A Street and a B Street. During the 1957 name-change, such alley designations as Consul, Council, Guerrero, Hidalgo, Juarez, and O’Campo were relegated to the anonymity of letters. Now, “unless very unusual circumstances warrant, no alley shall be assigned a street name.” As for the use of numbers as names, a practice common in the United States, El Paso at one time had four sets of streets which started numbering “First, Second...” This situation was corrected. Numbered streets now consist of First through Ninth Avenues.

The Planning Board requires that “whether Spanish or English” the street name should be “a proper, respectable word.” *Manteca* (“lard”) and *Hog* are cited as examples of impropriety. Presumably El Paso will never dedicate a street in honor of James Stephen Hogg, the first native governor of Texas. In one case, residents of an area objected to the proposed use of Slaughter, even though it commemorated an individual. The street was given another name.

Comical words are also forbidden; however, a few have been accepted, such as *Tonto* (“stupid” or “foolish”). Some residents of Chip Chip Way and Rolling Stone Avenue have maintained that this rule has been bent if not broken. At first glance, Coffin Avenue, in Kern Place, would appear to have resulted from a macabre sense of humor. However, the name was given to pay tribute to an Army officer of that name who was stationed at Fort Bliss during the first quarter of this century.

### Local Dignitaries Honored

As in other cities, many El Paso streets are named for local dignitaries,

#### **MAGOFFIN AVENUE**

such as Magoffin Avenue for the Magoffin family, whose patriarch, James Wiley Magoffin, was one of the earliest

settlers on the left bank of the Rio Grande. In 1913 the city council changed the name of St. Louis Street, one of the original 20 streets, to Mills Avenue in recognition of Anson Mills' many contributions to the city's development. Turney Drive commemorates the Turney family name. W. W. Turney, a prominent businessman, occupied the house at

1211 Montana, which was later donated to the city as a museum and formed the core around which the El Paso Museum of Art was built. Yandell Drive honors Dr. William M. Yandell, a physician who served El Paso County as its health officer during the last two decades of the nineteenth century. The street was originally called Boulevard, and when the name *Yandell* was added to the street name in 1920, it was known as the longest street in El Paso. The designation *Drive* was later substituted for *Boulevard*. Buckner Street is named after Hugh Buckner, owner of the local United Van Lines franchise. Actually, Mr. Buckner wanted the street named "United" after his van lines, but there was already a United Circle (named for an airline). Meanwhile, nearby streets—Mayflower, Empire, and Admiral—told out the names of competitive moving and storage firms.

Hawkins Way was originally created for a connecting road to Paisano Drive from the north. It was named for William H. Hawkins, a commissioners court member at the time the street was dedicated. Later, the original street was absorbed by Paisano Drive, but another street retains the Hawkins name. Martinez Street honors Felix Martinez, who was instrumental in getting Elephant Butte Dam built on the Rio Grande above El Paso. Raymond Telles Drive was named for the man who was mayor of El Paso from 1957 to 1961 and later Ambassador to Costa Rica.

Ivey Lane became Ivey Road in 1957. It was named for K. B. Ivey, a cotton farmer in the Lower Valley. The El Paso Street Guide for 1888 listed an Ivy Street, the fourteenth street north of the river running east between Cotton Avenue and the river; the name Ivy—whether after man or vine—has been lost in the shuffle. W. H. Burges Drive was named for a prominent El Paso lawyer whose career and distinguished civic activities began in 1889 and continued for some 50 years. Winchester Road was not named for the weapon so common in the early West but for Winchester Cooley, a banker who had financial interest in the surrounding land. Additionally, Cooley Avenue perpetuates the family name.

Western outlaws made their marks in the saloons and on the dusty streets of early El Paso with their brawling and shooting, but they left their

### **BILLY THE KID ROAD**

names upon few streets. Even though Billy the Kid was probably never in El Paso, there is a Billy the Kid Road branching off South Zaragosa Road in the Lower Valley. This is perhaps appropriate since his name branded a line of clothing once manufactured in El Paso.

In some cases, time has obscured the identity of the honoree. Schuster Avenue is a typical example. Some say it was named for Ben Schuster,

an early settler who owned a store in El Paso and whose sons became doctors. Another source says the street was named after one of the sons, Dr. Michael Phillip Schuster, a pioneer physician who founded Providence Hospital. In other cases, time has obliterated the identity of the honoree. Rodolfo Ramon Way commemorates somebody. However, studies have failed to tell us who he was.

### SCHUSTER AVENUE

#### National Figures Honored

In addition to honoring local residents, street names traditionally commemorate national personalities. Twenty-one Presidents of the United States have had El Paso streets named for them. These twenty-one do not include President Grant. Grant Avenue was named for Judge Walter B. Grant of Boston, Massachusetts, who is credited with obtaining a large endowment for the local institution of higher learning, now The University of Texas at El Paso. The leader of the Southern forces during the Civil War came out better than General Grant. Robert E. Lee Road cuts through the airport area where, appropriately enough, most streets have aeronautical designations such as Sikorsky, Braniff, Bonanza, and Boeing. Heroes of the Alamo, Travis and Bowie, have also provided names.

The army has crept off the Fort Bliss reservation and made an impression on civilian streets with such names as Pershing Drive for General John J. Pershing. Doniphan Drive recalls Colonel Alexander W. Doniphan, who led his First Regiment of Missouri Mounted Volunteers into El Paso del Norte in 1846. To show impartiality, the leader of the Mexican forces is represented in Santa Ana Way. Many officers who served at Fort Bliss have left their imprints upon the streets of El Paso, including Major General Robert L. Howze, who commanded the post during World War I.

### PERSHING DRIVE

#### Geography, Topography, Flora, and Native Peoples

Countries, states, cities, mountains, bodies of water, and assorted other landmarks have been used to designate El Paso streets. Many of the fifty United States are present. And it is worth pointing out that Utah is not among them. Nothing against Utah. In fact, Utah Street was one of the original twenty streets, but the name has been lost in the course of El Paso history. The phrase "Utah Street" became synonymous with SIN because of the many bawdy houses that clustered along the southern end of the street during El Paso's roaring frontier era. So, in the interests of respecta-

## MESA STREET

bility, the name was changed to Mesa Street, since the street leads to the mesa, or the upper levels of the city.

Carolina Drive commemorates South Carolina, its designation related to the pioneer Porcher family of El Paso's Lower Valley. When J. S. Porcher's mother died in 1922, developers wanted to name a street after her. Members of the Porcher family suggested the street be named "Carolina," because the family originally came from South Carolina.

The fact that El Paso is a smelting center in the midst of a mining region has caused streets to be named after rocks, minerals and metals: Granite, Gold, Silver, and Copper, for example. Then Emilio Peinado, a real estate developer, added an exotic set in a subdivision off Doniphan Drive: Bauxite, Chromite, Cuprite, Fluoride, Graphite, and Pyrite. "As a mining engineer and geologist, I thought these mineral names would be appropriate," Mr. Peinado said.

Across the nation, the nineteenth century abounded with street names designed to bring to mind the gracious living associated with English country estates. Prefixes and suffixes such as "Glen-" "-ville," and "-vale" were used in city after city. During the last half of the century, names ending in "-hurst," "-mere" and "-meade" became popular. El Paso did not take up this practice until the 1950's with such street names as Elmhurst, Pinehurst, Edgemere, and Sunnymead Place.

At this writing, El Paso has accumulated seven streets using "-dale" and sixteen with "-mont." The largest group of streets ending in "-mont" were named by Emilio Peinado. He used "-mont" (meaning "mountain") in a northwest subdivision off North Mesa because the area was so rugged and hilly. "Then," added Mr. Peinado, "I cut the hills down" So the street names now commemorate the hills which used to be, including such names as Crestmont, Beaumont, Fremont, Parkmont, Ridgemont, Marthmont, Normont, Dumont, Skymont, Lomont, Chermont, and Clairemont.

Some El Paso streets, on the other hand, retain the special feature that inspired their respective names—Rim Road, for example, and River Bend and Shadow Mountain. So far, neither the rim of the mesa nor the bend of the Rio Grande in the Upper Valley nor the morning shadow cast by Mount Franklin has fallen victim to the March of Progress.

## RIM ROAD

Flowers, fruits, and trees are traditionally popular street names. All three categories are represented in El Paso in both Spanish and English. Among the English names of flowers are Azalea, Rose, Pansy, Myrtle, and

Hollyhock. Apple, Pear, Tangerine, and Orange Tree Lanes indicate the variety of fruits tolled off on local thoroughfares.

We may have difficulty growing trees in our desert Southwest, but we have a generous variety represented in our street names: Ash, Laurel, Eucalyptus, Willow, Walnut, Palm, Poplar, Magnolia, Maple, Birch, Cedar, Elm, and Post Oak are a fair sampling. Pecan Court was named by J. S. Porcher, logically enough, because the road ran through his pecan orchard.

And no Southwestern community would be complete without a Tumbleweed Avenue. In El Paso it is located without much apparent logic between Rolling Stone and Tropicana.

Indian tribes have not been forgotten. There are Navajo Avenue, Zuni Place, Apache Street, Kiowa Court, Comanche Avenue, and Tigua Circle, to name some. Even the fierce and once despised chief of the Chiricahua Apaches, Geronimo, has been honored with an important thoroughfare in El Paso. Also, another Chiricahua chief, Cochise, widely feared for the barbarity of the warfare he waged and the brilliance of his strategy, is commemorated in an El Paso street name.

### GERONIMO DRIVE

#### Spanish Street Names

Of course, Spanish street names were used from the beginning, putting El Paso in a class by itself. According to the United States Post Office Department's Street Directory of 1908, El Paso was the only town in the country with a street named Porfirio Diaz. The town was one of four in the entire nation that had a Mesa Street. Spanish street names reflect the same categories as those in English: people, geography, special influences, and miscellaneous categories.

Six presidents of Mexico have local streets named for them. And naturally, Spanish explorers' names would come into view in the romantic vision of real estate developers. Francisco Vásquez de Coronado led the earliest organized exploration of the Southwest. He did not get to El Paso, but his name is perpetuated in the Coronado Shopping Center and the adjacent subdivision that tolls as many Spanish explorers as the developers could remember from their history lessons: Balboa, Cortez, De Leon, De Soto, and others, most of whom lacked many, many leagues of putting their names to El Paso's mountains and valleys by virtue of discovery.

### BALBOA ROAD

Geography is likewise reflected in Spanish-oriented names. There is

an Arollo Road, also a Corral Drive—terms so popular that translation would be insulting in our area of the country. Several streets are named for Mexican states—such as Chihuahua and Durango, both original street names on the first plat. Then there are cities: Acapulco, Guadalajara, Guaymas, Mazatlán, Vera Cruz, and Zaragoza, to name a few. And rivers: Rio Grande, of course, and also Rio Bravo (the name the Spaniards gave to the Bold River that sometimes came rampaging through the Pass of the North) and nine additional streets whose names begin with *Rio*.

Other Spanish-flavored names, like their English counterparts, designate rocks and minerals (such as Piedras, Plata, and Galena), flowers (Mimosa, Rosa, and Ocotillo, for example), fruits (Durazno, Manzana, Pera), and trees (such as Alamo, Mesquite, Tornillo, and Los Olmos).

The use of Spanish words for El Paso streets continues to be a popular practice, but—as with English street names—the recent designations tend toward the exotic and far-fetched. Which is only fair. If El Paso can have a Sea Breeze Drive, it is certainly entitled to a Cueva de Oro Court.

### Bilingualism Is Common

El Paso street names show the interaction of Spanish and English. In 1986, Camino Alto Road was adopted, adding the English translation of *camino*, perhaps for the benefit of newcomers. That same year, Camino de la Paz Court was adopted, tacking the English word *court* onto a name which contained *road* in Spanish. And not too long ago came Paseo Redondo Avenue. Further, the two languages have been variously blended in phrase names such as Lost Padre Mine Road and Old Pueblo Road. Lomaland, Verdeland, and Yermoland Drives combine the two languages with happy abandon.

Sometimes pronunciation problems arise in El Paso. Words like "Hueco" and "Tornillo" are difficult for the newcomer who does not speak Spanish and has not yet become familiar with Spanish pronunciation. However, nobody has yet found the body of the tourist from Boston or New York or Cincinnati who starved because he could not pronounce the name of the street on which a restaurant was located. And the story of the traveler from the interior of Mexico who called a taxi to pick him up at the corner of RIGHT TURN and NO PARKING is undoubtedly apocryphal.

One thing is safe to say: No matter where you go in El Paso, you are bound to find some of the city's colorful history and cultural personality within a block or two—if not literally underfoot. ☆



# The NEWS at the PASS— ONE CENTURY AGO (April-June, 1889)

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*by Damon Garbern*

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**O**N THE FIRST DAY OF APRIL, THE LICK Observatory announced the sighting of a new comet. Whether this was a sign of the political times to follow is not certain, but life in El Paso in the late spring of 1889 was anything but calm and quiet.

The month began happily enough. Western Union reduced its rates because of the heavy volume of business, some 18,000 messages a month. One could now telegraph The Indian Territory for 50 cents instead of 75. Those liking mountain scenery were advised to go to the grain warehouse of Casey & Cassiano to "see the mountains of grain and baled hay piled about you—then select what you want." On April Fools' Day the pupils had planned to ditch after recess. Principal Esterley heard of the plan (there's always a snitch) and just before recess announced a holiday for the rest of the day.

However, such pleasantries could not last. In Buffalo, 800 carpenters went on strike for a nine-hour day. In St. Louis, 1200 carpenters struck for an eight-hour day and 40 cents an hour. In El Paso, an editorial railed

against the dangers of air pollution caused by the coal and kerosene fires. "Impure air is sapping our life's blood." The editorial declared that two stoves and 80 passengers in a horse car could use up available air in minutes and that a 30-square-foot classroom, "designed for 60 students," would have no air left in less than an hour. The editor admonished teachers to throw the doors and windows open and give students a five-minute recess every hour.

Horse thieves were a plague on transportation. Jerry Collier's Stable had two carriage horses stolen. Mr. Collier saddled a horse and went in pursuit of the thieves. He tracked them to the Rio Grande and recovered his horses when the thieves were unable to force the horses to swim the river. Now if we could get our stolen Ford Mustangs to lock wheels automatically when they reach the Rio Grande...

Commissioners Court even back then got flailed in print. "Owing to the failure of all the County Commissioners to arrive on time, the called meeting of the Commissioners Court to consider the question of a special county exhibit at the Fort Worth Spring Palace had to be postponed." The *Times* advocated participation in such exhibits to help publicize El Paso.

The sheriff and the county jail also came under fire. A letter to the *Times* stated:

To the Citersons of El Paso we are Prisons of El Paso County jail and want to inferm the Public of el Paso our mistreatment. We are lock up like Brutes an can not get any acomidatin from the jailer.... We would like for the Public to inferm the county Commissioners and have them infesticate facts. Resp. yours

J. M. Brown

The *Times* reporter was shown through the jail by Jailor Jones and he "found it to be in the very best condition, clean and neat, well ventilated and comfortable beds for the prisoners. One of the prisoners told this reporter he was well satisfied.... He had a good bed, plenty to eat, and good tobacco to chew." The reporter further stated that "Sheriff White and Jailor Jones are always ready for an investigation of the jail."

Fortunately, all was not misery in El Paso that spring. Although the Rio Grande was rising, and the annual spring flood was threatening, the city played gracious host to the state convention of the Texas Press Association. A Grand Parade was held, including a brass band, fire wagons, the Bicycle Club with "twenty wheels," and nearly 50 wagons

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from local businesses and individuals. The editors could review the parade from Myar's Opera House or the balcony of the Grand Central Hotel. The District Court Room was decorated with floral wreaths in honor of the visitors, and "a bevy of pretty little girls pinned on each editorial bosom a fragrant bouquet." Included in the entertainment was a 50-voice chorus singing selections from the cantata "Belshazaar" accompanied by the full Fort Bliss orchestra.

Even during periods of such riotous gaiety, the event which dominated the minds of El Paso citizens was the municipal election in the spring of 1889. It was the Big News throughout April, May, and June. The Democrat-biased *Times* declared that the Democratic candidate for mayor, C. R. Morehead, would, if elected, "put into full effect the provisions of the new charter, systematize all departments...and...undertake public improvements including upgrading of waterworks, extension of sewers and street lights, improve streets, alleys, sidewalks, erection of all needed public buildings including new schools, both white and colored, maintain fire department, promote manufacturing and increase rail facilities." As for Mr. Krakauer, the Republican candidate, the *Times* called attention to the fact that he had been a member of a previous city council which, it was asserted, had spent all the street funds, leaving the present council nothing to work with. The *Times* also pointed out that although the street maintenance money had been used by that council to pave El Paso Street (where Mr. Krakauer had a business) the merchants were now refusing to pay their allotments for repairs and improvements.

The *Times* report of a Republican rally went like this:

Of all the limp efforts of a "grand rally" ever attempted in this city that of the republicans in the Bronson block last evening came the nearest to being a total collapse. When Mills had got through waving the bloody flag and poisoning the atmosphere with filth, vituperation, and bad grammar, Mr. Chandler...went cavorting over the history of El Paso...in a way that showed him to be semi-destitute of judgment or densely ignorant of what he was talking about.

In sharp contrast, the *Times* reported the Democrats' Jefferson Day dinner as a "grand success in every particular." And "every particular" was described—even the ten-course menu (a very elaborate one for the party of the common man), which began with "Bouillon" served with sherry, continued through "Fish," "Roti," an entree accompanied by "Mumms extra dry," salad with "Vin de Bourgoyne," and so on to "Cake Charlotte Russe" (with "Johannisberg"), "Cafe Noir" (with "Chartreuse Verte"), and, finally, "Cigars." Between each course an extended toast was presented followed by a selection by the Fort Bliss Orchestra. The Goodnight toast

was "happily responded to by Juan S. Hart (editor of the *Times*)." His speech, unlike those of Mills and Chandler described above) was "a sweet and highly appreciated medley of patriotism, the politic, and rich humor."

The Democrats needed all the good times they could get; for after the election, Morehead had received 855 votes to Krakauer's 892 for a total of 1747 votes cast. Even a *Times* headline ("Villainous Venom-Fraud and Filth-The Weapons of Our Opponent in Their Despair") could not alter the results. However, as there were only about 1500 eligible voters in the city at the time, the *Times* could report that "the democratic side made no effort to buy such fraud, and all its votes were cast by citizens of legal qualifications."

The canvassing of votes was to be done before Judge Peyton Edwards. At the council meeting of April 16, Alderman Hague, "going on in the grand republican refrain as the champion of law and order," said it was the council's duty to support the wishes of the people, not to tamper with election results. But his remarks could not "support the sledge hammer blows of law and reason...by Judge Edwards." The new council was installed after several aldermen from the old administration left the council chambers, saying they would not be party to seating the new council until charges of election fraud were cleared. Krakauer also installed a "special police force" whose duties were to surround city hall and let no Democratic troublemakers in. The group also took possession of the ballots and other administrative paraphernalia.

The drama continued in appropriate fashion. Sheriff White arrived with a court order, entered the building, dispersed the special police force, and arrested Krakauer for contempt of court for refusing to surrender city documents and the election returns.

The council sat several times a week to canvass the votes. Finally in the middle of June, the work was completed, leaving Krakauer still the victor by three votes even with all the challenged votes thrown out. However, it seemed that Krakauer had not secured his final United States citizenship papers until AFTER the election, and thus had not been a legal candidate at the time of the election. The other candidates were seated, with the office of mayor vacant.

The Republicans nominated S. H. Buchanan; the Democrats, Richard Caples. After it was disclosed that Mr. Buchanan owned no property in the city and that Mr. Caples was a substantial property owner, Mr. Caples was elected Mayor on June 28 by 15 votes.

How could the summer be as interesting as the spring just completed? ☆



• A TIME TO REMEMBER •

# GROWING UP in FIVE POINTS

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*by J. Harry Miskimins, M.D.*

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**I**N THE 1920s AND '30s, FIVE POINTS WAS A BUSY shopping center, the only one of any real size outside of downtown. Nobody thought very much about how Five Points got its name. If anybody ever asked, the usual response was that five streets intersected at that point—Piedras, Montana, Yandell, Tularosa, and Pershing. But there were other streets, too—namely, Elm, Cedar, and Wyoming. Maybe at the time the center was named, those other streets were thought to be on the fringes of the complicated intersection. Anyway, Five Points it was. And a wonderful place. Bustling with people coming and going to the stores and the Post Office and briskly noisy with the clatter of Model T's and the insistent clang-clang of the trolley making its way along Piedras Street.

In 1919 my father, H. M. Miskimins, bought his own drugstore (the word "pharmacy" was rarely used in those days). It was located in a

building that he rented (and later bought) at 910 N. Piedras. My father named it the Rolston Drugstore—no doubt because it was next door to the Rolston Hospital. He continued to operate his drugstore there until the summer of 1953, when he sold the business and the building to Sears for \$20,000. He was amazed by the offer, thinking it excessive.

The Rolston Hospital was a general hospital of 60-65 beds. In 1923, it was bought by the Masons and renamed the Masonic Hospital, this site later occupied by the Sears Building, which now houses the El Paso Police Department. One of my earliest memories is connected with the celebration held at that hospital at the time of the re-naming. I remember colorful tents dotting the small lawn space at the corner of Piedras and Montana and nurses in starched, stiff uniforms serving sodas...free. And on exhibition tables, there were instruments and bottles, x-ray films of fractured bones, charts and diagrams to show the public. Another early memory has to do with the hospital's fire escape (considered the latest innovation at the time.) It was an enclosed spiral slide three stories high. On several occasions we neighborhood boys tried to climb up the winding, slippery slope, the metal fastenings producing quite a racket. We were firmly told that the noise was disturbing the patients, and we were summarily sent on our way. Only to try again later.

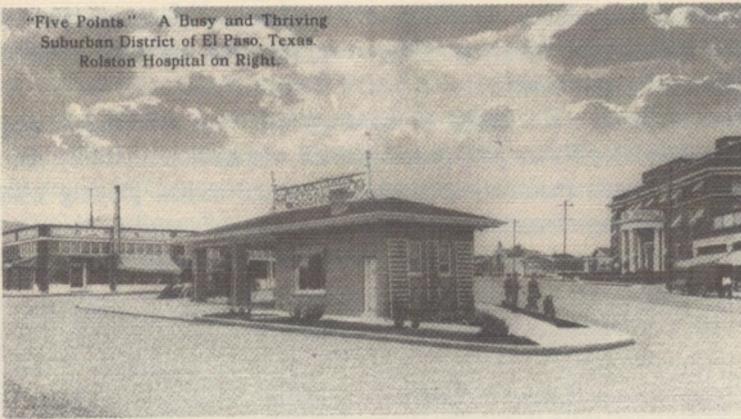
My parents, my sister, Ruthie,\* who was three years my junior, and I lived at 2925 Montana, almost in the heart of Five Points, and I vaguely remember that my father bought the house from Dr. Paul Rigney. From our front door to the back door of the drugstore was barely a block—via a shortcut across a vacant lot between the hospital and the nurses' home, which fronted on Raynor Street. This lot included a driveway to the rear of the hospital and a parking area for the doctors and the visitors. The driveway was also used by ambulances, and I had a front-row seat every time an ambulance, its siren wide-open, screeched through that driveway and discharged a patient into the hospital. Behind the parking area, over near the nurses' home, was a tennis court—complete with clay surfacing, markings, net, and backdrop. We boys played many a game of amateur tennis there—with tennis balls that got to be fuzzless, even clothless, and rackets that we crudely repaired to keep the strings from unraveling. We made do with what we had.

A big part of the lot, which faced onto Montana, was completely undeveloped, and it was great for playing sandlot baseball. I can remember only a couple of the hard and fast rules that governed our games: you

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*Editor's Note:* Later, Mrs. Earl Winters, and now deceased.

always used spit to massage into your glove while you were waiting for a ball to come your way, and you never held a bat so that the trademark would hit the ball. I also remember that the number of bases depended on how many boys were playing. If there were just three or four players, only first base was used. If five or six boys were playing, there was a second base. Bases were a collection of rocks, while home plate was usually a piece of heavy cardboard or a stomped-down tin can. Our baseball "field" was bordered on the south by a cement walkway from the back door of the hospital to the nurses' home. Midway along this walk was a vine-covered gazebo. It was a great place to sneak a smoke—mostly soda straws filled with coffee. Once in a while, maybe, a real cigarette.



"Five Points." A Busy and Thriving Suburban District of El Paso, Texas. Rolston Hospital on Right.

A picture postcard, c. 1920, its caption reading, "Five Points.' A Busy and Thriving Suburban District in El Paso, Texas. Rolston Hospital on Right." (Courtesy Southwest Collection, El Paso Public Library, and James W. Ward)

When I was about nine or ten years old, my father insisted that I work at the drugstore during holidays and summer vacation. I resented this wholeheartedly, but looking back, I know it was good training. I learned to wrap packages of all shapes and sizes, make change without help of paper and pencil, mop a floor, shine silver, take inventory, replace stock—all those chores necessary in a drugstore. When I wasn't jerking sodas, I was cleaning and polishing—or maybe snitching licorice roots from the penny-candy case. (They were honest-to-goodness licorice roots, the kind you can't find anymore.) My father was strict on the subject of cleanliness,

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and with a marble counter top and back-bar-with-mirror, I stayed busy all the time. The regular help and I worked from noon until 11:00 at night. When I was about fourteen years old, I was assigned the job of tallying up the cash at the end of the working day. The cash register was a simple machine. There was a printout on adding machine paper, but only for the register, not for the customer. I counted out coins and put the proper number into rolls. This task done, it was up to me to close and lock the doors and walk the short distance home.

On my way home, I often looked into the first-floor windows of the hospital, and occasionally I would see a patient propped up in bed or nurses changing shifts and rarely saying "hello" to doctors walking in or out of the hospital. These sights made me wonder what was going on inside the hospital. All sorts of images and daydreams entered my mind about the mysteries going on inside.

Against the two side walls of the drugstore were the usual displays of nostrums—pink pills for pale people (which was an iron mixture), patent medicines, serutan (natures, spelled backwards), soaps, playing cards, toothpaste, shaving creams, and other such standard "drugstore" items. In one of the front corners of the store was a watch repair shop run by Art Kassel, who worked there for years. I spent many an hour looking over his shoulder to see what made clocks and watches tick. His wife was an x-ray technician for Doctors Mason and Cathcart in the Banner Building downtown. Art was a Shriner and a musician, and I sometimes played in the Shriner Band in downtown parades during my high school years.

The front of my father's drugstore was all plate glass, and just behind the glass were advertising displays which were changed every two or three weeks by an agency. The displays were colorful with preprinted cardboard and different shades of crepe paper that could be stretched, creased, and folded into many shapes. A little farther along was a large candy display case, where children would stand (seemingly for hours, actually maybe only ten or fifteen minutes) deciding how to spend their pennies. Tootsie Rolls and striped peppermint candy canes sold two for a penny. I ate up many a profit waiting on those children.

The hospital next door did not have a doctors's lounge, and the doctors had the custom of coming into the drugstore for mid-morning cakes and coffee. I remember these doctors well. For example, Dr. Felix Miller. He was the most talkative of the lot and told about his surgical patients. Many years later, he helped my practice by referring patients to me. I still have charts in storage that have Dr. Miller's name as the referring doctor. I also remember Dr. E. K. Armistead and his brother, both

of them always very correct in their speech and dress. During the Depression, I remember how Dr. E. K. bragged that he lived in his office. Dr. Hardy, another member of the informal Rolston Drugstore "club," was an internist, but his first love was neurology. He liked to relate, in detail, how his hospital patients were progressing. Dr. Krause was an extremely quiet person and my father's physician. My father always saved a morning newspaper for Dr. Krause, who would then take it to his office. As I got older, many of these doctors allowed me to take prescriptions over the phone. My father insisted that I read each prescription back to them before handing it over to be filled.

When I wasn't working (or playing sandlot baseball), I was of course going to school. I first went to Fannin Elementary School, located at the corner of San Jose and what is now Alabama. At the time there wasn't any Alabama right there, merely a sand pit used by construction companies. From Five Points, I crossed the railroad tracks at Elm in front of Austin High School (now Houston Elementary School), then walked through the west side ROTC parade ground, slid down into the sand pit, and made my way up the soft sandy sides, taking two steps up and one step back. It was a dangerous place to climb and was declared "off-limits" by teachers and



The interior of the Rolston Drugstore, 1920s, several doctors gathered at the soda fountain for their morning "coffee break." (Photo courtesy Dr. J. Harry Miskimins)

parents. But that was my route to school—and back home again. It was particularly fun after school. We children would run and jump onto the sloping sand, then jump again to reach the bottom, hoping that the teachers never saw us. If they did, it was a quick trip to the principal's office. This was a trip that struck terror in our hearts. You had to stay after school in the principal's office, keep your hands folded together, sit up straight, and no fidgeting. That made you get home late, and Mother had to know why. Which meant: you got punished twice for the same offense.

From Fannin, which had classes only from Kindergarten through the fourth grade, I went to Crockett School for two years, and then to Houston School for the seventh grade (by that time Austin High had moved into its new building out on Memphis). And after the seventh grade, I became a freshman at Austin High.

One of our favorite pastimes during my grade-school years was the game of "kick the can," and our favorite place to play it was on the steps of the Church of Christ located at the northeast corner of Montana and Raynor. The minister, a Mr. Blanchard, warned us not to kick the can out into Montana Street or to hide on the roof of the church. We did both. Many were the times that we kicked the can into the sides of moving cars. Then everybody would scatter. The roof of the church was a swell place to hide—and also to watch the motorist looking vainly for the culprit who had dented his car. As we grew older, we became braver and participated in most of the pranks committed by boys at that time, such as greasing the streetcar tracks, mixing chemicals in the drugstore after hours, and driving a car on the streetcar trestle that crossed the arroyo where the El Paso Tennis Club is now located.

There were two other drug stores in Five Points: Gunning-Casteel, located directly across the street from the hospital, and the Ideal Pharmacy, farther south on Piedras. All three were certainly in competition with one another, but during the Depression they practiced a great deal of cooperation. They took turns monthly with the needs of the hospital. And all three filled many a prescription without payment. Sometimes even the wholesalers who delivered to the drugstores were not paid. It was more or less a "no-money" economy. If the druggist or the grocer or the plumber felt you couldn't pay,...well, you couldn't pay, and that was that. On one occasion that I remember well, a Mr. Wiseman repaired our carbonating machine at the drugstore, and in turn my father filled his prescriptions. Mr. Wiseman and his wife lived at 2905 Tularosa, and he was recognized throughout the area as a competent jack-of-all-trades. He overhauled cars and other motors in his garage, he kept the machinery at the hospital in

good running order, and he fixed all manner of things for the various business establishments in Five Points.

I don't remember much about prices in the '20s, but I recall vividly that when the full force of the Depression hit Five Points, ice cream cones, double dip, cost five cents each. Cigarettes were ten to fifteen cents a package. Bull Durham was five cents a sack. Snickers and Milky Ways came two to a package, each candy bar nearly twice the size of what it is now, and the package sold for five cents. The Five Points Post Office, next door to my father's drugstore, sold penny post cards and stamps at two cents apiece for first-class letters. My father kept a supply of both as a favor to those who needed them after post office hours. The picture shows at night during the week cost a dime. I'm talking about the "American," an open-air theater located on Yandell just off Piedras. The theater showed both silent and talking movies, and it had a piano or organ that played the appropriate music for the silent films. Also in Five Points was O'Shaughnessy's Restaurant, just up the block from Gunning-Casteel. We ate there only when my mother was ill or out of town. Lunch was twenty-five cents; pie was ten cents extra.

Only one of my boyhood friends, Bill Burton, was—like me—a Five Points boy. The others were from the periphery. There was a minister's son and Sammy Abdou and the Azar twins. And not far off lived the Chapman boys, Roy and Jack. The Burton family (Bill and his brother, Harry, and their parents) lived next door to us.

I was such a poor student in high school that the principal, H. B. Fort, had to talk to my parents. That talk may have been the force behind my father's newest plan to get my attention. He required me to attend summer school to make up for my poor grades, then sent me to his small, leased-out farm in the lower valley. I lived with the workers and hoed cotton fields all day. This did get my attention. Finally, my father's reiterated admonition began to make sense to me: "Learn to work with your mind and not your hands."

As a business district, Five Points wasn't all that much, I guess, in comparison with today's standards. It was just a random combination of "points" where a hospital had been built and stores had accumulated. You did have to go to downtown El Paso on occasion, but mostly you did your shopping in this small community. You knew many people by name and many others by sight. During my time at Five Points, it was a place remarkably free of tension. There was authority in the family and school, but a kind of "laid-back" discipline that all of us understood. For a boy growing up, it was a good time and a good place. ☆



## The Killing of FRANK SINGH

*by Art Leibson*

**D**URING THE 1920s AND '30s THERE WAS A LARGE colony of Hindus living in El Paso's Lower Valley. Mostly they carried the surname Singh, a title held by many of the warrior castes of northern India. They were a close-knit clannish group of farmers and farm workers who supplied most of the fruits and vegetables on the El Paso market. Industrious, they asked only to be let alone. Many of them had entered the United States illegally after the passage of the Oriental Exclusion Act. They had made the long and dangerous trip from Calcutta by way of Hong Kong and Panama, then had worked their way north to where paid guides were waiting to slip them across the border. Once inside the United States, they would be met by friends who would get them settled into farm jobs.

Behind the wholesale smuggling was a powerful Hindu organization, the Gadir Hindustani Party, that financed the operation including the usual \$300 fee paid to those arranging the border crossing and resettlement. In return, the aliens who had been helped to find work in this country were expected to send regular payments back to Gadir to help others follow them to America. If they failed to remit, "enforcers" quickly brought them into line. In California, the goal for most of them, 34 Hindu killings were charged to unidentified agents of Gadir between 1925 and 1933. The organization even had its own airplane that was used in its smuggling operations.

On the night of September 23, 1933, a murder having all the Oriental mystery of Fu Manchu was the killing of Frank (Nand) Singh, a foreman living on the Bernie Berg ranch about a mile west of Ysleta. Singh was shot early in the evening as he lay in bed trying to put his seven-month-old child to sleep. The bedroom was illuminated by light from an open door leading to the kitchen. The bullets were fired through a window and found their mark in the victim's head. The child was untouched. Singh's

wife, Guadalupe, ran into the room, grabbed the child, and tore out of the house as two more shots were fired into Singh's body, from a second weapon as ballistic tests later showed.

At first it seemed an open-and-shut case. Guadalupe signed a statement saying she had seen Asa and Jerse Singh, two fellow workers, run off after the shooting. Before they left, she said, Asa had made an obscene remark and had warned her that she also would be killed if she didn't keep her mouth shut. Then two Border Patrol inspectors, Irving Cone and J. Metts, made their joint statement saying that Asa Singh had asserted in their presence that he was going to "get" Frank Singh.

There was one slight error in all that incrimination. It was proven beyond a doubt that Asa was nowhere near the neighborhood of the slaying at the time of the shooting. The investigation then took another turn. Frank Singh was known to be a brutal man possessed of a violent temper who, a few days earlier, had struck a Mexican farm worker with a heavy hoe. But the revenge motive also fell through.

After Chris P. Fox, sheriff at the time, had compiled a thick file of "evidence," it was decided conclusively that the death was one more execution that probably could be charged to the long tentacles of Gadir. Fox was able to learn that Singh had been an informer, paid to betray countrymen who were illegal aliens. Many had been deported to India because of information he had provided the authorities.

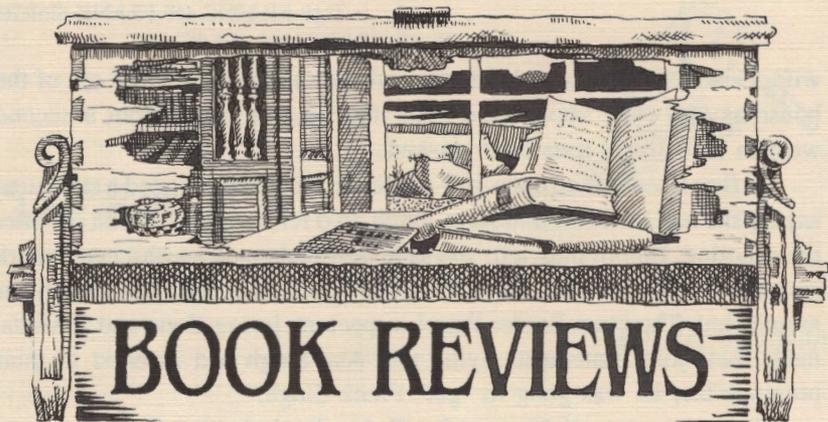
The sheriff crossed the river to talk to Dr. V. L. Verma, a Juarez physician and a leader among the Hindu colonists in the region. "I want you to understand that the dead Hindu was an informer for the Immigration Service and he reported many Hindus," Dr. Verma told the sheriff. "Many of them were deported and it was all his fault. Anybody who was against his own race like that fellow should be killed."

Fox soon learned that other Hindus had recently come to El Paso from California and as quickly had departed. He was satisfied that the party's enforcers had struck again, that there were others in the Lower Valley who had sheltered them on their mission, and that they would never betray the killers. They never have.

As with all unsolved murders, the case was never really closed, but those in the Sheriff's Department who knew the Hindu temperament and loyalty were satisfied that it was futile pursuing it further. The thick file was tucked away in an obscure corner. ☆

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*Art Leibson, a columnist for the El Paso Times, begins in this issue of Password a series of articles dealing with some of the prominent unsolved murders in El Paso County.*



### **WESTERN WOMEN: THEIR LAND, THEIR LIVES**

*Edited by Lillian Schlissel, Vicki L. Ruiz, and Janice Monk*  
Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1988, \$14.95

This collection of essays originated in a 1984 Tucson conference sponsored by the Southwest Institute for Research on Women/Women's Studies of the University of Arizona. Much interesting research is included, but what makes the book particularly thought-provoking is the format. The editor presents nine major articles on topics as diverse as cross-cultural marriage in the far western fur trade and the legal rights of native American Indian women, each article followed by two or more commentaries responding to the conclusions reached in the major essay. The reader thus shares in the dialogue and exploration of this recent area of study and is again reminded that "history" is always subjective, even when the relevant facts can be established.

The first essay, for example, has Robert L. Griswold arguing that the domestic ideology Anglo women brought with them from the East sometimes conflicted with the realities of pioneer life, but that these attitudes, including the cultural elevation of "wifedom and motherhood," became the moral norm when the cowtowns settled into farming and ranching centers for the "respectable middle class." Griswold subscribes to the old argument that "civilizing the West meant, above all, civilizing men" and seems to lament the "virtuous women" who worked for reforms against drinking, gambling, and prostitution. One of the commentaries notes that "poor and working-class women, who comprised probably about 70 to 80 percent of the population of females, did not have the benefits of society's moral sanctions regarding domesticity; they were too busy trying to survive on a day-to-day basis." The commentary concludes that the cult of domesticity in the West functioned on many levels and did not always

advance the cause of women.

The idea of diversity rather than a monolithic unicultural experience is a dominant theme of the collection. The editors repeatedly caution that the study of women in the West must recognize the history of the women already there when Anglos came.

Beyond this, the theme that most unifies the collection is the emphasis on economics. For example, in "'And Miles to go...' Mexican Women and Work, 1930-1985" (the only essay that focuses on the twentieth century), Vicki Ruiz, a former history instructor at The University of Texas at El Paso, shows again that "gender is a more significant variable than minority status in determining income" and that the educational level can mitigate but not eliminate this disparity. Ruiz's study of Mexicanas and Chicanas agrees with other essays in the collection which show that although women contributed economically to the development of the West, they were unequally rewarded for their work.

LOIS A. MARCHINO

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**THREE ROADS TO CHIHUAHUA: The Great Wagon Roads that Opened the Southwest** *by Roy L. Swift*  
Austin, Texas: Eakin Press, 1988, \$24.95

Much that has been written about Texas and Mexico during the nineteenth century concerns itself with the military conflicts, but rather neglects other aspects of that era. This carefully researched book details the development of commercial relationships between the two neighbors. It makes clear that the extensive and lucrative lead- and silver-mining activities in northern Mexico furnished the stimulant for trade, specie being a much-needed commodity on the frontier. It also makes clear that the absence of well-established trade routes constituted the most powerful deterrent to trade and that the profit motive served as a compelling factor in establishing the routes.

Of the three roads discussed, the best known is the Santa Fe Trail, extending from St. Louis to Santa Fe, from there to El Paso del Norte and Chihuahua, and thence to the interior of Mexico. It is dealt with only briefly

since much has been written about it elsewhere.

A second road leading from Chihuahua into Texas was pioneered by Dr. Henry Connelley, a United States medical doctor who turned trader and merchant in Mexico. He sought a more direct route to Arkansas in order to avoid the huge custom levies in New Mexico and Chihuahua. With several Mexican merchants as partners, Connelley organized an expedition in 1839 from Chihuahua to Presidio del Norte. From there, it moved northeastward across undeveloped Texas to the Red River, where freight facilities similar to those in Independence, Missouri, existed. Unexpected expenses and numerous delays caused the route to be abandoned.

The third route, next in importance to the Santa Fe Trail, was the dream of Stephen F. Austin, who described it while a political prisoner in Mexico. The route, as eventually established, began at Chihuahua, continued through Presidio to San Antonio, connecting with Indianola on the Texas gulf, its anchor to the sea routes leading to New Orleans and New York.

In addition to describing the "three roads to Chihuahua," the book also recounts the complex problems inherent in moving goods across a vast wilderness of rugged terrain, almost devoid of potable water and occupied mainly by hostile Indians. And it portrays the stalwart individuals—such as August Santleben and Captain Henry Skillman—whose leadership, foresight, and heroic efforts were vital to the enterprise.

The author of the book, a fourth-generation Texan whose great-grandfather fought in the Mexican War, has incorporated his extensive research into a coherent and interesting account of the development of early trade between the United States and Mexico.

HENRY D. GARRETT, M. D.  
El Paso



## SHALAM: UTOPIA ON THE RIO GRANDE

by *Lee Priestly*

El Paso: Texas Western Press, 1988, \$5.00/\$10.00

For several years I reviewed and selected "metaphysical" titles for El Paso Public Libraries. In among the tarot cards, Ouija boards, and bamboo sticks, I found a "bible" called *Oahspe*. It claimed to be "spirit written," its Introduction telling of three angels who had guided the fingers of Dr.

John Ballou Newbrough at his typewriter.

*Oahspe* became the inspiration and guide for a group called Faithists, some of whom came to New Mexico in the late nineteenth century and founded Shalam, a settlement forty or so miles from El Paso just beyond Las Cruces close to present Doña Ana. The colony was founded for two purposes: to enable the members to live righteous and dedicated lives away from the squalor of cities and, more importantly, to provide a place for the proper rearing of foundlings, orphans, and neglected children.

In late October, 1884, twenty-two colonists arrived by train at Doña Ana, a Sante Fe flagstop, and walked the mile and a half to their destination. That first winter they lived in tents and cooked on open fires. The villagers of Doña Ana, appalled at these living conditions, showed the newcomers how to build outdoor ovens and bank their tents with brush and mud so as to provide a little more warmth and protection.

With the arrival of spring came Edward Howland and a railroad car filled with foodstuff and necessities from Boston. Construction of classrooms, a nursery, and living quarters began; and life proceeded in an orderly way. If Dr. Newbrough was the dreamer, Edward Howland was the doer. He was in the fields from dawn until dark and ultimately when the experiment failed, he was the last to leave Shalam. He and his wife, the former Mrs. Newbrough, his step-daughter, and four Shalam orphans settled in Las Cruces and continued to live by the precepts of *Oahspe*.

The philosophy of Shalam was a faint beacon in a dark world but a handicap as well. The neighbors stole livestock, trees, chickens and eggs; and the Faithists' belief forbade recourse to law. Rabbits ate the apple tree seedlings. Influenza took several of the babies, and Dr. Newbrough died of pneumonia.

The book is scrupulously researched, well illustrated, and beautifully printed. The author, a longtime resident of Las Cruces, has separated fact from rumor and gossip and has created a significant work that finally does justice to the generosity and sacrifice of Newbrough and Howland. Her account makes it clear that these two men spent their fortunes and their lives in an attempt to make the world a little brighter. If in the Faithist heaven Newbrough and Howland know of Lee Priestly, they are pleased.

MARGARET K. BURLINGAME  
 Librarian, Westside Branch Library  
 El Paso Public Library System



## THE TERRITORIAL HISTORY OF SOCORRO, NEW MEXICO

by Bruce Ashcroft

El Paso: Texas Western Press, 1988, \$5.00/\$10.00

El Paso readers will enjoy discovering the many ties between the El Paso area and Socorro, New Mexico, as these ties are revealed in Bruce Ashcroft's presentation of Territorial Socorro.

After Juan de Oñate and his followers held their feast of celebration at the Pass of the North on April 30, 1598, they continued up the river, receiving help at an Indian pueblo near the foot of some towering mountains. In gratitude, they named the place "Socorro," or "succor." In 1626, the colonizing Spaniards returned to the area and established the first Catholic mission there, naming it "Nuestra Señora del Pilabo del Socorro." When the pueblos of the upper Rio Grande revolted against their Spanish overlords in 1680, many of the Piro Indians from Socorro remained loyal to the Spaniards and founded a new church near El Paso del Norte. They gave it the same name as the one they had left, "Socorro," distinguished from the New Mexico settlement by "Socorro del Sur."

Later, Socorro, New Mexico—like the El Paso Valley—became a flourishing agricultural community, known up and down the Rio Grande for its grain, pasturage, fruits, and wines. Then, in the 1880s, the combined prosperity of the mining industry in the mountains to the west and the coming of the railroads turned Socorro into a boom-town at about the same time that El Paso was greeting its first flush of prosperity. A smelter was built a few miles to the west of Socorro, and branch rail lines connected town, smelter, and the mining settlements as far west as Magdalena. Socorro was being hailed as the mining center of New Mexico and the surrounding states.

At least three newspapers flourished in Socorro during the boom era. One of them, *The Bullion*, was a mining journal edited by Charles Longuemare. In 1888, when the new smelter in El Paso was claiming more and more of the region's mining business, Longuemare left Socorro and established *The Bullion* at the Pass. He would be a prominent El Paso citizen through the '90s.

Ashcroft's excellent history of good times and bad in Territorial Socorro, New Mexico, also tells us—necessarily—something about the development of El Paso.

CONREY BRYSON

El Paso

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