

A Passionate Life: Josephine Clardy Fox

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World traveler. Art collector. Socialite. Business woman. Benefactor. These titles describe Josephine Clardy Fox, a fixture in the social and financial world for decades in El Paso and the woman who made sure that the names “Clardy” and “Fox” would be familiar to El Pasoans for a long time. Today, not many people know much about the woman who grew up in the Southwest, but was well known in New York, San Francisco, London and other big cities, a woman who made a huge impact on the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) without ever attending it and on the community that was enhanced by her wealth and philanthropic contributions.

Josephine Clardy was born in Missouri on Aug. 13, 1881, to Allie Davis and Zeno B. Clardy. She was their only child. Her father was a prosecuting attorney for St. Francois County in Southeast Missouri. In 1882, Zeno Clardy moved his family to El Paso, for reasons that are not clear. According to Ruby Burns, author of a full-length biography on Josephine Clardy Fox, he may have been lured by the prospect of promising business opportunities arising from the arrival of the Southern Pacific Railroad and others in 1881 in El Paso. W. H. Timmons in *El Paso: A Borderlands History* wrote that the coming of the railroad caused the population to double in just one year from 800 in 1880 to 1,600 in 1881.

Burns related that Zeno Clardy’s brother-in-law, Firmin Desloge, was captivated by the stories of El Paso as a boom town. However, he had a large, highly successful lead-mining business and could not move, so he gave Clardy money to invest for him in real estate. Upon arriving in El Paso, Clardy joined a law practice with Allen Blacker, a prominent attorney. Clardy was known to accept parcels of land in exchange for his legal services and became a wealthy landowner from the continued practice of this bartering system.

Young Josephine Clardy attended a parochial school until 1891, when she entered the public school system, attending Mesa School for the fourth grade. She remained in the public schools until 1895. She then attended finishing school at Hosmer Hall in St. Louis, where she quickly developed a love of drama and music, interests which fueled her passion for the arts throughout her life. Josephine’s aunt and uncle, Lydia and Firmin Desloge, introduced and included her in many of the functions exclusive to their social circle while she was in St. Louis.

In the spring of 1901, Josephine returned to El Paso with her father. A few days later, Zeno Clardy died after suffering a heart attack at the age of 45. His wife and daughter were devastated by his death.

That fall, with the encouragement of her mother, Josephine went to Berkeley, CA, to study music. A year later, she traveled to New York to study with noted voice teacher, Emilio Agramonte, known for his work in opera and oratorio and director of the Gounod Society of New Haven, CT, dedicated to the performance of classical vocal music and named for the 19th century French composer Charles Gounod.

Burns said that Josephine returned to El Paso in 1902 and performed as a soloist in a musical called “Lullaby Concert.” Josephine traveled extensively in the United States and Europe, where she continued her study of music. She eventually gave up singing, however,

perhaps because she suffered an eye injury that would plague her the rest of her life, according to Burns.

Josephine Clardy was a tall, beautiful, vibrant, wealthy, and, by some accounts, a spoiled young woman. She was not ready to settle down into marriage as some of her friends had already done. She loved the attention of her suitors from several different countries and enjoyed being involved in social activities in El Paso when she was here. One of her more determined suitors was Eugene Emmett Fox, a hard working,

much happiness. Josephine quickly contacted him and convinced him that she loved him.

The two married on Jan. 20, 1916, in New York when Clardy was 35. The couple settled in El Paso at a house located at 1119 Montana Ave. At this time, Josephine began a collection of elegant furniture and art for their home. In 1926, Fox’s work took him to San Francisco, and the couple spent three happy years there, according to Burns. Fox was next dispatched to Washington, DC, but Josephine did not move with him. She continued her own travels, with El Paso remaining her home. Their marriage was to be plagued by years of separation due to his work, her illnesses and their separate travels apart.

Eugene Fox supported Josephine and himself on his salary and his own money. Contrary to what some might have thought, Fox said, “What I have, I have acquired by my own hard work. ... I have never spent one penny of my wife’s money.”

During the Depression, however, the couple suffered financial hardships caused by the weak economy. The First National Bank collapsed in 1931. Many businesses and tenants suffered because of the failure, which in turn affected Josephine’s income. She and her mother struggled to pay the taxes on their property. Eugene was living out of pocket trying to obtain surveys for Western Pacific Railroad but was not being paid for his time and effort.

Josephine suffered injuries in an automobile accident in 1933, the basis for her back pain in later years. Her husband, meanwhile, had taken a job for about one-third his previous salary and he rode night trains to avoid hotel bills and sent what he could to his wife. He rarely saw her at this point, and Christmas of 1933 would be their last day together. In March 1934, an unconscious Eugene Fox was taken off a train to a hospital after visiting his family in Kansas City. He died from a massive cerebral hemorrhage in Topeka, KA, on April 2, 1934.

Six years later, Josephine’s beloved mother died on March 23, 1940. Josephine Clardy Fox found herself alone, with no children and no immediate family in a huge house. Burns related that there were times when the ailing woman found herself bedridden and in pain, and although her house was full of fine art, it sometimes contained no food and she had no one to love her.

In the 1940s a new man would come into her life whose financial expertise would greatly add to her wealth. That man was William J. Elliot. According to Burns, Elliot came to El Paso in 1939. He was in real estate and owned a corporation named El Paso Properties. He later orchestrated the sale of some of Josephine’s

land for a shopping center, a post office and housing developments.

The Clardy-Fox Additions were tracts of land that had been used to grow cotton in the Lower Valley. The land was sold to build homes during the boom after World War II. In 1955, Josephine sold 21 acres for more than \$400,000 to be developed into the Fox Plaza Shopping Center. Ground was finally broken in 1958 and doors officially opened on July 1, 1959. Land on Paisano and Cortez Streets was sold to the government for \$345,000, with groundbreaking for the new post office occurring



Josephine Clardy Fox was known for her love of hats. (Photo courtesy of the University of Texas at El Paso Library, Special Collections Department)

handsome railroad executive, who took a room at the exclusive Toltec Club when he arrived in El Paso. He and Josephine maintained a close friendship for several years starting in 1904. According to Burns, it was understood that they would marry once Josephine consented. Clardy kept him dangling as she dallied with other men and enjoyed the single life with friends and as a traveling companion to her mother.

Fox took care of many of the business affairs of both Josephine and her mother, met Josephine in New York when he could and was infinitely patient. Finally, however, in summer 1915, Fox broke off the unofficial engagement and went on his way, wishing her

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