

THE LIFE OF DON PEDRO JARAMILLO: BENEFACTOR OF HUMANITY

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“**H**ERE LIE the remains of Pedro Jaramillo the Benefactor of Humanity. Born in Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico. Died at Paisano, Starr County, Texas, July 3, 1907.”

This is the epitaph, written in Spanish, on a small stone in the form of a cross that marks the grave of an old Mexican faith healer in a small cemetery near Falfurrias in South Texas, in what is now Brooks County.

Pedro Jaramillo came to this part of Texas from Mexico in 1881. His interest in the locality developed through a friend in Mexico who knew this country. He first came in the company of some men who were bringing liquors to Las Cabras Ranch of Don Andrés Canales, where a celebration was to be held on St. John's Day, June 24, a festival widely celebrated on Mexican ranches in those days. This gave Don Pedro an opportunity to see something of the country.

He went back to Mexico and then returned to settle at Los Olmos Ranch. This was another of the large Mexican ranches that were situated in the then thinly populated part of Texas between the Nueces River and the Río Grande. He announced himself as a *curandero*, a healer, and settled at Los Olmos Ranch in the neighborhood of present-day Falfurrias. At that time there was only one doctor between Corpus Christi and Laredo, at San Diego, but the Mexicans would have preferred to consult a *curandero* even if doctors had been plentiful.

He claimed that God had bestowed on him the power to heal the sick; to say which prescription, given in the name of God and executed with faith and in the name of God, had power to heal. His mission was to help the sick through their faith in God's power to heal them.

He made no charges for the prescriptions; the patients gave whatever they cared to, or nothing at all; nevertheless, what the people gave

voluntarily was sufficient for Don Pedro, who himself often gave to the poor and the sick who came to him. For himself he wanted only enough for his very frugal living. He thought that since God had bestowed on him the power to help humanity, He could also take that power away from him if he used it for his own benefit.

The story of how this gift of healing was bestowed on Pedro Jaramillo was told to me something like thirty years ago by a man who lived at Los Olmos and who said that he had been born and reared there. He said that he, when a boy, heard "Don Pedrito," as he became known to everyone, tell it to his father.

Don Pedrito related that when he was a poor laborer in Mexico (some say he was a shepherd), working for half a bushel of corn and the equivalent of five dollars a month, he suffered an affliction of the nose (his picture shows a prominent scar just below the bridge). One night, he said, he was suffering so much that he went out into the woods to a pool of water. He lay down and buried his face in the mud at the edge. This relieved him. He stayed here treating himself with the mud. At the end of three days he was well, but his nose remained disfigured. This disfiguration of the nose is always associated with the gift of healing that is credited to Don Pedrito.

He returned to his house and lay down and slept. After a while a voice awakened him and told him that he had received from God the gift of healing. At the same time, the voice told him that his master was sick and that he had the power to cure him. He got up and went to his master. He prescribed the first thing that came into his mind. After this manner he prescribed always. In this case the prescription was a tepid bath daily for three days. His master followed this prescription and recovered. Thus began the work of this curandero.

At his new home on Los Olmos Creek, his work began among the families at Los Olmos Ranch and the neighboring ranches. It grew to a marvelous extent until it finally covered hundreds of square miles. It lasted a full twenty-five years.

During the first years, it was difficult to contact a great many of the people. Only through long, hard trips could it be done. At this time Don Pedrito made trips on horseback far from his home, sometimes accompanied by an old man, a friend. He would go to Corpus Christi, San Antonio and Laredo. He would stop at intermediate points, and in this manner he saw thousands of people who were sick and wanted his help.

On one of these trips to San Antonio, it is said, the crowd became so great that the police were called out. The doctors took notice and made an investigation to see by what authority Don Pedrito practiced. They found that they could do nothing to restrain him because he made no charges for his prescriptions.

When Don Pedrito went away on a trip, he left at home groceries to feed the people who came from a distance and waited for his return. These groceries were brought by wagon and team from the town of Alice, forty miles away. When his work was well established, he would buy four or five hundred dollars' worth of food at a time. The merchant also said Don Pedrito was the only customer he had who bought an entire barrel of cube sugar in one order. He would sometimes prescribe the sugar and furnish the patient with the remedy. He kept the groceries in a lumber room built for that purpose and called it "the store," but nothing was sold; where need existed, food was given.

One of his friends, Don Antonio Hinojosas, made him a present of a hundred acres of land. This he developed into a farm. He fenced it, put a small house and a well on it, and set someone to work it. Here he raised corn for the making of tortillas (the daily bread of the Mexican in those days), watermelons, cashaws (the long-necked pumpkin that the Mexican prefers to other varieties), peppers, garbanzos (chick-peas) and garlic. Whatever came off the farm went into Don Pedrito's work. What the curandero received with one hand he gave away with the other.

When Don Pedrito had been at Los Olmos about ten years a most terrible drought visited the country. It began in 1893 and lasted several years. "There was dearth in the land," as the Bible poetically says; but the plain meaning is want, scarcity and famine. Don Albino Canales, son of Don Andrés Canales of Las Cabras Ranch, who was a small boy at the time, says that Don Pedrito practically fed the northern part of Starr County (now part of Brooks County). Then the State sent some help in the form of corn and beans. And Don Pedrito was selected among those to distribute the food.

Don Pedrito employed people to do the work about his place and to look after and help those who came.

John Sutherland, whose father was postmaster at Los Olmos for a number of years, told me that at times there would be as many as five hundred people camped on Los Olmos Creek awaiting the return of Don Pedrito. Some came for miles on foot, others on horseback, others in

wagons and buggies. An entire family might come bringing one sick member; at the same time a man might arrive on horseback to ask for remedies for several of his family, his relatives and friends. It could have been that this man had traveled a hundred miles or more to see Don Pedrito.

When Don Pedrito was at home, he would go into his *jacal*, or hut, and sit down behind a table. A man he employed directed the people who passed before him. They told the nature of their sickness or not, it is said, for Don Pedrito knew without being told (he is credited with having had clairvoyant as well as mind-reading power). When he gave the prescription—sometimes orally, sometimes written down—the patient would place what he cared to give on the table. To some patients the curandero would say, "No, keep your money; you need it for your trip home." To others he would say, "No, return it to whom you borrowed it from." In this way he dispatched the people easily and quickly.

After Don Pedrito had lived at Los Olmos for some time, a post office was established there with the name of Paisano. The mail was first brought by a mailcarrier on horseback; later it came by stagecoach on the run from Alice to Brownsville. Then much of Don Pedrito's work was done by mail. In the many letters he received, sometimes as many as two hundred a week, were enclosed stamps or money. Of the stamps there were enough for the replies, and finally enough to fill a large box.

The register of the post office showed that many letters were sent out but that the stamps sold were not equal in the number to the letters mailed. For this reason an investigation was made from the Post Office Department in Washington. The investigator was not convinced until he saw the amount of stamps that Don Pedrito had collected at his house.

When the railroad reached the new town of Falfurrias in 1903, something like twenty years after Don Pedrito had come to Los Olmos and only four years before his death, many sick people came on the train. A man at Los Olmos established the business of transporting the people back and forth the four miles between the railroad station at Falfurrias and Don Pedrito's home at Los Olmos. This man had four vehicles that at times made three or four trips a day, bringing the people to get prescriptions, and taking those away who had been prescribed for.

The work of this curandero was not confined to his own people. He prescribed for many of the Anglos. And all those who knew him and his work were convinced that he was a good man, charitable and sincere,

one who believed that he had a God-given mission to perform and dedicated all his time, efforts and money to that end.

Nevertheless, his work caused him to meet with disapproval by some doctors and officers of the places he visited. It is said that he was suspected in Mexico and at one time put in jail there, but the charge against him of being a *brujo* (wizard) was not strong enough to justify his being held. The late Dr. J. S. Strickland, who knew Don Pedrito better than any other doctor in the country, and who no doubt treated the same patients at times when neither man knew it, said that Don Pedrito was a smart but uneducated man, and that he did perform wonderful cures. Mrs. N. A. Hoffman of San Diego tells that she heard Dr. Strickland say, when someone suggested to him that the curandero be prohibited from doing his work, "No, how do I know that Don Pedrito's prayers don't do more good than my pills?"

And there was the saintly parish priest, Father Bard, located some fifty miles from Don Pedrito, who was within the priest's parish. When one of his altar boys, Lafayette Wright, was inclined to make light of Don Pedrito and his remedies, Father Bard reproved him. He explained that God, knowing of the great need of the people where there were so few doctors, saw fit to bestow on this humble man the power of helping these people. He had endowed him for the work. And the servant fulfilled his vocation faithfully.

It can be said that there has never been another so honored and appreciated among the Mexican people of South Texas as this curandero, this folk healer, Pedro Jaramillo. It can also be said that no one else in this part of the country, of whatever nationality, religion, economic or social standing, has done, through a lifetime, as much to try to relieve human suffering as this man did through the twenty-five years that he lived in South Texas. He gave to his work the days of his life and the many thousands of dollars presented by those who felt that they had been helped through him.

An now, forty-odd years after his death, the Mexican people are holding this folk character, this "Benefactor of Humanity," in still greater reverence as time passes. They regard him as a saint, an attitude he discouraged during his lifetime. He told his patients repeatedly, "I have no healing power. It is the power of God released through your faith which heals you."

Today, pictures of Don Pedrito are placed among those of the saints in the homes of the Mexicans of South Texas, and small statues copied from his picture are kept in their homes too. Masses are often said for the repose of his soul in the churches of the region, where many people still remember him. And in many homes a place of honor is given to an enlarged picture of the curandero. A firm in Laredo that supplies curative herbs uses his picture and the trademark, "Don Pedrito."

On last All Soul's Day, in 1950, seventy years after he first came to Los Olmos Ranch—now a ghost ranch itself—people came for miles to visit his grave. They entered a cemetery of twenty-five graves through a gate over which is a placard written in Spanish. It reads, "A memorial to Don Pedrito Jaramillo from the Señor Cortez and his Cooperators."

Visitors kneel at his grave and pray; they say the rosary. They bring candles in glass containers, with the figure of the Virgin of Guadalupe printed in colors on the glass, to light and place at his grave; they bring wreaths of artificial flowers and statues; they bring other votive articles of many kinds. All is performed in fulfillment of vows made to the spirit of Don Pedrito or in supplication of his help in the spiritual world.

His grave is covered with a roof supported by four posts. At one end, which is protected by the roof, is a narrow shelf on which are placed the lighted candles. At the other end is a placard with the announcement, "Dedicated by the Center of Psychologic Studies. Love and affection of McAllen, Texas. 1-13-47."