

Museum News

Pedro Castillo y Olivares "Tamale Pete"



Photo courtesy of Alice Evans Downie

Pedro Castillo, better known as "Tamale Pete," was an iconic fixture in Sanderson for over sixty years. Selling his wares on the streets and at the depot from a small pushcart, and always attired in his white waiter's coat, he was a shining example of self-reliance to the disabled, as well as to the able-bodied. He is shown here about 1952, doing what he liked best, serving long-time customer W.D. O'Bryant, Jr. a delicious homemade tamale from his little cart.

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 icon and 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 cow-

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

boy 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 and caused Sanderson rancher Charles Downie to cross 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.

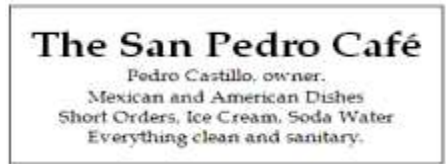
In those years, Mrs. Downie taught him to cook, a fateful event that enabled him to support himself and his family through the years. He never sought, nor was he ever forced to take public assistance at any point in his life.

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.

It was a happy arrangement until 1913, when Cupid shot Castillo with his amorous arrow and he fell in love

with and married a young lady named Concepción. He decided they needed to live in town, and so he left the ranch and moved to Sanderson. With the cooking skills he had learned at the Downies, together 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.

Dining cars were not instituted on the Sunset Lines until the latter '20s, and if passengers wanted to eat, they had to leave the train and go into the depot cafe, the Beanery, and risk missing their connection. Tamales were an exotic finger food that could be paid for and passed up through the open train window, the diner never having to leave the train.

Selling food to passengers at the 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 magnifico!"*

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

It was also in the 1920s that Castillo applied for US citizenship, but, sadly, he never finished the paperwork. It was always a great regret of his, as he did love and appreciate the United States and the opportunities he had here, but it did not stop him from being successful.

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 according to 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.

thy. 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."

Not much information is available for Pedro Castillo. The bulk of this article came from a 1952 newspaper piece authored by the late local newspaperman and rancher G. Walter Downie, for the San Angelo Times. It is contained in its entirety in the Terrell County history book, pp.294-5. "G." Downie was a treasure in his own right, and had known Pedro Castillo from childhood. "G." was a friend, and not a day passes that I don't miss his presence. Thanks, "G.," for recording Pedro Castillo's story.

Hot Tamale!



Tamales, known as the comfort food of México (and just about everywhere else!) arose in the mists of history, probably around 8000 to 5000 BC, in Mesoamerica, and can be dated to the ancient Mayans around 1200 BC. It is thought that the ancient Toltecs and Olmecs, predecessors of the Mayans and Aztecs, also made the delicacy, primarily for their armies on the march, travelers and hunters, as a movable feast.

The word "tamale" comes from a word in Nahuatl, native tongue of the Aztecs, *tamalli*, and means "steamed cornmeal." And that is exactly what it is, cornmeal flour mixed with a little lard or shortening, wrapped in corn husks or jungle leaves and steamed or boiled.

Tamale flour was made from hominy, dried field corn that has been soaked in ash or lime water to soften the husk, then dried and ground on *metates*.

The most common modern fillings are pork or chicken, although almost any filling may be used.

The Mayans preferred plain maize and *huah*, iguana meat. The Aztecs were adventurous and used turkey, fish, frog, salamander, pocket gopher, rabbit, turkey eggs, bees, honey, fruits, maize flour, squash, beans, and

probably Chihuahua meat, since the small dogs were kept as a household food source and quick sacrifice to the family gods.

Today they can be bought in stores and, no doubt, every town in the Southwest has at least one person who makes and sells tamales as a business.

This author remembers his high school days in the '60s in Marathon, Texas, when tamale sales were used to benefit the class bank account for the prom and banquet. He was selected by his peers to go down to French's Store to retrieve a fresh hog's head to take to Mrs. Grano, the absolutely best tamale maker in the world. He remembers opening the box to look at the recently deceased pig, only to be shocked to see the victim staring back up at him indignantly, with little black, beady eyes!

He remembers that sadness welled up in his mind for the poor little pig's sacrifice... until he remembered how great those tamales were going to taste when they were done. Tender, succulent shreds of hog meat encased in luscious, steaming cornmeal packets, with just enough spice to make your nose run. Yeah!!

But, please, Mrs. Grano, no iguana or Chihuahua filling for me!

References

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Phone interview with Patty Wilson, August 5, 2012

All newsletters can be found at <http://terrellmuseum.info/newsletters/>