

Ordinary Women of the Borderlands: Extraordinary Lives

by Norma Longoria Rodríguez

Dedicated to my grandchildren Sofia, Camila, Liliana, Izabella, Jakob, Jasen, Lukas, Mateo Rodríguez and Mario, Dominic and Tomás Bellavia, sixth generation descendants of Epigmenia and fifth generation descendants of her daughters.

Epigmenia Treviño Bazán (1850-1938) and Jesús Bazán (1848-1915) had eleven children, five boys and six girls. The girls were Petra (1875-1896), Antonia (1877-1966), Mercedes (1885-1974), Luisa (1890-1956), Josefa (1891-1920) and the second Petra (1896-1984). The first Petra died in 1896 at the age of 21. The second Petra was born the same year that her sister died and was also named Petra.

The Bazán sisters grew up with their five brothers, Bernardino, Pedro, Jesús María, Gregorio and Nemencio on the Guadalupe Ranch. The young women were very beautiful. Irma Bazán Villarreal recalls her father Bernardino Bazán, a nephew of the women, stating that the sisters were so beautiful that they were known as “the Beautiful Bazán Sisters” throughout the ranch communities.

The sisters lived happy lives on the Guadalupe Ranch located in Hidalgo County, fifty miles northwest of the Rio Grande helping their parents on their ranch. They learned all homestead duties such as cleaning, cooking, baking, canning, processing cheese, sewing, embroidering, crocheting, quilting, gardening, growing and preparing herbal remedies while learning their particular uses, soap making, child rearing, etc. They also helped with farm chores such as feeding chickens, gathering eggs and feeding and taking care of the farm animals. They processed poultry, game, beef and pork including butchering and rendering of products from the process such as preparing carne seca, chorizo and chicharrones. Early on, they learned to process corn for tortillas, tamales and gorditas. They also made flour tortillas. They baked breads, cakes, pan de polvo (wedding cookies), empanadas (fruit-filled turnovers) and dulces (candy). Mercedes always made a special, tedious-to-prepare delight, to give to family at Christmas time, dulce de frijol. The recipe called for the time-consuming removal of the peel of the pinto beans without the

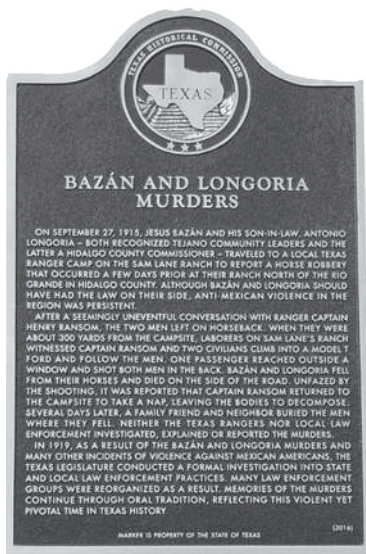
benefit of today’s kitchen blenders and food processors. The result was a delicious preserve that could stand alone as a dessert, used as a spread on breads or in my case, simply relished by the spoonful.

The young ladies were taught to read and write Spanish and were provided a basic education for the times. Most probably they were taught by their mother or a visiting teacher from Mexico. They knew enough English to get by in the English-speaking world but their mother tongue was Spanish. They were taught to be polite, proper, considerate young ladies. They loved to attend family gatherings, celebrations and dances held throughout the ranch communities and had many cousins and friends.

The first Petra married a man (last name García) but died at the age of 21 and had no children. Antonia married Antonio Longoria and had six children. Mercedes married Manuel Vela, Luisa married Juan Cavazos and had one son. Josefa married Gregorio Villarreal, and had three children. Petra (the second one) married Alfredo Rodríguez and had seven children.

In 1915 when the sisters’ and brothers’ ages ranged from 16 to 37, life overwhelmingly and forever changed for Epigmenia’s family. Her husband Jesús Bazán and Antonia’s husband, Antonio Longoria, were murdered by the Texas Rangers. It was a state-sanctioned crime of impunity of two innocent well-known ranchers and community leaders, a separate but intertwined family history.

For the last decade the history of the murders of the two patriarchs has been well-documented and recognized in the public history project *Refusing to Forget /refusing-*



The Texas Historical Marker citing the murders of Jesús Bazán & Antonio Longoria by the Texas Rangers that left Epigmenia Treviño Bazán & Antonia Longoria, her daughter, widows. Five of the sisters are pictured in a faded photo: Petra, the young girl, sitting with Epigmenia & behind 1 to r: Luisa, Mercedes & Josefa. -Bazan/Longoria Family Photo.

toforget.org and in books, newspapers, a state museum exhibition, university studies, historical conferences, speeches, lectures, poetry, magazines, historical websites and journals, paintings, and, finally, a Texas Historical marker that acknowledged the murders.

This parallel family history, however, is about the Bazan women’s survival after the murders and merits its own narrative. Their bravura is much less known but they picked up the brittle pieces of their broken lives and stored them in the silence of the heart. The community embraced them in their grief and the women moved on with fortitude to provide a loving and safe home for their children.

In 1915 there was no welfare or Social Security benefits for widows and orphans and no close medical assistance. If they needed to consult a doctor because their home remedies and expertise in car-

ing for the sick was not enough, they had to travel to the larger towns or to Mexico which were about fifty miles away and two to three days travel by wagon. Most definitely there were none of today's programs such as grief counseling, job skills empowerment workshops or unemployment pay. Diseases such as tuberculosis, smallpox, measles, chicken pox and mumps were rampant. As if all this wasn't enough, along came the Spanish Flu epidemic. In the late 1920's the Great Depression brought havoc to the country. How did these women survive and keep their children well-fed and healthy? It was with great strength, an acceptance of what needed to be done and love for their children and the extended family.

They kept their land as the sisters and their brothers had been instructed to by their parents. As long as they owned land they could have cattle, pigs, goats, chickens and wild game. At times they would lease out their land to family or other close trusted ranchers. The sons of Epigenmia, the brothers of the women and friends and neighbors helped them with the ranch work and all the sisters and brothers took on parenting roles for all the children. Though nameless at the time, this community concept is now referred to as the popular mantra "It takes a village". The children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren living today still refer to them as Papá Jesús, Papá Juan, Mamá Toncha (Antonia), Mamá Mercedes, etc., instead of Tío and Tía.

Antonia, who lost both her husband and her father, and of all the sisters, had the most children, ages one to sixteen, in 1915, was in a particularly perilous predicament. She knew that she, her children and all her brothers also were in danger of being murdered because that was common during the Matanza. Killing entire families at the hands of Texas Rangers resolved the issue of leaving family heirs. The land could then be bought by locals and newcomers to the Rio Grande Valley who were interested in changing and developing the area from mostly cattle ranching to irrigated farming of produce, cotton and citrus. With the threat of death being a high probability and local law enforcement looking away, the Bazán-Longoria family had to forgo seeking justice for the murders and chose to enter into a code of silence regarding the murders to save their children and themselves. When friends asked Antonia if she was going to do anything about having the murders investigated, she would answer, "Why should I get into this, to create more orphans?"

By the mid-1920's Antonia and most of her brothers had moved into town to provide schooling and work opportunities for their children. Some started farming and ranching at a smaller scale closer to towns, or opened small businesses. The only siblings who remained on the ranch for the rest of their lives were Jesús Maria and Mercedes and their spouses. In 1924 Antonia settled permanently in Mission where her older children began careers in the mercantile business. Luisa eventually moved to Hidalgo to be close to her son and Petra moved to Alice in the late 40's so her two youngest daughters could finish high school.



Antonia Bazán Longoria, widow of Antonio Longoria.

Of the six surviving women, four became widows at an early age and one died tragically. Epigenmia and Antonia were widowed at the ages of 67 and 37, respectively. Josefa died of suicide at age 30. Her two older children, Corina and Gilberto, moved to Falfurrias with

their father and the six-month old Teresita remained on the ranch and was reared by Mercedes and Manuel Vela. Decades later Josefa's grandchildren would despairingly ponder if Josefa was perhaps suffering from post-partum depression, a serious illness or latent trauma from the murders when she died of suicide. Unfortunately they will never have an answer. This is one of many examples of injustices being denied and repercussions of the pain of trauma carried over to descendants over one hundred years after the murders. Petra was widowed at age 39 when her husband Alfredo died in a



Petra with her first daughter.

traffic accident. She had her seventh child seven months after his death. Luisa was widowed at age 45.

Today in the memories of all of the children, grandchildren, grandnieces and grand-nephews of the women, something remains constant: all of the sisters except Luisa, were extremely quiet and very soft-spoken. When they were in the company of others they only spoke when greeting people or if asked a direct question and they did

not elaborate. They did not initiate conversations at all. They would sit quietly at the kitchen table, in a living room or on the porch with their family, guests, or friends and listen quietly to the conversations. They inquired about everyone's well-being, offering food or drink but did not really engage in idle conversation. Everyone accepted this as their way of being and felt very comfortable and peaceful in their quiet presence.

The sisters however did not mince words when the occasion called for it. A granddaughter of Petra, Maria Teresa Brito, remembers a time when her mother used improper language in the presence of Petra. Without raising her voice, Petra said, "You did not use language like that when you lived in my house." Enough said. Many years later when living in San Antonio in a large public housing complex on the West Side, Maria Teresa remembers that her tiny elderly Mamá Petra would be offended by young men drinking, smoking, talking loudly and doing who-knows-what-else, would leave her apartment and march down to run them off. They quickly obliged, having recognized and respected the authority of this lady. However at another occasion when receiving a painful injection from a brusque nurse who lacked a gentle touch, Petra called out "Bestia" as the nurse was exiting the room.

If Antonia found someone or something not to her liking, she would mutter a negative word or phrase, almost inaudible, and walk away or look away from the offending person or situation. According to family members, at the time of the murders a rancher came to see Antonia. Without hesitation she looked directly at him and asked if he had anything to do with the murders. He adamantly denied any

complicity. The rancher died fourteen months later from a year-long trauma-induced nervous condition attributed to a gun battle at his ranch.

Esther Ramírez remembers that when she visited Mercedes and Manuel at the ranch, Mercedes would make polite conversation and then would go out to the hen house, catch a flying chicken, process it and make a delicious lunch of arroz con pollo. Later while Manuel would entertain the children with tales Mercedes would call out with disdain, “embustero” (teller of fibs).

Luisa was very prim and proper. She liked pretty dresses and fragrant perfumes. A grandniece, Melba Coody, remembers that she loved going to Luisa’s bathroom because she loved the fragrance of so many powders and perfumes on her counter. Esther Ramírez remembers that at her sister’s wedding Luisa showed up in a beautiful yellow dress and hat. No little old ladies’ dress for her. After moving to Hidalgo, Luisa rode the bus all over the Rio Grande Valley visiting relatives. She adored children and was very loving. At one point she even bought or rented a little house in McAllen and lived alone.

After Epigmenia’s death Antonia became the matriarch of the family and was deeply loved by family and friends and referred to as Mamá Toncha by family, friends and neighbors. All of her relatives and friends traveled to Mission to visit her. One nephew, Pete Bazán, spoke of hitch-hiking from his home and then taking the bus connection to visit Mamá Toncha and his cousins in Mission when he was a young man.

Not one of the widows, despite their beauty and kindness, ever remarried. They were simply too busy making a life for their children and no one could ever replace their beloved husbands. I do not know if any of the women ever had suitors. I have a feeling, having known them, that if any came around, they most probably sent them packing politely but without hesitation.

I believe that all the women suffered immensely but Epigmenia’s losses must have been extremely overwhelming. Besides the murders of Jesús and Antonio, Petra’s death at 21, the death of Josefa by suicide at the age of 30, the horror of her twelve-year-old granddaughter finding the body of her mother Josefa, the death of Petra’s husband—when Petra was seven months pregnant with her seventh child—and the worry of having seventeen orphaned grandchildren would have been impossible to bear for anyone. Epigmenia knew

she was the matriarch of both families and there were no patriarchs. It was up to her to help her family. All of the women worked hard to maintain their families and lands. While today we honor women’s work and lives through Women’s History Month, Hispanic Heritage Month, International Women’s Day, Mother’s Day, etc., these women worked 24/7 of every day, week, month and year for the rest of their lives some as long as half a century or more. Mother’s Day was every day without celebrations.

Epigmenia lived on the ranch for the rest of her life, passing away in 1938 at the age of 88. Antonia died in 1966 in Mission at the age of 89. Luisa died in 1956 in Hidalgo at the age of 66. Mercedes died in 1974 at the ranch at the age of 89. Petra died in Alice at the age of 84.

I feel a great attachment to these women, my great-grandmother Epigmenia, whom I never knew, my beloved grandmother Antonia and my great-aunts Mercedes, Luisa and Petra, whom I was so fortunate to know. I like to think of them as the fragrant flowers and roses they grew in their gardens on their ranches and the yellow wildflowers that pop up in the spring among the chaparral in the undulating waves of grassy

fields in the tranquil beauty of the borderlands. They possessed the physical beauty of flowers but they were also sharp and tough as the thorns of rose bushes. They were the Mexican version of the “Steel Magnolias of the South”. The Women’s Movement had nothing on these strong, independent, self-supporting borderland beauties. I doubt that they were even aware of the word feminista, yet they lived their lives as such.

My memories of, and love for, these extraordinary women are forever intertwined in the silence of my heart. I think of them often: When I hold the rag doll Mercedes handcrafted for me, the sunbonnet (a replica of one she always wore) and doll’s quilt sewed by my grandmother Antonia; the tranquil loving presence of Mercedes and Petra and the hugs and kisses of Luisa who absolutely adored children—I feel their love. These magnificent, valiant, strong, loving, hard-working women are my herstory, my heritage and my legacy which I gratefully embrace.

BIO: Norma Longoria Rodríguez is a retired educator who records borderlands family history for her children and grandchildren. She wrote about the murders of Jesús Bazán, her great grandfather and his son-in-law, Antonio Longoria, her grandfather, in a literary ofrenda in the November, 2015 issue of La Voz de Esperanza. Photos: courtesy of the Bazan/Longoria family.



The rag doll Mercedes handcrafted for the author, the sunbonnet (a replica of one she always wore) and doll’s quilt sewed by her grandmother Antonia.

Poemitas for Nickie Valdez, RIP by Tommy Noonan-Minot, ND.

Nickie 1

Subito Santo! 2

E pluribus unimos 3



Nickie 1

Mil gracias 2

¡Vaya con Dios! 3