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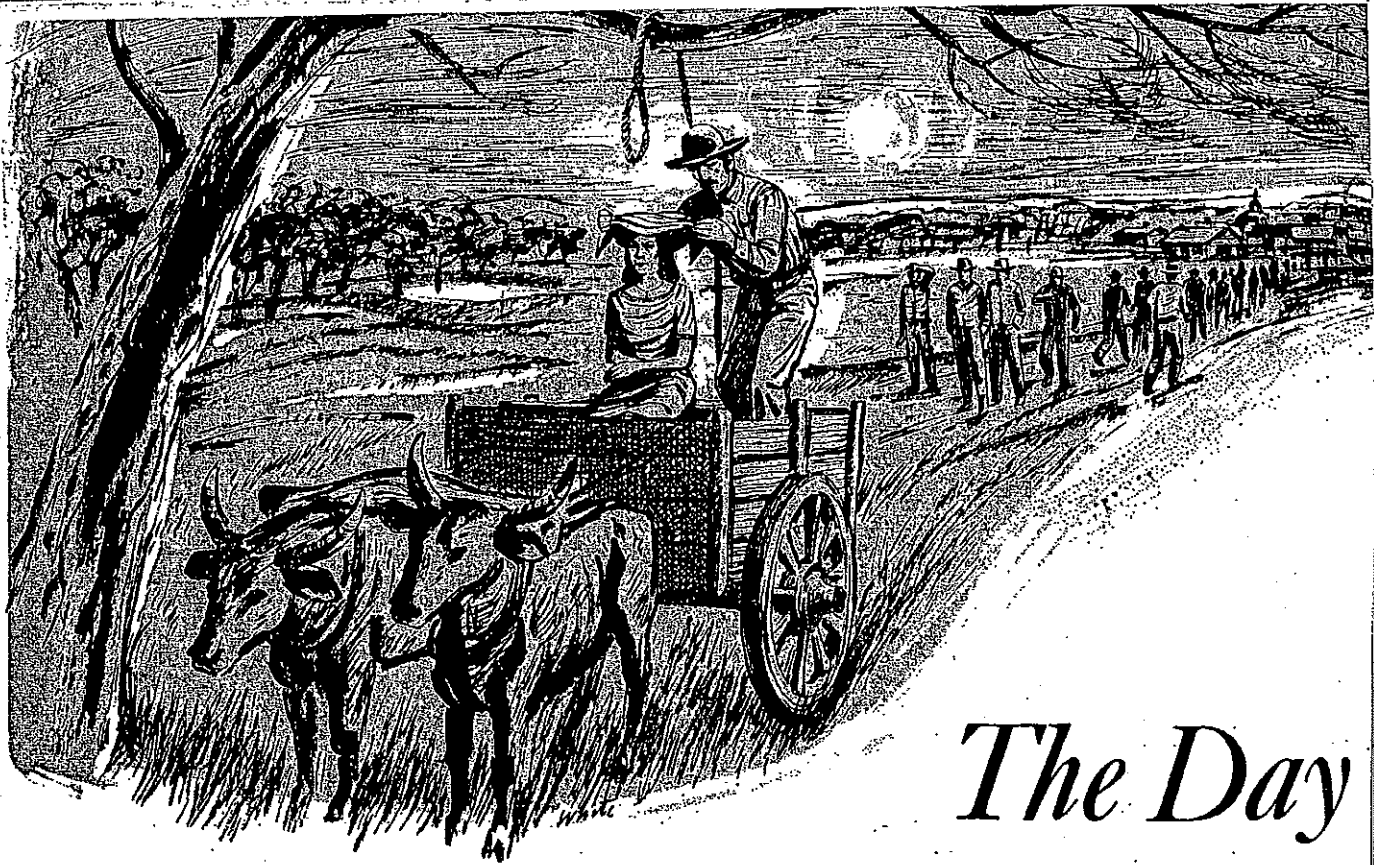
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The Day

ON FRIDAY, November 13, 1863, the sun rose sullenly on the town of San Patricio. Those few who were responsible for the grisly event to follow said it was a fitting day. The many who disapproved shuddered and muttered that no good would come of a community that committed such an atrocity, even in the name of the law.

Although according to the sentence of the judge, the act could be carried out at any time between 11 o'clock in the morning and sundown, it now was late afternoon and still even those who were so intent on carrying out the sentence of the judge hesitated.

Men and women gathered in little groups on the courthouse square and watched in glum silence as preparations went forward.

One man looked up at the gathering clouds and watched as a heavy, billowing gray mass rolled in from the Gulf and blotted out the sun. "If they cannot see the sun, they cannot know when it is down," he commented hopefully. "If they don't do it before sundown, then the verdict will have been voided. They should let her go."

Chipita Rodriguez was a slight woman of middle age, and now she walked with difficulty beside John Gilpin. They approached a two-wheel cart. A team of oxen was hitched to it. She struggled as

she walked, because heavy chains bound her legs close together at the ankles.

Chipita Rodriguez had a date with destiny. She was going to be hanged by the neck until dead.

She walked directly to the cart. John Gilpin, San Patricio County hangman, halted. The condemned woman hesitated only momentarily, then climbed up to the short bed of the cart unaided in spite of the shackles. She glanced around at the gathered townspeople and not a face turned to hers. The eyes of the silent citizens gazed upon the ground in shame for what the county was about to do to Chipita Rodriguez. One woman fainted and moaned as she slumped to the grass of the courthouse lawn.

In the bed of the ox-drawn cart was a new cypress coffin. Chipita Rodriguez gazed at it momentarily, then sat down on it, the calmest of all the persons in sight. She tried to readjust the chains around her ankles and winced as they pinched her flesh.

She weighed barely 100 pounds. Her clothes clung loosely to her thin body, and the cares of the years past were imprinted upon her drawn face. Life had not been good to Chipita Rodriguez.

The hangman spoke to the sleepy oxen, and as they sluggishly pressed against their yoke the cart lumbered along the dusty street and the hangman

walked beside it; and there was dread in the slump of his shoulders.

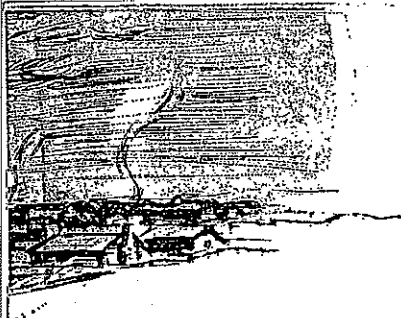
Some of the gathered people trudged along the street at a respectful distance behind the cart; but others slipped silently to the sanctity of their homes, to hide from the shame they saw in the faces of their neighbors.

It was in the midst of the Civil War and things were turning against the South. Tempers were on edge and flared easily. San Patricio was a thriving community of about 1,000 people and the county seat of Patricio County. Most citizens were Irish or of Irish descent, and superstition was strong among them. Now a dread uneasiness was building up, even before the sentence of the court was carried out.

The charge against her was murder. A horse trader named John Savage had sold some horses to the Confederate Army and on his way back to Corpus Christi had stopped for the night at the small roadside inn operated by Chipita and Juan Silvera, her son from an early marriage.

A few days after the horse trader had spent the night at the inn, his body, wrapped in burlap bags, was discovered floating down the Nueces River. It was known locally that the dead man had been carrying considerable money.

Suspicion pointed to Chipita Rodri-



guez and her son and ultimately both were arrested and charged with murder. A grand jury returned indictments against both mother and son.

When she was arrested, Chipita vowed that she was innocent. But during the trial, she said nothing, neither denying nor affirming the charge.

She and her son were tried before Judge Benjamin Neal, and the trial jury

When the ox-cart reached a spot beneath a large mesquite tree, several hundred yards from the square, Hangman John Gilpin stopped it in a slight grass-covered depression beneath a large over-hanging limb. The silent stragglers who had followed from the jail halted several yards back of the spot and waited in shamed silence. Gilpin had been forced to requisition the cart used to haul the condemned woman to the place of execution; and now some of the same men who had refused to lend the hangman a cart made no move to assist him in his grisly business.

He climbed up into the cart and tied the woman's hands behind her. He then drew a bandana from his hip pocket and started to cover her face with it. She mumbled what witnesses believed to be a protest, but Gilpin forced the

to be filled remained until Gilpin drove the cart away. Then they followed by twos and threes up the road to town.

"Tis a black day for San Patricio," an elderly Irish citizen said. "Tis a curse we have brought upon our town."

Little was mentioned thereafter in public about the Rodriguez case, but in the privacy of their own homes, and in small private gatherings, people talked. The consensus was that Chipita refused to affirm or deny the crime because she thought her son had committed it. And the son had remained equally silent, thinking his mother was guilty.

There is a story told that 25 years after the hanging of Chipita Rodriguez a 71-year-old man, knowing he was about to die, confessed to the murder of the horse trader. Of course that was somewhat late to do the victim any good, but it doubtless rekindled the ghosts in the minds of those who had a hand in sentencing and hanging the victim.

They Hanged Chipita

By RUEL McDANIEL

EVIDENCE SUGGESTS THAT THE ONLY WOMAN EVER HANGED IN TEXAS WAS INNOCENT OF THE MURDER CHARGE AGAINST HER.

included three men who had been members of the grand jury which returned the indictments. Owen Gaffney, the trial jury foreman, was justice of the peace. Four members of the grand jury had indictments ranging from cattle rustling to murder hanging over them at the time they sat in judgment against Chipita Rodriguez.

The jury, in finding the woman guilty of murder in the first degree, recommended mercy.

Judge Neal ignored the recommendation and sentenced the accused to be hanged on Friday, November 13, less than a week after the trial. Juan Silvera, the son, drew a five-year penitentiary sentence.

Even before the trial, the saddle-bags in which the murdered horse trader carried his money were found near the river, not far from where the body had been discovered, and in it was the \$600 the man had been carrying. Most townspeople thought this was sufficient evidence to prove Chipita's innocence, but the fact was ignored by both judge and jury. People wondered why some men were so hell-bent on hanging the woman.

cover over her face and tied it at the back of her neck.

He tossed the end of a new hemp rope over the mesquite limb, then slipped the noose at the other end of the rope over the woman's head. He pulled it tight. She groaned.

"I can't take any more of this!" one man muttered. He turned and walked fast back up the road.

Gilpin tightened the rope, then looped the loose end around a low-hanging limb, near the trunk. There was little slack in it. Then he got down out of the cart and yelled at the oxen.

The cart rumbled away from the grass-blanketed depression. The rope pulled taut. The noose tightened around Chipita's neck and slowly it dragged her from the cart. Her feet were barely off the ground after the cart moved away.

After a while Gilpin pronounced her dead.

He sought volunteers to help him dig a grave under the tree, but those few who remained ignored him in shocked silence. Gilpin dug the shallow grave himself.

Most of those who waited for the grave



Naturally those of a practical mind scoff at the suggestion that indeed a curse did fall upon the town of San Patricio, just as the elderly Irishman had predicted; but there is no scoffing away the facts. San Patricio experienced a gradual decline after the hanging. In a few years the county seat was transferred to Sinton, and by 1920 the community did not even have a post office. Today one general store makes up the business part of the community. One with a superstitious turn of mind could appropriately call San Patricio a ghost town, with the ghost of Chipita Rodriguez reigning over the silent and decayed remains of once-thriving San Patricio.

And this is the record of the first—and last—woman ever to be hanged in Texas.

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