

# NARRATIVE TEXTS

## Leonor Villegas de Magnón, Author and Founder of La Cruz Blanca, 1876-1955

Born into wealth, Leonor Villegas de Magnón could have lived a life of aristocratic ease but chose instead to follow her conscience. She became a champion to people on both sides of the Texas-Mexico border.

A native of Nuevo Laredo, Mexico, she attended schools in Texas and New York, married a Hispanic U.S. citizen, and settled with him in Mexico City. Here Leonor grew aware of a smoldering discontent against dictator Porfirio Díaz and began secretly writing for revolutionary publications.<sup>1</sup>

Her father had immigrated to Laredo, Texas. When he fell ill, Leonor traveled there to attend to him. The sudden outbreak of the Mexican Revolution prevented her from returning to Mexico, so she opened a kindergarten in her family's Laredo house and penned editorials for newspapers.

In March 1913 fighting broke out across the river in Nuevo Laredo. Leonor quickly mobilized a group of women to assist. They pulled injured men from the battle, administered first aid, and got them to hospitals. Realizing the need for a more organized medical response, she founded and financed La Cruz Blanca (the White Cross).

On January 1, 1914, Nuevo Laredo again came under attack. Cruz Blanca volunteers helped wounded revolutionaries cross the Rio Grande. Leonor converted her home into a makeshift hospital. When U.S. authorities came to arrest the rebels, Leonor recruited sympathetic American friends to smuggle civilian clothes to patients and help them escape.

Afterwards Leonor and 25 nurses joined a revolutionary army at Juárez as medics. The Mexican government awarded medals to Leonor at the revolution's end, but she was concerned that the story of the nurses and the border inhabitants was being lost. Leonor wrote two narratives of their war experiences, one in Spanish and one in English. She was disappointed not to find a publisher for them in her lifetime. Arte Público Press in Houston published Leonor's two volumes in 1994 and 2004.

### Quotations

*I write in praise of nurses, those selfless women devoted to our country. . . . Each had already proven her loyalty and effectiveness. The Rebel knew their hearts would never harbor treason.*<sup>2</sup>

*History purports to tell the facts. Yet it has forgotten the important role played by people of Laredo, Nuevo Laredo and other border towns who, in those times, drew together in fraternal accord.*<sup>3</sup>

### Photo

ITC 84-597. Caption: "Leonor Villegas de Magnón (*left*) and Jovita Idar treat casualties of the Mexican Revolution, c. 1914." A. Ike Idar, San Antonio.



### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Biographical details in this article are from Teresa Palomo Acosta and Ruthe Winegarten, *Las Tejanas: 300 Years of History* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003), pp. 75-78; Mary Beth Rogers, Sherry A. Smith, and Janelle D. Scott, *We Can Fly: Stories of Katherine Stinson and Other Gutsy Texas Women* (Austin: Texas Foundation for Women's Resources, 1983), pp. 81-87; Nancy Baker Jones, "Villegas de Magnón, Leonor," *Handbook of Texas Online*, <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/view/VV/fvi19.html> (March 30, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> Leonor Villegas de Magnón, Spanish manuscript of *La Rebelde* (1920s), quoted in Clara Lomas, "Transborder Discourse: The Articulation of Gender in the Borderlands in the Early Twentieth Century," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 24: 2 & 3 (2003), p. 68, translation McKenzie.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*