

Felix Martinez: Southwestern Renaissance Man

By Frankie Fernandez

Many men who became prominent in early El Paso came from the South and East. With visions of a modern metropolis, their hands molded the small, “sinful” town into a shining star on the border. However, one man who helped build the city was already a civic leader, businessman, publisher and gifted orator – from New Mexico. He was a true Renaissance man: Felix Martinez.

He is thought to have descended from Capt. Gen. Don Felix Martinez, whom the Spanish Crown appointed governor of the Province of New Mexico in 1715. The younger Martinez was born on March 29, 1857, to Felix and Maria Martinez in Peñasco, Taos County, N.M.

According to Robert Rankin White, Martinez studied for five years at St. Mary’s College, run by the Christian Brothers, in Mora, N.M. His family moved to Colorado in 1871, where he began clerking in a store in Trinidad. Martinez then studied business privately for three years in Pueblo, moving to El Moro in 1876, where he became part-owner in a mercantile.

Three years later, Martinez sold out and returned to his home state, settling in Las Vegas about the same time the Santa Fe Railway arrived. He opened his own store and went into the cattle business.

At 22, he met and fell in love with 14-year-old Virginia Buster. The two planned to marry on Sept. 24, 1880, but six days before the wedding, Martinez lost everything in a devastating fire.

“I have only myself to offer and this charred [silver] dollar,” he supposedly said to his bride-to-be, according to Martinez’s daughter, Mrs. C. P. Henry, in the *El Paso Times Sunday Magazine* on Jan. 13, 1963, recounting her parents’ courtship. Luckily for Martinez, the wedding took place as scheduled. Over the years, the couple had four sons (Felix Jr., Alejandro, Horacio and Alfonso) and three daughters (Flora, Reyes and Virginia).

After the fire, Martinez successfully rebuilt his business, selling it in 1886 to pursue a career in real estate and politics. In 1884, Martinez ran for county treasurer as a Democrat, and although he lost, he made a deep inroad in the Republican vote. He won the election for county assessor by a close margin in 1886, then went on to be elected to the Territorial House of Representatives in 1888.

In 1890, Martinez went into publishing and purchased a Santa Fe newspaper, *La Voz del Pueblo* (The Voice of the Community). As president and editor, he moved the paper to Las Vegas and used it to promote his political views. The newspaper became highly regarded with distinguished partners that included Ezequiel Cabeza de Baca, who would become the first lieutenant governor and second governor of the state of New Mexico, and Antonio Lucero, the future first New Mexico Secretary of State.

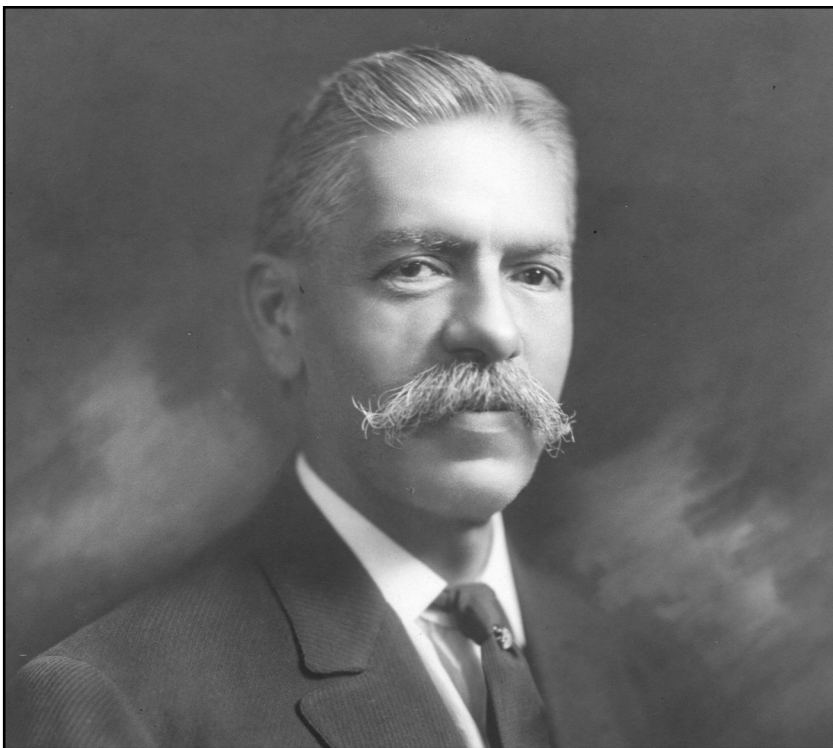
In 1890, Martinez joined the rapidly developing Populist party, and assumed leadership of El Partido del Pueblo Unido shortly thereafter. He used his influence to unite the Populists and Democrats and was elected to the Territorial Council. Martinez sponsored legislation for the creation of New Mexico Normal University, now New Mexico Highlands University, and for the state mental hospital in Las Vegas. In 1892, he became chairman of the New Mexico delegation to the Democratic National Convention, and in December 1893, Martinez became clerk of the U.S. and Territorial Courts for the 4th Judicial District of New Mexico.

In 1897, Martinez resigned that position to move to El Paso, a town that was ripe for development, whereas

Las Vegas had slowed down. Martinez packed up his family and settled first at 236 Tobin Place, then later on 21 acres occupied today by Washington Park.

In El Paso, Martinez used his extraordinary business skills to help the city grow. He owned and organized the Southwestern Portland Cement Co. and was president of the Central Building and Improvement Co., which constructed the downtown Plaza Block, including the White House building, the Paso del Norte Hotel, of which Martinez was a director, and Calisher Realty Co., which housed Everybody’s Department Store.

Martinez also owned and published the *El Paso Daily News* from 1899 to 1909. He was the founder of El Paso Realty Co., as well one of the organizers of the El Paso Chamber of Commerce. He purchased the El Paso-Juárez Railway Co. and was one of the directors of the First National Bank of El Paso, later resigning that position to become one of the first directors of the Federal Reserve



Felix Martinez was known for helping to bring a reliable source of clean drinking water to El Paso and for helping to develop the downtown area. (Photo courtesy of the El Paso County Historical Society)

Bank of the 11th District, headquartered in Dallas. Martinez also served on the planning committees that led to the building of El Paso Public Library and the Texas School of Mines and Metallurgy, now known as the University of Texas at El Paso.

In the early 20th century, Martinez became active in the cleanup of the “sin city.” He backed reform candidates in an attempt to close El Paso’s 162 gambling and prostitution houses, using his newspaper to fight the purveyors of vice. In so doing, Martinez made enemies and received numerous death threats, resulting in his carrying a hollow cane containing a sword and a whistle on the tip. Although the reformers were defeated in the 1903 city election, public opinion did shift. One year later, open gambling in El Paso ended.

Although Martinez had officially retired from politics, he remained active in the community. In her tribute to Martinez in *Password*, journal of the El Paso County Historical Society, Deane Miller wrote that he served as an advisor to the historic meeting between U. S. President William Howard Taft and Mexican President Porfirio Díaz in 1909, arranging meetings at the Customs House in Juárez, and at El Paso’s Toltec Club, of which Martinez was a founding member. During the Mexican Revolution, Martinez used his negotiating skills in an

attempt to reconcile Francisco Madero and Pancho Villa.

Martinez is best known for his ceaseless efforts to bring a reliable source of potable water to the El Paso area and a consistent source of irrigation to the Mesilla and El Paso valleys. El Paso’s early water supply came from the Rio Grande, whose water was often muddy and unsanitary. Those who could afford it shipped in pure water by the barrel from Deming, N.M. Martinez brought these facts before Los Angeles engineer Dr. W. J. Davis, stating that deep wells were needed to bring clean water to the growing city. As a result, in 1902, El Paso had its first reliable water supply.

Since 1899, Martinez had promoted the Rio Grande project, which supported the construction of what was known as the International Dam. In 1903, Martinez attended the Eleventh National Irrigation Congress in Ogden, Utah, bringing the Twelfth Congress to El Paso in 1904, attended by committees from Texas, New Mexico and Mexico. With Martinez as the chairman, the committees agreed a dam was needed, but the site was still undecided. Reclamation Service engineer B.M. Hall proposed a new site north of Las Cruces, and the Elephant Butte Dam project began, the largest irrigation and dam project in the world at the time, according to White. Subsequently, Martinez and others organized the El Paso Valley Water Users’ Association, which he directed until his death.

Thanks to his community service and political activity in New Mexico and Texas, as well as Martinez’s amazing talent as a bilingual orator, in 1913 President Woodrow Wilson asked him to tour South American countries to promote and negotiate what would become the Panama Canal. Martinez had been suggested for the position, with diplomatic status, of United States Commissioner General to South America and the Panama-Pacific International Exposition by his friend, Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan. Martinez left New York aboard the *USS Birmingham* and traveled across South America by train, returning to New York in January 1914. He then participated in the opening ceremonies of the Panama-Pacific Exposition in San Francisco in 1915.

Martinez died from pneumonia on March 22, 1916, before the official dedication of Elephant Butte Dam. His body lay in state at the El Paso Chamber of Commerce. His request for a simple funeral went ignored, and the funeral procession included a platoon of mounted police, the 6th Infantry Army Band, officers of his various companies and city officials. He was buried at his beloved ranch Trinchera near the New Mexico-Colorado border.

White wrote that although Martinez “was probably the most prominent Hispanic in the United States at the time of his death, he would not have liked that designation. He considered himself an American, and he often spoke ... against race prejudice and race promotion of any kind.” Armed with an education, business skills and an affinity for people of all stations, Felix Martinez used his many talents for the good of others, in both New Mexico and Texas, in little towns and growing cities, nationally and internationally. White summed up this Renaissance man in these words: “He was small in stature, but he must be considered a giant in Border history.” 🇲🇪