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# Paula Angel:

## *The Search for “The Only Woman Ever Hanged in New Mexico”*

by Robert J. Tórréz

New Mexico's history is full of marvelous stories about ordinary people who happen to end up in the historical record when they get caught up in extraordinary circumstances. As we leaf through the stories of such individuals, one often wonders how much of what has been passed on to us about their lives is fact, and how much of it is myth. The following is the story of one such person, Paula Angel, a fascinating and mysterious woman about whom we know very little, but who has for several decades been endowed by our history books with the dubious distinction of being “the only woman ever hanged in New Mexico.”

Paula Angel's story was brought to wide public attention when an article about her was published in *The New Mexican*, on April 26, 1961, under the title, “Bizarre Frontier Hanging Recalled.” The story was timed to coincide with the 100th anniversary of her execution in 1861 at Las Vegas, N.M. Reporter Ernie Thwaites indicated the story was “as told” to him by then New

Mexico District Court Judge, Luis E. Armijo.

The essential elements of Judge Armijo's story are as follows. Paula Angel earned her small niche in history on April 26, 1861, when she was executed for a crime “as old as Eden” — the stabbing death of a lover who had jilted her. Paula was brought to trial during the March

1861 term of San Miguel County District Court and found guilty of first-degree murder. Judge Kirby Benedict imposed upon her the only sentence allowed by New Mexico's territorial law — death by hanging. The date of her execution was set for Friday, April 26, 1861.

While awaiting her appointed day of execution, San Miguel County Sheriff Antonio Abad Herrera daily taunted his prisoner: “Paula Angel, you have only \_\_\_\_\_ days more to live,” reducing the figure from day to day. When April 26 dawned, a large crowd had gathered in Las Vegas from every corner of the territory to witness the hanging. Sheriff Herrera had selected a large cottonwood in a nearby grove and drove Paula there in a wagon that also carried her coffin. He maneuvered the wagon

under the noose that dangled from a limb, halted and placed the noose around her neck. Then, “perhaps overeager...[he] whipped the team and wagon away.”

As Herrera pulled away, he glanced over his shoulder and was horrified to see that he had forgotten to tie her arms. Instead of being hanged, Paula had grabbed hold of the rope and was “frantically trying to pull herself upward from the strangling noose.” The sheriff leaped from the wagon and grasped her around the waist, trying to pull her downward while Paula desperately clung to the rope. But the spectacle was too much for the startled crowd and they rushed forward, pulled Herrera to the ground and cut Paula down. Herrera protested, noting that justice had not been done, but he was shouted down by the crowd, which contended that Paula had been hanged — albeit unsuccessfully — and the sentence carried out.

Then Col. J. D. Sena of Santa Fe, “a prominent and forceful man,” stepped forward and addressed the crowd. Reading from the warrant of execution, he emphasized Paula had to be “hanged by the neck until dead.” The crowd backed away and Paula Angel was again stood on the back of the wagon, this time with her hands tied behind her back, “and with little further delay gained her own particular claim to fame...”

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teristic for a tale that seems to have reached us largely through oral tradition. Several of the individuals named in the story by Judge Armijo are accurate for the time and place. These include San Miguel County Sheriff Antonio Abad Herrera, District Court Judge Kirby Benedict, defense attorney Spruce M. Baird, and "Colonel" Jose D. Sena.

The presence of "Colonel" Jose D. Sena and the role he played that fateful day is most plausible. Sena had a long and distinguished public career and possessed a well-documented talent for public speaking. At his funeral in 1892, Sena was eulogized as a popular speaker whose "eloquence and rhetoric often inspired the multitudes to the highest enthusiasm." It is not difficult to imagine him standing before that crowd in Las Vegas in 1861, pointing out that Paula's bungled hanging did not comply with the letter of the law.

However, the use of a military rank with Sena's

name suggests that parts of this story developed after the actual event. Sena entered military service in July 1861, three months after Paula's hanging. At that time, he was mustered in as a captain in the New Mexico Volunteers, and later participated in the

Civil War battles at Valverde and Apache Pass (Glorieta), and several Indian campaigns. He was promoted to the rank of major in 1863, but there is no indication he ever attained the rank of colonel, although his son, Jose D. Sena Jr., was

later a colonel in the New Mexico National Guard.

This fascinating and entertaining account of Paula's execution, however, is unsubstantiated by a single shred of primary documentation. The following will explore this historian's efforts to determine whether or not someone named Paula Angel was, in fact, hanged at Las Vegas on April 26, 1861, and if so, whether she has been the only woman executed in New Mexico.

## DID PAULA HANG OR NOT?

The question of whether Paula was the first or the only woman to be hanged in New Mexico is answered by a marvelous manuscript found in the Spanish archives of New Mexico. This folio of ancient documents records the story of two Cochiti women, Maria Josefa and her daughter, Maria Francisca, who were hanged together at Santa Fe

on January 26, 1779 for the premeditated murder of Francisca's husband.

So while we can easily determine that this distinction is not Paula's alone, documenting the facts of her own story has proven more of a challenge. For several years, this writer harbored doubts

her hanging had actually taken place. This skepticism surfaced during an on-going project to compile a complete and accurate list of the legal executions that took place in territorial New Mexico (1846 - 1912). To accomplish this, it

was necessary to establish two basic criteria. The first required primary evidence of an indictment, trial, or other judicial actions that document the due process which distinguishes legal hangings from the dozens of lynchings that took place during that period of our history.

Second, it became clear early in the course of this research that documentation of a death sentence imposed through due process was, in itself, insufficient evidence that an execution had actually taken place. Many death sentences imposed by New Mexico's territorial judges were not carried out because governors frequently exercised their privilege of executive clemency and issued a number of pardons and commutations of death sentences to life imprisonment. Additionally, a few condemned persons died while awaiting execution, while others cheated the hangman by escaping from the territory's notoriously inadequate jails. William Bonney, better known to us as "Billy the Kid," is merely the most famous example of a condemned prisoner who escaped from jail while awaiting execution.

The records needed to fully document Paula Angel's case have been difficult to find. Several authors have cited the handwritten transcripts of Paula Angel's trial and sentence, presumably located at the San Miguel County Courthouse in Las Vegas. However, between the time these books were published and when the San Miguel County Territorial District Court records were transferred to the New Mexico State Records Center and Archives in Santa Fe in 1976, Paula's case file had disappeared.

Only two items related to Paula's trial are extant at the State Records Center and Archives, New Mexico's official repository for territorial judicial records. The first

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consists of an entry of the case name and number, *Territory of New Mexico v. Paula Angel, 73b*, in a surviving San Miguel County District Court docket index. The second item is an April 3, 1861, entry in the Executive Record where New Mexico Territorial Gov. Abraham Rencher notes he “issued his writ for the execution of Paula Angel, sentenced to be hung, at the March term, 1861, of the District Court, for San Miguel County.”

This scant information seems to indicate Paula was probably tried and condemned through due process, but does not constitute the primary evidence needed to prove the execution

actually took place. Even the newspapers of the period failed to carry a report of what should have been a well-attended public event. The firing on Fort Sumter on April 12, 1861, also meant that by the time Paula Angel was scheduled to hang, the territory’s few newspapers were more concerned with reporting the unfolding events of the Civil War and rumors of silver strikes in southwest Colorado.

Was it possible that during these trying and undoubtedly hectic days, Paula could have been set free or had her sentence commuted? This possibility was reinforced when the *Las Vegas Daily Optic*, commenting on a 1907 case of two women being tried in Sierra County for capital murder, noted emphatically that “No woman has ever been hanged in New Mexico.” Other newspapers in the territory made the same claim, and while it

is no surprise these papers did not know of the 1779 hanging mentioned earlier, it did not seem likely the Las Vegas newspaper would have been unaware of Paula Angel’s story.

## PAULA INSPIRES LEGENDS AND FOLKLORE

Furthermore, there is among the vast treasure of Las Vegas folklore, the tale of an unnamed weeping woman, or *llorona*, as these wandering spirits are called, which tells of a young woman who was condemned to hang for killing her lover. As related by Edward Garcia Kraul and

Judith Beatty in *The Weeping Woman, Encounters with La Llorona*, when the time came for this woman to be hanged, no one dared “pull the rope” for fear her spirit would come back to haunt them. Consequently, she was set free, but when she died years later, her spirit was condemned to wander the hills at the outskirts of Las Vegas because she had not expiated her heinous crime. Could this story have been based on what might have happened to Paula Angel and explain why there seemed to be no primary evidence of her hanging?

Part of the answer to this historical puzzle was provided by Julian Josue Vigil’s publication of an old folk ballad entitled *La Homicida Pablita*. Vigil determined that Juan Angel, Paula’s cousin, had composed the ballad in 1861 to commemorate her tragic crime and

death. Juan Angel’s ballad includes several elements of the story passed on to Judge Armijo by his grandmother. As the ballad unfolds, one can visualize Paula’s trial and feel the heavy burden of the death sentence imposed on her. We shudder as the closing cell door brings Paula to full realization of her disgrace and the fate that awaited her. The ballad even describes her final ride on the wagon that carried her to the gallows.

## FINALLY, PROOF AT LAST!

But while folklore often complements and provides direction for research on local history, this ballad still was not the primary evidence needed to determine what happened to Paula Angel. It was not until quite recently that the most important, but elusive piece of documentation showed up in the most unlikely of places — the Huntington Library in San Marino, Calif.

The Huntington’s William Gillet Ritch Papers, a collection of nearly two thousand documents extracted from New Mexico’s archives more than a century ago, contains the original warrant issued by Gov. Abraham Rencher for the execution of Paula Angel. The document, dated April 3, 1861, is written in Spanish and contains language rather typical of the genre. Addressed to the Sheriff of San Miguel County, it opens with “Greetings,

“Whereas I have received official information that at the March 1861 term of District Court, held in and for the county of San Miguel, in the Territory of New Mexico, where, one Paula Angel, was convicted at said court of the crime of murder committed against the body of one Miguel Martin, and

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was sentenced by said court to suffer the penalty of death:

"With this you are ordered that on the 26th of April of 1861, you take the said Paula Angel from the jail of the County of San Miguel, in which she now finds herself incarcerated, to some appropriate place within the limits of said county, and within a distance of one mile from the seat of that county, and that between the hours of ten in the morning and four in the afternoon of said day, 26th of April 1861, you then and there hang the said Paula Angel by the neck until she is dead, dead, dead; and may God have mercy on her soul."

Here is the "writ [of] execution" Gov. Rencher had noted in the Executive Record of that date! The final piece of documentation needed to complete the search for Paula's story is on the reverse side

of Gov. Rencher's warrant. It consists of a simple handwritten statement and signature of San Miguel County Sheriff Antonio Abad Herrera. Here, Herrera, perhaps still a bit shaken by the day's events, certified compliance with the order to hang Paula Angel with the simple phrase, "*Retornado y cumplido este mandato (Returned and completed this sentence), hoy, Abril 26 de 1861.*"

We can now be reasonably certain about the basic facts surrounding Paula Angel's execution. Someday the missing judicial case file may surface and provide us details of her indictment and trial, and possibly, something about Paula herself. For now, we can certainly relieve her of the dubious distinction of being "the only woman hanged in New Mexico." But this does not mean we should

forget her story. In fact, we should continue to tell it, not only because it is a splendid tale, deserving of being told, but also because it serves as a wonderful example of how myth and history often combine to provide us with colorful and fascinating views of our frontier past. ■

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TRAHAN