

Museum News: La Jornada de la Muerte

by C. W. Bill Smith, curator

Terrell County Memorial Museum

One of the more tragic tales of early Terrell County was the mass poisoning of seven men on a ranch in the northeastern sector in 1911. The Terrell County history book calls it "La Jornada de la Muerte"...the Journey of Death.

The story begins with Juan Moreno, a well known peddler in the area who lived in Sanderson and took his goods out to the ranches in a wagon.

Elizabeth Lopez Flores, biographer of the Saenz and Bravo families, says that Moreno was a traveling salesman who was fast with a gun. "Donde ponía el ojo, ponía el tiro," it was said of him, "Where he set his eye, he sank his bullet."

Besides his skill with firearms, Moreno was a big man who rode a big white horse, a figure larger than life. So it came to be that through the years Moreno's behavior and persona instilled fear in many of the people who crossed paths with him, and they tread lightly when he was around. Naturally, a man like that attracts enemies, whether he knows it or not, and apparently he may have made one enemy too many.

In his vocation visiting the cow camps, herder's camps and ranches of the area, Moreno had a thriving business selling clothing and all the necessities of life to the isolated families living in the county. On one particular trip in late September of 1911, he set up camp at El Tanque de Caballos (The Horse's Tank), now on the Owens ranch in north central Terrell County, and which can still be seen from the Sheffield highway.

The day was drawing to a close and Juan staked out his burros and his horse, started a fire and set out the dutch oven. He had a taste for camp bread, so he got out the flower can and the baking powder and began to make his supper. He was tired and he wanted to turn in early.

The next morning a passing cowboy saw the peddler's wagon and decided he needed some things. He called out to Moreno but got no response. As he got closer, he saw Moreno lying on the ground, his supper plate upended in the dirt by the now cold campfire. Moreno was dead, but there was not a mark on him, just the face twisted in the agony of a man poisoned.

A little bit skittish at the sight of a dead man, the cowboy jumped on his horse and rode hard to town to fetch the sheriff. A little later that day he led Sheriff J.J. Allen back to the murder scene and the investigation began.

Lying close to the body was a half empty tomato can. Sheriff Allen theorized that Moreno had died of ptomaine poisoning, from eating tomatoes that had gone bad. There was no evidence of foul play, and he had no reason to suspect otherwise.

The two men moved the body into the shade under the wagon and covered it, then left to go back to town.

Upon arriving back in Sanderson the news of Juan Moreno's death had already spread like wildfire. A group of men, relatives and friends of Moreno, came to ask the sheriff if they could retrieve the body and Moreno's belongings.

The group of men, Pancho Moreno (Juan's son), Ignacio Bravo, Teodoro Moreno, Frailan Guerra, Mateo Ruelas, Pedro Saenz (a Baptist preacher) and Jesus Flores immediately set out for El Tanque de Caballos and arrived late in the evening.

Seeing that it was time for supper they decided to eat before returning with Moreno's body and belongings. Jesus Flores, however, said he wasn't hungry so he went out to retrieve the burros and Moreno's saddle horse. The others used the supplies on the wagon to prepare the meal and began to eat, especially enjoying the freshly-baked camp bread.

About ten minutes after eating, the six men began to feel ill. The symptoms began with an odd, metallic taste in the mouth. Soon, their muscles began to spasm, starting at the head and neck and progressing to all the muscles of the body. Now they were on the ground, convulsing and writhing in agony, their toes drawing back under their feet.

Pedro Saenz had seen this before, and he knew the signs of strychnine poisoning. He crawled to the lard bucket and began to eat handfuls of lard to draw the poison out.

The pain and agony went on for several hours until, one by one, the men succumbed to the poison. Saenz, however, recovered...the old *curandera* remedy had worked for him.



When Jesus Flores arrived back at camp he was dismayed to find his friends and kinfolk dying before his very eyes. There was nothing he could do but go for help, but town was twenty -five miles away and by the time he returned the five men had died. Some had died by asphyxiation due to paralyzed chest muscles...others had died from the extreme physical exertions of the convulsions. Saenz was still very ill, but he was getting better.

Many theories were offered for the turn of events, but two seemed likely. Obviously, the men had eaten from poisoned supplies. Either the strychnine was in the flour can or the baking powder tin. It could have been done deliberately by someone who was never caught, or it could have been a terrible accident.

Strychnine was a common poison used by trappers in those days. Moreno could have obtained a baking powder tin that had been used by a trapper to hold his poison, and mistaken it for baking powder. But we will never know. Consensus of opinion at the time was that it was an act of treachery by an enemy, with a tragic outcome for friends and family. There was no proof of this, however.

Today as we zip along the highway to Sheffield in the air conditioned comfort of our cars, we pass the tank where this story took place and don't give it a thought. It still exists and was rechristened by the locals as "El Tanque de los Muertos"... the Tank of the Dead, the name it retains to this day, the site of one of the most tragic events in Terrell County history.