

Juan Antonio Chaves Remembers Early Days

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Transcribed by John Ogden Leal, Bexar County Archivist
Commentary by Steve Gibson, Bexar Genealogy

by Charles Merrit Barnes

Antonio Chavez tells of the old military plaza and the many things that happened during and following the siege of the Alamo.

Among the very few who resided here when the tyrant, Santa Anna, created such havoc is an old citizen whose home is at 229 Obrajo Street within a very few yards of where he was born. This old resident is Don Juan Antonio Chavez, who was born in the year 1827. He was 10 years old when the tyrant came, and remembers it well. His parents were then living in the house where he was born. Speaking on the coming of Santa Anna, Don Antonio said:

"When Milam and his comrades came into San Antonio from the Molino Blanco, the December previous to the coming of Santa Anna, our home was right in the line of fire between Milam's men and the Mexican army under the command of General Cos. On that occasion we were compelled to flee from home and seek refuge in the country. When we returned we found the house badly shattered with shot and shell. The doors were riddled with bullets and grape shot from the cannon and escopetas and the rifle balls. Had our family remained some, if not all, would have been killed.

When Santa Anna was marching on San Antonio, a friend of my father's came and told us there was going to be another very wicked fight. He advised him to leave and go again into the country. The experience my father had during the previous fight between the forces of Milam and Cos induced him to heed the counsel of this friend. My father took the entire family with him to the country several miles away from the city. We remained there until the Alamo had fallen and all of its defenders slain. We did not return for quite a while afterward. This time our home was not in the line of fire, but we did not know this, and it was much safer, anyway, for us in the country".

Grandfather Stolen

"My grandfather was Francisco Xavier Chavez. He was born in Albuquerque, N.M. When he was but an infant he was stolen by Indians. I do not now remember the tribe but think, probably, it may have been Comanche's. He remained in captivity with them until he was grown. Then he concluded at the first good

opportunity he would quit them and live among civilized people. This opportunity came to him on one occasion when the Indians were north of San Antonio several miles, on a hill overlooking the city. When they came there they had intended to make an attack on the place, but gave up the idea. All but two of the Indians had ridden off. My grandfather made as much delay as possible in adjusting his saddle, when one of the two Indians, becoming impatient, rode off leaving him alone with the other. To this one my grandfather said: "I am going to leave you. If you try to stop me, I will kill you."

"Grandfather then compelled the Indian to ride in one direction, while he rode in the opposite. He came into San Antonio at the ford of the San Pedro, where the street cars now cross that stream at North Flores Street. He rode along that street until he came to the Military Plaza. Then he went to the house of the then Spanish Governor, where he informed that official who he was and of his long captivity among the Indians, and of his desire to lead a life of peace and civilization. My grandfather could not only speak the Spanish language very well, but with equal fluency he spoke several of the Indian languages, so the Governor invited him to become one of his household and his official interpreter. My grandfather accepted the invitation and the salary of gold a month that went with it.

He lived at the Governor's house for many years. The house of the then governor was on the west side of Military Plaza. Its portal was topped by a flat arch. The keystone of this arch was the blessed coat of arms of Spain. The first Spanish Governor had resided there. This governor had been accused of treason and beheaded in the name of the King of Spain. His head was placed on top of a tall pole in the center of Military Plaza, where the City Hall now stands. It was one of Codero's successors who was governor when my grandfather came here."

King of Spain Was Sponsor

"My grandfather married his first wife when he was living at the house of the Governor. I do not recall her name. She died within a year and a half of their marriage. His second wife was my grandmother. She was the Donna Juanna Padron, one of the three widows who came to San Antonio with the Canary Islanders. Her first husband had been killed by Moors. The King of Spain at that time was a great friend of her husband and his family. This monarch stood sponsor for her son by her first husband. This son was named Juan de [xxxx] y Casa Fuerte. The killing of her first husband caused her to want to go where she would never more hear of the Moors. He sent her with two other widows to this colony of Canary Islanders, which was then being gathered for coming here. Soon after her arrival she met my grandfather then a young

widower. They were married not long afterward and raised a considerable family before she died. After residing here some time, my grandfather concluded he would pay a visit to his parents in Albuquerque. He asked permission to do so and it was reluctantly granted. The Governor could not spare an escort and traveling between here and Albuquerque was very dangerous on account of the Indians.

My grandfather said he did not need an escort from the Governor, but would make the Indians escort him. Sure enough, strange as it may seem, he did so. When he knew that Indians were in the vicinity, he rode out and joined them. He went with them on their expeditions hunting deer and buffalo after which he induced them to turn their route toward his boyhood home and accompany him until he was near it, promising at a certain time to rejoin them and to return here with them."

Gladdened His Parents

"His parents had heard he was alive and in San Antonio and he had promised to visit them, and when he appeared at his old house, they were both astonished and delighted. He stayed with them for some time and reluctantly parted from them but he had given his word he was going to return with the Indians and did not wish to break it. He promised his parents to return to them again. He left them full of sorrow and returned to San Antonio meeting his Indian friends at the appointed place and coming with them until they were in sight of San Antonio.

My grandfather often acted as interpreter between the Governor and the Indians. They had full confidence in him. His parents in Albuquerque were very wealthy. They wished him to remain with them and share their wealth but he did not wish to give up his San Antonio home. He was unable to return to Albuquerque when he intended to. He got permission a second time to go there, but just when he was about to start, the permission was revoked and he was forced to remain here. His parents died before he had the opportunity of going back again to them so they left him no inheritance of the vast estate which all went to other heirs. He did not grieve over that but did weep for the deaths of his parents. He was frugal and lived comfortably.

When my grandmother, the former widow Donna Juanna Padron died, he married Donna Micaella Fragosa who survived him.

My father was Ygnacio Chavez and my mother's maiden name was Maria Leonarda Montes de Ocha. The home of her family stood at the southeast corner of Market Street and Main Plaza and was the old house that was recently torn down to give place to the large new building now being constructed there. This house stood

immediately opposite and south of the northeast corner of Market Street and Main Plaza where the famous Indian massacre took place. The building in which it took place was called the "carcel" or jail. Indians had stolen the Lockmar, Hernandez and Duran children and had agreed to return them. They brought in the Lockmar girl and Hernandez boy, but held back others. When told they would have to bring back all of the others and their squaws would be held hostages until they did so, the Indians commenced shooting the Americans with their bow and arrows, killing two and wounding several others. The Americans then began to slay them and killed nearly all of them."

West Side Of The Plaza

"I can only remember three or four of the occupants of the west side of the Military Plaza in the time of my boyhood. The northwest corner of Dolorosa Street and this side of the Military Plaza was owned by Jose Flores and his family lived there. They owned for some distance north along this side of the Plaza. Don Erasmo Seguin also lived along there about the middle of that side of the Plaza. Next to him on the north was the place where the Perez family lived and extending to the southwest corner of the Plaza the Perez people occupying the house where the Spanish Governors had lived. It is the one which has on the arch above its entrance the court of arms of Austria and Spain blended. The Estrada family also claimed a part of this property. All of the property on the west side of the Military Plaza then ran back to the San Pedro Creek.

Originally the entire plaza was enclosed with high palings. Out on the plaza and in front of the building now on the north side of Commerce Street and with that street between them, was a row of buildings that first formed the carcel or quarters of the Spanish and afterward the Mexican troops, their officers being quartered in the western corner adjacent to the quarters of the Governor. This enclosure was called a presidio, or fort. The Indians were so bad at that time that the settlers residing about here were forced to build their houses, or jacals, right around this presidio and retire into it when the Indians made an attack. These jacals stood around the Military Plaza, even some of them within my memory."

First Fort Near San Pedro

The first presidio, or fortress, was established not far from the head springs of San Pedro Creek, but the Indians drove the Spanish settlers down the stream until they got as far south as Military Plaza where they received reinforcements from Spain and were able to make their stand and locate their settlement out

of which the Alamo and other Spanish Franciscan missions grew. This row of old buildings that stood out on the north side of Military Plaza has all disappeared. The last to go was the one which was known later as the old 'Bat Cave'. This was the combined court house, city hall, police station, and county jail, which was torn down after the city hall was built and which was at the corner and west end of this northern row.

Several others which had stood at the east end of the row and near North Flores Street disappeared shortly before. Before their destruction, the late Sam S. Smith, father of Thad Smith, had his office of County Clerk in one of them. He moved from it into the old Bat Cave building and from there to the old court house, formerly the Mason's Hall.

The City Weigher used to weigh cotton, hay, and other commodities in one of the buildings that stood in front of where Muegge now has his store. Prior to that, a Dr. Shafter had resided in one of these buildings out on the north part of the plaza near North Flores Street and Jacob Lyons had occupied another after the soldiers had vacated it and before it was torn down.

The plaza first embraced all of the buildings on its west side up to the edge of San Pedro Creek, several of which buildings are still standing there. The others that have been replaced by more modern buildings were all, as the present ones, made of adobe. The western palings of the old presidio extended to and included San Pedro Creek which flowed through it and the buildings on the inside of the enclosure were built facing the east, with the San Pedro, as now, running in their rear. That stream then furnished the water supply for the garrison.

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Antonio Chaves was baptized Juan Francisco Antonio Chaves and was born in la villa de San Fernando de Béxar (San Antonio, Texas) on February 14, 1827. He was one of fourteen children born to Jose Ignacio Chaves and Maria Leonarda Montes de Oca. He died December 27, 1911 at his home in San Antonio and was buried at San Fernando Cemetery No. 1. He married Gertrudes Rivas on October 25, 1853 at San Fernando Church. She was the daughter of Juan Rivas and Maria Menchaca. Gertrudes was born sometime between 1835 - 1839, and died August 29, 1890.

Together Antonio Chaves and Gertrudes Rivas had 9 children of which only five were still living at the time of his death (Richard H, Adela, Gertrudis, Ella and Fred):

- i. *Juan Antonio Gerano Chaves, born September 19, 1857 in San Antonio, Bexar Co., Texas.*
- ii. *Richard Hipolito Chaves, born September 16, 1859 in San Antonio, Bexar Co., Texas.*
- iii. *Maria Adela Tabina Chaves, born August 29, 1861 in San Antonio, Bexar Co., Texas.*

*Notes for Maria Adela Tabina Chaves:
possibly died 9/2/1948, buried San Fernando Cemetery No. 1*

- iv. *Felice Federico Chaves, born May 18, 1863 in Graytown, Bexar Co., Texas.*
- v. *Evaristo Federico Chaves, born October 26, 1865 in San Antonio, Bexar Co., Texas.*
- vi. *Maria Gertrudis Chaves, born December 16, 1867 in San Antonio, Bexar Co., Texas.*
- vii. *Ella Chaves, born 1870.*
- viii. *Juan Antonio Chaves, born May 16, 1872 in San Antonio, Bexar Co., Texas.*
- ix. *Dorotea Juana Chaves, born February 06, 1875 in San Antonio, Bexar Co., Texas.*

Antonio Chaves was but a child of 5 1/2 years old when his Grandfather Francisco Xavier Chaves died. His recollection of his grandfather had to have been passed down to him by his parents and other family members. He was raised in San Antonio and then between 1841 and 1848 he received a religious education, attending St. Vincent's College in Cape Girardeau, Missouri. Upon completion of his studies he returned to San Antonio and taught school both there and in Mexico. In the late 1850's Antonio Chaves quit teaching school and established himself as a farmer, stock raiser, and land investor. By the 1860's he owned over 800 acres of land. During the Civil War Chaves served as county commissioner for Bexar County. In 1866 he won election as representative for that county to the Eleventh Texas Legislature. Following his term Chaves returned to San Antonio, serving the community as county commissioner as well as deputy sheriff under sheriff John Crawford.

His grandparents where Francisco Xavier Chaves and Maria Juana Francisca Padron. Antonio states that his grandfather married his first wife while he was living at the house of the Governor and that she died within a year and a half of their marriage. I have not been able to find any evidence to that fact. It is for certain that he was married at least twice but he could have married the first time for a short period of time.

*For more about Francisco Xavier Chaves go to:
<http://bexargenealogy.com/archives/franciscochaves.rtf>*

He also tells a story that I'm sure has been handed down for several generations about his grandmother doña Juana Padron. However, the story is most likely about his great-great grandmother, Maria Robaina de Bethencourt, one of two widows to come to San Antonio from the Canary Islands. She had a son with Juan Rodríguez Granado, however, he died during the journey from the Canary Islands. She named her son after the viceroy of New Spain, Juan de Acuña, Marqués de Casafuerte. There is no

evidence that she had a husband who was killed by Moors before she married Juan Granado and left the Canary Islands for the wilderness of San Antonio de Béxar.

If you have more information on the Chaves family or the descendents of Juan Antonio Chaves please contact me at: steve.gibson@bexargenealogy.com