Notable Women of El Paso: How Many Do You Know?

By Sarah E. John

Some people might think that there are few significant women who contributed to the development of El Paso. In fact, the opposite is true. There are so many women who should be mentioned that it would take many publications to list all of them. The “her-story” of El Paso women reflects the city’s international influences, and it is a story which encompasses several centuries, races, nationalities and age groups. The women of El Paso have been actively engaged in the civic, political, economic and social development of the city. They were businesswomen, educators, domestics, laundresses, military women, factory workers, artists and architects – and most were raising families at the same time. Their hard work and struggles have helped all of us back and forwards and diagonally with no spaces between first and last names. Good luck! The solution may be found at the end of this article, page 15.

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While a couple of these women technically did not live in El Paso, they still made a contribution to its history, either through their presence here at one time or another or through the accomplishments of their descendants. Some were prominent, some will not be familiar to you, but all made their contribution. See if you can find the names of 20 such women in the word search puzzle below. Solutions run up and down, forward and backwards and diagonally with no spaces between first and last names. Good luck! The solution may be found at the end of this article, page 15.

Isabel de Oñate, Juan de Oñate’s wife, was the granddaughter of Hernán Cortés and the great-granddaughter of Moctezuma. She is a perfect example of the mestiza, a person of both indigenous and European blood. She, along with other mestizos and Spaniards, passed through the area in 1598 on their way to establish a permanent Spanish colony in what is now Northern New Mexico.

Juana Márquez Dowell (1853-1891) was the daughter and granddaughter of Tigua Indian caciques, or chiefs, from Ysleta. In 1852 she married Ben Dowell, a veteran of the Mexican War who became a popular local saloon keeper. They lived on a ranch at what would eventually become downtown El Paso. During the Civil War, Juana and her children moved the family to the “safety” of Paso del Norte (present-day Juárez) while Ben fought for the Confederacy. Later, when Ben became the first mayor of El Paso, Juana became El Paso’s first First Lady.

Francisca Alarcon (1840s-1930s) was born in Chihuahua and was left a large amount of money by her first husband, a banker. She moved to the United States and bought a great deal of property in El Paso. She remarried and was known as Doña Paca, which was eventually twisted into “Grandma Parker” by some local Anglo Americans who could not pronounce her name. When one of her sons-in-law ran for alderman in early El Paso, Doña Paca rode on a mule, carrying a flour sack of silver $3 coins, and paid one coin to each person who voted for him. Doña Paca knew all the big shots and politicians in the 1870s and 1880s. She even rolled her own cigarettes, just like all of the men of the era did. She died in the 1930s at age of 97.

Mary L. Stanton (1862-1946) was a pioneer teacher in El Paso who used her personal collection of books to lay the foundation for the El Paso Public Library in the 1890s. She organized a reading club for young men and allowed them to borrow the books. The library was moved to City Hall in 1895 and was opened to all El Pasoans. Later, an Andrew Carnegie donation allowed the city to build its first public library in the early 1900s. While highly-educated and well-educated, the fun-loving and gregarious Ms.

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**SEEK AND FIND**

D G E K H C L E W L E B A M B F K B
D S I R R A H Y L O P A I R Z J O
G Z F K L L A C C M E E L A L O P J
Q R H E R L I N D A W O N G C H E W
E O B W E I E E Q T X C A K P S G B
W S U I T E D W W B I Q V B U U G S
W A O R S F F L O S N O C S F Z Y S
C G Y U V A R C C D Z H I F S I R K
W U A H H I B A J Z A T V V X E O J
E E A P C R A E M R A N G X K A S F
P R I G S L K K L H Z N A L V Z H S
E R H B A E O E A D O C I U Y A O E
G E C R I Y E R E S E F M X J R N N
B R O N K T Z E R O O M E T A K N
K O A O E M A R Y S T A N T O N A N
N I Z L G A L I C I A C H A C O N K
B Z L O U T H E L M A W H I T E T Z
R Y K Y E M O L G A K O H L B E R G

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Puzzle by Ruth Vise and Heather Coons
Puzzle created using PuzzleMaker at discoveryeducation.com

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ISABEL DE ONATE
JUANA DOWELL
FRANCISCA ALARCON
JESUSITA HART
MARY STANTON
OLGA KOHLBERG
EUGENIA SCHUSTER
KATE MOORE
HERLINDA WONG CHEW
ZACCHIA AYOUB
CALLIE FAIRLEY
OLALEE MCCALL
MABEL WELCH
CHARLEE KELLY
THELMA WHITE
POLLY HARRIS
ALICIA CHACON
ROSA GUERRERO
PEGGY ROSSON
SUZIE AZAR

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Stanton did not fit the schoolteacher stereotype. Proud of her independence and the fact that she never married, she reportedly said, “The life of a spinster is ideal, a spontaneous laugh is the happiest thing in the world, and to say ‘damn’ in the right spot is most invigorating.”

Olga Bernstein Kolberg (1864-1935) came to El Paso from Prussia in 1884 with her husband, a tobacco merchant. Mrs. Kolberg, a well-educated woman, was instrumental in the establishment of several civic organizations and institutions such as the Woman’s Club, the first hospital, Mt. Sinai Jewish Congregation and the public library, among others. She may be best-known, however, for establishing the first free public kindergarten in El Paso in 1893, also the first of its kind in the state of Texas.

Eugenia Manany Schuster (1865-1946), born in Hungary, was educated in Vienna, where she learned to speak five languages fluently and studied piano under Franz Liszt, the famous musician and composer. She came to El Paso with her physician husband in 1894. In 1902, she helped him establish the original Providence Hospital, becoming its administrator, and did all types of work in the hospital – including performing and managing all office work, housekeeping, cooking and custodial duties – in addition to rearing four children.

Kate Moore (1870-??) was the first woman to ride a bicycle in El Paso. Even riding with her long skirts covering her legs, she shocked many of the older residents of the city. Moore was also one of the only two graduates from the first class at El Paso High, the city’s first high school, in 1887 (the other graduate was a boy). Becoming a music teacher, she could still be seen riding her bicycle to work.

Herlinda Wong Chew (1899-1939) was the daughter of a Chinese father and Aztec mother. By 1910, she and her Chinese husband, Antonio Chew, were living in Juárez, and owned a store there. Although the Chinese were not allowed to immigrate to the United States at that time, Mrs. Chew taught herself immigration law and was known as the Honorary Immigration Consultant of Juarez, and owned a store there. Although the Chinese were not allowed to immigrate to the United States at that time, Mrs. Chew taught herself immigration law and was known as the Honorary Immigration Consultant of Juarez, the first Chinese merchant. Mrs. Chew opened a store and eventually attained the rank of Lt. Colonel in 1956.

Thelma J. White, the valedictorian at Douglas High School in 1954, filed a lawsuit in 1955 for admission to the then-segregated Texas Western College. The petition she filed in federal court to gain admission to TWC stated that she was denied access to an education because of her race and color, contrary to and in violation of the Constitution and laws of the United States. The landmark ruling proclaimed the segregation policy unconstitutional. This decision compelled all state colleges in Texas to change their admission rules. Thus her efforts eventually led to the desegregation of public colleges and universities throughout Texas.

Polly Harris made serving the needs of El Paso’s women, minorities and the elderly her life’s work. Besides shining in the business community, she served three terms as a City Council representative in the 1970s and 1980s and was well-known for her acting.

Alicia Rosencrans Chacón, born and raised in El Paso, was a graduate of Ysleta High School. She was the first woman to be elected County Clerk in El Paso (1974), the first Mexican-American woman to serve on the city council (1983), and the first female County Judge (1990).

Rosa Guerrero not only taught dance in the public schools, but also directed the Rosa Guerrero Folklorico Internacional for almost 30 years. In 1974, her film Tapestry showcased not only her talent and work, but showed how she has been a national and international leader among ethnic groups by showing us how to “love and appreciate the many cultures that make America.”

Peggy Rosson first gained knowledge of state government while serving on the Texas Public Utility Commission as the state’s first female commissioner. She built on that experience and became the first El Paso female Texas State Senator from El Paso in the 1990s.

El Paso businesswoman and pilot Suzie Azar had served two terms as city representative in the 1980s before being elected the first woman mayor in 1989. During her time in office, she supervised the first water conservation proposals as well as various building projects and infrastructure improvements.

Many other remarkable El Paso women can be added to the list. Maybe YOU will be the next woman to make a positive contribution to the city’s development. Why not?