

[Elizabeth Fountain Armendariz]

Marie Carter

Anthony,

New Mexico [Interview?]

730 words

OLD TIMERS STORIES

Elizabeth Fountain Armendariz

(Mrs. Aurelians Armendariz)

Mrs. Armendariz, who lives in the family home of her parents at Old Mesilla, ushered me into a room of curios, explaining:

" This is the Gadsden Museum collection which belonged to my father, the late Albert J. Fountain Junior. I follow in his footsteps, for collecting curios is my hobby. The Santos, or Saints in this case are very old," she said, pointing to a large glass case of statues, ranging from one to three feet in height. Unlocking the case doors she took out a Santo and placed it in my hands. "That one is a hundred years old, and was found in a cave."

The Santo was a painted canvas stretched over a delicate frame-work of wood.

Library of Congress

" Observe the paint," she said, "faded yet still beautiful, and the Santo's features so easy to define. The Santo on the table is shrouded in mystery; I promised the donor not to tell from whence it came."

" Were you born in Old Mesilla?" I inquired.

" Yes," she replied, "and I have been a teacher in the Mesilla school for the past fifteen years. I want you to examine these articles; they were 2 given to my grandparents by Juan Maria Justiniani, or the Hermit of the Organ mountains, a Cartuchian monk. This little brass bell is the same one he always carried, tied to the handle of his cane. These brown rosary beads, which he gave to my grandmother, are made from the leaves of flowers. This black rosary he gave my grandfather. Note the artistic rose design hand-carved by the [hermit?]."

" And these?" I inquired, pointing to some odd-looking books.

" Were written by the Hermit," she replied. "The brown book is written in Spanish, and its cover is crude cowhide. The other book is written in Italian, and is covered with sheepskin. The Hermit used to walk from the Organ mountains to Mesilla to preach to the people. Here is another rosary much larger than the other two; it came from the Grotto of Our Lady of Lourdes, (France) and he wore it around his waist. This ring with the spikes in it he use for inflicting punishment upon himself. It was his way of doing penance.

" The Hermit was a very religious man. The natives feared him because they believed that he could read their minds; also predict the future. On one of his visits to our community, I have been told, he did something very odd. He happened to be talking to the resident priests when two men approached, one leading a mare. The priest introduced them to the Hermit. He shook hands with one of the men but when the man with the mare proffered his hand the hermit ignored it, saying;

Library of Congress

" 'I cannot shake this man's hand, not until he restores that stolen mare to its master,'

" 'Is that mare stolen property?' demanded the angry priest.

" The guilty Mexican bowed his head in shame as he responded in a low voice: "Si, senior.'

" The Hermit, Juan Maria Justiniani, was an Italian aristocrat, born 3 Sizzario, Lomardy, Italy. Some say that the Virgin [appeared?] to him and told him to go westward, and that he followed her advice, while others contend that he was expelled from Mexico. At the age of 20 he made a promise to travel to all the mountains of the world, to teach and to preach to the ignorant. At first he lived in a cave at Las Vegas, and then he moved to a cave in the Organs.

" That," she said, pointing to a picture of a tall, white bearded monk, wearing the brown hooded cape of his order, and leaning on a cane to which a small brass bell, the one she had shown me, was attached, "is the Hermit. My father painted him from memory. Whenever the natives wish to find something real bad, they pray to the Hermit to help them. For 49 years he lived the life of a hermit, dying at the age of 69, April 17, 1868. His grave is in the Catholic Cemetary, here, in Old [Mesilla?].

" It seems that the [hermit?] predicted his own death. He was in the habit of lighting a bonfire every night to say his rosary."

" 'Tonight,' he told Father Baca of Las Cruces, 'there will be no fire.'

" And when the bright flames, to which the people of Mesilla had grown accustomed, failed to appear in the eastern sky, they knew, even before they found him, that the Hermit of the Organs was dead.

Library of Congress

Mrs. Elizabeth Fountain Armendariz, Granddaughter of Col. AlbertJJ. Fountain, Commander of the Grand Army of the Republic June 30, 1891. Mrs. Armendariz was born in Old Mesilla, New Mexico, Feb. 4. 1897; teacher in Mesilla school for fifteen years; She is an artist, musician and curio collector; has a painting painted by her father, and taken from the original photograph of Mary Todd, wife of Abraham Lincoln. The original photograph is dated, 1859, N. Y. On the lower part of the painting is the word: "Consagrado," which means, consecrated.