

# THE FIRST VAQUERA

by Janice Ladendorf



Janice Ladendorf & "Skan"

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A ghost rider haunts the prairies near Floresville, Texas. Many people have seen her riding over the hills near the San Antonio River on a white stallion with her long black hair flowing out behind her. Who is this ghost?

In life, her name was Donna Maria Del Carmen and she lived from July 9, 1765 to Jan. 15, 1856. Her neighbors called her, the first vaquera. Where does she ride? Her ghost haunts her family ranch, the Rancho de Las Cabras or the Ranch of the Goats. Why has her spirit returned to it? An analysis of her life could reveal the answer to this question.

In Donna Maria's day, married women in the United States could not legally own property, but in Spanish territory, women could inherit land and retain title in their own names. Sixty even obtained land grants directly from the Crown. Under these laws, Dona Maria could and did inherit the family ranch from her father. Under her expert management, it thrived under the rule of Spain, Mexico, Texas, and the United States.

1810, the census identified thirty surveyed ranches north of the Rio Grande River. Women owned and ran six of them. Although Donna Maria's father was still alive, the Ranch of the Goats showed as one of the six.

How did Donna Maria become one of these six women? Like all pioneer women, she had to be tough and strong to survive. Heredity, education, and experience all worked together to form her indomitable character.

Her grandfather came from the Canary

Islands and settled in the wild country near the San Antonio River. He sold cattle and goats to the Mission San Francisco de la Espada. When it was secularized, her father managed to obtain title to some of their land.

Pioneers had to be prepared to defend themselves from bandits and Indians. Donna Maria lived in a fortress with three-foot walls and bastions for sentries. Living space for twenty families existed within these walls and everyone who lived on the Ranch used their small chapel.

Dona Maria was the eldest of six children and her father treated her like a son. From childhood, he taught her to manage their land. Whenever she rode out with him, she wore men's clothes and rode astride in a man's saddle. Her actions shocked their neighbors.

She also worked beside her father's vaqueros or cowboys and soon proved she could outride, out rope, and outshoot any man. People began calling her the first Vaquera. Since she had been born before our Revolutionary War, she may well be the first American cowgirl

As she grew older, many men came to court her. She could weld feminine weapons as skillfully as she could ropes and guns. She used her beauty to attract men and her charm to conceal her prickly tongue and naturally aggressive personality.

When she married Gavino Delgado, she kept her own name. Their two children died in infancy. When her husband began speaking out against Spanish rule, she decided she could not afford to alienate the authorities and risk losing her land. She denounced him and sent him away from her beloved ranch. Later, he was declared a rebel against the Crown.

In 1814, Indians killed Dona Maria's father. They had been led by her nephew, Ignacio Casanova, but he was never brought to trial for this murder. Dona Maria inherited the Rancho de Las Cabras and her father's authority. As the new head of her family, she could afford to flout convention and upset her neighbors. She took many lovers and had two illegitimate children.

During the long war with Spain, she stayed neutral to protect her land and provided sanctuary to families and soldiers from both sides. After the war, she spent fourteen years fighting to obtain legal title

to her land from the new government of Mexico.

When she first approached the authorities, she wore a black dress and pretended to be a helpless widow. She claimed Indians or Spanish soldiers had stolen her title deeds. When playing feeble woman didn't work, she spent six years preparing a new survey of her land. She submitted it with a legal petition and finally won her long battle.

In 1828, the government granted her title to two square leagues of land and in 1833, they acknowledged her ownership of an additional league. The total came to over 13,000 acres.

Under her management, the Ranch of the Goats supported up to twenty-five hundred cattle, nine hundred goats, and two hundred other animals. It served as a center for organizing cattle drives south to Coahuila. With the help of nearby families, Donna Maria built an extensive irrigation system, a granary, and a sugar mill.

When a large band of Indians encircled her home, she rode out to meet them with a gun in each hand and flying a white flag of peace. She cried, "Take whatever stock you want, but leave us in peace." They took twenty cattle, ate one, and drove the rest away.

After that, she paid tribute to all of the local Indian tribes. She always gave them food and occasionally included bullets and gunpowder with her gifts. She even officially adopted an Indian boy. Much to her neighbors' chagrin, the Indians never attacked her home again.

During the Texas Revolution, again she stayed neutral to protect her land and gave shelter to refugees from both sides. She always did whatever she had to do to keep faith with her land. She gave her life and love to it.

When she died, she left her property to another emancipated woman, her natural daughter, Maria Gortari. In death, maybe her indomitable spirit could not let go of her beloved ranch. Afterwards, it was sold, subdivided, and eventually abandoned. This outrage may have been final factor that brought her spirit back to ride over her land.

The remaining acres have recently become a historic site. Now that her ranch and her reign have received public recognition, perhaps her restless spirit may find peace at last.