Borderlands

Strong Women
Building a Strong City

The Best Place To Start

Volume 27

2009 - 2010

Produced by Students of El Paso Community College
Strong Women
Building a Strong City

This issue of Borderlands features outstanding women in El Paso. Because of space limitations, we can highlight only a few, but we will include more articles on women in future issues of our student publication.

A word search puzzle on remarkable El Paso women opens this issue. The idea for the article came from a faculty development workshop I attended last year presented by my colleague from the history department, Sarah E. John. I asked her to make the quiz she gave us into an article, and then I thought, why not do a puzzle? I tried many crossword puzzles to no avail, but then my student editor hit on the idea of using a word search puzzle, and we hit pay dirt. We hope you enjoy it!

The articles in Borderlands are based on the research projects of select English 1302 (research and literary analysis) classes. As freshmen learn research techniques, they study a topic of local history from a list that changes every year. They learn to research in steps, writing several assignments before they complete their final paper. They must use online and print sources, interviews and community resources, such as the El Paso County Historical Society and the Border Heritage Center of the El Paso Library downtown, as well as other area libraries. They learn that good research means constant questioning, careful analysis of sources, especially those online, and pursuing every lead. They discover that research is detective work, with one source leading to another.

And speaking of detectives, Rachel Murphree, part-time librarian and our web weaver, asked if she could research Callie Fairley, one of the first female police officers in El Paso, and a fascinating character in our history. The result is an intriguing article on the first woman vice detective in our city.

Last year Sally Andrade, Chair of the Oral History Committee of the YWCA El Paso del Norte Region Centennial, asked us to feature the local Y’s history. The YWCA had begun a project to organize and archive its historical materials, and an exhibit at the El Paso History Museum on the development of this incredible organization opened this spring. The article is based on the exhibit script with updates and additions.

This will probably be the last time Borderlands will appear in the El Paso Times because the cost of insertion has become prohibitive for us. However, we will find other means of distribution, and we will continue to be found on the Web. Use your favorite search engine and type in “EPCC Borderlands.” I bet we’ll appear in a second.

Remember, we use the Associated Press Stylebook for rules on punctuation and form, so comma use and other style matters may differ from academic writing.

Student editor Heather Coons, a strong woman herself, proved to be an excellent editor, meeting deadlines and tracking down details and photographs, always with a great attitude and sense of humor. Thank you, Heather.

A pleasure it is to work with you! Former student Liz Torres volunteered her art talent to produce our cover, in addition to researching Mabel Welch and photographing some of her homes. Thank you, Liz, for your wonderful contributions.

This issue on women is a special one to me and I dedicate it to former editors Gretchen Dickey, Kazestella Vasquez, Adrianna Alatorre, Sandra Pierce and Lynn Cordova, all of whom are creative, energetic, strong, principled. They are made of the stuff that the women featured in this issue are. Ladies, thank you for inspiring me to keep teaching and writing and thank you for lessons only you could teach!

Ruth Vise, Faculty Advisor & Editor

Borderlands Staff: From left to right, Heather Coons, Editor, Elizabeth Torres, Artist.

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From The Editor

Within these pages we explore some extraordinary women, some from the past, some from the present, all leaving a defining mark forever etched into the history of El Paso. In the face of seemingly insuperable odds and obstacles, they triumphed, paving the way for others to follow their footsteps. And from their stories we can all learn about living, about love, about success, and yes, failure. But most of all, we learn about the similarities that can never be bound by ethnicity or gender.

Truly, this issue has been a collaboration, from the women who made the history, to the loved ones who supported them behind the scenes, to those who worked so diligently to put it all on paper. To all of you, I give my thanks, but there are a few I would like to thank personally: My husband, Robert, for your unwavering love and support, and my children, Josh and Amanda, for not burning down the house while Mommy was busy. Special thanks to Rosa Guerrero and Alicia Chacón; you were both so gracious and kind. Thanks to Chief Justice David Chew and the Chew Family for a wonderfully informative presentation and taking the time to speak with me. Thanks also to Liz Torres for sharing your art and to Janet Bartlett and St. Alban’s Episcopal Church for your assistance.

Last, but certainly not least, I would like to thank Ms. Vise, for providing me with an opportunity to see my work in print. You’ve been my teacher, my mentor and my friend, but most of all, you’ve given me of the most precious gifts anyone can receive: knowledge. It has truly been an honor to work with you.

When Ms. Vise first approached me about joining the Borderlands staff, I was ecstatic. Finally, I had a legitimate excuse to spend my time reading at the library! Little did I know what it was getting myself into. Publishing an issue consists of a whole lot more than just completing a single research paper in class. There have been workshops and conferences, meetings and deadlines. There have been basement hunts for that all-elusive picture, as well as the inevitable technical difficulties without which no deadline would be complete. And those are only a few of the professional challenges I faced.

I also had no inkling of the incredible personal challenges I would encounter during the making of this publication, or just how much they would call in to question my commitment to see this project through. My father passed away up north on Easter Sunday. My son went through a major reconstructive surgery that could only be performed by specialists out of town. So much for my quiet afternoons at the library. It was more like planes, trains and automobiles!

But through it all, I faced this project with a sense of enthusiasm and excitement as I researched and wrote about the lives of women trailblazers. I was humbled by their compassion; I was amazed by their courage; I was inspired by their dedication. But most of all, I was honored with the privilege of telling their stories.

So for me, this issue has great significance. It is not just a tribute to the accomplishments of local women. It is a tangible symbol of my ability to overcome one of the hardest times of my life. I was profoundly affected by what I learned during the course of this issue, and it is my desire that you, too, will be touched by the lives of some of El Paso’s most amazing women. Happy reading!

Heather Coons, Editor
Notable Women of El Paso: How Many Do You Know?
By Sarah E. John

Some people might think that there are few significant women who contributed to the development of El Paso. In fact, the opposite is true. There are so many women who should be mentioned that it would take many publications to highlight them, and choosing the few who are part of this article was very difficult. The information included here has come from the hard work in research done over the last 30 years by many local historians, especially women, who are interested in getting the message out that women have played an important role in the progress of El Paso.

The “her-story” of El Paso women reflects the city’s international influences, and it is a story which encompasses several centuries, races, nationalities and age groups. The women of El Paso have been actively engaged in the civic, political, economic and social development of the city. They were businesswomen, educators, domestics, laundresses, military workers, factory workers, artists and architects – and most were raising families at the same time. Their hard work and struggles have helped all of us today, both men and women.

While a couple of these women technically did not live in El Paso, they still made a contribution to its history, either through their presence here at one time or another or through the accomplishments of their descendants. Some were prominent, some will not be familiar to you, but all made their contribution. See if you can find the names of 20 such women in the word search puzzle below. Solutions run up and down, forward and backwards and diagonally with no spaces between first and last names. Good luck! The solution may be found at the end of this article, page 15.

Isabel de Oñate, Juan de Oñate’s wife, was the granddaughter of Hernán Cortés and the great-granddaughter of Moctezuma. She is a perfect example of the accomplishments of their descendants. Some were prominent, some will not be familiar to you, but all made their contribution. See if you can find the names of 20 such women in the word search puzzle below. Solutions run up and down, forward and backwards and diagonally with no spaces between first and last names. Good luck! The solution may be found at the end of this article, page 15.

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Jesusita Siqueiros Hart (1830s-??) first met Simeon Hart during the Mexican War in the 1840s. Hart was wounded in the battle of Santa Cruz de Rosales and was cared for by Don Leonardo Siqueiros and his family at his molino (flour mill) in Mexico. Simeon and Jesusita, Don Leonardo’s daughter, fell in love and married and moved to El Paso. Simeon built his own flour mill, which became known as Hart’s Mill, next to the Rio Grande near what is now Paisano Drive just west of U.T. El Paso. The house that he built for the family adjacent to the mill became the Hacienda Restaurant in the 1960s.

Mary L. Stanton (1862-1946) was a pioneer teacher in El Paso who used her personal collection of books to lay the foundation for the El Paso Public Library in the 1890s. She organized a reading club for young men and allowed them to borrow the books. The library was moved to City Hall in 1895 and was opened to all El Pasoans. Later, an Andrew Carnegie donation allowed the city to build its first public library in the early 1900s. While highly cultured and well-educated, the fun-loving and gregarious Ms.

continued on page 15

SEEK AND FIND

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Puzzle by Ruth Vise and Heather Coons
Puzzle created using Puzzlemaker at discoveryeducation.com
The Chew Legacy: The Story of Herlinda Wong Chew

By Lucinda Ann Bowers, Lorena Hernandez, Blanca Lopez and Julio Magallanes

Just as the Mexican immigrant of today struggles against prejudice and discrimination in an effort to live the American dream, so, too, did the Chinese decades before them. In fact, with the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, they became the first illegal immigrants in the United States. El Paso became the primary smuggling point because of railroad access. Ironically, thousands of Chinese were brought to this country to build the transcontinental railroad. As a result, El Paso and Juarez had a thriving Chinese community during the early 20th century, and from that community arose a leader, advocate, humanitarian and savvy businesswoman named Herlinda Wong Chew.

Chew was born in Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico, to a Chinese father, Carlos Wong, and an Aztec mother, Francisca Perez, sometime between 1893 and 1894. Her revolution brought terror to the Chinese. In a July 17, 1910, article “Herlinda Wong Chew: El Paso La Garantia,” written by columnist Fredrick and Carlos, Herlinda Chew always wanted a lawyer in her family. Chief Justice of the Texas Eighth Court of Appeals; Judge Linda Lee Chew; attorney Patricia Chew; and Martin Ying, a family friend, at the El Paso Museum of History. The Chews' interest in immigration laws deepened, and, once again relying on friendships in the immigration office, she borrowed their books. Being a highly intelligent woman, she soon discovered a loophole through which her family could enter the United States legally as merchants.

In February 1922, the Chews entered the United States through Calexico, Calif., one of the few legal ports of entry. From there they took a train to El Paso and set up residence at 1912 Yandell St. They quickly opened their first grocery store, La Garantia, in 1907. The Chew family stated that in spring 1911, Herlinda Chew, her father and his third wife were in Juarez to visit friends, and this was probably when Herlinda and Antonio met. The meeting, courtship and date of marriage between Herlinda and Antonio remain a mystery.

Herlinda Chew became ill in 1939 and sought treatment in Portland, Ore. She died from tuberculosis on August 10 of that year. She was 45. A few days following her death, her husband became ill from grief and died one month later at age 48. The official cause of death was stomach cancer.

Reeling from the deaths of both parents, their oldest child, Josephine, quit law school and returned to El Paso to manage the business and care for her seven younger siblings: Antonio, Grace, Wellington, Herlinda, Gloria, Fredrick and Carlos.

Herlinda Chew always wanted a lawyer in her family. In 1930, when her son Wellington became just that, specializing in immigration law. Three of his children - David, Linda, and Patricia - followed in his footsteps and have made their own mark in immigration law.

Way ahead of her time, Herlinda Chew stands as a role model for us all. She took advantage of every opportunity and made sure her children did likewise. Compassionate and wise, she became a legal immigrant and helped others to do so. She overcame tradition, sexism, the Chinese Exclusion Act and the Mexican Revolution. Her name lives on in Herlinda Chew Way, a street located in East El Paso. More importantly, it lives on in the accomplishments of her children, grandchildren and the descendants of the hundreds of people she aided throughout her life.
On October 2, 1902, a train carrying the great showman Buffalo Bill arrived in El Paso. On that same train was a young nurse heading to California from New York. Intending nothing more than a brief stop to visit a friend, she walked out into a rainstorm, and with her footsteps came a herald of change for the nursing and medical profession, in the city, the state and in the nation.

A. Louise Dietrich entered the world on Nov. 17, 1883, in the small farming community of Ossining, N. Y. As one of the 11 children born to Valentine and Mary Dietrich, she knew early that service to others was her life’s calling. After completing her early education in Ossining, she enrolled in the nursing program at St. John’s Riverside Hospital in Yonkers, N. Y., completing her degree in 1899.

After graduation, Dietrich trained at Sloan Maternity Hospital in New York City. She then began private duty nursing with esteemed pediatrician Dr. Emmett Holt, president and charter member of the American Pediatric Society, as well as several of his associates.

In 1902, Dietrich and her friend Emily Dana Greer, also a nurse, took a trip out West to California. They planned a short visit en route with a mutual friend in El Paso. Not only did they arrive during a torrential downpour, but typhoid fever was raging, too, and their friend was very ill. The two women decided to stay for a while.

Dietrich discovered that the infant mortality rate in El Paso was one of the highest in the country, especially in the summer months. Babies suffered from “summer complaint,” which was a fancy name for dehydration and diarrhea. In response, a physician established a baby sanitarium in Cloudcroft, N. M., in 1910. Dietrich and Emily Greene alternated summers as superintendent of the sanitarium. In an article written for The American Journal of Nursing, Dietrich described how the babies not only survived but thrived in the air “that God meant people to breathe.”

From the very beginning of her nursing career, Dietrich realized the importance of educated nursing professionals and was one of the nation’s leading advocates for medical legislation. As president of the El Paso Graduate Nurses Association, Dietrich attended the second meeting of the Texas Graduate Nurses Association (TGNA) that took place in San Antonio in 1908. According to Women Pioneers in Texas Medicine, it was at this meeting that Dietrich was appointed to represent the organization in San Francisco for the National Associated Alumni meeting, a forerunner of the American Nurses Association. At this meeting, Dietrich secured membership of the TGNA into the association.

The TGNA’s main objective was to gain legislation requiring the registration of nurses in Texas. That goal was realized in March 1909 when the state passed the Nurse-Licensing Law. While that was a victory, the law had no provisions for inspecting or accrediting schools. In 1921, Dietrich was appointed the group’s legislative chairman. The TGNA then initiated a study of how schools should be monitored, and in 1923 the Nurse Practice Act provided for a board of nurse examiners and an educational secretary who would visit and evaluate schools once a year. Dietrich accepted the position of the state’s first educational secretary, and in one year, she traveled more than 13,000 miles and wrote 780 letters, all without secretarial help. Dietrich continued her position with the state until 1928.

In 1917 at the TGNA’s eleventh meeting, Dietrich discussed Red Cross work in San Antonio and El Paso, such as the establishment of Red Cross nursing centers and the need for increasing enrollment among nurses so as to be ready for demands to be made on them by war. During both world wars, Dietrich played an important role in recruiting and training nurses for the American Red Cross. In an El Paso Times article dated Sept. 28, 1954, Dietrich stated her only life regret was not serving in the Armed Forces, and her greatest honor came when she was awarded a silver star with the title of “Unofficial General of the 4th Army Nurse Corps” in 1951.

Prior to becoming the educational secretary, Dietrich had served the TGNA in numerous capacities. She was secretary-treasurer, the first vice-president, president, chairperson of the Red Cross Nursing Service Committee, and council member. In 1929, after retiring from her position as educational secretary, Dietrich returned to the TGNA and served as their full-time general secretary, with headquarters here in El Paso, until 1955.

In 1931, Dietrich was charged with writing the history of the first 25 years of the Texas Graduate Nurses Association. She recorded that in 1911, El Paso hosted the fifth meeting of the group at the Parish House of St. Clement’s Church. The 30 members, traveling distances from Texas, New Mexico, and eastern Texas, were taken to Cloudcroft by an El Paso & Southwestern Railroad excursion train to see the Baby Sanitarium and tour the newly rebuilt Lodge. The railroad and residents of Cloudcroft provided meals for the nurses.

So successful was this meeting that the organization referred to it as “no one in the future would ever try to surpass El Paso in its entertaining and meetings.” In 1919, nurses returned to El Paso for their annual meeting. Once again, the attendees enjoyed the hospitality of the far West Texas city. El Paso nurses paid the housing and food expenses for all 90 members who only had to pay their travel costs.

Nationally, Dietrich served as chairperson of the legislative section of the American Nurses Association, and as a board member for eight years. She was also a member of the board of directors for the League of Nursing Education.

Dietrich wasn’t just active in the medical community, though. She was a devout member of the Episcopal Church, St. Alban’s Parish. She was memorialized at St. Alban’s with a chair marked “A. Louise Dietrich” in 1953. She also was an active member of the Parent Teachers Association.

After 60 years of serving others and fulfilling her life’s dream, Dietrich died on Jan. 22, 1962. The following February, the El Paso Herald-Post ran a column in which the retired executive of the National Nurses Association, Janet Geister, wrote a letter to honor one of the greatest medical advocates of the 20th century. Geister stated that although she and Dietrich didn’t always agree, “She [Dietrich] had a singular and powerful courage in standing by her convictions.”

The Texas House of Representatives 57th Legislature honored Dietrich by passing a resolution which stated that she had done almost as much as her distinguished predecessor, Florence Nightingale, with her service to the medical profession.

Dietrich was memorialized at St. Alban’s with a likeness of her nursing cap and training-school pin placed into a stained-glass window. The Dietrich Fellowship Fund continues to provide a means to pay for school, so that the “Nightingale’s” song is still heard in the Southwest.
1909-2009: YWCA Celebrates 100 Years in El Paso

Text based on the Museum of History YWCA Exhibit script by Susan Novick

Scores of El Pasoans celebrated the opening of the YWCA Centennial Exhibit the evening of April 23, 2009, at the Museum of History downtown. The exhibit, which runs through September, traces the beginnings and development of the YWCA El Paso del Norte Region to the present, complete with photographs and artifacts which have been preserved over the years. The El Paso association is the largest YWCA in the country.

Begun in England in 1855 to assist women who were working outside of their own homes as well as women moving to larger cities from the provinces, the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) quickly found interest in the United States, with the first group organizing in 1858 in New York City. Two years later, this group opened the first boarding house for female teachers, factory workers and students. Known as the Ladies Christian Association of New York, it had as its objective “to labor for the temporal, moral and religious welfare of young women who are dependent on their own exertions for support.” In 1907, the YWCA of the USA was incorporated in New York City.

Similar groups spread to the East Coast and Midwest with programs including prayer meetings and Bible classes, employment bureaus and restaurants, as well as boarding homes. Just as today’s Ys always offer fitness and exercise programs, many of the early groups provided programs in calisthenics and physical exercise to help women to withstand the effects of long and hard work in factory and office.

1909-1918 The Beginning

In 1909, a group from the Women’s Missionary Union representing the Protestant churches of El Paso met to organize a YWCA to take over its work. Mabel Stafford, a national YWCA secretary, came to town to help organize the association, and the women had their first meeting on April 8, 1909, at the First Christian Church, where all of the Union’s property was given to the new group, including two lots on Missouri Street, furnishings, cash and mining stock. Carrie Smith, the first president of the YWCA, accepted the gift. One month later, the association set up offices on the second floor of the Herald Building. The women first established a lunch room and then provided a residence for the many women who had come to El Paso seeking a healthier climate and employment in the city whose population surged from 15,906 in 1900 to 77,560 in 1920.

By February 1910, the YWCA had raised more than $10,000 of the $20,000 needed to build the boarding house on 541 W. Missouri St. Realizing that the group needed outside financing, Mabel Stafford explained the group’s predicament in a letter delivered to Mrs. Russell Sage, a wealthy New Yorker with friends in the New York YWCA, who came through El Paso by train on her way to California. Mrs. Sage sent the El Paso women $10,000 for the residence, and on March 13, the women held a groundbreaking ceremony. The boarding house opened in October 1910 and served the needs of young women who came through or stayed here until May of 1941, when the building was sold and became the Harvey Hotel. Also in 1910, the YWCA opened a gymnasium in rented space to meet the need for physical exercise.

In 1916, business and professional women organized a club at the YWCA, sponsoring a loan fund for girls and women who needed financial assistance by raising money through concerts and vaudeville entertainment. When the United States entered World War I in 1917-18, the club organized a Red Cross Circle to make bandages and knit garments for soldiers and sailors. They made 15,000 bandages and knitted 300 mufflers, sweaters, helmets, wristlets and socks.

Although the YWCA had built a boarding house, its offices had always been rented, and between 1909 and 1916, the group moved four times. In one of their most successful fund-raising drives, YWCA workers raised $70,000 in a seven-day period from January 25 to February 1, 1917, to construct a permanent office building. Several out-of-town donors gave $30,000, and some 2,287 subscribers raised another $123,252.

This fundraising campaign was the first of its kind in El Paso. Adolph Schwartz, owner of the Popular Dry Goods Co., said of his support, “I regard this subscription as an investment which will yield returns through the girls employed in my store who are members or may become members of the YWCA.” The new building at 315 East Franklin St. was dedicated on February 3, 1918, and served the association until 1969.

While serving working women, the YWCA turned to consider the needs of adolescent girls, and the Girl Reserve were born in 1918. A Girl Reserve was “a girl who is constantly storing up putting in reserve, more of those qualities which will help her to take her place as a Christian citizen in her home, her school, her church and her community.” The Girl Reserve organized into clubs, many associated with schools, and each club had an adult advisor who worked with the girls on programs based on their particular needs and desires.
The clubs included special songs, rituals, conferences, training programs and uniforms. The national organization provided materials outlining programs for grade school, high school and employed girls under age 18. Prominent businessman Horace B. Stevens donated three lots in Cloudcroft in 1913 on which to build a summer cottage named "Rest-A-While" that was used for summer camps for Girl Reserves and Y-Teens through 1961 when it was sold.

1919-1948 Meeting Needs in an Uncertain World

Throughout this period, El Paso’s population continued to grow, and in 1920 women won the right to vote. In 1919, the National Board of the YWCA established the Hospitality House at the international bridge to aid Mexican immigrants. The local War Work Council of the YWCA began the International Institute for Spanish-speaking women at 122½ South Mesa St., where instructors taught cooking, sewing and English classes.

In 1922, the YWCA organized a World Fellowship Committee to promote better understanding among girls of all races and creeds. This committee organized lectures and activities that helped members learn about and appreciate other cultures, foreshadowing the YWCA’s current imperative to eliminate racism.

Locally, an African-American woman was added to the Girl Reserves Committee in 1930 to represent African-American girls’ clubs. Former YWCA Board Member Frances Hills said, “The fact that they invited us (African-American girls) to come and participate in their general meeting of the Girls Reserves was really a step in the right direction of eliminating racism.”

During the Depression, the El Paso YWCA opened a Relief School for unemployed women, the only one in Texas and one in a handful in the country. Administered by the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, the residential program took 45 women between the ages of 18 and 30 and paid their room and board and tuition at schools and colleges where they took courses in business, English, physiology and salesmanship, health, and public speaking and dramatics.

As the country entered World War II, the YWCA adapted its regular program to reinforce the contribution of women and meet the tremendous pressures created by the war. Programs included leadership development, health and recreation, and current trends in world, national, and local affairs.

1949-1968 Planning for the Future

The Girl Reserves became the Y-Teens in 1946, and clubs at Jefferson High School and El Paso Technical Institute joined clubs at Douglass School and El Paso, Austin and Bowie High Schools. Hired to lead the Teen Department, Patty Hudgens lived as a resident in the Central YWCA building beginning in 1945, and she recruited leaders for the clubs and attended Inter-Club Council meetings. "Inter-Club was always fun, because this gave the girls a chance to know each other from the various schools, including the Douglass girls. ... The Douglass girls had more participation from their mothers than the others, and we always had delightful meals and entertainment when they were the hostesses. The other girls did well, but Douglass outshone them in the food and entertainment," reported Hudgens.

In 1951, Drusilla Nixon became the first African-American woman to serve on the El Paso YWCA Board of Directors. She was married to Lawrence A. Nixon, respected physician and political activist who challenged the Texas voting rights laws in the 1920s and 1930s until African-Americans were able to vote in primary elections. Mrs. Nixon began her participation in the YWCA in 1937 by serving on the Girl Reserves Committee.

In 1956 the women began planning a new central building and by 1959 focused on developing decentralized programs in the city’s neighborhoods. That year Kay McIntyre became Executive Director as part of the movement toward adding experienced professional staff. Myrna Deckert, a woman who would become a powerhouse for the YWCA, became Teen Program Director in 1963.

The group began planning its first capital campaign since 1917, hoping to build on property it had purchased on Montana Avenue. By June 1966, only half of the $1.25 million in pledges had been raised, and the YWCA scaled back its building plans and revised its goal to $850,000. When cheaper land and more acreage became available at Brown and Cliff Streets, the association bought the property in 1967 and later sold the Montana and Franklin Street properties.

The new Central YWCA building was opened in 1969. "Oh my, we were so excited when we moved from Franklin to the Brown Street Building. ... Everybody was excited about it, and I think it’s kind of from that point that we sort of really took off," said Joyce Whitfield Jaynes, El Paso YWCA and YWCA World Service Council Board Member and namesake of this branch.


By 1970, El Paso’s population was 322,261, with one of the lowest median incomes of any city in this

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Mabel Welch: El Paso’s First Female Architect

By Elizabeth Torres, Javier Medina and Ruth Vise

A wife and mother in her 20s. A widow and the sole owner of a construction business at 35. A University student at 46. A registered architect at 49.

In today’s American culture, women are encouraged to follow their dreams regardless of age. But for a woman who moved from Mississippi to Texas in 1906 in a covered wagon to marry late, have her first child at almost 30, run a successful business and go to a university in her 40s in the early part of the 20th century was most unusual. Mabel Clair Vanderburg Welch never blinked an eye. As she once said, “Things had to be done, and I managed to get them done.”

Mabel Welch accompanied her husband from DeKalb, Texas, to El Paso in 1916, looking for a cure for his tuberculosis. Born near Longtown, Mississippi, she would not only embrace her new home but become the first woman architect in El Paso and only the second registered one in Texas.

Following graduation from high school, Mabel Vanderburg served apprenticeships in both millinery and interior decoration, traditional female pursuits in her day. These two artistic endeavors would serve her well both in helping her husband with his building company and later when she herself began building homes.

After courting for five years, Malcolm and Mabel married in 1915. During an Army physical, Malcolm was told he had TB, and a doctor recommended that he come to dry West Texas. Malcolm took three years to convalesce, and although he had been a successful merchant in DeKalb, he began building houses in El Paso, an occupation that would keep him outside in the soothing dry air he and Mabel had come to love. Having built houses on a farm he owned, Malcolm began financing homes for El Paso residents and by 1920 began building homes in earnest.

From the beginning, Mabel was an active part of Welch Construction Company. She did all the drawings for the houses her husband built, as well as the interior decorating. He built houses on Trowbridge Drive, Pershing Drive, Tularosa Avenue, Hastings Drive all over Central El Paso – and in the Lower Valley, all of dark brick with white trim and black lines around screen doors. The couple would move into a newly built house until it was sold. In a 1960 interview Mabel said, “For five years we did not occupy the same house over two months at a time. My husband built them and I furnished them.”

Three years after their arrival in El Paso, their only child, Elvin Carl, was born in December 1919. Even though Mabel Welch called herself “old fashioned” for believing that “women who have a good economic position should not work,” she herself was not only a wife and mother but a draftsman and decorator and part owner of a successful company in the 1920s.

In 1924, Malcolm’s TB became active again and Mabel had to finish a house under construction. While her husband was in the hospital, Mabel built the home she lived in most of her life at 3131 Wheeling Ave. The house was designed as a duplex, with her tubercular husband living in quarantine in the east side which opened to a porch where he could talk with his building crews. As an adult, his son Elvin recalled the only way he and his dad could communicate while the latter was quarantined was to wave to each other from their respective sides of this uniquely designed house.

In a typed autobiography her son recently presented to the El Paso County Historical Society, Mabel Welch noted that at first, the men who worked for her husband refused to work for a woman. So she replaced them and had “no more trouble.” She proceeded to build nine homes in the 3100 block of Wheeling Avenue and a total of 15 on the street in order to be close to her son and husband. During this time, Malcolm advised his wife on financial matters, building techniques and methods of dealing with building crews, and she learned every part of the business. In 1927, Malcolm died, and Mabel became the sole owner of the construction business, drawing all the plans, supervising the building, and even keeping the books.

At the time of Malcolm’s death, the Welches had a home under construction which had to be completed or Mabel would have lost the $10,000 bond. She needed money to complete construction and also to build other houses nearby, so she went to Sam Young, then president of El Paso National Bank, who lent her the money immediately, despite the fact that widows were poor financial risks in her day. In her autobiography, Mabel said that Young lent her money because he “had never seen me dancing or partying in Juárez.”

Mabel had begun building Spanish style homes before her husband’s death. Having discovered Spanish architecture in California while on a vacation, she thought the style complemented El Paso’s culture more than the Eastern red brick bungalow style that was then popular. She showed Malcolm one of her early Spanish houses on 2915 Wheeling Ave. on the way to the hospital for the last time before he died. “It’s very beautiful,” he said.

Her second such design was at 2731 Wheeling Ave. and then three elaborate two-story houses followed in Castle Heights below Manhattan Heights. From then on, Mabel Welch would be known for her Spanish-Mediterranean designs – with wrought iron decoration, red tile roofs, arches, balconies and courtyards.

While many builders went out of business during the Depression, Welch did not. She sold her medium-priced houses as quickly as they were built. In 1934, the Women’s Division of the Chamber of Commerce began an architectural program in El Paso to support the use of Spanish design. Welch herself wrote, “A city with our historical background and geographical location should have an architectural flavor appropriate to, and typical of, our surrounding culture.” In 1935, the city presented her with an official commendation for changing the predominant style of architecture in El Paso from American bungalow to Mediterranean.

Mabel Welch designed and built many homes in El Paso. (Photo courtesy of El Paso County Historical Society.)

The home at 3021 Federal Ave. sits high above the street.

The right side of the home at 3100 Federal Ave. shows the red tile roof, arches, balcony and white stucco walls that Welch loved. (Photos by Javier Medina Jr.)