

El Paso Mayor: Tom Lea Jr.

Article first published in Vol. 26, 2007/8. epcc.libguides.com

By Nora Orozco

During the summer of 2007, El Paso celebrated the centennial anniversary of the birth of artist and author Tom Lea. But El Pasoans in the early twentieth century knew another Tom Lea: the lawyer, the mayor, the reformer. And the father of the artist.

The eldest of three children, Thomas Calloway Lea Jr. was born on October 29, 1877, in Independence, Missouri, to Amanda Rose and Thomas Calloway Lea. He earned his law degree in 1898 from the Kansas City Law School in Missouri. In his 1995 biography Tom Lea: An Oral History, Tom Lea III tells how his father landed in El Paso. In 1901, he came to the Southwest to visit cousins who lived on a ranch in Carrizozo, N.M.



Tom Lea served El Paso as mayor from 1915 to 1917

Photo courtesy of El Paso County Historical Society

Passing through Alamogordo on his way home in a stagecoach, Lea discovered he had left his wallet at one of the rest stops. He rented a horse to retrace his route but failed to find his wallet. He then hitched a ride on a freight train on its way to El Paso where with his last silver dollar he bought several meal tickets at a restaurant simply called “Eats.” Offering to wash dishes when his tickets ran out, Lea found how kind and generous El Pasoans could be. Restaurant owner Oscar Uhling refused his help but staked him until Lea found a job – as a bill collector.

Lea first saw his wife-to-be on Kansas Street. Zola Utt was a high school freshman at Central School, and Lea was told that the best way to meet her was to go to church. He chased away other potential suitors while courting Utt, and the two became engaged. In between his arrival and his marriage, Lea traveled in Mexico, seeking gold with friends and hoping to strike it rich. Three years of adventuring later – but no gold – Lea married Utt in June 1906.

Appointed Police Court Judge in 1907, Lea served four years in this role and the **El Paso Herald** reported that he established a reputation as fair and compassionate with the downtrodden, but harsh and relentless with the expert criminal. In an April 1911 article, the **Herald** noted: “When Lea first took office, he set a rule that a man who assaulted a woman, no matter what her character or color, he should be fined not less than \$25, and to that rule he stuck to the last.” Lea became a trial lawyer in partnership with Robert Ewing Thomason who would later serve as mayor, U.S. congressman and federal judge. In his autobiography, Thomason said of Lea, “He ... was the most colorful and successful trial lawyer in the Southwest.” Of Lea’s courtroom power, Thomason had this to say in a eulogy printed in the **El Paso Herald**: “Tears were his chief weapon and he could bring them forth from judge, jury, and himself in behalf of the innocent horse-thief as well as the ‘dear little lady’ who had been forced to dispose of her ‘brute of a husband.’ ”

Tom Lea is remembered as a charismatic political reformer, and his oratorical style and success in the courtroom helped him to become an effective leader in the cause. Nationally, the Progressive Movement (1901-1917) was an effort to stamp out political corruption, promote democracy and close the gap between the classes. Reform usually began at the city level, and a major focus was cleaning up the corruption of political machines.

In El Paso’s case, it was a group called the “Ring,” a group of professional men and politicians who had controlled city government since 1899. Revenue from local brothels often funded schools, road

improvements and the acquisition of private utilities. The “Ring” controlled political opposition often by brute force, and buying votes was common, especially paying Juarenses to vote in city elections, according to Thomason.

Reformers had tried since 1905 to affect a change in local politics with little success. Mayor Sweeney, a prominent “Ring” leader in 1907, “ordered gambling to cease but took no positive steps to stop it. He closed the front doors of the saloons on Sunday, but the back doors opened for business as usual. It was a help, of course, to get the ungodly off the sidewalks when the righteous were on their way to church,” wrote C. L. Sonnichsen in his book *Pass of the North*. This farce of an attempt at cleaning up the town failed to satisfy the reformers.

During the 1913 mayoral election, reformers worked hard to reveal the corruption under “Ring” city officials. The Herald sent undercover reporters to look for evidence of corruption and found alcohol laws were not being enforced, and on Utah Street (today’s Mesa Street) alone, 367 prostitutes were found living and operating with no shortage of demand, according to Sonnichsen. Although reformers lost another election, it was a different story two years later.

Sonnichsen wrote that the incumbent Charles Kelly, so sure of victory, boasted he could be mayor of El Paso for the rest of his natural life if he wanted to. Kelly’s arrogance caused him to misjudge his campaign efforts until the last month before elections when he realized that his opponent, the young lawyer Tom Lea, had gained significant ground with the people. The “Ring” rented every meeting hall in the city the night before the election to make it impossible for Lea to hold a rally. He surprised them by holding his rally at the local skating rink, speaking to an enthusiastic crowd for an hour. He not only promised the same city improvements that Kelly did, but equalization of taxes and an efficient administration as well.

On February 16, 1915, Tom Lea became the youngest mayor ever elected to that date, carrying four out of seven precincts, with a vote of 4,218 to 3,149. The “Ring” had been defeated and never recovered political power. One of Lea’s first orders of business was to discontinue the collection of “fines” from prostitutes. The **Herald** reported, “The mayor announced that he did not want to conduct his administration ‘with the blood money of these unfortunate women.’” Each woman had been paying \$10 a month, a practice that had produced thousands of dollars for the city, which used the money to pay police and fire fighters. Although he lost a battle to shut down the red-light district, Lea had police routinely conduct raids, and the women underwent health exams on a regular basis. During his administration, the city council also passed an ordinance forbidding the public sale of narcotics and marijuana.

True to his promise, Lea began keeping a tight rein on the expenses claimed by city employees. He issued an order to suspend the practice of operating city automobiles for non-related business, especially on the weekends when taking long Sunday drives were a custom. Lea’s adherence to the law admitted no exception. In **El Paso Chronicles**, Leon Metz noted that on September 14, 1915, when city police sympathized with streetcar strikers and declined to arrest the rioters who were burning street cars and littering the town, Lea threatened to fire the officers.

During Lea’s administration, events precipitated by the Mexican Revolution came to a head when President Woodrow Wilson gave Pancho Villa’s enemy Venustiano Carranza his support, and Villa withdrew any kind of protection Americans had while traveling in Mexico. On January 11, 1916, a train carrying 20 mining engineers invited by the Mexican government to reopen the Cusihiuriachic Mines outside of Chihuahua City was stopped by Villista troops in Santa Ysabel, Chihuahua. The men were taken off the train and ordered to disrobe; 18 of them were shot to death. Their bodies

arrived in El Paso two days later.

Police received word that an El Paso mob was planning to lynch any Villistas they could find. Lea had 50 pro-Villistas arrested and ordered them to leave town, an act that El Paso historian David Dorado Romo equates with racism in his recent book *Ringside Seat to a Revolution*. Romo neglects to point out that Lea could have let them meet their fate with the mob, but instead afforded them protection. Meanwhile, the U. S. Congress wanted the president to intervene militarily.

With feelings running high on both sides of the border, a fight began two days later when two soldiers knocked two Mexicans from a sidewalk at Broadway and San Antonio Streets. The brawl accelerated into a near-riot in a crowd that grew to almost 1,000. As more fights broke out, General John J. Pershing called out companies of the 16th Infantry. Before order was restored, at least 25 Mexicans were beaten, with two taken to the hospital. Nineteen men were arrested, including 11 Anglos and eight Mexicans.

By late 1915, a typhus epidemic was wreaking havoc in Mexico City, Puebla and other cities. Known to infect war-torn areas where poverty and unsanitary practices abound, typhus, spread by body lice, resulted in 20,000 to 30,000 cases in Mexico City alone, according to the **New York Times**, as the revolution raged throughout the country. In January 1916, the Mexican Superior Board of Health acknowledged 2,001 deaths during December 1915, according to Claudia Agostoni of the Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas of the National Autonomous University of Mexico.

In an attempt to stave off the disease, health officials in El Paso wanted to set up a quarantine station for immigrants coming from Mexico. The disease, which has an incubation period of 10 to 14 days before high fever sets in, had been diagnosed in three men who had recently arrived from Aguascalientes, Mexico. Lea requested immediate quarantine, but disinfecting stations were set up instead. Immigrants crossing the El Paso border were bathed in kerosene and vinegar, inspected for lice and had their head and body hair shaved if lice were found.

Romo criticizes Lea and says his “atavistic fear of being contaminated by Mexicans – both bacteriologically and socially – seemed to have been an underlying motif of many of his administration’s policies.” Romo further attacks Lea for wearing silk underwear because he was told by Dr. W. C. Klutz, city health officer, that typhus lice did not stick to silk. Klutz also would die of typhus, contracted during his official duties.

Typhus had been and remained a scourge for many countries of the world, not just Mexico, and leaders everywhere were concerned with its spread and prevention. Not until it was discovered that DDT worked in prevention and that a vaccine came into widespread use in 1943 did the fear of typhus lessen.

Romo might be justified in his accusation that Lea was a xenophobe, but it is also the case that the assessment of the condition of the Mexican people because of the revolution was undeniably accurate. Living conditions had become dire. Thousands of hungry and jobless who witnessed their country ravaged by war sought refuge in El Paso. Agostoni contends that “the military and health authorities, the press and the public asked if the bullets or the microbes were causing the largest number of casualties.” In order to combat the typhus epidemic, Mexican health authorities also performed delousing procedures on their own citizens. Ironically, Howard Ricketts, the scientist who discovered the tiny bacteria causing typhus died in Mexico of typhus.

Tragedy did strike the Lea administration on March 5, 1916, when a group of prisoners who were

ordered to take a gasoline bath was burned to death in a fire ignited by a cigarette. Twenty-seven men were killed, including 19 Mexicans. The mayor's son Tom remembered this disaster and its aftermath. In Tom Lea: An Oral History, he said: "It really devastated my father and he thought about it an awful lot. Somehow or other he took the blame for it, you know, as he would. I remember that vividly."

A year later what would become known as the "Bath Riots" occurred in connection with the required fumigations of immigrants. When a 17-year-old maid named Carmelita Torres refused to submit to the gasoline bath, others on the international trolley joined her. Romo says that within an hour, 200 women had joined in the protest, effectively stopping traffic into El Paso. Neither American nor Mexican troops could subjugate the women. However, the disinfections, which had begun about 1910, would continue for decades.

Besides these events, Mayor Tom Lea also became a personal enemy of Pancho Villa. Lea refused to tolerate the man who had caused so many Mexican refugees to live in tents at Fort Bliss with nothing to call their own except the clothes on their backs and government rations. Although Villa was often in El Paso, Lea told the El Paso Herald, "If that bandit comes here again, the police have orders to throw him in jail." When Lea had Villa's wife Luz Corral Villa and his brother Hipólito arrested for smuggling arms and ammunition in El Paso, Villa offered 1,000 pesos in gold for the mayor, dead or alive.

Furthermore, the mayor received obscene notes in Spanish threatening to kidnap and harm his two sons, nine-year-old Tom and five-year-old Joe. In his book A Picture Gallery, Tom Lea III wrote, "For quite a while in 1916 a special policeman was detailed to guard our house at night. My father was always armed. Joe and I were taken to and from Lamar School daily by a special policeman wearing a long-barreled .44 plain on his hip."

When Tom Lea's term as mayor was up in 1917, he stepped aside as he had resolved to do. He had served as a volunteer in the Spanish-American War and again in World War I, but by the time he had completed officer's training school, that war was over. Lea's wife Zola died in 1936, and three years later, he married Mrs. Rosario Partida Archer. After his military service, he resumed his law practice and was a member of the Texas Bar for 40 years. He died from a heart attack on August 2, 1945. The Texas Supreme Court honored him in a November 1945 resolution, and El Paso named a city park below Rim Road for him.

Tom Lea was not perfect. What he and others did in their own age is still being debated by historians. But he took his job as mayor seriously, determined to help make El Paso a better city in which to live, not an opportunity to enrich his own pockets, as so many other politicians had and would.

Orozco, Nora. "El Paso Mayor: Tom Lea Jr." *Article first published in Vol. 26, 2007/08.*
epcc.libguides.com/content.php?pid=309255&sid=3225040. Accessed 6 Jan. 201

Biography of Tom Lea by Adair Margo

Tom Lea III was born in El Paso, Texas, on July 11, 1907, to a frontier lawyer and his wife, Tom and Zola Utt Lea. Tom Lea Sr. was mayor of El Paso from 1915-1917 during the stormy years of the Mexican Revolution. Tom Lea attended public schools in El Paso from 1912-1924 and, through his art teacher, learned about the Art Institute of Chicago and the noted muralist John Warner Norton, who taught there. Lea attended the Art Institute from 1924-1926, studying briefly under Norton and becoming his apprentice. From 1926-1933, Lea worked as a mural painter and commercial artist in Chicago and married fellow art student Nancy Taylor. He earned enough money to travel third class to Europe in 1930, seeing the works of masters such as Eugene Delacroix in Paris and Piero della Francesca and Luca Signorelli in Italy. Upon returning to Chicago, he continued work for Norton, leaving in 1933 for the place he loved visiting as a boy, New Mexico, the Land of Enchantment.

In Santa Fe, Tom Lea worked for the Laboratory of Anthropology, did illustrations for Santa Fe Magazine and worked briefly for the Works Progress Administration (WPA). After Nancy Lea suffered a botched appendectomy, the Leas returned to El Paso where Nancy died in 1936. Living back home, Tom Lea completed murals for the Texas Centennial celebration and for the Branigan Library in Las Cruces. He competed for government projects under the U.S. Treasury Department, Section of Fine Arts and won competitions for murals across the United States including the Benjamin Franklin Post Office, Washington, D.C.; Federal Courthouse, El Paso, Texas; Burlington Railroad Station, Lacrosse, Wisconsin; Post Office, Pleasant Hill, Missouri; Post Office, Odessa, Texas; and, Post Office, Seymour, Texas.

In 1938 he met and married Sarah Dighton, who became his lifelong partner. He met the typographer and book designer Carl Hertzog while working in his El Paso studio, as well as the noted Texas writer J. Frank Dobie. These friendships led to numerous collaborative projects, and Lea illustrated Dobie's books Apache Gold and Yaqui Silver and The Longhorns. In 1940 Tom Lea applied for and won a Rosenwald Fellowship, but declined it after receiving an invitation from the Editorial Staff of Life Magazine to become an accredited war artist-correspondent. From 1941-1946, Tom Lea became an eye-witness reporter for Life, traveling over 100,000 miles to theaters of war where American forces were involved, including the North Atlantic, the South Pacific on board the Hornet in the South Pacific, a trip to China where he met Theodore H. White, and landing on Peleliu. His writing and painting appeared in Life Magazine between April, 1942 and July, 1945. Lea's experience of landing with the first assault wave of the First Marines on Peleliu became a book he wrote and illustrated Peleliu Landing (1945). Following the war, Lea painted Sarah in the Summertime, based on a snapshot he carried in his wallet the entire time he was away. It was "a painter's votive offering made in the gladness of being home" and, at the end of his life, Lea considered it his magnum opus.

A final project for Life depicting the history of beef cattle in the Americas led Tom Lea to Mexico where he became fascinated with black fighting bulls. The artist turned to writing, and his first novel, The Brave Bulls (1949), became a bestseller and movie starring Mel Ferrer. Other works of fiction and history followed, including The Wonderful Country (1952), a best seller and movie starring Robert Mitchum; The King Ranch (1957) an annotated history of the mammoth South Texas Ranch; The Primal Yoke (1960), a mountaineering story set in Wyoming; The Hands of Cantu (1964), an account of horse training in 16th-century Nueva Viscaya; A Picture Gallery (1968), his autobiography; and In the Crucible in the Sun (1974), about King Ranch properties in Australia. Lea illustrated all of his books and, in the case of The Hands of Cantu, he created portraits of the characters and hung them in his studio before writing the story.

During his lifetime, Tom Lea took pleasure in capturing portrait likenesses. He started with

friends in El Paso and, when he went to war, drew well known subjects like Jimmy Doolittle, Claire Chennault, Berndt Balchen and Madame and Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek. Lea reserved portraiture for his own pleasure, turning down offers of commissions. Lea wrote that "I select my subjects, they don't select me." Twice he made an exception to his rule, painting Benito Juarez 1948 and Sam Rayburn in 1966. Both portraits hang in public buildings in Washington, D.C.

The last mural Tom Lea completed was for the El Paso Public Library in 1956. Entitled Southwest, the painting was done as a gift for the citizens of El Paso by the artist, assisted by his wife Sarah. Lea's later years were devoted to the easel, in oil, watercolor, casein tempera, pastel and Chinese ink with landscape as the predominant subject landscape. Requests would come, resulting in paintings like Ranger Escort West of the Pecos for the office of Gov. John Connally; or The First Recorded Surgical Operation in North America: Cabeza de Vaca, 1535 completed for the Moody Medical Library, U.T. Medical Branch, Galveston. While these paintings hang in public buildings, almost all of Lea's work was delivered directly from his studio into the private collections of personal friends.

The first dinner given by Gov. and Mrs. George W. Bush in the Texas Governor's Mansion was to honor Tom Lea. The governor read from Tom Lea, An Oral History, recorded by Adair Margo, for friends that included Mrs. John Connally, Lady Bird Johnson, and the Kleberg family of the King Ranch. When accepting the Republican nomination for president of the United States in 2000, George W. Bush quoted Tom Lea about living on the "sunrise side of the mountain," and, after his election, he made it known that a Tom Lea painting would hang in the Oval Office. Tom Lea died on January 29, 2001 following a fall at home. Laura Bush traveled to El Paso for the memorial service, the first trip she made as first lady of the United States. While in El Paso, she requested the loan of Tom Lea's painting Rio Grande from the El Paso Museum of Art to hang in the Oval Office.