

Museum News: Pedro Castillo y Olivares... "Tamale Pete"

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Terrell County Memorial Museum

Pedro Castillo would be a misfit in today's world of whiners, who complain about possible loss of their entitlements. He, of all people, would have deserved an entitlement. Disabled at an early age, his was a life of pain and hard work. He could have begged on the streets or sought a handout from the county. The county judges in early-day Terrell County often wrote a check on county funds and quietly presented it to poor folks, to those truly in need.

But, Pedro Castillo would have none of that. Instead, he chose the high road of self-reliance and entrepreneurship to make his way in the world, and in the process became a shining example for the disabled. Actually, that word...disabled...did not fit him at all.

Pedro Castillo y Olivares was born at La Hacienda Santa Rita, a working ranch in San Luis Potosí, México, on January 31, 1879.

Injured in a fall from a horse at age 7, he spent two years on crutches and suffered throughout his life from a severely deformed back. His disability prevented him from doing regular cowboy work, and so, he could not follow in his father and brothers' footsteps. There was not much he could do on a ranch in the way of labor, especially since there was no one to show him anything else.

So, at age 15, in 1894, he entered the U.S. at Eagle Pass, Texas, and made his way to Del Rio, Texas, where he spent two years working as a street vendor selling bread.

In 1896, God smiled on young Pedro when Sanderson rancher Charles Downie crossed his path. A self-made man himself, no doubt Downie took pity on the tiny, hunch-backed teenager, hawking his large load of bread around the streets of Del Rio. Downie offered Pedro a job at his ranch at Sanderson, a three-month tryout to see what he could do. Downie even paid the train fare to Sanderson. He would work for three months as a household domestic for \$12 per month.

In those three months, the family quickly came to love his personality and sense of humor, his soft-spoken demeanor. As a result, his stay was extended for 14 years and he became a valued and beloved employee at the Downie Ranch headquarters.

In those years, Mrs. Downie taught him to cook, a fateful event that enabled him to support himself and his family through the years. He never sought, nor was he ever forced to take public assistance at any point in his life.

As majordomo for the Downies, he not only did the cooking and cleaning for the family, more importantly, he learned to keep the ranch commissary supplied for its large staff of shepherders and cowboys. In a large operation such as theirs, running thousands of head of sheep, that was no mean feat.

In 1913, Castillo married a young lady named Concepción and moved to Sanderson. He and Concepción operated three restaurants over the next few years.

The June 2, 1923, edition of the *Sanderson Times* featured an ad on the front page for The San Pedro Café, listing Pedro Castillo as the owner and featuring Mexican and American dishes, short orders, ice cream, and soda water. "Everything clean and sanitary." In the interim, he also worked as a cook at other restaurants and hotels

About 1920, Castillo began his tamale operation in Sanderson. Of course, he made the tamales himself and sold them on the streets and at the train depot. He sold two dozen for 25¢, and hungry train passengers made it a land office business for him.

Selling food to passengers at the train depot was a going business for other Sanderson folks, as well. Mrs. Louella Lemons, second County Clerk of Terrell County, whiled away her retirement years making and bagging potato chips to be sold at the depot. Patty Wilson, her granddaughter, said visitors to the Lemons home, now the Terrell County Memorial Museum, were often given a bowl of potato chips for a snack.

With the addition of dining service to the trains, Castillo's business at the depot began to fall. By the late 1930s he was working Oak Street and the local cafes, running his operation from a small white pushcart and wearing a crisp, white waiter's jacket. It was in this format that Pedro Castillo became an iconic fixture in Sanderson. He acquired the name "Tamale Pete," probably because of a Western Swing tune popular at the time, "Hot Tamale Pete," that was sweeping the nation.

*If you wanna get something good to eat,
served with a great big smile,
Two blocks down and turn to the
right at Hot Tamale Pete's.*

*...
He's got good things wrapped in
shucks,
and peppers baked in dough,
When you finish you'll exclaim,
"Petey's magnífico!"*

The song pretty well sums up Pedro's operation (and personality) through the years.

In 1933, tragedy struck the little man whose life had always been hard. His beloved Concepción died, leaving no children to comfort and console him.

The next fourteen years were lonely for Pedro as he adjusted to life without Concepción.

However, in 1947, at the age of 68, he met Maria Aguilar, a woman from México, and found love once again. They were married and he spent the remainder of his life with her. Together they adopted two small children, her relatives from México, and he now had the family he had always wanted.

By 1952, Castillo's tamale operation had slowed down. He sold only three days a week to local housewives and cafes. The rising cost of ingredients forced him to raise his price to 35¢ per dozen, but the townsfolk agreed it was still a bargain.

To augment his income, he also distributed *La Prensa*, a Spanish-language daily newspaper from San Antonio. He would meet the train every day to pick up his papers, then distribute them on the way home. He continued this until his last few years.

In November of 1959, at the age of 80 and with some health issues, Castillo went by himself to the doctor in Del Rio for medical attention. Early on the morning of Nov. 3, 1959, his body was discovered in a drainage ditch. He had drowned in less than six inches of standing water.

At the coroner's inquest the Justice of the Peace noted that there was no sign of foul play. He theorized that Castillo had accidentally stumbled into the ditch and was knocked unconscious by the fall. Not able to raise his head above the water, he drowned. It was a cruel fate for a man who always held his head high.

By physical aspect, Pedro Castillo y Olivares was a small man, bent by disability, yet modest and unassuming. He certainly would not have stood out in a crowd. But, by his actions and by his spirit, he was a giant. Unafraid of work, faithful supporter of his church, proud owner of his own home and loving family man, he never sought assistance because of his handicap or used it as an excuse or to gain sympathy. Totally self-reliant, he took care of his family to the best of his ability. His least effort was greater than many men's best. It is safe to say that in this day and age of whiners and welfare leeches, we need more men and women like "Tamale Pete."



Photo: Alice Evans Downie

Tamale Pete - Pedro Castillos y Olivares