

Elizabeth Garrett: Songbird of the Southwest

By Daniela Ceron and Braydon Miller

When the name Garrett is mentioned, especially in the Southwest, most people automatically think of Pat Garrett who killed Billy the Kid, an alias of notorious outlaw William Bonney, another alias that Henry McCarty used. Sheriff Pat Garrett shot the Kid while attempting to recapture him after he broke out of jail. Even though Pat Garrett is better known throughout the country as a tough lawman, his daughter Elizabeth holds the place of honor in New Mexico. Elizabeth Garrett was a talented composer, singer and musician. Given her accomplishments during a time when women were not considered equal is remarkable, but that she was also blind her entire life makes it truly amazing.

Elizabeth Garrett was the third of eight children born to Pat and Apolinaria Gutierrez Garrett. She was born on Oct. 12, 1885, at her father's ranch in Eagle Creek, about four miles north of Ruidoso, NM. In his biography of Pat Garrett, Leon Metz wrote that there are several theories about how Elizabeth came to be blind. The two most plausible are that her blindness was due to an inappropriate medication being applied to her eyes to prevent infection as an infant or that she was simply born that way. Despite the fact that their daughter was different, the Garretts were determined to help Elizabeth become as independent as possible. She was raised to be self-sufficient and uninhibited like the other children in her family.

The Garrett family moved to a ranch in the Pecos Valley near Roswell, NM, when Elizabeth was very young. In a 1937 interview with Georgia Redfield for the federal Works Progress Administration program, Elizabeth said, "My childhood days on the ranch near Roswell were happy – neither constricted nor restricted." Her father insisted that his daughter have a normal childhood with few limitations. Elizabeth climbed trees, rode horseback and explored her environment freely.

Ruth Hall wrote in her biography of Elizabeth Garrett entitled *A Place of Her Own* that her father had originally decided to refrain from mentioning her disability at all. He taught Elizabeth how to use her hands and other senses to "see" what she could not with her eyes. The Garretts were very progressive in their attitude and care of Elizabeth. At this time in history, most people with disabilities generally were not taught to be self-sufficient. Her parents appear to have been way before their time in their parenting.

Elizabeth's father explained to her that she was visually impaired, unlike her siblings, before she left for school. Hall wrote that she cried at first as her father tenderly made clear that she was not like others and would have to attend a school far away from home in order to become self-reliant. Although she had some difficulty comprehending how she was different, she quickly learned to deal with the news with an open mind. Pat Garrett accompanied his daughter on the long train ride to Austin where she was enrolled at the Texas School for the Blind at the age of six. This was the

only school of its kind in the area that taught visually impaired individuals to become independent.

Elizabeth's qualms at being far from home disappeared when she discovered she would learn to play the piano. According to Hall, Elizabeth learned how to read Braille and write letters using a special typewriter. Students at the school also learned math, science and history. Elizabeth did well in all her studies, but excelled in her music classes. She learned to play several instruments and even formed and directed an octet.

Without such a school like this, Elizabeth Garrett more than likely would have lived a more restrained, less fulfilled life because of the limited options a person with a disability would have had at the time. It is because of the quality of education that she received and the

After graduating with honors from the Texas School for the Blind, she returned to her family, then living in El Paso. Her father had been appointed El Paso Customs Collector in late 1901. Elizabeth sang and played the piano at popular events of the El Paso Woman's Club and at teas and concerts in homes of prominent families. She became the director of a church choir and opened a small studio where she continued teaching music with the piano that her father had lovingly purchased for her. After Pat Garrett's appointment expired in 1905, the family returned to Las Cruces, but Elizabeth decided to stay in El Paso.

In 1908, Elizabeth moved back to New Mexico to be with her family after the murder of her father. Pat Garrett was shot twice from behind, a few miles from his ranch. Although Wayne Brazel, who had leased the Garrett ranch, confessed and was acquitted, some historians believe in a complicated conspiracy about the death of the man whom many believe brought law and order to New Mexico.

Soon after the death of her father, Elizabeth decided she would go to Chicago to study music. According to Hall, she had dreamed of studying under the famed Herbert Witherspoon, principal bass with the New York Metropolitan Opera and voice teacher who later went on to become the General Manager of the Met. With her family's blessing, she made the long train ride to Chicago. The El Paso's Woman's Club helped her pay for the trip by arranging for her to give concerts on the way.

In Chicago, she took a job at the YWCA as entertainer and director of music to pay for her room and board. Among other jobs, she sang Spanish and Mexican songs in Spanish in select restaurants during dinner hours. Always proud of her Mexican heritage on her mother's side, Elizabeth was bilingual, as were all the other Garrett children. After two years of study with Witherspoon, she returned home to Las Cruces.

Elizabeth was extremely proud when New Mexico officially became a state in 1912. Hall quoted Elizabeth as saying, "We've grown up together, my New Mexico and me." Garrett wanted to make others aware of New

Mexico's beauty. Her love for the state was reflected in many of the songs she wrote and performed. People soon dubbed her the "Songbird of the Southwest."

Garrett turned down an attractive marriage proposal in order to continue and grow in her musical career. In 1915, Elizabeth represented New Mexico at the world's fair, the San Diego Exposition. Not only was she the official hostess of the state's exhibition, but she also entertained visitors daily with her singing.

She composed "O, Fair New Mexico" in 1916 and the song was adopted as the official state song of New Mexico on March 14, 1917. The province of Ontario, Canada, asked permission to use the song, substituting the words, "O, Fair Ontario." In 1937, New Mexico was the first state to pass legislation which expressed



Elizabeth Garrett composed the official state song of New Mexico and sang all over the country. (Photo courtesy of the University of Texas at El Paso Library, Special Collections Department)

invaluable skills she learned, along with the help of her forward thinking parents and family, that Elizabeth was able to earn a living, to travel and to thrive as a career woman, a rarity in the early 1900s.

In James Shinkle's *Reminiscences of Roswell Pioneers*, Elizabeth recalled, "My father shared with me all the wonders and beauties and secrets of nature. This intimacy brought to me the tender side of his nature as perhaps no one else ever knew it." This bond influenced her as a composer, leading her to write numerous songs about nature. In the interview with Redfield, Elizabeth recalled that one of her earliest memories of composing was of a song about the fragrance of apple blossoms in the air and the bees that she could hear buzzing while she was swinging from an apple tree. Garrett often channeled the beauty and peace she encountered as a child into her songs.

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appreciation of a composer's accomplishment by granting a monthly stipend to Garrett for the duration of her lifetime.

According to Hall, Garrett joined the Red Cross in 1917 after the United States entered World War I. She entertained soldiers at hospitals and training camps, including Fort Bliss. She ended up moving to New York to further help the Red Cross. During her time in New York, Elizabeth met and became good friends with Helen Keller, the deaf and blind author, speaker and social activist. They worked together for the Red Cross, making appearances at hospitals and visiting wounded soldiers. Garrett also worked with the New York Commission for the Blind and for women's suffrage.

People from all over came to listen to Elizabeth sing and play the piano. She even played for prisoners. After one such appearance at Sing Sing Prison, one of the prisoners wrote a poem in tribute to her. In part it said:

*They call her blind, yet she could lead
A thousand soul-sick men
.....
And show the message all could read
Of love and peace and hope.*

While in New York, Garrett attended the opera, hearing the great Caruso several times.

According to Hall, Helen Keller inscribed a copy of her book *Midstream: My Later Life* saying, "To our dear Elizabeth: There is a flavor about her friendship that leaves the heart hungry for a touch of her hand and the sound of her lovely voice. She lives to bring light, happiness, and music to all." This aptly sums up how most people felt about Elizabeth Garrett.

Garrett returned to Las Cruces with the death of her sister Anne. Shortly after, Garrett returned to the Pecos Valley of her childhood and had her own stuccoed adobe house built in Roswell by Frank Stanhardt, according to the interview with Redfield. She filled "La Casita," as she named her home, with color, light and things New Mexican. The house was built to her specifications, including using ramps and handrails instead of steps. She had flowers everywhere and the shades were never drawn over the windows.

Her décor included sun symbol designs and thunderbirds, along with brightly colored Navajo rugs and native pottery. The house had a kiva fireplace and an outdoor fireplace for grilling. A Steinway grand piano paid for by generous friends and donations from school children of New Mexico highlighted one room. She lived in this home until her death.

Garrett served on the Board of Regents for New Mexico's School for the Blind in Alamogordo, for which she wrote the school song. During World War II, she again worked for

the Red Cross, performing for soldiers in hospitals and army bases.

Because of the encouragement and support that she received from her family, friends, and teachers, Garrett became a respected singer-songwriter, pianist, teacher and advocate for others with disabilities. She did not give up when faced with adversity, lived life to its fullest and became more independent than many sighted women in the same era. Garrett died on Oct. 16, 1947. She was found on the sidewalk with her Seeing Eye dog by her side. It is unknown whether she died from injuries suffered from the fall, or if she suffered a stroke or heart attack while on her way home.

Throughout her life, Garrett performed across the nation and penned numerous songs about the Southwest, including a song about El Paso written in 1927. At a time where there were no amenities for the handicapped and women were still considered the weaker sex, Garrett overcame her obstacles and proved that anything was possible with determination. She had the ability to portray beauty in her music even though she could not physically see it and had courage and strength comparable to that of her father. Elizabeth Garrett, the "Songbird of the Southwest," conquered her world on her own terms. In the interview with Redfield, Elizabeth said, "Quite frequently my father had to bring harmony with a gun. I always have tried to do so by carrying a tune." ♪

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on May 8, 1961. Elliot had died two weeks before from a heart attack on April 24. Not only had he greatly increased Josephine's wealth, but he and his wife had been great friends to Josephine Clardy Fox.

Burns noted that in 1956, Josephine donated land to the Board of Trustees of the El Paso Independent School District for a school to be located at 5508 Delta that would be named in honor of her mother, Allie D. Clardy. In 1961, she gave land on Lisbon Street for a branch library named in her honor.

Josephine was also active in the social scene of El Paso and assisted many organizations throughout the city. She was a member of the El Paso County Historical Society, the National Society of Arts and Letters and other clubs. She supported the El Paso Museum of Art, the El Paso Symphony Orchestra, the El Paso Community Concert Association, the Dallas Civic Opera and other groups. She often bought blocks of concert tickets and gave them to friends and students. In 1953, she was named to the Advisory Committee of the National Arts Foundation.

In 1959, while dining at the Statler-Hilton Hotel in Dallas, Josephine slipped and broke a hip. Then in December 1964, she broke the same hip and spent the rest of her remaining years at Providence Memorial Hospital. On occasion, she left the hospital to enjoy herself at dinner and shows with friends at clubs in Juárez. While in the hospital she surrounded herself with her prized possessions, paintings, jewelry and hats. In a July 28, 1970, interview, Joe Moreno, who worked for

the El Paso National Bank, told historian Leon Metz that hats and jewelry were Josephine's greatest extravagances. She had loved her diamond bracelets in particular.

Josephine Clardy Fox died on May 11, 1970, at Providence Memorial Hospital, having converted to Catholicism, her husband's faith. She was buried next to Eugene and her parents at Evergreen Cemetery in El Paso. After her death, it was discovered that she had left the majority of her estate, valued at over three million dollars at the time, to the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP). No restrictions were put on the disbursement of the funds. Her only request was for \$20,000 to be set aside for a scholarship fund and \$2,500 for a student loan fund.

Along with the monetary donation, she also left her possessions to the university. The Centennial Museum, located on campus, housed for decades many of the art objects and furniture that were given to the University. In 2009, a decision was made to put the majority of the collection up for auction because of storage issues. A public auction was held in December 2009. Scott Cutler, curator of the Centennial Museum, reported that the money generated from the auction would be used for the upkeep of the remaining collection and for the museum.

In 1972, the Institute of Oral History was established at UTEP by a grant from the Josephine Clardy Fox estate. Individuals with knowledge of a wide variety of subjects of interest locally from arts and literature to political and social issues were interviewed over a number of years and the interviews transcribed and made available to scholars. Many interviews are available online, with the originals housed in the special collections of the UTEP Library.

The university received a surprise while cataloging the 1,000 books from the Clardy Fox collection. Thirteen of the books contained rare fore-edged paintings, a method of taking watercolors and painting a scene on the right-hand open edge of the book. Dale Walker in his article "Re-discovering Fore-Edge Paintings: Art Beneath the Gilt," which appeared in the Fall 1970 *Nova*, stated that one of the 13 is a rare double fore-edged painting. *The Gentleman's and Citizen's Almanack*, compiled by Samuel Watson and published in Dublin in 1786, shows a fishing scene in one direction and a cock fight in the other direction.

In 1978, the fine arts building at UTEP was renamed the Josephine Clardy Fox Fine Arts Center in honor of her generosity to the university. Hundreds of her elaborately decorated wide brimmed picture hats were donated to the drama department to be used in costumes.

The contributions that Josephine Clardy Fox gave to the city can still be seen today. The library and school are testaments to the enduring memory of the Clardy Fox family. Fox Plaza remains a neighborhood shopping center, and UTEP continues to benefit from the revenues of her endowment. Anyone who attends a play or concert at the Fox Fine Arts Center unknowingly honors her memory, and the Institute of Oral History remains an important source of local history. Josephine Clardy Fox lived an unorthodox life in many ways, but she did it "her way," enriching the lives around her and contributing to the community and city she called home. ♥

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The Cohen brothers received numerous awards. According to their biographies on file at UTEP Special Collections, Andy was the first person to be elected to the El Paso Athletic Hall of Fame in 1955. Syd received the same honor in 1962. In 1962, Andy accepted the Merit Award from El Paso High School for his great contribution to sports, and the City of El Paso presented him with the Conquistador Award. In 1985, Andy was also named to the Texas Basketball Players Hall of Fame. Syd also won several bowling championships in El Paso. The brothers belonged to numerous civic organizations and coached both basketball and baseball for children in the city. Andy and Syd Cohen were the first two players elected to the El Paso Baseball Hall of Fame in 1988. Bob

Ingram wrote in *Baseball: From Browns to Diablos* that the Cohen brothers are now considered "the most respected and revered names in El Paso baseball."

With the death of Syd on April 9, 1988, followed by Andy's death six months later, on Oct. 29, 1988, the El Paso baseball community and the city itself lost two of the greatest baseball players and gentlemen that have called El Paso home. Not many El Pasoans know about the history behind the naming of Cohen Stadium which was built for the El Paso Diablos. Marina Lee, Andy's daughter, went as far as getting letters from Tommy Lasorda, who was manager for the Los Angeles Dodgers, to lobby city council to name the stadium after her father and uncle. Cohen Stadium is located in

Northeast El Paso on the Diana Exit off Highway 54 just before Transmountain Road.

In her letter to City Council, Lee wrote: "It [Cohen] is a name that would bring pride and honor to the stadium, to El Paso and the sport and/or business of baseball. It will always be meaningful." The meaning behind a name is not the number of friends left behind or the money generated or the number of sports jerseys sold at the end of the day. A name is the mark that one leaves in history and the memories that are left for others to enjoy once that person is gone. Andy and Syd Cohen were a definite example of this. In El Paso, the name Cohen means baseball and the long history of the sport in the city. ✍