

HISTORY OF SAN ELIZARIO

By 1531, Hernan Cortez had conquered the Aztec Empire. The Spaniards started migrating to the north. By 1535, Alvar Nuñez de Vaca and his group were actively exploring the Southwest. Another exploratory expedition through this area was the Espejo-Beltran Expedition in 1582-1583.

In 1598, Don Juan de Oñate acquired permission from King Phillip II to lead a group of people north to colonize present-day New Mexico. For this expedition, Oñate decided to cut across the Chihuahuan desert. Earlier explorers had followed the Rio Concho from Santa Barbara to the Rio Grande, then followed the Rio Grande west and northwest. By then, all of this was New Spain.

The journey started from Santa Barbara, Chihuahua, Mexico. There were 400 men, some were military, and some had their families present with them. They had 83 *carretas* (wooden wheel wagons) and seven to eight thousand livestock – including horses, sheep, and goats. Together this formed a four-mile-long procession through the desert. It was a long journey. Four days before arriving at the Rio Grande, somewhere near present-day Villa Ahumada, Chihuahua, Mexico, they ran out of water. Their written records tell us that when they arrived at the river on April 20, 1598, two of their horses died after drinking too much water, and their sides burst. Everyone rested under the cottonwood trees for ten days: they swam, fished, and hunted. There was a lot of wildlife and vegetation in those days. Since the Rio Grande was a mighty river, it often flooded the area in the spring.

On April 30, 1598, Don Juan de Oñate ordered the friars traveling with them to say a Mass of Thanksgiving (a Catholic worship service). He proceeded to formally proclaim "*La Toma*," claiming the land for the King of Spain. Later they feasted on duck, geese, and fish. The soldiers among them dressed in costumes and presented a play. (San Elizario also claims to have presented the first drama in present-day American territory). All this took place twenty-three years before the Pilgrims set sail from England on the Mayflower. However, St. Augustine, Florida, was founded in 1565 by Don Pedro Menendez de Avila of Spain. Therefore, San Augustine claims to have celebrated the First Thanksgiving in the United States. San Elizario celebrated the Second Thanksgiving in the United States and the First Thanksgiving in Texas. The Pilgrims celebrated the third Thanksgiving in the United States.

In San Elizario, some days later, after celebrating, they started their journey towards present-day New Mexico. They followed the river and crossed past what is now present-day El Paso. It took four months to reach the area, now known as Española, New Mexico, near present-day Santa Fe, New Mexico.

For eighty years, they lived in New Mexico and continued their explorations. When necessary, messengers rode back to Chihuahua, and wagons transported much-needed supplies. However, it was not until 1659 that the Mission of Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe was established at El Paso del Norte (now Juarez, Mexico), becoming an area where travelers had a place to rest before continuing their journey to and from Chihuahua, along the Camino Real.

In 1680, Spaniards that escaped the Pueblo Revolt came to San Elizario, with them came several tribes. Tigua Natives established their settlement in Ysleta. Piro, Tampiro, and Tano Natives established their colony in Socorro. Senecu Natives established their settlement in Senecu (now Juarez, Mexico). Each settlement constructed its mission to Christianize natives. Years later, Spaniards struggled to survive and relocated near Senecu, establishing San Lorenzo del Real. They erected a chapel for those already Christian.

Some ten years later, the Spaniards went back to reconquer New Mexico. Those who chose to remain here are the ancestors of a significant number of local people of Spanish descent who still live in San Elizario and the surrounding areas. Many more are scattered all over the United States.

The land around San Elizario was so fertile that settlers and their families established residence here, although the Spanish army relocated to San Lorenzo. One such family was the Tiburcio Ortega family. Father and son bore the same name and their hacienda was named "Nuestra Señora de la Soledad de Los Tiburcios". Others followed the Tiburcio Ortega family, and soon there was a farming community in the area. Unfortunately, the Apache killed some people, and others moved for fear of Apache raids and relocated to Socorro, Texas.

The Spanish military had established a fort about thirty miles east of Los Tiburcios (near present-day Fort Hancock, Texas), which they had named San Elceario in honor of the Catholic Church's patron saint of the military.

In 1789, they relocated the military base to the Hacienda de Los Tiburcios to protect the local people from the Apache. With the help of the local people, the military built a large presidio (garrison), and from then on, the area was called "El Presidio de San Elceario." A chapel was built inside the presidio to serve the military and their families. From here, the soldiers traveled in various directions to wherever their services were needed.

By 1821, Mexico won independence from Spain, leaving the area under Mexican rule. The presidio was practically abandoned, but the settlers continued to use the chapel. In 1829, a massive flood washed away several buildings in the valley, and the Rio Grande cut a new channel to the south, leaving the towns of San Elizario, Socorro, and Ysleta on the north side of the Rio Grande.

By 1836, Texas won independence from Mexico, and it became the Republic of Texas; thus, San Elceario and its sister towns were now in the Republic of Texas. The towns of San Elizario, Socorro, and Ysleta had been a part of Mexico for only 15 years. In 1845, Texas joined the Union, and San Elceario was now part of the United States. The United States fought with Mexico to establish the southern border, which became the Rio Grande and the rest of West Texas.

San Elceario continued to prosper. It was the largest town in the area. In 1850, it became the first county seat and courthouse of El Paso County. The building, now known as "Los Portales" or Casa Garcia, served as the first public school in El Paso County, beginning in 1870. The building that served as a stop and rest station for the "Butterfield Stagecoach Line" still stands behind the San Elizario Church.

THE FIRST GRISTMILL

The farmers from around the area brought their wheat and corn to the mill to be ground and sacked. The early Spanish settlers established an irrigation system that still serves local farmers. The system was improved when the area became part of Texas.

Our county jail, with its adjacent "Jurado" (jury) room, dates back to 1821. A story, which dates to 1880, had the infamous gunman "Billy the Kid" breaking his friend Segura out of the jail while posing as a Texas Ranger and asking the jailer to open the door.

The first pecan tree in the area was planted in San Elizario around 1850. Presently, El Paso County produces large quantities of pecans.

In 1870, the Texas Rangers organized the local men to help fight the Apache. This company was known as "Company N" Frontier Forces, with Captain Gregorio García as commander. A second Texas Ranger Company was organized in 1874, known as "Company D, Minute Men of Texas." Captain Telesforo Montes, the Commander, headed them.

In 1879, the Sisters of Loretto established Saint Joseph's School in San Elizario. The school was located on what is now the corner of Paseo del Convento Road and Socorro Road. Somewhere along the way, after the area became part of Texas, the town's name was changed from "San Elceario" to "San Elizario." Some say the name change was to aid the English-speaking population with its pronunciations.

SAN ELIZARIO JAIL

This jail was brought in sections by railroad and wagon from Chicago, Illinois. It is a federal penitentiary-type cell. The walls, floor, ceiling, front bars, and door are all steel. They were soldered together once inside the building. So even if someone broke into the adobe building, they could not open the cell.

Melquiades Segura, a friend of Billy the Kid, was jailed there in the late 1800s. Billy was in New Mexico at the time and heard about it. He rode all night long and arrived at the jail around midnight. He knocked on the door and told the guards he was a Texas Ranger, speaking Spanish (he learned the language in New Mexico). The guards opened the door, and Billy pointed the gun at them, took away their guns and keys to the cell, took his friend out, and jailed the guards. He took off with his friend to Mexico, which is only ½ mile away. And that is the only time Billy broke into a jail.

Antonio Trujillo, long-time constable of San Elizario, from about 1925 to 1975, was a tall, powerful man who had been a champion boxer while in the Army during WWI. He liked to wear Stetson cowboy hats. One time he had a prisoner he had to take to the El Paso County jail, but

it was late, and he left him in the old San Eli jail, which was no longer in use since about 1900. The following day, Trujillo, in his brand-new Stetson cowboy hat, came to take him to the El Paso jail. The prisoner told him he needed to use the outhouse. The man comes out with a gun (someone had left him a gun). He aims at Trujillo and shoots him in the head. He made a hole in his brand-new hat and grazed his scalp, knocking him down. Trujillo was furious he made a hole in his new hat. He quickly got up, got control of the prisoner, and took him to El Paso.

SAN ELCEARIO PRESIDIO CHAPEL

We cannot call it a mission because the Spanish built missions to Christianize the native population. The chapels built in San Elceario were for the military and their families: therefore, they were known as presidio chapels.

In 1789, the Spanish military established a presidio (military garrison), which they called "San Elceario," after the Catholic patron saint of the military. They built a chapel inside the presidio. Some forty years later, the Rio Grande flood of 1829 rendered this chapel useless, and another building was erected to serve the people. This building, which eventually became too small, was used until 1877, when the present church was built. Originally, the church did not have a bell tower. It was built later in 1887.

The bells in the church served as the town clock for the people of San Elizario as well as the small towns across the Rio Grande. They rang: to call people to Mass, to give good news such as weddings and baptisms, or to announce a death- the bells were rung differently when men or women died. They rang at noon to let people know it was lunchtime. Since all the people were Catholic, life centered on the church, its rules, and feast days.

In 1935, an electrical short in the sacristy caused a lot of smoke damage to the church. After this, the church was repainted. The original wall paintings were painted over. The existing walls are painted as needed. The old chandeliers were removed, and electric lights were installed. The tin roof was installed after the fire to hide the smoke-damaged rafters. The tin was hand-painted by some of the men of the parish. The stained-glass windows were donated by the parishioners before the fire but were not damaged by the smoke. The Stations of the Cross date back to about 1918. Note the stain-glass windows at the back of the church. One has the two American flags, and one has the Seal of the State of Texas. Historians think this was related to the Salt War.

The church is still in use and is updated from time to time. The pulpit was removed, the communion rail was removed and later added again. The old floor was replaced at least twice, and the original pews have been revarnished. The main altar was removed in the 1970s, and the large cross was moved to the main altar. There were originally two confessionals, but one was damaged by the dampness in the adobe walls and fell apart when it was moved away from the wall. A memorial was added after World War II.

EL PASO DEL NORTE

Spanish for the "Pass of the North", originally, the Spaniards named it "El Paso del Río del Norte." A gorge in the chain of the mountains (part of the Rockies) around El Paso and Juarez was used by Don Juan de Oñate to cross the mountain at this point. This was the only place where the mountain chain could be crossed from south to north or east to west. Before he could reach the Rio Grande, Oñate had to cross the mountain range and the narrow pass, which enabled him to cross without climbing the mountains. This path was called "El Paso del Norte." The valley between the Franklin mountain range became what is now El Paso, Texas, County and City, and Juarez, Mexico.

THE SALT WAR OF 1877

The dispute was over a vast deposit of salt lying under shallow lakes ninety miles northeast of San Elizario, on Texas Highway 62, the road to Carlsbad, New Mexico. The water has since evaporated, but the salt still exists. Salt was vital because it was necessary to cure meat before refrigeration, and it was also used in mining silver. Salt had as much value as money in those days.

These lakes were the common property of the valley towns of San Elizario, Socorro, and Ysleta, as given to them by the Spanish Crown, which took possession of the area in 1598. Mexico won its independence from Spain in 1821 and ruled them for fifteen years. In 1836, Texas won its independence from Mexico, and the Republic of Texas claimed this area, plus land in New Mexico and Colorado. Texas was admitted to the Union in 1845.

In the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, the United States promised to honor all the Spanish land grants, but nobody filed a claim to them since no individual owned the Salt Lakes. The local people and people from Mexico continued to take free salt, as they had in the past. A resident from San Antonio, Sam Maverick, filed a claim to a section of the Salt Lakes, but there was still plenty of salt outside his claim. A group of politicians from Franklin (now known as El Paso) decided to file a claim for the lakes and charge people for taking salt from them.

A lawyer named Charles Howard came from Virginia as a missionary; he was known as a famous Marksman and was probably the best in the state. He became friends with Luis Cardis, an Italian well known and liked by the Hispanic people. Together and with the help of the local priest, Father Borrajo, they got Cardis elected to the State Legislature. However, their friendship did not last, and he and Cardis became bitter enemies. Howard went to San Antonio, found out who owned the salt lakes, and married his daughter (who died within a year). He then got power of attorney and hired some men to haul the salt, and was prepared to sell it for a nice profit. The Hispanic Community, knowing they had a legal right to haul the salt, free of charge, hired Luis Cardis as their lawyer. When Howard returned, he killed Cardis. The politicians, including the Sheriff, supported Howard and would not arrest him until the Hispanic Community insisted. They released him under the condition that he would leave the county. Several men signed the \$12,000 bond for his release – Charles Ellis, McBride, and John Atkinson. Howard left and went

as far as Mesilla, New Mexico but soon returned to El Paso. His return infuriated the people, and they wanted the men who signed the bond to pay up, and they wanted Howard arrested.

Several weeks later, they formed a caravan to go to the lakes and load up on salt. Then Howard made a huge mistake. He rode to San Elizario and stopped at the Charles Ellis store. Ellis had lived in San Elizario for several years and was married to a local woman named Teodora Alarcón, who had inherited the mercantile store from her late husband. Ellis spoke Spanish, and he thought he knew the people well and that they liked him. However, he was an Anglo-American, and he had paid 1/3 of the bond after Howard killed Cardis. When they saw Ellis hanging around, the crowd (led by Barrera, father of the lady engaged to Luis Cardis) thought he was spying for Charles Howard. So, Ellis went home and hid in the wine cellar. Ellis' wife hired a local man to take him food. The crowd was looking for Ellis. The hired man, to gain popularity, bragged he knew where Ellis was hiding. The crowd pulled Ellis out, tied him to a horse, dragged him out of town, and slit his throat. In the middle of the night, a friend of Ellis, Jesus Jose Parra, went for the body, put it in a burlap sack, loaded it onto a wheelbarrow (a horse would make too much noise), and quietly took the body to Ellis' residence and buried it under a tree in their apple grove. The widow of Ellis has long since died, so to this day, no one knows where exactly the body was buried. However, it is believed to be around the Ronquillo house. Howard went to take refuge with a group of Texas Rangers in town. Howard had brought with him an outlaw gang called "The Boys." The Hispanics surrounded the Ranger's quarters, and the shooting began the next day. The shooting continued for several days. "The Boys" left Howard when they saw they were outnumbered. They wanted Howard. Howard and the rest finally came out and were all taken, prisoners. In the end, Howard Atkinson, one of the men who signed for Howard's bond, and McBride, Howard's agent, were executed. The Rangers were allowed to mount their horses and ride away, minus their guns. Some in the crowd invaded Doña Teodora Alarcon Ellis' store and hauled away several wagons loaded with the merchandise across the Rio Grande into Mexico. The widow died pennilessly.

Although a reward was offered for the looters, no one claimed it. The 9th Cavalry Buffalo soldiers stationed at Ft. Bayard near Silver City were called in but left because they were not an international army and would not go into Mexico. Later a group of Texas Rangers on their way to San Elizario to "Keep the Peace" stopped in Ysleta and hanged a man accused of taking part in the San Elizario revolt. They hung him on the spot. They proceeded to Socorro and hanged another. By the time they reached San Elizario, the revolt's leaders had crossed the Rio Grande River into Mexico. Before the Salt War, Ft. Bliss had been closed because the Apaches were no longer a threat. Because of the Salt War, Ft. Bliss was reopened to keep the peace. So, if it was not for the "*peleoneros de San Eli*" (troublemakers), Ft. Bliss might not exist today.