

OLD MILITARY PLAZA

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by Charles Merrit Barnes

Don Juan Antonio Chavez tells who lived about it. He speaks of Indian raids, pestilence and wars.

Don Juan Antonio Chavez, who narrated the incidents mentioned in the previous article, was too modest to speak of himself. He was a member of the Texas Legislature in 1866, when Throckmorton was Governor. He had previously served as County Commissioner of Bexar County in 1854, when Pease was Governor, and has his commission from the latter Governor. At that time John McCloud was County Judge and Chavez associate Commissioners were John Beck, John Fries and Beitel. He was also County Commissioner of Bexar County in 1884 when Charles L. Wurzbach was County Judge and his fellow Commissioners were Rafael Quintana, Edward Braden and William Hoefling. He retired from active politics at the end of his last term of County Commissioner in 1886. Resuming the narration describing the old buildings about the Military Plaza and their occupants, Mr. Chavez said:

"Commerce Street, when I can first remember it, ran between the row of buildings I have previously described, standing out on the north end of the Military Plaza and the row of houses that formed the north side of Commerce Street. The houses on that side of the plaza were all single storied. They were made of a combination of stones and mud or lime mortar and cedar, or cypress posts. They had very thick walls. They were not adobe, as they have been erroneously called. What is adobe proper is bricks of sunburned mud. There were some few, but very few, of the adobe structures. The adobe was only used by the very poor. Those who were able to build substantial structures used the stone, wood and mortar of mud and lime. These were the most durable ones. Although the adobe houses, likewise, lasted well."

NORTH SIDE OF COMMERCE STREET

"The row of buildings forming the north side of Commerce Street opposite the Military Plaza was an interesting one. The first of them, that at the northeast where the Catholic Orphanage for girls now is, was occupied by Father Odin [Jean Marie Odin], then the Vicar General of this diocese. He was afterward the Catholic Bishop of the Texas diocese at Galveston and still later became archbishop of New Orleans. On his premises there grew a

large china tree to which the vigilance committee one night hung one of the victims sentenced by Judge Lynch's court. Father Odin's successor, who then lived there, cut this tree down immediately after it had been used for this grim purpose."

"Next to this house on the east, between it and the former Elmendorf hardware establishment was one in which a widow lived. Her name I have forgotten, but she was the custodian of the old chapel of miracles previous to it going into the family of Juan Jimenez, whose descendants now have charge of it."

"Where the Elmendorf hardware house was, there lived another priest. He was called the Padre Minos. His housekeeper at his death succeeded him to its occupancy. She raised a youth named Jacob Lynn, who succeeded her in its tenancy. Adjoining this house on the east there lived another widow, whose name I do not now recall, but she had two nieces and a nephew. One of the nieces, whose name was Jacoba, married Antonio Perez. The other, who was named Antonia, married a German gentleman whose name I have forgotten. The name of her nephew was Patricio Bueno. Her property ran all the way east as far as the late Fredrick Kalteyer's Eagle drug store."

"Commencing at the latter place and running all the way east to the northwest corner of Commerce and North Flores Street and including that corner now occupied by Muegge's grain establishment, was the property of Mariano Rodriguez. The building in which the latter establishment is and the one adjoining it are very much as they were when originally built and these two are the only ones on the north side of Main Plaza now which are so. This completes the row of structures forming the present north side of Military Plaza."

EAST SIDE OF MILITARY PLAZA

"The east side of this plaza was formed by another very interesting string of structures. The first was the one which formed the southeast corner of Commerce and North Flores Streets. It stood where the Silver King now stands. It was a single story structure. It was the store of a merchant named Valeancela and originally faced north and on Commerce Street. Later it was the property of the late Theodore Schleuning, one of the Llano German colonists who built the present two story building there. Next to it on the south and facing the Military Plaza, was the house that formed the middle portion of this part of the east side of that Plaza. It was occupied by Nepomuceno Seguin. The next place was the property of my uncle Juan Antonio Padilla [Padilla], and his wife, my aunt, Polonia Padilla [Maria Apolonia Montes de Oca], my mother's sister. This property ran to and included the corner of Trevino Street and the Military Plaza. This was all the property between Commerce and Trevino Streets. Later Francis Guilbeau had a store which took up all of my aunt

and uncle's property and that occupied by Nepomuceno Seguin. Still later, John and Christian Dubis (?) had a store there."

"All of that space on the east side of this Plaza between Trevino and Galan Streets is occupied by the rear portion of the San Fernando Cathedral. This is the only portion of any building on the entire plaza which today is exactly as originally built by the old Franciscan friars in 1734. It is the only part of the original structure which was saved from destruction in the conflagration that burned the eastern portion of the edifice. It is also the only two-story structure that originally stood on the entire plaza for over a hundred years. Capped by a symmetrical dome, this graceful Moresque structure is one of the architectural beauties of the city. The upper portion was occupied for many years by the priests and some of the bishops lived there. The last bishop to reside there was the late and much loved Bishop J. C. Neraz, who remained there until he built the present home of the Catholic bishop on Dwyer Avenue, now occupied by the Rt. Rev. Monsignor Forest, the incumbent now."

"When the eastern portion of the old Cathedral was burned, the contract to rebuild it was given to Edward Tynan, who worked on it for some time. There was a suspension of building there for several years. It was only within the past few years that the cathedral has been completed the last work done being the completion of the two towers. These were not finished according to the design made by the architect, Giraud, former Mayor of San Antonio, who drew the plans. His intention was to have the towers crowned with Moresque domes in unison with the rear portion."

"A church fair was held in the old church while it was being rebuilt, the object of this bazar being to raise funds for its erection. Many brought offerings which were sold there. Some of these came from as far as the Medina River. The late Prof. Toudouze brought quite a collection of specimens of his work in taxidermy for sale there."

"All of the balance of the east side of Military Plaza was occupied by property of the late Jose Casiano Sr., whose premises extended through from Main Plaza on which his residence faced to the Military Plaza. This included all of the property on the east side on the latter plaza between Galan and Dolorosa Streets."

"As the southeast corner of Dolorosa Street, where the large two-story brick house now stands, was a lot on which there grew a tree of considerable size. This tree, like the one I have mentioned as having stood at Camaron and Commerce Street, was also used by the vigilance committee to hang one of its victims on. The owner of this property then was Francisco Flores, he,

like the priest did the other, cut this tree down soon after the vigilantes hung this victim on it."

SOUTH SIDE OF MILITARY PLAZA

"The southwest corner of this plaza was occupied by the priest, Padre Valdez, whose premises extended to where the establishment of Abe Cohen now is. Adjoining it on the west was property occupied by Francisco Bustillos which extended westward to and included the present side of the new building that has superseded the structure which collapsed several years ago. Adjoining it on the west where Broggi now has a store, was premises of Francisco Ruiz. The old Ruiz house, now Broggi's store, with but slight alteration, stands very much as when originally built and was when tenanted by the Ruiz family. At that time the premises included the site now occupied by a two story house containing a saloon."

"Where there is now an undertaking establishment was the home of the Herrera family, while immediately adjoining there on a very narrow lot, was the hut of the Hernandez family."

"This is the family, whose son, Jesus, was captured on Laredo Street by Indians and carried into captivity. This is the boy to whom I alluded when I mentioned the Indian massacre at Market Street and Main Plaza at the old carcel in the latter 40's of the last century."

"The next property to this on the west extended all of the way to the San Pedro Creek on the south side of Dolorosa Street. It was that of Enemencio de la Cerda. Later an American family named Porter, lived and kept a hotel, or boarding house there. Mrs. Porter, after the death of her husband, left here went to El Paso and became postmaster there. The late Edward Frobese afterward acquired this property. His family lives in the rear on Nueva Street now."

"This completes the list of those who owned or occupied property on the four sides of Military Plaza, as I have previously mentioned the owners or occupants in early day, of the other portions of this plaza."

LONG RIDE TO SCHOOL

"When I was about 14 years old, my father concluded to send me to school in Missouri. I went to college, first at Perryville, Mo. Father Odin took me there. He, my father and a guard took me as far as Houston. We rode all the way there on horseback. It was a long ride to go to school. But I still had a much longer journey ahead of me. I left my father and the escort at Houston. Father Odin and I together with two boys of the Navarro family, and one of the Cassiano family, at Houston,

took a sailing vessel and went to Galveston. There we took the steamship Savannah and went to New Orleans via the Gulf of Mexico and the lower Mississippi River."

"When about the middle of the Gulf of Mexico, or half way between Galveston and the mouth of the Mississippi we met another steamer, the Neptune, later to take part in the war between the United States and Mexico. This was in 1841. When the two vessels saluted to each other, the Savannah stopped and so did the Neptune, the latter sending a yawl boat with sailors to make inquiry regarding our mission and to send mail back to New Orleans by our ship."

"After our ship reached New Orleans, we took a steamboat there. On it we went to St. Genevieve, where we took a stage for Perryville. After studying for some time at Perryville, where Father Odin had left me, I went to St. Vincent's College at Cape Girardeau. I was gone from home then seven years and returned by the same route that I had come."

NARROW ESCAPE FROM INDIANS

"I had a cousin, Carmen Gomez, who with another cousin, her sister, had a terrible experience with Indians. They were coming in a cart drawn by oxen over White Hill along the Goliad Road, when Indians came upon them. They endeavored to escape in the brush but could not. Carmen had a baby with her, which she had beneath her clothing. When one of the Indians caught hold of her hair she said to him, because she recognized him as one she had seen often in San Antonio."

"Cassimiro, please spare me."

"He paid no heed to her plaint, but placing his foot on her neck and holding her long hair in one hand, with other holding a knife, he scalped her. Her sister, Trinidad, ran into the brush after having an arrow shot into her neck. The Indians then left. Trinidad came on foot into town and told of the occurrence. A rescuing party was sent out. It found Carmen and her baby in the brush near where she had been scalped. Carmen recovered but had to conceal the place where she had been scalped. Her sister, Trinidad, was never able to speak distinctly afterward, for the muscles of her throat, after the arrow was withdrawn, contracted and prevented her articulating distinctly."

LIVED UNDER FIVE FLAGS

"I have lived in San Antonio under five different dominions, and have seen as many flags float over her citadel and the Alamo since I have been living here. I was born under the Mexican dominion. Its constitutional flag of A.D. 1821, against which Santa Anna contended and prevailed, was floating over the

Alamo. When he came here in 1836. He captured it together with the Alamo and annihilated its brave defenders. On his arrival the flag he hoisted was the bloody red one. It was the flag of no country. He hoisted it to indicate his intention of giving no quarter."

"The next flag I lived under was that of the Texas Republic, the Lone Star flag that floated over the Alamo until the Republic became one of the States of the American Union, by annexation. I saw that starry ensign hauled down when General Twiggs surrendered the city to the Southern Confederacy, whose cross hatred flag floated for four years over the city, and until that 'Conquered Banner' was furied forever after the defeat. --- Then the Star Spangled Banner, which now floats above us, was again raised. I have been here during four different wars. The first was that of the Texans, who successfully struggled for independence. The second was when the United States fought against Mexico and conquered. The next was the Civil War between the North and South. The last was the Spanish American, which occurred a decade ago."

"When I was born, the city's inhabitants could be counted by hundreds. Its American population numbered less than a hundred. I have seen the city expand until its populace has reached the hundred thousand mark and the city's commerce has so grown that she is now the great metropolis of the greatest State in the Union's galazy. I have seen her small jacals and squat hut substantial single storied structures superseded by mammoth modern buildings. I have marked the advance of civilization, sometimes by rapid strides and at others halted by wars strife and pestilentis visitations, when the place was decimated by the plagues of more than half a century ago. I have seen the country abound with the buffalo and mustang that have since been exterminated. I have been here when the Indians were hostile and plentiful. I have seen them scalp the populace in the principal streets. But I have lived to see the place become peaceful, prosperous and still remain the picturesque Mecca of the Pilgrims of Pleasure."