

Museum News: Pedro Saenz, Indian captive

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People from all walks of life and with every kind of background came to live in Sanderson. Immigrants, businessmen, railroaders, doctors, lawyers, ranch workers, herders...the list goes on and on. The stories that made America also made our community.

One theme found in early day America was the tale of the Indian captive. Texas, particularly, had many citizens captured during Indian raids and forced into servitude. Cynthia Ann Parker, Matilde Lockhart, Herman Lehman, and many others fell to Apache, Comanche, Kiowa, and Wichita

raiders through the years. Though she settled in Texas after her release, Olive Oatman and her sister Mary were captured by Yavapai Indians in Arizona and sold to the Mohave, where she received her famous blue facial tattoo. Life was hard for the captives, but in some cases, they were never able to assimilate back into American society when repatriated. They became the so-called "white Indians."

Even Sanderson had its own Indian captive, Mr. Pedro Saenz, patron of a very large family still active in the community today. But Pedro's story did not begin with his captivity...it was rooted in national events.

From 1846 to 1848 the United States was engaged in a war with Mexico. After the final defeat of Santa Ana and his government, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo ceded Upper California and New Mexico to the US, for a "purchase" fee of \$15,000,000. The "Mexican Cession" included Arizona and New Mexico and parts of Utah, Nevada, and Colorado, as well as forcing Mexico to relinquish all claims to Texas and set the Rio Grande as the southern boundary of the United States. A boundary survey determined the official border and the agreement ratified in 1853. With one signature thousands of square miles and thousands of Mexican citizens suddenly found themselves on the north side of the border.

This is the world into which Pedro Saenz was born in 1865. In that year the US was consumed with civil war, but the people of San Elizario, Texas, near El Paso, were consumed with making a living and protecting themselves from marauding bands of Apaches. Periodic raids not only resulted in the loss of livestock and material, it also resulted in kidnappings. Women and children were captured and spirited away into the desert, some never to be seen or heard from again.

It was just such a raid, about 1876, which tore eleven-year-old Pedro from his family. The youngest of Ignacio and Andrea Manriquez Saenz's four children, Pedro was spirited away into the wilderness and was thought lost forever. As was common in so many cases, youngsters were absorbed into the tribe and became "Indians" themselves, embracing the Indian life-style and culture and losing all touch with their former lives and families.

But, apparently, such was not the case with young Pedro. A few years after his capture, Pedro escaped back to civilization with the help of his new Indian wife. He did not go back to his family, but shortly after his return his wife died suddenly and he was left alone once again.



Photo courtesy of Alice Evans Downie.

Pedro and Rosa Bravo Saenz

But, a new-found faith carried him through. During his captivity Baptist missionaries worked with the tribe and young Pedro became interested. He converted and eventually became a Baptist preacher, an avocation he followed for many years.

He remarried several times, and eventually arrived in Sanderson, Texas, in 1905, where his sister Catarina lived with her husband, Juan Moreno. Pedro opened a barber shop and preached on the weekends.

In 1911, Pedro courted young Rosa Bravo, an émigré from Mexico and daughter of Ignacio and Monica Rivas Bravo. He was thirty years her senior, but he was a well-respected man and was a worthy match for Rosa.

They were married and began a long, happy life together. That same year Pedro's brother-in-law, Juan Moreno, was found dead, killed by food poisoning, as first thought. Moreno was a tough character and a traveling salesman, and was found at his camp out on the road. When Pedro and other family members and friends went out to pick up his body they also were poisoned by bread made with tainted flour or baking powder. As the others writhed in their death-throes from the poison, Pedro recognized what was happening and began to eat large quantities of lard, which saved his life. Rosa's father, Ignacio Bravo, was one of the victims, and the community was shaken to its core by the tragedy. It was an infamous story that made headlines around the US.

Life went on, however, and the incident did not stop Pedro and Rosa from producing a family of eleven children who survived to adulthood, many of their descendants still living in the Sanderson area today. Pedro continued to work and preach, but his preaching days came to an end after an incident in Big Spring, Texas. A man was wrongfully imprisoned and no one would believe him except Pedro, who tried to argue his case with area preachers in an effort to gain support. When the preachers rejected his arguments and pleas, the man died while in custody and Pedro, disgusted with organized religion, left the ministry.

In 1942 Pedro passed away at the age of 77. He led a very colorful life and produced a fine family. His widow, Rosa, lived on until 1965. She became a naturalized citizen a few years before her death and went to her eternal rest with the well-earned reputation of an excellent and beloved mother, grandmother and great grandmother.