

## **Ana Esparza, a Legacy of Oral History in Texas**

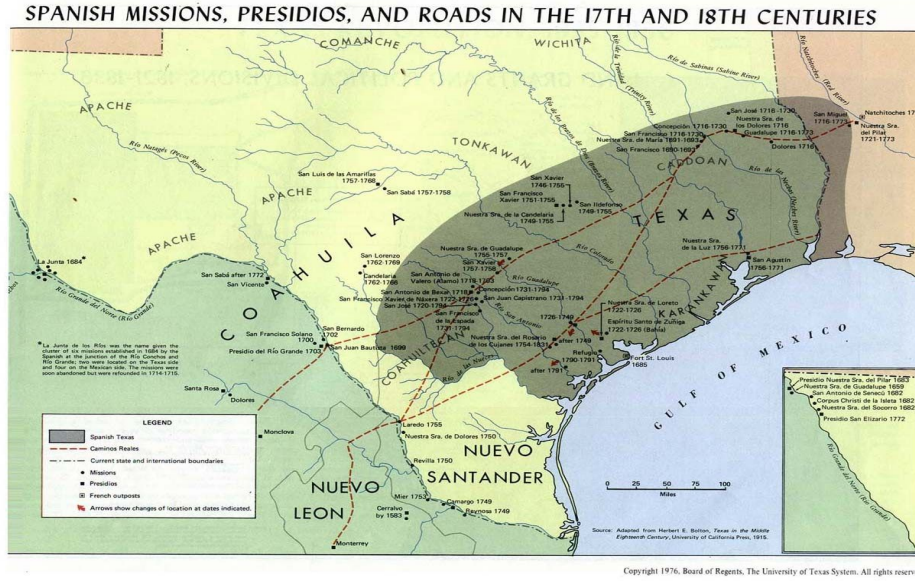
**A series of introductory essays inspired by the stories told at Brush Square Museums.**

**By Katie Bender**

Laura Esparza's earliest memories of her father, Ray Esparza, are trips to old cemeteries, digging through primary sources and stories of the battle of the Alamo. The Esparzas are historians, soldiers, farmers, educators, and storytellers, with a long tradition of oral history that defies the Anglo narrative that has shaped the myths of Texas. Laura's great-great-great-grandmother, Ana Esparza, survived the battle of the Alamo with three of her children, and watched Mexico's state of Coahuila y Texas become the Republic of Texas. Her son, Enrique Esparza, the longest living survivor of the battle, told his eye-witness account of that day to the *San Antonio Express* in 1907. Though widely known in Tejano communities, this account was left out of the common telling of the battle. (1) Enrique's great-great-grandson Ray, Laura's father, served in the Navy in World War II and used the GI Bill to put himself through college studying history at Southwest Texas State University. Ray spent the latter half of his life carefully combing through old records, gathering information, and creating the Esparza Archive that can be accessed today at the Alamo in San Antonio, cementing the Esparza place in history. When Laura was a graduate student at the University of California San Diego, majoring in theater studies, she wrote a one-woman show bringing Ana Esparza's story to life. In writing the piece, Laura channeled nearly two hundred years of family history, connecting with her ancestors, and breathing new life into the Tejano perspective. (2) The Esparzas, over many generations, have told their story, reminding us of the import of oral traditions in historical research. Laura Esparza is also a Division Manager at the City of Austin's Parks and Recreation Department. For this article, I got to spend an afternoon talking with her about her family and experience growing up steeped in Texas history. The following article pulls from our interview as well as books, archives, and primary sources.

### **Ana Esparza**

By all accounts, Ana Salazar de Esparza was stubborn, fierce, and determined. She doesn't fit into any of the stereotypes of a subservient frontier wife. Born sometime in the early 1800s, she grew up in San Antonio de Béxar Presidio in the state of Coahuila y Texas in Mexico. Ana lived under the flag of Spain, Mexico, and The Republic of Texas. To understand the massive social and political upheavals she witnessed in her lifetime, we must understand the world she grew up in.



*Spanish Missions*, copyright 1976, Board of Regents, The University of Texas at Austin.

San Antonio de Béxar was established in 1718 by a settler named Martín de Alarcón as a center of Spanish defense in the Spanish territories of Mexico. Built on the west side of the San Antonio River, the mission needed irrigation for farming, and so the Espada aqueduct was designed by Franciscans and built by Indigenous workers in 1731. Fifteen years later, the aqueduct irrigated approximately 3,500 acres of land and was a much-needed infrastructure that made this presidio unique to Mexico's northern frontier. The aqueduct remains today, a testament to the many peoples who made their mark on the area. San Antonio de Béxar, located between Mexico City, the port of La Bahía, and the frontier to the north and west, became a strategic military key for anyone seeking control of the region. As a military outpost, the town was crucial in Mexico's bid for independence from Spain. On September 16th, 1810, Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla, issued his Grito de Dolores and launched the Mexican War of Independence calling for the end of Spanish rule in Mexico, redistribution of land, and racial equality.



*The Espada Aqueduct, Photo by Jane Thurmond, The Historic Bridge Foundation, 2003.*

In the battle of Medina, in 1813, three hundred and twenty-seven citizens were shot for tyranny in San Antonio de Béxar and many of the women and children in town were pressed into servitude, grinding corn to feed the Spanish Royalists. (4) Caught up in the fight for independence from Spain, Bejareños witnessed war, its aftermath, and the potential and cost of revolutionary change. The war for independence would last fourteen years. Mexico's constitution of 1824 established Mexican democracy which stretched as far south as Chiapas and as far west as California with San Antonio de Béxar right in the middle. While we do not know Ana's birth date, we can use the age of her children to assume that Ana came of age during the revolution and raised her children in the newly independent Mexico.

### **Changing Tides of History**

In 1824, the new Mexican government passed the General Colonization Law, allowing foreigners easy access to citizenship and land in Mexico's state of Texas. San Antonio de Béxar, with its comparatively stable economy of farming, the infrastructure of an aqueduct, central plaza, and San Fernando Cathedral, was an attractive place to settle. Families like Ana's welcomed settlers who brought the increased potential for trade and forged alliances with them in building the state of Texas. (5) We know very little about Ana's life before the battle of the Alamo. Enrique's account states that Ana married Gregorio Esparza several years after the death of her first husband. She had a daughter from her previous marriage named Maria de Jesús. When Ana married Gregorio he had an established farm, like his father before him. The land they owned and worked was on Flores Street about twelve miles northwest of the Alamo mission. Over the next ten years, Ana had three sons: Enrique, Manuel, and Francisco. By all accounts, the family lived well. They were not well-to-do, but they did not go hungry. Gregorio

was an active member of the Benavides Company, a group of Tejano volunteer soldiers pledged to uphold Mexico's Constitution of 1824. Gregorio and Ana were involved in shaping the future of Mexico and allied with settlers in working for independence.

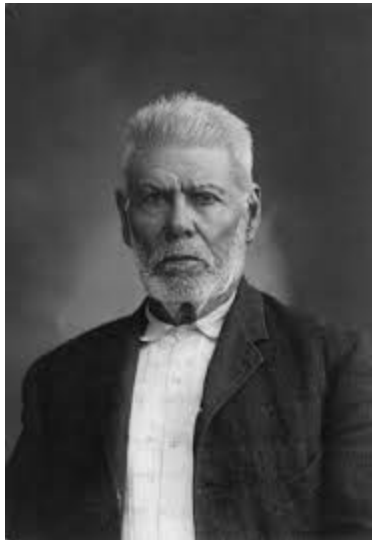


Santa Anna in Military Uniform. Digital Image. Wikipedia. 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antonio\\_López\\_de\\_Santa\\_Anna](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antonio_López_de_Santa_Anna)

In 1834, Antonio López de Santa Anna made a deal with the Centralists that led to him becoming president, taking unlimited control of the government, abolishing the constitution of 1824, and replacing state legislatures with military outposts (3). Settlers and Tejanos began to feel Santa Anna's heavy hand in the form of new taxes on imports, restrictions to settlers bringing in slaves (slavery was officially illegal in Mexico), and an increased military presence at ports of entry and outposts. In 1835, civil war felt inevitable. In response to Santa Anna's dictatorial style of leadership, the Benavides Company, and Gregorio by extension, vowed to take action against El Presidente. Gregorio was certainly not in the majority. Francisco, Gregorio's brother, had signed on to fight with Santa Anna's centralist forces should the need arise. In 1835, a group of volunteers successfully reclaimed a cannon taken by the Mexican army in Gonzales. Soon after, the volunteers turned their attention to San Antonio de Béxar to defeat General Cos, installed by Santa Anna to keep the peace. In December of 1835, volunteers arrived in Béxar and Gregorio joined in attacking General Cos.

The fighting broke out through the streets of the town with insurgents taking houses as they fought their way toward the Alamo mission. The course of the battle changed when a group of Soldados and Bejareñas loyal to Mexico saw Mexican cavalry heading south. The women went to General Cos to ask him for protection. Fearing desertion, General Cos did surrender and negotiated peace terms that were easy on the Bejareños loyal to Mexico. As a final parting shot, General Cos had the fortifications of the Alamo mission burned. For weeks after the battle,

Gregorio would help to rebuild the fortifications. Ana continued to work the land and care for the children, fearing reprisal from Santa Anna.



*Enrique Esparza, c.1907, Adina De Zavala Papers, Dolph Briscoe Center for American History.*

### **A Last-Minute Decision**

In 1907, Charles Merrit Barnes interviewed Enrique Esparza for *The San Antonio Express* about his experience of being a child caught in the battle of the Alamo. (7) Enrique was in his seventies at the time, well-spoken in both English and Spanish like his father, and his memories of the event were sharp and visceral. (1) He was twelve when Santa Anna's troops took over the town of San Antonio de Béxar. As early as January 1836, rumors spread that Santa Anna was heading north to Béxar with sizable troops. It was an especially cold winter, and no one expected Santa Anna to move troops quickly across the barren and frozen terrain. The Esparzas made plans to head north to Nacogdoches with the Smith family. They were waiting for the wagon to arrive when, on February 23rd, scouts spotted Santa Anna's troops five miles south, weeks earlier than expected. A bell in the central plaza rang out the warning of Santa Anna's imminent arrival. Families still in the town had to choose between trying to get out undetected, an uncertain proposition given the size and proximity of Santa Anna's army, or seeking shelter in the Alamo mission.

The Esparzas made the last-minute decision to stay together and seek shelter in the Alamo. Enrique recounts "it was twilight when we got into the Alamo and it grew pitch dark soon afterward. All of the doors were closed and barred. The sentinels were posted upon the roof, but these were protected by the walls of the Alamo church and the old convent building. We went into the church portion. It was shut up when we arrived. We were admitted through a small window." (7) Ana and Gregorio had grabbed whatever provisions and belongings they deemed



necessary and made their way to the safety of the mission. Finding the doors shut fast, they just managed to climb in through the chapel window. Shortly after, they heard that Santa Anna had sent a messenger calling on everyone to surrender. Enrique remembers hearing the explosions of one of the cannons on the roof of the Alamo as Travis' brash reply. Santa Anna fired back, and for the next quarter of an hour, the two sides exchanged fire. (1) Enrique said "my heart quaked when the shot tore through the timbers. My fear and terror was overwhelming, but my brave mother and my dauntless father sought to soothe and quiet my brothers and myself." (7) Enrique's eye-witness account is a visceral reminder of the uncertainty and terror of those unwittingly caught in the making of history.



*Handbook of Texas Online*, Amelia W. Williams, rev. by R. Matt Abigail, "ALAMO," accessed August 06, 2020, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/uqa01>.

### Life in Seige

The Esparzas spent the next twelve days living inside the Alamo mission with Santa Anna's army of approximately three thousand soldiers surrounding them. In 1836, the Alamo mission took up approximately three acres of land and, with an open courtyard in the center, was surrounded on four sides by walls, barracks, and to the north, a small chapel. The Esparzas lived side-by-side with neighbors they'd known their whole lives including the Navarro sisters, Concepción Charli Gortari Losoya, newcomers like William Travis, his enslaved house servant Joe, and Davy Crockett. Enrique remembers many of the people inside the Alamo, but he describes the time inside as "long and full of terror." (7) Santa Anna had a reputation for cruelty, and the odds of surviving were slim.

Enrique remembered that on the twelfth day, the people inside exchanged fire with Santa Anna's army, and that ammunition was very low. Morale was low as well for, during the day, Santa Anna had made several breaches in the wall with cannon fire. That night Enrique was awakened by shouts, and in the darkness, all he could see was the "flash and flame of a fired gun." Ana took the children to shelter in the chapel. Gregorio, who worked the cannons, stood

on the wall loading and firing for as long as he could. When Santa Anna's army breached the wall, Gregorio was shot in the chest and stabbed with a sword. He died on the wall. Inside the chapel, the Esparzas heard a terrible din, a cannon boomed, and the shot crashed through the walls. Santa Anna's soldiers had breached the walls and turned the fort's cannons on any survivors. Mexican soldiers stormed into the chapel, shooting blindly, and looking to kill any surviving secessionists. However, they faltered when they saw women and children. Ana expected they would kill her and her children. (7) The soldier pointed a bayonet at Ana and asked her where the money the Americans had was. She responded calmly that she didn't know but that the soldiers were welcome to look for it. An officer stepped in and admonished the soldier for threatening the women. The officer had all the women collect their belongings and they were sent under guard to the house of Don Ramón Músquiz. (6)

### **The Músquiz Family and Santa Anna**

Ana knew the Músquiz family and their house well and immediately went to work looking for food for her children and the other survivors. The women were meant to be under guard. No one knew what Santa Anna would do with them, but they did know all the surviving men had been executed except Joe. Still, Ana was determined to do what she could for her children and the other survivors. Don Ramón Músquiz warned Ana that she must stay put and that it was dangerous for her to be moving about. Enrique remembers his mother saying that she "didn't care how dangerous it was, that her children were in need of food, as were they all, and she intended to take care of them if Santa Anna did not." (1) Ana was pragmatic and determined, even in the most uncertain times. Músquiz brought bread, meat, and coffee for them all.

The survivors, approximately nineteen women, children, and enslaved people, were brought before Santa Anna. (1) Enrique described him "with a great stack of silver money and a pile of blankets on the table before him. Each woman was to make a declaration and then would be given a blanket and two silver pesos." (7) While they waited in line, Juana Navarro, one of the other survivors, asked that Ana not tell Santa Anna she had married an American. Ana agreed. Finally, Ana stood before Santa Anna and explained the circumstances that brought her to reside inside the Alamo. Francisco, Gregorio's brother, was present for the interview and asked to retrieve and bury Gregorio's body. Santa Anna agreed, and unlike any other secessionist fighter, Gregorio received a Christian burial in the nearby campo santo. Ana and Francisco stood side by side at the grave in mourning.

### **The Aftermath**

The hardship endured during the thirteen-day siege and the loss of Gregorio had lifelong repercussions on Ana. While there was no terminology for post-traumatic stress disorder, it is clear by the way Enrique talks about the event and their life after, that they all suffered physically and mentally. Ana had pneumonia after the battle, and she and the children went to live at a cousin's house for several months until Ana was strong enough to run the household on

her own. All the children had to grow up quickly; Enrique took a job working at a stable and Ana cleaned houses. Ana watched as the fight for independence from the centralist Santa Anna became a fight for an independent Republic.

Texas gained its independence from Mexico on April 21st, 1836, when Santa Anna was captured at San Jacinto and agreed to surrender Mexico north of the Rio Grande. Within months, the geopolitical fallout for Tejanos would be clear. The Republic very quickly set about divesting Tejanos of their lands and rights. Ana had to forfeit the house and land on Flores Street. (2) She did, on numerous occasions, apply for reparations for the loss of her husband and the role he played in the battle of the Alamo. These lawsuits survive today, her signature attached, (1) but during her lifetime she would not see reparations or recognition for the family's sacrifice. Family stories of this time are full of unimaginable hardship; the Esparza family had land in Pleasanton, about forty miles outside of San Antonio de Béxar. Ana had a cart, but no horse. She loaded her children onto the cart and pulled them, by herself, the forty miles to their new home, eating only what she could forage along the way. She had survived three flags over Texas, and she would start over again amidst the socio-economic and political changes the Republic of Texas brought on the Tejano population. The home she built for her family in Pleasanton was the beginning of a family legacy.

Ana died on December 12th, 1847, it is believed she is buried in the same campo santo as Gregorio. Many years after her death the Esparza brothers, using translated testimony, eye-witness accounts, and cross-examination were able to prove their family's sacrifice at the battle. They received a small land grant in Atascosa County, in the town of Pleasanton, where they were able to establish farms, a church, and a schoolhouse. (1)



Esparza schoolhouse in Pleason, family photograph. Copyright Laura Esparza, 2020.



## Defying Common History

Ana and Gregorio Esparza are not the kind of heroes we read about in textbooks, but their sacrifice and determination in the face of both Mexico's mercurial democracy and The Republic's disavowal of Tejano rights, show heroism that has long gone overlooked. Their stories live on in the eye witness account of their son Enrique, in the carefully collected archives put together by Ray, and in the solo show Laura Esparza continues to perform. The Esparza family's oral tradition defies common history and reminds us that Anglo Texas was not born fully grown, but like a Russian doll, hides power structures inside power structures: the United States, the Confederacy, the Republic, Mexico, Spain, and the 11 Nation Tribes indigenous to the region, each one crucial in the shaping of this land. The Esparzas' heroism and their stories remind us that borders are malleable and that this land has changed dramatically in the last two hundred years and will continue to change. It is our job to be clear-eyed about where we come from as we build for a better tomorrow.

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