

THE STORY OF SAN ANTONIO

300 Years of Romance

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By Bess Carroll

CHAPTER X

"The Canary Islanders"

Told by Judge Bart DeWitt

It has been a long time since Evangeline was exiled from Acadia, and her tale has been learned by every tot in school, yet San Antonio had its Evangeline, too, and no one knows her story.

In many ways alike are the stories of Longfellow's poem and of the "Canary Islanders," ancestors of a great many prominent old San Antonio families. For a royal decree sent 400 families from their "Fortunate Isles" to a savage wilderness where the city they had hoped to find was a tenement of wigwams.

By royal decree the king of Spain had ordered, in 1723, that the cream of his French and Spanish subjects on the isles of the Canaries should emigrate to the "New Philippines." Others he had called from the banks of Lake Teztuco, Tlascans, unconquered by the mighty Montezumas, kings in their own right to the kingdom of their homes.

FEARED PIRATES

My ancestor, Margarita Betancourt, was the widow (descendant) of the Norseman who discovered, for Spain, the Canary Isles. The plague of her life, after her husband's death, was the fear of pirates who frequently called on the isles and captured children, particularly girls. They usually selected the most beautiful girls that they could find; and since Margarita was the mother of two daughters, she searched the sea line anxiously day by day for the black flags of pirate ships. Those were the days when men really "walked the plank," when gold and dead men who "told no tales" were buried together, when John Silvers actually lived.

GOOD NEWS

It was good news to Margarita, then, that she should go to a new world. It was told quite generally, I believe that a great city had been built on the unknown land that both Spain and France claimed. She pictured a place free of bloodthirsty

buccaneers, where her two little daughters could grow up without the menace of a skull-and-crossbones flag.

It was a pitiful remnant of the proud shipment of human freight sailing from the sunny Canary Isles that finally stood at Monterrey, bedraggled and "broke," hungry and disillusioned. Pirates they had left behind; the mystery of the unknown had become starvation and death.

According to the records of Old Mexico, the last leg of the long trip made by these proud grandees must have been a sad, melancholy affair. Witness the testimony of an old document describing their migration to San Antonio:

"They were given what was most convenient and necessary, namely; eighty-six horses, seventy mules laden with provisions for their maintenance. Also, twenty-seven mules moreover to carry biscuit, meat and everything necessary, and sixteen metates with their grinding stones."

Thus they came, the "dons", bringing their proud titles to a land claimed by "Heap Big Chiefs." Only sixteen families arrived at Bexar.

FIND SHABBY FORT

The "city they had expected, the mythical city of San Antonio, was a shabby fort of fifty-three men. It had moved away from the river over to "Alamo Plaza," to be a bit more distant from the watering grounds and the council halls of Indians.

And poor Margarita! Her words, as she saw this bare little spot in the chaparral, are on San Antonio's ancient records now.

"I left a land of pirates, and fell into the hands of Indians."

At that time it was estimated that 30,000 red men of all kinds lived immediately at San Antonio's doors.

Why, I can remember when the Indians came to town, myself, and could almost put my hand on the spot, between Hertzberg's and the Gunter hotel, where early San Antonians used to drive a pole into the ground and top it with pennies, for Indians boys to shoot. And they seldom missed one of those pennies, either, with their arrows. But then, that's another story.

HEART BROKEN

Margarita, poor soul! She had literally jumped from the frying pan into the fire. Pirates at least were semi-civilized,

but the Apache was not, and didn't want to be! And Apaches had a penchant for kidnapping paleface children.

Well, Margarita finally died of a broken heart. It was a pity she couldn't have lived to see the beautiful city that grew up around her, after a little while. But she passed on, out of a land of pirates and Indians, to the shores of a still stranger, newer place. No one knows what she found there!