

Museum News: The Juan Zepeda, Sr., Story

By C. W. (Bill) Smith, curator

Terrell County Memorial Museum

On June 11, 1965, a 15-foot wall of water roared through the town of Sanderson Texas, taking away lives, work places and cherished family homes. Cruz and Josefina Marquez lost her family home, a house built with loving hands by her father, Juan Zepeda and his older children, from the soil of the earth and rocks brought up from Sanderson creek by his children. It was a family tragedy, almost as bad as losing a loved one. That old house held many sweet memories for the Zepeda children and grandchildren, and for them the loss of their family home was personal.



Mr. and Mrs. Juan Mendez Zepeda, Sr.

Juan Zepeda, Sr., was born in Allende, Coahuila, Mexico, near Piedras Negras, on January 6, 1876. His parents, Santiago and Sra. Ygnacia Zepeda had lived in Allende all their lives, but opportunities for work for the young Juan were slim. He moved up the road to the village of Zaragoza, not far away, and met a young woman, Juanita Hernandez, daughter of Sr. Roman and wife Anne Hernandez. They were married, and for the first year they stayed in Zaragoza, but work again became scarce, and Juan felt that a move to the United States would be better for his young family.

So, in 1904, they packed their belongings and their new son, Santiago, and emigrated to Sanderson, Texas, a fateful move for the Zepedas and their child.

However, once they came to Sanderson Juan could not find steady work. He took many jobs to keep food on the table. As the years passed, more children were added to the family, thirteen in all.

In Sanderson, Juan and Juanita sought out two other families of the Methodist faith. Together, they formed a community of believers. Soon, others joined them and in 1908 they built the El Buen Pastor Methodist Church. The work was done by the parishioners, themselves, from adobes made on site and laid by the hands of the faithful. The benches and altar furniture were made by hand for the new structure and El Buen Pastor became the centerpiece of the Mexican Methodist families of Sanderson.

In 1911 Juan finally found steady employment, though seasonal, picking cotton at Fort Stockton. He was able to move his parents to that city, where his mother passed away around 1926.

That same year, Juan was able to buy a piece of land at Sanderson, down by the creek. It was here that he built the family home with the help of his children.

By 1928 his oldest sons, Santiago and Roman, were working at Kerr Mercantile. It was at this time that the second Ten-mile Hill road was being built and Juan was able to go to work for that crew. Unfortunately, there was a terrible accident and Juan and two other men were severely injured. Local doctors could do nothing for Juan and he was sent to San Antonio where he spent a year in recuperation and therapy. When he finally returned to Sanderson he was incapacitated permanently and could no longer work as a laborer. But, ever the provider for his family, he purchased two cows and started a small dairy. Once again, his children pitched in to do the work, milking the cows and delivering the product to homes in Sanderson. Even after they got out of the dairy business they kept one cow for the family's use and people from Sanderson would come to buy the excess milk.

Juan Zepeda never stopped providing for his family. He and his wife always had a big garden with lots of produce and a large pen of chickens. Juanita was even able to have a nice flower garden, often the envy of the neighborhood. She was a happy person with a big kitchen where she spent most of her days. She was an expert cook and talented seamstress and her days were spent providing food and clothing for her family. Happy parents in a loving environment make for happy children, and they were always playing and teasing and the home was filled

with laughter and love. They had always known hard times so the Depression of the 1930s was endured with grace and patience.

But soon, the world war loomed on the horizon and the happy times turned grim, as one after one, their sons went off to war. Mrs. Zepeda was intensely worried for her sons as they went into harm's way. She asked her husband to go to the post office every day...sometimes when every train passed through...to check the mail for word on their sons. Juan had to remind her that freight trains did not carry the mail.

One day, a dreaded telegram arrived. Though she didn't read English, Mrs. Zepeda knew what a telegram from the government often meant. With fearful hands she gave up the telegram to be read to her. Juan, Jr., had been taken captive by the Germans and was being held in Luxembourg. She did not believe what was being said and gave the telegram to a neighbor to read and translate for her, again, just to be sure of the details. The next weeks were a living nightmare for the Zepedas, as they sought more information about Juan's wellbeing. When he was finally released they learned that he had been beaten and abused in the detainment camp and suffered grievous injuries. He would come home and go on to marry, but his injuries were too severe and they eventually took his life.

During those long months of waiting for word on her boys, Mrs. Zepeda grieved for them as she prayed earnestly for their return. She told her family that she did not want to die before her sons returned from war. And true to her wishes, shortly after the last son returned home, Mrs. Zepeda passed away at the age of 58, in 1946. The next year her children began to pass away, first a son, then a daughter. Juan Zepeda was beginning to lose his family, but he kept moving forward and taking life one day at a time.

As the years wore on, he became unable to care for himself. At that point, his daughter Josefina Marquez and husband Cruz moved into the family home and began to see to his needs.

In June of 1955, at the age of 82, Juan Zepeda went into the hospital in Fort Stockton with his final illness. He knew the end was coming and he prepared for it by drawing up his own funeral service. He planned for the 23rd Psalm to be recited, and typical of him, he requested that no one be sorrowful at his passing, and that no one wear the color black at his funeral.

On July 2, 1955, Juan Zepeda, Sr., passed into the ages, gathered with his family and especially with his beloved wife. He left a large family of eleven children and thirty-nine grandchildren.

Ten short years later even his home was gone, lost to the flood, but the family memories of a good man and woman who lived their lives well, will never be forgotten.