

Teresa Urrea: La Santa de Cabora Inspired Mexican Revolution

By Armando Rosales Jr.

Home to some remarkable people, *El Segundo Barrio* is one of El Paso's oldest communities. In 1896, it was home to Teresa Urrea, one of the most important and influential women to walk the Southwestern United States and Northern Mexico. Aside from her healing knowledge as a *curandera*, she is known for her political role in the years leading up to the Mexican Revolution. David D. Romo, author of *Ringside Seat to a Revolution*, writes that "in many ways, the Mexican Revolution on the border began with her." Through physical and psychological healing and political encouragement, Teresa Urrea became an inspiration to indigenous groups of Northern Mexico, as well as to people in the United States during the reign of Mexico's dictator, Porfirio Díaz, and the years prior to the Mexican Revolution.

On Oct. 15, 1873, Niña Garcia Nona Maria Rebecca Chávez, later known as Teresa Urrea, was born in Ocoroni, Sinaloa, Mexico, on a ranch owned by her father, a wealthy liberal rancher named Tomás Urrea. Her mother, a servant on Urrea's Rancho de Santana, was Cayetana Chávez, a 14-year-old Tehueco Indian. Teresa spent her first 15 years with her mother and aunt, living in a servant's hut and working on the ranch. In 1888, Teresa's father recognized her as his daughter and sent for her to live in the main house of the ranch.

Teresa did not go to school or learn to read until she was nine years old. About this time, it appears that she began to call herself "Teresa." Others called her by the diminutive, "Teresita." She became an apprentice to a folk healer or *curandera* named Huila at this time. Overseeing the household at Rancho de Santana, Huila not only used herbs to heal the sick and injured but was also a midwife. Teresa learned about the medicinal uses of some 200 herbs and folk remedies readily, assisting Huila on her visits to expectant mothers. It appears that Teresa could put women in labor into a type of trance or hypnosis, making the birth less painful, an ability she would later use with many who came to be cured.

Luis Urrea, novelist and grandnephew of Teresa, described one of her early cures on his web site. A young Yaqui ranch hand had been kicked in the head by a mule. Teresa picked up a handful of dirt and spat into it, rubbing the mixture on the man's injury, resulting in instant healing. Word of Teresa's miraculous healings spread among the people in the region very quickly, and they soon began calling her a saint.

William Holden, author of a book-length biography of Urrea, says that as a *curandera*, Teresa Urrea unselfishly provided aid to many people and took nothing in return. The art of *curanderismo* gave Teresa influence, something a half-Indian, half-Mexican servant girl could not even hope for in those days.

Teresa lived during the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz, who ruled Mexico for 35 years, "modernizing" the country at a great cost to the poor and to indigenous tribes. Many natives were enslaved and sent south, notably the Yaquis. Her father was a political moderate who detested much of what the Díaz administration did to the native people. When he backed the wrong political candidate, Tomás Urrea left Sinaloa and moved his family to Cabora, Sonora, in 1880 to escape reprisal from Díaz.

Shortly after moving to Cabora, Teresa slipped into a coma. Theories suggested for the cause of this cataleptic state range from assault and attempted or completed rape by a miner who lived in the area to a form of epilepsy. This coma or trance lasted almost four months. Teresa had already been put in a coffin and was being prepared for burial when she rose up suddenly. Upon awakening,

Teresa gave off an odor of roses. Urrea believed she had been visited by the Virgin Mary during her deep sleep, being left with an even more powerful gift of healing. The ranch Teresa Urrea called home in Cabora became known as the "Lourdes de Mexico," according to Diane Telgen and Jim Kamp in their reference book *Notable Hispanic American Women*.



Teresa Urrea, known as "Teresita," miraculously cured thousands, both in Mexico and the United States. (Photo courtesy of the University of Texas at El Paso Library, Special Collections)

Teresa cured people suffering from everyday illnesses and injuries as well as from cancer, blindness, stroke and paralysis. Soon, the news of her extraordinary healing powers spread among Mexico's Northern Indian tribes and the government her father was trying to stay away from. Not only was Teresa Urrea healing the poor and sick, but she became an inspiration to these people to rebel against the perpetrators of the injustices Díaz brought upon them. While the native tribes she helped and those who knew her looked up to Teresa, her fast rise to popularity and fame did not sit well with the Mexican government or the Catholic Church.

From early on, Teresa received many nicknames such as "The Mexican Joan of Arc," "La Niña de Cabora," and "Queen of the Yaquis." However, when natives began calling her "La Santa de Cabora" and began treating her like a folk saint, the Church became incensed. In *The Power of God Against the Guns of*

Government, Paul Vanderwood wrote that in October 1890 when lithographs of Teresa Urrea were presented by parishioners in Guaymas to Sonora's Bishop Herculano to be blessed, the Bishop was disgusted and shocked, throwing the lithographs to the floor. Urrea was threatened with excommunication, as were those who believed in her. Historian Max Dashu said that from the onset, Urrea was denounced by the priesthood as a heretic. It did not help that Urrea felt true believers needed no intermediary to converse with God.

For years the Mexican government had subjected the Indians of Northern Mexico to genocidal wars and land seizures. With no one to turn to, the Yaqui, Mayo, Tarahumara and Tomochiteco Indians let their fury and frustration build; the corrupt government of Porfirio Díaz did not care if they lived or died. Teresa believed that the land belonged to the native Indians and should not be stolen. Telgen and Kamp stated that Teresa Urrea told the Indian villagers, "God intended for you to have the lands, or he would not have given them to you."

In *Latin Legacies* by Vicki Ruiz and Virginia Sánchez Korrol, Marian Perales wrote that Porfirio Díaz claimed that his governmental policies were in the name of order and progress, never mind that they displaced indigenous peoples, pushed small farmers out of business, and created a disaffected, politically minded, middle class. Besides stripping these tribes of their land, Díaz sent many Indians throughout Mexico to work as slaves in mines and remote plantations and controlled national, state and local elections. Slowly the Indian villagers' patience began to wane, and they became more and more motivated by Teresa's words. Throughout her life, however, Teresa denied active participation in politics.

During the years Teresa spent in Cabora the number of people wanting to share an experience with her increased. Alex Nava stated in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* that "more and more Indian villagers would flock to Teresa's home, hoping that she would bring God's presence to the troubled and chaotic circumstances in their lives."

In one of the best known rebellions attributed to Urrea, a group of armed Yaqui, Tomochiteco, Tarahumara and Mayo Indians defeated Díaz's *federales* at the village of Tomochic, whose residents adored Urrea and had a hand-carved icon of her in their church. The Indian villagers were able to hold the *federales* off for a few weeks before the soldiers burned the village to the ground. Scores of women and children were burned to death while hiding in the town's church. After the battle of Tomochic, the Indian villagers started calling themselves "Teresitas," and their battle cry became "Viva la Santa de Cabora!"

After another small revolt against the Mexican government, Díaz ordered Teresa and her family to be deported and had 500 of his soldiers enforce the exile. Once he realized she was the "Santa de Cabora," Díaz called Teresa "the most dangerous girl in Mexico." Teresa and the rest of the Urrea family were deported to Nogales, Ariz., in 1892. The family arrived by train only to find local journalists among her followers seeking a few words with "La Santa De Cabora."

Fearing pressure from the Mexican government, the Urrea family moved to El Bosque, a small farming community outside of Nogales, and later to Solomonville, Ariz., in November 1895. By 1896, political trouble found Teresa Urrea. Solomonville briefly became the site of *El Independiente*, an anti-Díaz newspaper published by Lauro Aguirre and Flores Chapa, two Mexican liberals and associates of her father.

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Moving their paper to El Paso, Aguirre and Chapa were arrested, charged with committing “subversive acts” including the intention to “engage in revolution” as Mario T. Garcia wrote in *Desert Immigrants*. They were tried in an El Paso court. W. H. Burges, well-known El Paso lawyer, defended the men. The court didn’t find any real evidence of revolutionary activity. “I am publishing a paper against Mexico,” Aguirre told the court, “because I hope to remedy the evils by pointing out what they will lead to,” according to Garcia. The court found Aguirre and Chapa were just exercising their freedom of speech.

During the trial, attention began to focus on Teresa’s involvement in the alleged “conspiracy.” In *Las Tejanas: 300 Years of History*, Teresa P. Acosta and Ruthe Winegarten wrote that Teresa Urrea did in fact help the revolutionist Lauro Aguirre in the fight against Porfirio Díaz. Aguirre had often visited the Urrea ranch and had helped educate Teresita. Some historians believe that Aguirre used her to help support his own political activities.

Professor Elisabeth Guerrero said that Teresa became more politically active once in the United States, allowing her picture to be taken and sold to raise funds for the resistance movement and even signing an anti-Porfirian constitution written by Aguirre. Aguirre also published an editorial signed by Urrea titled “Mis ideas sobre las revoluciones” in *El Independiente* on Aug. 21, 1896. She maintained her innocence and insisted she never had anything to do with the rebellions.

However, Dashu wrote that “Teresa went on with her political organizing of *El Plan de Tomochic*, which denounced the genocide of the Yaqui nation, urged restoration of the Liberal Constitution of 1857, and called for abolition of all laws or social practices that maintained ‘inequality based on gender, race, nationality, or class.’” Her support for such activities suggests Teresa was more than just a “folk saint” rendering aid to the poor.

Once again, Teresa Urrea managed to stay clear of imprisonment by making the move to El Paso, Texas, in 1896. In *Ringside Seat to a Revolution*, Romo wrote, “When she ... did arrive on June 13, 1896, about 3,000 pilgrims camped outside her home on the corner of Overland and Campbell Streets. They had traveled by foot, wagon and train from all over the U.S.-Mexican border.” In 1897, the Urreas moved to 500 S. Oregon St. in a building which now has a historical plaque describing her and the miraculous cures she effected. Many immigrants crossing into the United States made their home in *Segundo Barrio* and still do.

Teresa said that she treated up to 250 people a day in El Paso. The people who waited in lines to see Teresa included the prominent and wealthy, such as El Paso’s mayor Robert Campbell and Lauro Carrillo, the ex-governor of Chihuahua. Teresa Urrea never turned anyone away although she knew some people really didn’t have any faith in her healings and were just curious to see what all the commotion was.

Perales wrote that the El Paso press assisted Teresa by portraying her as an “apolitical spiritual healer,” allowing her to stay out of any political wrongdoing until an outbreak of border rebellions in August 1896. Frances Holden stated in an article for *The Handbook of Texas Online* that “on the morning of Aug. 12, 1896,

at least seventy armed ‘Teresitas’ attacked the Mexican customhouse in Nogales.” Perales says that these so-called “Teresitas” were made up of Yaqui, Pima and Tomochi Indians, many of whom were laborers for the Southern Pacific Railroad. The assault on the Nogales customhouse was a protest movement against anti-agrarian and anti-indigenous Mexican land policies. Similar attacks occurred at several border towns along the Texas border.

Once again, the rebels cried “Viva la Santa de Cabora!” associating Teresa Urrea with the rebellion. These confrontations gave Porfirio Díaz an insight to what the indigenous tribes thought of his “modernizing” and “urbanizing” plans for Mexico, according to Perales. Holden wrote that Díaz believed Teresa Urrea was directly involved and demanded her extradition

authorizes or at the same time interferes with these proceedings. Decidedly I am a victim ... expatriated from my country since May 19, 1892.”

A Mexican official quoted by *The New York Times* said that Teresa was responsible for the death of more than 1,000 people during the uprisings by Northern tribes. Telgen and Kamp and other historians noted that after a short time of being a tenant in El Paso’s *Segundo Barrio*, Teresa suffered harassment and even death threats from the Catholic Church and both the United States and Mexican government, forcing her to leave El Paso in search of a safer environment. In 1897, Teresa Urrea’s father moved the family to Clifton, Ariz.

Clifton was far away from political activity that lingered in cities such as El Paso. Tomás Urrea started a dairy and firewood business and Teresa continued her healing practices. On June 22, 1900, at the age of 27, she married Guadalupe Rodriguez against her father’s wishes. Her husband, a Yaqui Indian and copper mine worker, went “mad” on their honeymoon, shooting Teresa, and tried to take her back to Mexico. Although he did not injure Teresa seriously, he was sent to an insane asylum. After this disastrous marriage, a friend of the family convinced Teresa to leave Arizona for California in search of peace and quiet.

In California, Teresa joined up with a medical company based in New York that toured the United States on a “curing crusade.” Her only request was that the people she rendered aid to were not to be charged. The *San Francisco Examiner* claimed that she cured as many as 200 people a day. Teresa later found out the promoters were in fact

profiting off her patients, so she hired a lawyer to end their contract. While in New York, Teresa competed in a beauty pageant and won. On tour in St. Louis, Teresa called her friend from Clifton, Juana Van Order, to send one of her sons to be her interpreter. Her friend sent her oldest boy, John Van Order, who was 19 years old.

Teresa and John lived as husband and wife back in California and had two daughters, Laura in 1902 and Magdalena in 1904. Meanwhile, Teresa’s father died on Sept. 22, 1902. Teresa, John and their oldest daughter Laura moved into “Sonoratown,” a small barrio in Los Angeles, Calif., many of whose residents were from Sonora, Mexico. There she supported Mexican laborers fighting for higher pay. Teresa moved back to Clifton, Ariz., with her family after their home in Los Angeles burned down. Urrea had turned into the “darling” of Clifton’s most respected and wealthiest Anglos, having cured many residents, and in particular, the son of a wealthy banker.

Upon returning to Clifton, the “Santa de Cabora’s” health began to deteriorate and on Jan. 11, 1906, Teresa Urrea died of tuberculosis at the young age of 33. Teresa left her two daughters in the hands of her *comadre* and long time friend, Mariana Avendano, and her husband Fortunato. Many of Teresa Urrea’s believers felt she had used up all the energy and power that was given to her



Teresa Urrea once lived in this building at 500 S. Oregon St. in El Paso. Today, the faithful burn candles at the base of a plaque placed on a wall by the El Paso County Historical Commission, which identifies her home and celebrates her life. (Photo courtesy of Armando Rosales Jr.)

back to Mexico, a demand the United States ignored. Dashu wrote that Teresa was said to exclaim, “My poor Indians! They are the bravest and most persecuted people on earth! They will fight for their rights until they win or are wiped out. God help them! There are few of them left.”

Perales said that both the American and Mexican press wrote that copies of Lauro Aguirre’s newspaper *El Independiente* as well as photos of Teresa Urrea were found on the Mexican rebels who attacked the customhouse in Nogales. Lauro Aguirre’s *El Independiente* took the liberty of personifying Teresa as a “visionary woman” encouraging an “apocalyptic revolution.” In 1896, a statement from Teresa Urrea was printed in the *El Paso Herald*. It read:

“The press generally in these days has occupied itself with my humble person in terms unfavorable in the highest degree, since in a fashion most unjust—the fashion in the republic of Mexico; they refer to me as participating in political matters; they connect me with the events which have happened in Nogales, Sonora in Coyame and Presidio del Norte, Chihuahua where people have risen in arms against the government of Sr. General Don Porfirio Díaz... I have noticed with much pain that the persons who have taken up arms in Mexican territory have invoked my name in aid of the schemes they are carrying through. But I repeat I am not one who

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Development Association and director of the Texas Retailers Association, disagreed.

In Schwartz's opinion, a seven-day retail week would increase business costs without increasing sales because the number of shoppers would remain fairly constant. Not only would that lead to rising inflation and energy usage, Schwartz stated, but small business owners would be the most affected because of a lack of resources, such as a smaller number of employees to work more hours.

One thing was certain: Texas blue laws were confusing. In an *El Paso Times* article titled "Texas' Blue Law: What Can You Buy Sunday?" district attorneys from 31 counties were contacted for assistance in interpreting the law. Ten replied, all with conflicting answers.

Because the law was so difficult to decipher, it made enforcement almost impossible for local agencies. Investigations and policing came from the most unlikely sources: fellow merchants.

Here in El Paso, enforcement was financially backed by the Downtown Development Association (DDA). The DDA hired private investigators and attorneys to ensure compliance with Sunday legislation. Violators were contacted in writing, requesting compliance. If that failed, a civil injunction would be filed.

Several major court cases resulted from injunctions against El Paso's rebellious retailers. The owners of Malooly's Furniture Store, Gibson's Discount Stores, Michelle's Clothing, K-Mart and several automobile dealerships, as well as many others, found themselves before a judge.

In 1971, a civil court injunction was requested by the DDA against George and Eddy Malooly, owners of Malooly's Furniture Store, for selling prohibited items on consecutive Saturdays and Sundays.

"We are only trying to serve the people," the Malooly brothers stated in an article published in the *El Paso Herald-Post* on Dec. 4. "Many, many people have called us from outlying areas, saying they are unable to travel so far during the week."

Judge Hans Brockmoller, 120th District Court, granted the injunction, which barred any Sunday openings by Malooly's Furniture, according to an *El Paso Times* article on Dec. 17. The Maloolys did not file an appeal.

The DDA also requested a civil court injunction against Gibson's Discount Stores, with criminal charges pending. Brockmoller issued the injunction, and Gibson's appealed. In 1973, the appeal was denied, and Gibson's took the case to the Texas Supreme Court, which upheld the state's blue law in a 5-4 decision against Gibson's.

Justice Thomas M. Reavley stated that it was the court's opinion that blue laws were a legislative question, not a constitutional one. Justice Ross E. Doughty disagreed, questioning the legislature's right to prohibit the sale of certain merchandise one day a weekend.

Gibson's continued the fight all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court. In 1978 the case was dismissed due to failure to apply within a proper time frame.

In another case, Mickey Robbins, owner of Michelle's Corp., a clothing store, was held in contempt of court for violating an injunction requested by the El Paso Retailers Association. H.W. Freeman reported in the *El Paso Times* on Sept. 13, 1981, that Robbins felt he was not in violation of the law due to the law's "charity clause." Twenty-six percent of Sunday sales went

to the El Paso Rehabilitation Center where his daughter, Michelle, was being treated for cerebral palsy.

Opponents of the blue law had about as much luck with the state's legislature over the years as they had with judges. State Rep. Paul Moreno described the law in a 1971 *El Paso Times* article as "antiquated and wholly inadequate," but early repeal attempts, such as the one he introduced, regularly failed. On Feb. 12, 1975, Rep. John Hoestenbach announced a new effort at repeal. However, the bill was not even voted out of the House Business and Industry Committee.

The next major attempt to repeal blue laws was led by El Paso Rep. Robert (Bobby) Valles in 1979. Supported by Gov. Bill Clements, Valles' bill would have offered repeal on a local basis, so the will of the people could decide. Valles believed this distinction gave the bill a good chance of passage. Tri-State Associated Grocers Inc., representing 130 independent grocers, joined the fight. In an effort to get consumer feedback to the legislature, hundreds of leaflets and letters were passed out by El Paso grocers. Sam Stewart, Valles' administrative assistant, declared the bill dead on May 5. Ken Bridges, spokesman for Tri-State, vowed not to quit. "It'll come up again, no doubt about it."

The fight finally ended in June 1985. Texans For Blue Law Repeal, Inc., a group of retailers, headed up a strategy and lobbying campaign. The Texas legislative session ended with an indigent health care plan, seatbelt laws, increased arts financing – and repealed blue laws.

Today, remnants of Sunday legislation can still be seen in auto sales. Laws imposed by the Texas Department of Transportation require dealerships to close either Saturday or Sunday. The sales manager of a local automobile dealership told Russell Folk that because an automobile is such a large investment, most customers shop around for days before purchasing, so being closed one day doesn't affect business. When asked if he would open on Sundays if the law was repealed, he replied, "I don't think so ... people get tired, even the building gets tired."

Since 1863, weekends in Texas have been influenced by Sunday legislation, in one form or another. Liquor stores are still closed on Sunday. At other stores only beer and wine may be sold but only after noon. And on Christmas day, hard liquor cannot be purchased except at restaurants. But Texans and most Americans can buy almost anything else on Sunday, as most blue laws have been repealed across the country. ♀

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among heirs and sold. By 1895, with competition from the railroads, *El Molino* went out of business. The millstones were sold and shipped to Mexico, the wheel taken to a ranch in Cloudcroft.

Several members of the Hart family lived in the family home after Simeon and Jesusita died, including their bachelor son Juan, who built a large monument on the grounds in 1913 to honor his father. It was believed that Simeon Hart was buried under the tomb. The bodies of Juan Hart and his sister Pauline Hart Davis were removed from the monument in 1936 and taken to El Paso's Evergreen Cemetery. The monument itself was destroyed in the early 1950s to build Paisano Drive. No one knows exactly where the elder Harts are buried. Three other bodies were excavated close to the tomb, but none has been positively identified as Simeon or Jesusita.

Reputedly haunted and with a story all its own, the Hart mansion, best known to locals since 1940 as the Hacienda Café, stands empty in 2010, awaiting another owner. For more than 50 years the café welcomed natives and tourists alike to its historical rooms, serving food and drink in the shadow of the first industry of El Paso: Hart's Mill. ♀

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by the Virgin Mary. They believed all the healings and stress built up throughout her life finally took its toll. Hundreds of people attended her funeral at Shannon Hill Catholic Cemetery, where she was buried next to her father.

Moving from one country to another, then state to state and city to city, Teresa Urrea left a permanent imprint in the minds and hearts of all the people she healed and supported. Urrea's spiritual guidance is still called upon during the harshest and most desperate times. In El Paso's *Segundo Barrio*, many people are praying and hoping Teresa Urrea's spirit is with them. Parts of this historic community are in danger of being demolished to build a "downtown district" which could include one or more "big box" stores. The building Teresa lived in happens to be part of this section in the *Segundo Barrio*.

As she did in the past, Teresa Urrea continues to unite people of all races and classes. Many of *Segundo's* residents have come together to form *Colectivo Rezizte*, a group protesting against the politicians and business owners involved with the plans to destroy their community. With the help of the *Paso del sur* group and their faith in Santa Teresita, opponents of the use of eminent domain will continue to battle to preserve this part of El Paso's history and more importantly, the homes and lives of many. Although more than 100 years have passed since "La Santa de Cabora" physically graced our world, it is clear that she will long be a source of guidance and motivation for the poor and unrepresented. ♀

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In 1966, Goetting became only the third person in the United States to receive the National Margaret Sanger Award for her work in the birth control movement. In 1968, she received the Planned Parenthood Center of El Paso Leadership Award, the Presidential Award in 1970, and the Paseña Valerosa Award in 1974. In 1977, Goetting was recognized by the El Paso Women's Political Caucus as a Pioneer in Women's Rights. She received an honorary life membership from the El Paso Library Association in 1979. In 2009, she was named to the El Paso County Historical Society's Hall of Honor.

In a surprise move in July 2009, Planned Parenthood closed six facilities in El Paso because of financial problems. According to the *El Paso Times*, more than 12,000 patients were forced to look for alternate care.

Kathleen Staudt, a political science professor at the University of Texas at El Paso, told the *El Paso Times* that she was shocked. "How could the 21st largest city in the United States – El Paso – not have Planned Parenthood clinics?"

While other providers attempt to fill the gap, Planned Parenthood in El Paso will be missed. It will take another organization, other individuals to carry on the work and pioneering spirit of Betty Mary Smith Goetting, who did so much to help El Paso women. ♀