

Trinidad Meija Escalante Swilling: the Mother of Phoenix

By: Christine Marin. 2009.

The presence of Mexicans in Arizona dates back several centuries, since the area that includes present-day Arizona existed as the northern frontier of New Spain, and later, Mexico, until the end of the Mexican-American War in 1848. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and the 1853 Gadsden Purchase clearly defined the U.S-Mexican boundaries and Mexicans became American citizens. The region we now call “Arizona” remained their home. In 1867, John W. “Jack” Swilling, an enterprising frontiersman known as the “Father of Phoenix”, and his wife, Trinidad Meija Escalante Swilling, the “Mother of Phoenix,” arrived in the Salt River Valley to make their home.

Trinidad Meija Escalante Swilling was born in 1847 in Hermosillo, Mexico. Her grandfather came to Mexico during the Spanish Colonial period and her mother, Petra Meija Escalante, was born in Mexico. After the death of Trinidad’s father, Ignatius, in 1864, she and her mother came to Tucson to be with relatives. Trinidad was just a young girl then. The story is that Jack Swilling, a Confederate veteran of the American Civil War, had been involved in mining interests near and around the Prescott area, and was in Tucson on a flour-buying trip for Indian fighter King S. Woolsey. When Jack arrived in Tucson, the mill was out of flour and he was forced to wait until flour could be brought in from Hermosillo. Jack and Trinidad somehow met and, as they say, fell in love. Trinidad ran away with Jack, against her mother’s wishes, and she and Jack lived together in the Tucson area until the next priest came through Tucson to baptize Mexican children, and to confirm Catholic marriages. The marriage registers of St.

Augustine's Cathedral shows that Trinidad Mejia Escalante married Jack Swilling on April 11, 1864, with Father Aloysius M. Bosco presiding over the marriage. At this time, Jack was 34 years old and Trinidad was a young lady of 17 years of age. Newspaper accounts say that Jack and Trinidad came to the Salt River Valley in 1867, and they made their first home in Wickenburg. Historical accounts show that Jack organized the Swilling Irrigating and Canal Company, a group that developed the first modern canal system in Phoenix, and established the townsite of Phoenix, earning him the name as the "father of Phoenix." Swilling also built the family's adobe home, "Dos Casas", near the head of the ditch. The Swilling home, near 36th and Washington Streets, was recognized as the first permanent American dwelling erected by a White settler. Trinidad recalled being the first Mexican women in the Phoenix townsite, and that her friend, "Mrs. Lough" was the first white woman in Phoenix. In her oral history account, Trinidad explained that Jack befriended the Lough family near Gillette, near the junction of the Agua Fria and the New Rivers. They were travelling with livestock and wagons on their way to Phoenix when they encountered trouble along their journey. Their oxen and cows became ill and died, leaving the Loughs stranded. Jack arranged for a wagon and provisions to be sent from Globe to Gillette for them, and they came to the Salt River Valley with his help. Mrs. Lough and Trinidad maintained a long-lasting friendship.

The Territorial Census of 1870 lists two daughters in the Swilling family household: Georgia, age five; and Matilda, age two. A son was born in 1871. Trinidad raised seven children, two of whom died early in childhood, and she loved and cared for two orphaned Apache children. The Swilling marriage served Phoenix in another way: it enabled the Mexican community to practice their Catholic faith and to establish the first Catholic Church in Phoenix

in 1870. This made it easier for Father Edward Gerard of Florence to come to Phoenix via a horse-drawn wagon to hold Catholic services at the homes of Jesus Otero and the Swillings and to work with other Mexican families to establish St. Mary's church in 1881 on east Monroe Street. After Jack's death in 1878, Trinidad worked as a seamstress to support her children. In 1880, she met and married a German immigrant, Henry Schumaker, and had three sons.

Trinidad Mejia Escalante Swilling Schumaker, the "Mother of Phoenix", died in Phoenix in 1925 at the age of 78. A Phoenix journalist for the *Arizona Republic* called her "one of the best-known pioneer figures of the Salt River Valley." Prior to her death, she donated to the Phoenix Museum of History her beloved mother's rosary, her prayer book and a shawl.

Sources:

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