

Museum News: Luis Martinez "La vida es mas importante que el oro"

by C. W. (Bill) Smith

One thing about writing stories about Terrell County...you never run out of material. Just when you think you have written about or said everything that could be said, you stumble across another story. Luis Martinez is a case in point.

There were many notorious (good and bad) men and women who came to Terrell County. The nature of the terrain makes it a difficult place to live, even today. Everyone loves the scenery, but only a few hardy souls have the stamina and fortitude to live here, both in the old days and now. How many young Border Patrol couples have come and gone because of the lack of convenience and services? It's a fun place to visit, but how many can live here 24-7 without a Walmart, a pharmacy or a decent (or even indecent) food store? Not many, apparently.

Luis Martinez was one of those special people. He lived his life as a cowboy, working in the great outdoors for a number of ranchers. In his long years in Pecos/Terrell County he worked for the Downie, Stillwell, and Pakenham ranches, and for George Fenley, first sheriff of Terrell County. He worked for the infamous Reagan Brothers during their Lost N___ Mine time, he was a personal friend of the hapless Mexican Negro cowboy, Seminole Bill Kelley, who discovered the gold, and he knew the general location of the mine but refused to take anybody to it in fear for his life. His reasoning was, "La vida es mas importante que el oro," life is more important than gold. How many people today have lost sight of that maxim?

Martinez was born in Laredo to Mexican émigré parents. Dates are a little shaky...one source says he was born in 1874, his death certificate says 1883. But, death certificate information is often wrong, as it is provided by close friends or relatives and not confirmed by records. To fit the narrative best, the true date was probably the earlier one.

At about the age of 13, about 1887, Martinez decided to strike out on his own. He did not own a horse so he set out on foot to walk up north from Laredo, probably looking for work. Through a combination of walking and hopping freight trains, he rolled into Dryden around 1888 and was hired by Mr. John Doak, who was running the Pecos County Land and Cattle Company, a huge ranch. Dryden was their headquarters and most of the buildings at that time were company-owned. His first duties were feeding livestock, running errands and doing general maintenance work. After a year he was promoted to horseback and his long career as a cowboy began.

While working for Doak he made a trip driving cattle "up the trail." But, they hit a snag when they got to the Red River. On the north side of the river the Indians refused to let them cross tribal lands and they had to sell the cows locally and return home. Martinez was very young and did not recall many details about the trip, which was very uneventful anyway.

It was a dangerous time to be alive in Terrell County. There were many murders, robberies, cattle rustling and smuggling operations being carried on. Of course, the murders stuck out in his mind. One was the murder of Juan Bueno, a cowboy for the Doak outfit. One evening Bueno and another man got into an argument as they sat around the campfire. The next morning they rode out together to check the cattle, but only the other man returned. After an extensive search, Bueno's body was found by the trail, riddled with bullets. They couldn't prove anything, but the heated argument the night before was fresh in everyone's mind.

In another killing a herder was found shot to death. Some men had hired him to watch the cows while they gathered them. When they were ready to take the herd away, they didn't want to pay the man, so they shot him. Martinez and one of the cowmen "found" the body, and the cowman wanted Martinez to get off his horse and check the body. Martinez was suspicious and wouldn't leave his horse and his weapon. He didn't want to end up lying beside the dead man. The sheriff was summoned and came out with rough lumber and built the man a coffin. He was buried on site.



Juana and Luis Martinez

As the years rolled by, ranches were fenced, became smaller and smaller and moved to sheep operations. Martinez would work for a few months for an outfit, and then move on. He had become an expert cowboy.

In 1925 Luis Martinez married a woman named Juana Basquez, a native of Mexico, and a few years later they adopted a little girl. In later years they took in a brother and sister and helped raise them, but they had no children of their own.

In 1933 tragedy struck. Martinez was in Sanderson trying to chase down a cow on the streets and his horse fell, severely injuring his leg. He was never able to cowboy after that.

It was the depth of the Depression and times were hard anyway, but losing his livelihood was difficult. Terrell County came to the rescue. In those days, people suffering a hard time were often given a monthly stipend by the county, an early form of welfare when there was no state or federal program in operation. That, and what odd jobs he and Juana could do helped tide them over during the difficult times.

Luis Martinez passed away in 1959 and his wife in 1962. They lived a life that truly testified “La vida es mas importante que el oro.” They didn’t have much, but they did have a treasure trove of golden memories of a time when Terrell County was a very interesting place to live.