

# Cleofas Calleros Made Local History Important

By Ben Balusek, Vanessa Dunsavage and Luis Ramirez

**H**e was afflicted, as many of us are, with the pride of the Spaniard, the stoicism of the Indian, and the Mestizo temperament which results from both. A man who had been self-taught, who had been befriended by humble folk, businessmen, generals and at least one Pope, he was punctilious in dress and manner." These words by his nephew, Jesus Ochoa, reflect the respect and affection in which Cleofas Calleros, noted historian and social activist, was held at the time of his induction into the Hall of Honor of the El Paso County Historical Society, an organization which he helped found.

Cleofas Calleros was born on April 9, 1896, in Río Florido, Chihuahua, Mexico, to Ismael Calleros and Maria del Refugio Perales de Calleros. The family moved to the city of Chihuahua when Cleofas was six months old. In August 1902, when Calleros was six and a half years old, his father was exiled to El Paso, Texas.

In a 1972 UTEP Institute of Oral History interview by Oscar Martinez, Calleros stated that his father was contracted to bring building materials to El Teatro de los Héroes in Chihuahua. As he was delivering two loads of glass to the theater, an employee of the Mexican governor told him to deliver one load of glass to the Governor Luis Terrazas's "palace-to-be," and to deliver the other load of glass to the theater. When Ismael Calleros refused to comply with the corrupt governor's plans, he was exiled from Mexico and his wagons, mules and horses were seized.

He was placed on a train coming to El Paso and was ordered never to return to Mexico. A week later, Ismael Calleros sent a letter to his family telling them he had found a new job and advised them to come to El Paso. The family, including Cleofas, brother Martín, sister Rita and their mother, came in October 1902 and moved into a house on South Tays Street in the *Segundo Barrio*, according to Fred Morales, author of a biography of Calleros. The elder Calleros worked at the El Paso Dairy located at the end of present-day Cotton Street.

Cleofas witnessed parts of the early years of the Mexican Revolution since he lived in downtown El Paso, just blocks from the Mexican border. Morales stated in his book *History of Jake Erlich and Cleofas Calleros* that Calleros saw many of Pancho Villa's rebels at Sacred Heart Church, where they worshipped. Calleros also visited the rebel camp of Francisco Madero near ASARCO numerous times.

The younger Calleros attended Alamo School and then Sacred Heart School. He graduated from the eighth grade as the class valedictorian in 1911. In the interview with Martinez, Calleros said that by graduation, he had "already finished algebra, commercial arithmetic, commercial law, physiology and physical geography." According to Morales, Calleros took a bookkeeping course at El Paso's Draughton's Practical Business College, with the rest of his education obtained on his own, through reading and correspondence courses.

The major reason Calleros did not continue on to high school was one that prevented many in the United States from attending high school in the early 1900s: the need to work and help their families. Throughout his youth, even while studying, Calleros aided his family by working. His first job was with the El Paso Dairy, his father's employer. The *El Paso Times* reported that Calleros also worked in the Ellis Brothers Printing Shop after school. It was here that he learned how to bind books by hand. This technique stuck with Calleros and became very useful in the future.



**Cleofas Calleros was made a Knight of the Order of Isabella the Catholic by Spain for his work on Spanish history in the Southwest. (Photo courtesy of the El Paso County Historical Society)**

In 1912, Calleros began working for the Santa Fe Railway. He began his career with the railroad as a messenger boy, working seven days a week from 7 a.m. to 8 p.m., using his own bicycle and earning \$30 a month, which Calleros said in the Martinez interview was "very, very good money." At 17, the young Calleros was collecting waybills for goods for the railroad, including those from Francisco "Pancho" Villa, whose headquarters were in the Toltec Building. Morales wrote that the rebels paid in gold, a weight under which the boy staggered.

Calleros worked hard and fought to obtain jobs that were above the standard for Mexican immigrants or nationals. Calleros told Martinez that working for the railroad was not easy because Mexicans were usually not found in higher positions and both he and two other Mexicans were called "greasers" and "dirty Mexicans," and members of the KKK and Masons tried to get them fired.

The Selective Act of 1917 began drafting young men to serve in World War I, and Calleros lied about his age and citizenship to be a part of it. He served with Company E, 315th Supply Train, 90th Division and became a quartermaster sergeant. He took part in the battles at St. Mihiel and Meuse Argonne in France, where he was wounded in action and received the Purple Heart. He also served as a part of the occupation of Germany until 1919 and was a member of the U. S. Army Officers Reserve Corps until 1938.

Ochoa related that during his time in Europe, Calleros was able to take a trip to Spain to explore the

archives housed in the University of Salamanca. While reading the codices of the Indies, "he realized for the first time in his life that historians often wrote with a less than accurate perception or knowledge of the facts: he had come face to face with the de-hispanization of history – and his interest in setting the record straight was to remain, as his avocation, his prime concern for the remainder of his life," according to his nephew. The history of the Southwest, Texas, New Mexico and Mexico would fascinate him and be the topic of lifelong research.

On April 25, 1918, Calleros married Benita Blanco, who was born in Chihuahua and had immigrated to the United States in 1905, three years after the Calleros family came to El Paso. Cleofas and Benita Calleros became naturalized citizens the same year. They had one daughter, Margarita, born in 1926.

After World War I, Calleros continued his education by studying law and interstate commerce and receiving certificates in both from LaSalle Extension University in 1920, as well as studying and becoming certified in "boys' guidance" by St. Edward's University in 1924. He would later receive an honorary master of fine arts degree from New Mexico State University and an honorary doctorate in history from the University of New Mexico for his research and publications.

Calleros became the Border Representative of the National Catholic Conference Department of Immigration in El Paso. During his 42 years as welfare director and social worker, Calleros helped handle more than one million immigration cases dealing with passport problems, U.S. citizenship and permanent residency with very little help. Calleros aided members of religious orders expelled from Mexico when the country began persecuting the Catholic Church after the Mexican Revolution. He also worked to return many American citizens who were "repatriated" to Mexico by the U.S. government during the Depression.

A devout Catholic, Calleros not only worked for the Church officially for many years, but also toiled for the institution in his time off. Morales wrote that Bishop A. J. Schuler named Calleros to a committee overseeing the building of the magnificent Cristo Rey statue on the top of a mountain overlooking Texas, Mexico and New Mexico. Calleros directed the building of the road to the top of the mountain and the feeding of the volunteers who did the work. He directed the first procession up the mountain in 1939.

Calleros was involved with numerous organizations through the years, many of which he was either the founder or co-founder. He was the founder of the El Paso's Boy's Club and was a Scoutmaster of Troop 11 of the Boy Scouts. He was a co-founder of the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), the Chihuahua State Historical Society and the Western History Association.

Calleros was awarded the Daliet Award for the years 1925, 1926, 1927 and 1928 for his research and writing on the Texas Knights of Columbus Historical Society for the Texas Centennial. At the time of the awards, Calleros was district deputy and grand knight for the Del Norte Council 2592, Knights of Columbus, having been a founder of the first chapter in Texas.

He shared the Award of Merit, given by the American Association for State and Local History, with the *El Paso Times* for a series of 215 articles that dealt with West Texas history. These articles became the foundation of the book Calleros wrote, in collaboration

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with Marjorie F. Graham, entitled *El Paso – Then and Now*, a book originally planned to be seven volumes, recording the history of El Paso from 1536 to 1896. To satisfy the requests from readers for a book chronicling events from the time of their parents and themselves, the 1890s, Calleros began with volume seven, published in 1954. Unfortunately, only one volume was realized and dealt with life in El Paso in 1896, reflecting the splendid modern 1890s.

By 1926, Calleros was a notary public and had begun offering free citizenship classes at St. Ignatius Church, something he did for 50 years. Calleros worked with several day nurseries as well as with Sacred Heart Orphanage and the St. Joseph's Clinic and Maternity Home, the El Paso Child Welfare Board and the El Paso Health Commission. Besides his interest in the history of Catholic sites and organizations, he was greatly concerned with issues of undocumented immigrants or "illegal aliens" as they were known in his day.

On February 22, 1954, Calleros was knighted by the Spanish government into the Order of Isabella the Catholic. The *El Paso Times* reported that "Calleros was awarded the decoration, one of Spain's highest, in recognition of his writings in early Hispanic history, especially the earliest exploration-missionary period in the Southwest." In 1961 in honor of his work with the Knights of Columbus, he was made a Knight Commander of the Order of St. Gregory the Great. He was awarded the Rose of Our Lady of Guadalupe by the Archbishop of Mexico in 1963.

One of his greatest works was a true labor of love for Calleros. He co-authored with Angel Alcazar de Velasco a massive book all made by hand using 14th century methods and a 17th century Gothic type. Entitled *Historia Del Templo de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe* and published in 1959, the book observed the 300th anniversary of the founding of the Mission of Our Lady Guadalupe in Paso del Norte (Juárez, Chihuahua) by Fray de San Francisco y Zúñiga in 1659. It took seven

years to complete the book, and Calleros suffered a heart attack while working on the tome. All of the copies were bound in authentic Mexican calf leather and were embossed with 23 carat gold from Germany. One copy was hand printed on authentic vellum and presented to Pope John XXIII. Five copies were done on silk.

Forty copies were printed on parchment paper with Roman numerals. Another 40 copies were on parchment paper with embossed printing. Three hundred copies were on Florentine paper with Arabic numbers. Each page had a different border and no words were hyphenated. The renowned El Paso artist José Cisneros supplied 12 drawings for the book. Calleros told the *El Paso Times* that the book was a "dream come true" for him.

Morales reported the book was financed by the Ponder, Morgan and Momsen families of El Paso. Calleros gave a parchment copy of the book to fellow Texan and former Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson. A copy was also given to President John F. Kennedy, the first Catholic to be elected to the U. S. presidency. The majority of the copies were placed in museums, libraries and universities across the globe, including one in the El Paso Public Library and another in the New Mexico State University Library, the latter given by R. E. McKee. The El Paso Library copy is now located in the Meadows Library of the Museum of Art.

In 1970, Calleros donated his personal collection of books, documents, manuscripts and personal papers, some of which dated back to 1663, to the El Paso Public Library. Calleros told the *Times*, "The City of El Paso has been good to me. With the help of its people, I have acquired this collection and I want to give it back to them."

His collection of *National Geographic* magazines which he personally bound with many unique bindings was a part of the collection donated to the library. He had 110 volumes of the magazine dating back to 1907. He bound each volume in a different material, including animal skins and pelts, fabrics, stones, paintings, wood,

maps, X-ray negatives and feathers. The magazine dedicated a page to him in the March 1962 issue, showing him with his collection.

Cleofas Calleros died on February 22, 1973, at age 76. He was buried at Fort Bliss National Cemetery with military honors. His daughter, Margarita Blanco, donated another collection of personal papers and photographs to the Special Collections Department of the University of Texas at El Paso Library. In 1977, Calleros was inducted into the El Paso County Historical Society's Hall of Honor. In 1992, West Eighth Street was renamed Calleros Court in the Chihuahuita Historic District by the City Council of El Paso.

In his interview with Oscar Martinez, Cleofas Calleros decried the use of the word "Chicano" in the 1960s and 1970s as the civil rights movement grew, first in the West and Southwest and then nationwide. However, he sympathized with the aims of the Mexican American movement to receive equal opportunity in all phases of American life and to be recognized in American society for their contributions.

Calleros wrote about the local Tigua Indians and was honored by them; he wrote the history of El Paso's missions long before city leaders decided they should be maintained and publicized as tourist attractions; he recorded the history of both civil and religious organizations; he wrote and gave speeches in both Spanish and English about El Paso and Texas but also New Mexico, Mexico and Spain. A community activist for decades, he worked with countless community and religious organizations throughout his life, founding or co-founding many of them. He fought against discrimination his entire life, trying to make El Paso a better place in which to live, all the while making a living by helping immigrants to this country become productive citizens – just as his family and he had. ✍

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get its start, donating \$25,000 each year for five years to help establish the organization, according to Metz.

The McKees had an impressive collection of Southwestern and Indian Art, knowing many of the artists personally. The McKees helped with the establishment of the El Paso Museum of Art and the procurement of the Samuel H. Kress Collection of paintings through their relationship with the president and art director of the famous collection. The El Paso museum received 57 paintings and two sculptures, dating from the 13th century. It was one of 40 museums and universities in the nation to receive a part of the Kress collection. Metz wrote that in addition to paintings, the McKees collected pottery by Maria Martinez, famous for the "black on black" technique, treasures that McKee displayed in his offices as well as in his home.

McKee stepped down as president of the company on February 1, 1961, little more than a year after his wife Gladys Evelyn McKee died on January 26, 1960. McKee remained chairman of the board. His son, Robert E. Jr., took over as vice-chairman and treasurer, and youngest son Louis, already supervising engineer of the firm, became vice president.

At the age of 75, Robert Eugene McKee, Sr. died on October 21, 1964. His survivors included his second wife, Mary Grace, six sons, two daughters,

27 grandchildren and five great grandchildren. The family home was donated to the Rehabilitation and Cerebral Palsy Center of El Paso in 1966 and later acquired by various private owners, according to Alex Hinojosa in an article for the *El Paso Times*.

During his lifetime, McKee was named Outstanding Citizen by the El Paso Realtors, given the Conquistador award in 1960 by the city of El Paso and inducted into the El Paso County Historical Society's Hall of Honor in 1967. Pepperdine College named him to their Hall of American Builders. A 32nd degree Scottish Rite Mason, McKee also served as a vestryman at St. Clement's Episcopal Church, where the McKee Chapel was built in his honor. He was active on the boards of the El Paso Museum and the Southwestern Children's Home, two of his major community interests.

After McKee's death, the company continued building, producing the Civic Center and William Beaumont Hospital, the Fox Fine Arts building and the engineering complex on the UTEP campus and many others in El Paso, as well as the Atlantic Richfield Plaza and other buildings in Los Angeles and multiple projects in Dallas and other cities. The company merged with Santa Fe Industries in 1972 and R. E. McKee Inc. moved its headquarters to Dallas. By 1982, only one McKee actively worked with the company, and Santa Fe Industries sold R. E. McKee Contracting Company. According to

Metz, the McKee Contracting firm closed on June 30, 1995, and dissolved on December 6, 1996.

Celebrating its 60th anniversary in 2012, the McKee Foundation is administered by R. E. McKee's family, with Louis McKee serving as President and Treasurer of the nonprofit organization. The foundation donates thousands of dollars for scholarships at the University of Texas in Austin and El Paso, New Mexico State University and the University of New Mexico. For their work, the McKee family and the Foundation were inducted into the Texas Philanthropy Hall of Fame in 2001.

Robert E. McKee's company constructed more than 3,000 projects in the United States and Panama. McKee helped to change the face of many cities throughout the nation. As Leon Metz said, "The McKee name will live on, remembered not only in those thousands of buildings, but in the art collection and other interests through which R. E. McKee sought to make the world a better place for those with whom he shared it." T

(Photos of Scottish Rite Temple and McKee home on pages 8 and 9 by Kim Wilson. All others courtesy of the Robert E. and Evelyn McKee Foundation Archives.)

