

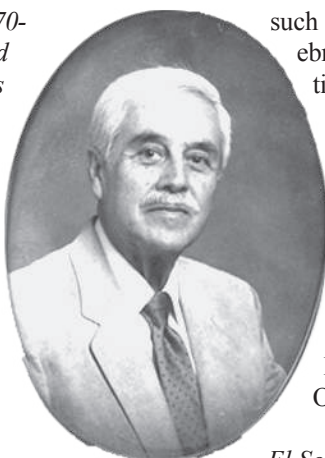
EN SU VOZ:

Interviews with Don Moisés Espino del Castillo

El Duque de las Calaveras

By Ellen Riojas Clark, Ph.D., Professor Emerita

NOTE: For thirty-years in San Antonio, between 1970-2000, Don Moisés Espino del Castillo, composed and published *Calaveras*, a collection of calaveras/verses about prominent figures not only from San Antonio but people known worldwide. For his poetry and the writing of *Calaveras*, Don Moisés received international recognition for work that has revived and maintained this *Día de los Muertos* tradition. Five interviews were conducted by Dr. Clark with Don Moises with the first one in late 1999 and the remainder in 2001. The last publication of *Calaveras* that were always free was in 2000. *El Duque* died in 2002 in San Antonio, TX. The following are excerpts from those interviews.



Origen de *Las Calaveras*/Origin of *Las Calaveras*: “*Calaveras* are a tradition that came from Spain.”

“[*Calaveras*] is a custom that began when Spanish satirical poets began complaining about the Spanish monarchy. Spain was crumbling, and the poets were making fun [of the monarchy], the original *Calaveras* were dedicated to the political elite. Later, *Calaveras* became popular and included all kinds of persons who had certain impact in the society, artists, sportsmen, musicians, singers, teachers, anyone who attracts attention.”

“After the Mexican Revolution, [*Calaveras*] became more popular among the people [of Mexico]. First, the *Calaveras* were tremendously satirical against politicians such as Porfirio Díaz.

The dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz was falling down with the revolution and the poets had the pleasure of using the [situational] context as part of their writings. The famous caricaturist, José Guadalupe Posada made *Calaveras* famous with his ridicule; with funny and sarcastic figures of death on a weak horse, a skeleton, and



Don Quixote by José Guadalupe Posada

all the politicians dead and beheaded or murdered by the death”

¿Como llegaron a USA /How did they come to the US?

“Our [Mexican] compatriots that came to the U.S., as a result of the Mexican Revolution and other political disorders, brought with them their traditions such as *Cinco de Mayo*, patriotic celebrations

such as the 16th of September, and Day of the Dead, a celebration about the dead ...accompanied by the publication of *Calaveras*.”

La tradición de *Las Calaveras* siguen vivas/The tradition of *Las Calaveras* remains vivid

¿Donde publican *las Calaveras*? /Where [are] *las Calaveras* published? “The *Calavera* is alive today in many places in Mexico, mostly in the south of the country, in places such as San Luis Potosi, Guanajuato, Oaxaca, Chiapas, and Veracruz...”

“[*Calaveras*] are [also] published in Nuevo Laredo, Mexico City, Guadalajara, Guanajuato, and Oaxaca, the home state of our friend Posada.”

“[Newspapers] such as *El Mejica*, from Houston; *El Sol de Tejas*, from Dallas; *El Herald*, from Fort Worth. The one in Los Angeles asked me for *Calaveras* to be published in the Hispanic section. In Miami, there are a lot of Cubans and they have asked me for *Calaveras*.”

El gusto del mexicano [es] por la burla, la mofa/The Mexicans' love [to] joke [and] to make fun. *Las calaveras* [se usaban] como medio para preservar la lengua hispana/*Las Calaveras* [were used] as a mode of preserving Spanish. “Mexican humor is very sharp, they rejoice very much in the mockery and the [making] fun of others. [The humor is] Caustic, jokester, spicy...”

“[*Calaveras*] must be presented as a literary art. They are connected with Hispanic literature, since [*Calaveras*] are part of the epigrammatic genre. The epigrammatic is a burlesque genre or rather *burlista*.”

“The *Calaveras* are not dedicated to a person who is already dead, because dead people cannot reply, or defend themselves when the *Calavera* is a little bit out of the line. That person is already judged and it is cowardly to mock somebody who is already dead.

Calaveras are about people who are alive.”

Las calaveras [muestran] la riqueza de la lengua española y como [son] parte de cultura popular/ *Las Calaveras* [illustrate] the richness of the Spanish language, and how they

form part of the popular culture

“[Calaveras] can help to remind people how rich their language [Spanish] is and that it is a language not only for the cultural elite, but also for popular culture.”

“Calaveras have a very wide lens, to preserve our language [Spanish] and our traditions and, at the same time, to educate the people on how complete their language is and how many phases it has...”

La muerte le llega a todos/Death comes for all: “Death is a natural phenomenon experienced by [all]: rich, poor, children, seniors, ugly people, beautiful people, fat people, thin people, politicians and no politicians [escape it]...”

Religion/Religion: “Here [with the Calaveras] we are not analyzing any theological point of view. There are religions or religious sects that are completely opposite. For example, when a person dies people have a party with a banquet and music. This, people say is good, for when the person dies [we celebrate] because they go to heaven.”

La burla a la gente en el poder/The mocking of people in power: With the epigrammatic genre, people enjoy making fun of falling monarchies. Then people in Mexico, took its pen and paper, and began creating jokes about those elites in congress. This was a way for the people to relax, making fun of [the powerful]. It was as a leakage valve, since people could not do anything against the monarch or dictator. The people can make fun of anything.

Tradiciones indígenas sobre la muerte/Indigenous death traditions: “When the missionaries or conquerors came they found out that the indigenous people had their rites, very their own, very special, and where they celebrate the death with meals, drinks, wakes in the cemeteries.”

¿Cuándo empezó a publicar las Calaveras?/ When did you start to publish Calaveras? “I remember it was in 1971, in May or June. I went to visit Don Manuel Ruiz Ibáñez at the Express, and he suggested the idea of publishing Calaveras. I believe he got the idea because he used to publish a cultural column in Spanish, in the Sunday edition of the Express, and where he published some of my poems”

¿Quién publicaba Calaveras en San Antonio antes?/ Who published Calaveras in San Antonio before [you]? “Calaveras were published here in San Antonio before, 25 years before mine there was a man, Feliciano Rodarte, who published calaveras in San Antonio. He published *calaveras* in his own magazine. Mr. Feliciano passed away and then there was nobody who wrote *calaveras*.”

Gente que vino de Mexico por la Revolución/People who arrived from Mexico after the Revolution

...“Many of those immigrants that moved because of the Mexican revolution established themselves in San Antonio, many others in Corpus Christi, and others in the Valley, in cities

such as McAllen, San Benito, and Mission. The Calaveras where published there. In Corpus Christi there was a newspaper titled *La Verdad*, I don’t remember the name of the owner but he published Calaveras, in his own way, and he publish them until Don Feliciano Rodarte died and there were no more Calaveras.”

Al principio la gente no entendia las calaveras, se molestaban algunos/At first people did not understand and they were disturbed: “In the beginning, since the Calaveras were absent [from San Antonio] for 23 years, people did not understand them very well. They believed it was a type of an insult or satire and that they were being insulted. We had to give some explanations.”

¿Como escogia a quien le hacia Calaveras?/How do you chose who to write about? “People [to whom the

Calaveras were dedicated] where chosen once they were popular, especially politicians. Any person who was excelling in society or had become famous for something became a candidate for a Calavera.”

Calaveras como válvula de escape de los pueblos/Calaveras are a mode of escape for a community

“Calaveras have been a pressure valve used by the people; can be used as a form of revenge. If they have not been able to directly attack a political figure, at least it is a way to have their attention. The people always tell the truth and in their own way, they can express it [via a calavera].”

Como hacia las Calaveras/How do you go about writing calaveras:

“Well, first I look for the person’s funny or ridiculous side. Then I mold it to the metrics I have already selected (eight syllables and eight lines). If the person is a very important figure, such as the president of the United States, Mexico’s president or the Pope, then is possible to extend to twelve syllables instead of only eight.”

Henry B. González, Congressman:

“For Henry B. I wrote a lot of them, for example, he hits someone, he lands a punch on someone who called him a communist. calavera], now in the US Congress, we not only have a Congressman but we also have boxers.” ...He liked them, he always congratulated me.

He would always tell me, don’t let go of this tradition of ours. One time he reminded me that he always a defender. Listen, that’s how calaveras are, they are about what is popular [at the moment]. Once there was a problem with the raspa [snow cone] vendors and the city and he defended them. He told the city that the vendors were poor and they lived from their work efforts making something that people liked and bought. That raspas [snow cones] were a tradition of ours and that this cultural food we enjoyed.. Why were they going to deny these efforts. [The city] gave them back the right/permission to sell the raspas downtown. For [at first] they did not want the vendors to sell them downtown.

Habla sobre la revista, Calaveras/Talks about the magazine, Calaveras: “Well, sometimes we printed 1000 or 2000,



CALAVERAS

Humorous Annual Spanish Publication in Verse



Dr. Ellen Clark
• U.T.S.A •

A lo que digo me aferro
porque la conozco bien,
es una mujer de hierro
que se come a mas de cien;
su celo universitario
lo expresa de muchos modos,
casi casi vuela a diario
llevando un mensaje a todos;
como le gustaba el canto y el arte de corazón
por andar volando tanto un día se cayó el avión.

published November 1995



Henry B. González
• Ex-Congresista •

Honorable Congresista
de los ilustres de antes,
si le decías comunist
tesonabla con los guantes.
La calaca en un al mud
lo sepultó con decoro,
en un enorme ataúd
con chapetones de oro.



Henry Cisneros
• Empresario •

Ya volvió Henry Cisneros
otra vez a San Antonio,
con mucho celo y encomio
tiene proyectos sinceros.
Con lenguaje muy correcto
le dijo a todas las masas:
“aunque no soy arquitecto
yo voy a construir casas”.
La muerte, después de oír
le dijo al estar hablando:
te sepulto en San Fernando”.

published November 2000

Editor's Note: Above is a sample of Don Moisés' calaveras published in San Antonio for 30 years. Sample covers of the publication are shown on p. 4. La Voz de Esperanza began publishing a Calavera issue each November since 1999.

depending... Some years were better than others, we also depend [financially] on sponsors and people who helped us. Because [in the magazine] we did not publish advertising, it only included sponsored Calaveras. The printer use to tell me: it is going to cost this much, around 2,000 dollars and then I know I have to raise the money to pay him. Once I got the money, I brought the Calaveras to the printer, the Calaveras were already in the order they were supposed to be printed and the printer calculated how many pages the magazine was going to be. He used to tell me the magazine can be of 4, 8 and 12 pages. It was by quadruplets.”

Imprenta que más uso Homer Whitt/Whitt Printing Company: “I have been using [many printers in San Antonio], one time I used San Antonio Press, then Munguia, New Braunfels, Ad Printing Company, Cisneros owned by Rudy Cisneros, and I used Homer Whitt the most.”

Invasión del Halloween a Mexico/Halloween in Mexico: “In the United States, the special celebration is Halloween, which has nothing in common with the Day of the Dead.”

“The Calaveras are ‘married’ with the

pan de muerto (Dead Bread) because it is during the Day of the Death celebrations [that Calaveras] are published.

“It is a cultural tradition from here [the U.S.] that goes to

Mexico, to the south. But the Calaveras have arrived only here [to San Antonio]. The dollar invasion is very powerful, the American customs are very strong and then the businesses open their doors because they make money with it [Halloween]. The kids are getting used to buy candies and everything for the celebration.”

“First, Halloween is not authentically from the United States it is from the north of Europe...” so now with this I don't mean that I am an enemy of Halloween. I am not an enemy of Halloween, but I do not practice it, I am not interested in it. What I want is that this tradition that is ours [Calaveras] to be celebrated by Hispanics.”

BIO: Ellen Riojas Clark, Ph. D., Professor Emerita of the Department of Bicultural Bilingual Studies, UTSA is author of *The Calaveras of Don Moisés Espino del Castillo*, Arte Publico Press, 2014

A Don Moisés Espino Del Castillo, QEPD

Fue en vida, Don Moisés, Maestro de Calaveras.
Cargando la tradición que él nos enseñó, de veras.

Llegó su remplazo como a cerca de las seis,
Pues, vino siriqui-siaca a llevarse a Don Moisés.

—¡Alto, paren!, No hay derecho:
No he dejado mi legado y me resta un buen trecho.

—Recoge todas tus cosas y despídete formal,
La Tiesa dijo, impaciente por llenar su gran morral.

—La persona que trajiste para tomar mi lugar
No tiene el porte de ser un tipo formal

—No me pugnes, ni me empees en cambiarme de opinión
Todo ésto ya está escrito y es tu último escalón.

—Transcurrió bastante tiempo fue mucha la discusión:
Al final de la batalla Don Moisés cayó silencio al dares un petatón.

—Enrique Sánchez