

NARRATIVE TEXTS

María del Carmen Calvillo, Rancher, 1765-1856

María del Carmen Calvillo was an early ranchowner who became a local legend. Residents near Floresville say they sometimes see a ghostly figure on a white stallion gallop over the plains, inspecting her holdings, with her long hair flying in the wind.¹

María displayed determination to hold onto land during tumultuous times, as well as the savvy to use Spanish laws to her advantage. She grew up on ranchland her father leased and eventually owned. Married by age seventeen, she gave birth to a son in 1783 and another a year later. When her boys died young, María adopted three infants to raise.²

During the Mexican War of Independence, her husband joined the short-lived Casas Revolt of 1811 and subsequently was declared a rebel against the Spanish Crown. Perhaps to protect her land entitlement, María separated from her husband. Her father died during a raid on his ranch in 1814, and María inherited the property.³

María preserved title to the land amid upheaval and four successive political administrations: Spain, Mexico, Republic of Texas, and the United States. She petitioned the court for return “of property lost in the Anglo-American invasion,” demanded surveys to determine property lines, won confirmation of her inheritance, and received additional land grants. She organized her neighbors to construct a granary, sugar mill, and irrigation canals. She grazed 2,000 head of livestock and kept marauding Indians at bay by releasing “beeves” (cattle) to them.⁴

Through efforts of women like María del Carmen, Spanish laws protecting women’s rights to inherit and manage property became part of Texas law.



Graphic

ITC 82-19. Drawing by Thom Ricks.

Endnotes

¹ Mildred Burrows Garret, “Mission Valley, of San Antonio River, cradled many Texas heroes,” *San Antonio Express*, May 21, 1933, pp. 1-3D; Robert Alexander Fromme, “Las Cabras and Doña María del Carmen Calvillo,” e-mail to Dillo List, August 27, 1995.

² Biographical information from ecclesiastical records and from María Calvillo’s will; see Nora E. Ríos McMillan, “María del Carmen Calvillo: How an Independent Spirit Emerged,” *Journal of South Texas* 13:2 (Fall 2000), pp. 175-76, 178; Robert García, “María del Carmen Calvillo de Delgado and the Two Children in Her Will,” *Los Bexareños Genealogical Register*, 21:1 (March 31, 2004), pp. 7-9.

³ McMillan, “María del Carmen Calvillo: How an Independent Spirit Emerged,” pp. 174-77, 178; I. Wayne Cox, “Calvillo, María Del Carmen,” Handbook of Texas Online, <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/view/CC/fcabz.html> (March 29, 2005).

⁴ Legal matters, organizing neighbors, and appeasing Indians, from McMillan, “María del Carmen Calvillo: How an Independent Spirit Emerged,” pp. 178, 180-82; legal initiatives in Adán Benavides, Jr., *The Bexar Archives (1717-1836): A Name Guide* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989), p. 149; legal matters and appeasing Indians, in Dee Jacques Moynihan, “Doña María: Rancher of Las Cabras,” *Texas Highways* 49:8 (August 2002), pp. 28-29; number of livestock from Teresa Palomo Acosta and Ruthe Winegarten, *Las Tejanas: 300 Years of History* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003), p. 19.