



In Search of El dorado

A daily journal of my travels and adventures in my.....Search for Eldorado

Hello to Family & Friends

Wednesday, February 3rd 2021 Day 18



There certainly is a perk parking at a truck stop, high speed WiFi from McDonald's.

I ran over to WalMart to do some food shopping and then headed down the road to Sarita and the Kenedy Ranch Museum. Reviews state that the King Ranch Museum is not as good as this one, even though the King Ranch is more well known and over twice as big, 825,000 acres, bigger than the state of Rhode Island and worth about \$1 Billion. The King Brand is on trucks, restaurants and airplanes.

I hope this time the web can be believed.

The door was locked and the lights turned off when I tried the door. The docent must have heard me and opened up.

MIFFLIN KENEDY COMES TO TEXAS

His devout, well-established, Quaker parents sent him to the private school of Quaker scholar John Gauss.

By the time he was 25, he had taught school, shipped out as a sailor on a voyage to India, worked in a Pittsburgh brickyard, and clerked on a Mississippi steamboat. In 1843 he became the master of the steamboat Champion on the Apalachicola and Chattahoochee Rivers in Florida.

It was there he met the rough-and-ready river pilot, Richard King, a powerfully built man, seven years Kenedy's junior and from a dirt-poor background in New York City. Apprenticed to a jeweler at age nine for board and keep, King ran away to sea shortly thereafter. The meeting of these two and their subsequent lifelong friendship would have a significant effect on the future history of South Texas.

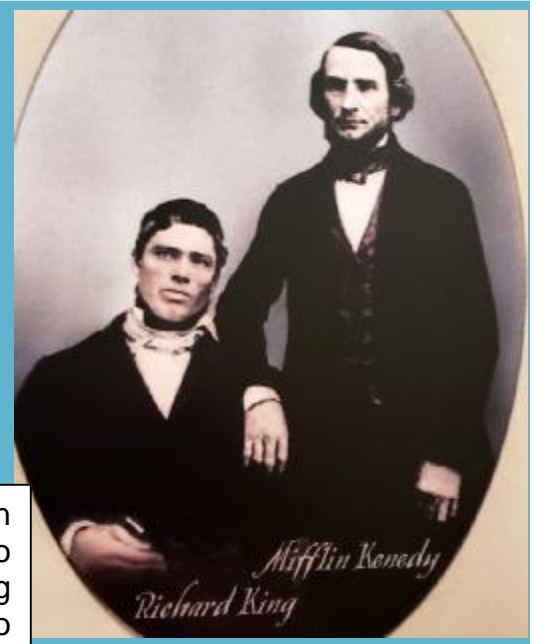
In 1847 Mifflin Kenedy came to Texas to serve as a steamboat captain with the U.S. Army during the War with Mexico. He wrote to his friend King, who was in Florida, telling him about the war and the opportunities on a river called the Rio Grande. A few months later King arrived in Texas.

Kenedy, by then master of the steamer *Corvette*, arranged to have King posted to his steamer as first pilot. Before long, King had his own boat as well and the two captains ferried troops and supplies up and down the Rio Grande until February of 1848 when hostilities ceased.

Recognizing opportunity on the new frontier, the two men decided to stay. For a time each went his own way, King opening a bar in *Boca del Rio* and Kenedy going up river to promote the new town of *Roma*.

Neither enterprise was making significant profit when fate intervened in the form of powerful merchant Charles Stillman who asked Kenedy to come to Matamoros to discuss a business proposition. The result was the formation of M. Kenedy & Company on March 1, 1850, with four equal partners – Mifflin Kenedy, Charles Stillman, Richard King and James O'Donnel.

For the next two decades, M. Kenedy & Company dominated steamboat trade on the Rio Grande. Kenedy and King made fortunes on the river. Following the Civil War, the company was reorganized in 1866, becoming King, Kenedy & Company.



During the Civil War the Company licensed their steamboats in Mexico and delivered bales of cotton down the Rio Grande to ships bound for Europe. Because they flew the Mexican flag they were able to sail right past the Union blockade and into port. This is where, in yesterday's newsletter I mentioned them making \$300,000 in six months. The rich get richer.

Before the end of 1868, Mifflin Kenedy made ranching history by completing 30 miles of fence across the throat of the peninsula that formed the Laureles Grant. By so doing, he enclosed 131,000 acres and became the owner of the first fenced range of any appreciable size west of the Mississippi. The fence was built of creosote posts and hard pine planks brought by ship from Louisiana and hauled inland by wagon.

In 1882, Kenedy sold the Los Laureles to a Scottish syndicate for \$1,100,000 and used the proceeds to continue purchasing lands in what was then Cameron County and which would one day become the 400,000 acre Kenedy Ranch. He then immediately purchased the 400,000-acre La Parra Ranch in what was then Cameron County. In March of that year, the Kenedy Pasture Company was formed with Mifflin Kenedy as president and treasurer, his oldest son Thomas as vice president, son James as general manager, and son John as secretary. James, who had returned to the ranch following his escapade in Dodge City, died of tuberculosis in 1884.

\$1.1 million in 1882 is the equivalent of \$28 million in today's dollars.

By this time, Petra Vela was in poor health. She and Mifflin had built a large, plantation-style house at La Parra but never occupied it. Instead they chose to live in Corpus Christi where most of Mifflin's business dealings took place. Construction was begun on a mansion on upper Broadway on the bluff but just as it was completed, tragedy struck again. Petra Vela de Kenedy, Mifflin's wife of 33 years, died on March 16, 1885.

Almost immediately following Petra Vela's death, Mifflin was summoned to San Antonio where Richard King lay near death at the Menger Hotel. Day and night, he sat by his lifelong friend's bedside. On April 14, Richard King died.

In 1888 Mifflin Kenedy suffered yet another blow. His oldest son, Thomas, was shot and killed on his 35th birthday by the jealous husband of the woman he was escorting in Brownsville. In the span of four years, Mifflin had lost his wife, his best friend and two of his sons.

JAMES "SANTIAGO" KENEDY

This story brings into play some historical figures from my Arizona trip. Maybe a bit long, but I like it.

In 1878, James, or Santiago as some called him, went up the trail with some of Mifflin's cattle to Dodge City. James, Mifflin's favorite son, shared some of the qualities of his stepbrother Adrian, also a favorite. He had a short temper, and enjoyed drinking and gambling.

While in Dodge James had an altercation with Mayor James H. "Dog" Kelly at Kelley's Alhambra Saloon. Although the facts are still in dispute, one story is that young Kenedy, probably after too much to drink, tried to shoot the mayor and was arrested by assistant marshal Wyatt Earp. He paid his fine and was strongly advised to leave town, which he did but not for long.

Still intent on killing the mayor, James returned to Dodge and went to Kelly's house. Kelly, however, had taken ill and was in the hospital at Fort Dodge. While he was away a young beautiful entertainer, Dora Hand and her friend Fanny Garrettson were staying at his home.

James rode up to the house early in the morning and fired several shots. One struck Dora Hand under the arm, killing her instantly. It was reported that she died in "the full bloom of gaiety and womanhood. She was an innocent victim."

As James rode off towards Fort Dodge at full speed, a posse was formed to go after him. Among the lawmen in the group were Bat Masterson, Wyatt Earp, Charles Bassett, Bill Duffy, and Bill Tilghman.

A gunfight broke out when the posse caught up with James. He was shot in the left shoulder and his horse was killed. He was brought to the Dodge City jail and given medical treatment.

Word of James' troubles reached Mifflin in South Texas and he arranged to go to Dodge City to help his son. The trial, which was not open to the public, took place in the sheriff's office before Judge R. G. Clark. James was freed for lack of sufficient evidence. Mifflin and his son returned to the ranch in South Texas.

For the next few years things seemed to be going along fairly well. James married Corina Ballí, the daughter of a wealthy rancher. They had a son who they named George, affectionately known as Georgie. James died of tuberculosis in 1884.

All the rooms in the museum had one wall covered with artwork depicting the history of Texas and the Kenedy's.



Above is a photo of two men installing the artwork.

Look closely at the bottom right of the top photo. Do you see those little red boxes beneath the artwork? The museum had an audio tour. Each of those boxes had a number which was entered on the device and then you could listen to a narrator impart some portion of the history of the Kenedy's. It was not only interesting, but there were chairs to sit in while you listened. No standing and reading for several hours.

Left - They also had several of these life-size statues. Extremely detailed and very well done.



I believe this is supposed to be Mifflin Kenedy in his office.

SARITA KENEDY



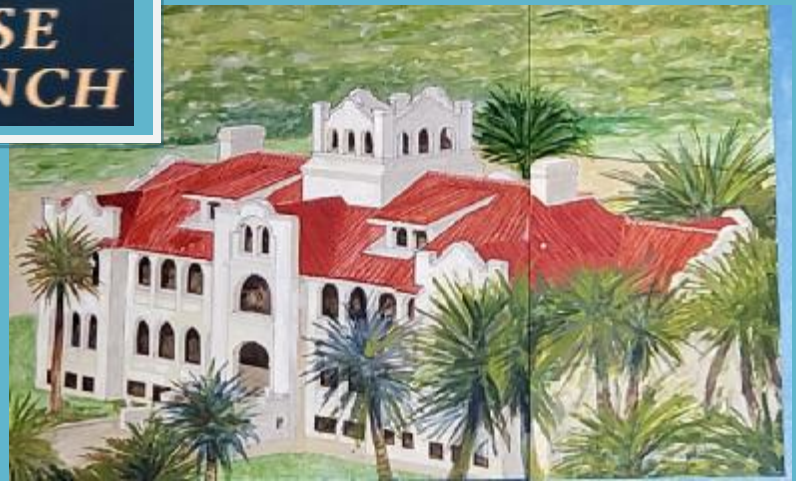
If you remember from yesterday, Mifflin's wife, Petra Vela, had eight children with her first husband, six of which lived to adulthood. Then she had six more with Mifflin who adopted her children and raised them as his own. Down a few pages you will see that the Kenedy line comes to an end. Most of their sons lived fast and died young. Adrian Vidal, Mifflin's adopted son, was executed in a Mexican prison while the captain stood helplessly outside the prison walls. When Mifflin died intestate, in 1895, the 400,000-acre ranch ended up in the hands of his sole surviving son, John Gregory Kenedy, known as Don Gregorio.

Sarita was born on September 19, 1889, in Corpus Christi. She was baptized Sara Josephine Kenedy after her aunt, Sarah Josephine, the wife of Dr. Arthur Spohn. Shy and retiring in public settings she was open and friendly around friends and family. Sarita enjoyed life on the ranch – riding, camping and swimming in the surf on Baffin Bay. She loved to hunt and was a better shot than most boys.

Sarita was only six years old when her grandfather, Mifflin Kenedy, died. Although she never knew her grandmother, Petra Vela, many people said Sarita's passion for life and heartfelt generosity were a legacy from her. She also embraced her grandmother's Mexican heritage and devout Catholicism. Like her mother and grandmother, Sarita possessed a deep and abiding faith that sustained her throughout her life.

In 1903 when Sarita was 14, the St. Louis, Brownsville & Mexico Railroad was incorporated. Her father, one of the original founders of the line, chartered a town to serve as a section point along the route of the rapidly advancing rails and named it for his daughter.

THE GREAT HOUSE AND LA PARRA RANCH



The Kenedy's great house at La Parra stands about six miles east of here, across highway 77. Today it is a house of prayer called Lebh Shomea, which means 'listening heart' in Hebrew. Not open to the general public, Lebh Shomea is a Christian retreat under the direction of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate.



Don Gregorio, intent on keeping the ranch intact, did what Mifflin had done when Petra Vela Died. He acquired the inheritance rights of the other heirs so La Parra and the Kenedy Pasture Company would continue under his direction. Don Gregorio died in 1931.

Prior to his death, Don Gregorio distributed most of his assets to his wife and two children. When Marie Stella died in 1940 Sarita and Johnny each owned half of the ranch.

THE LAST OF THE KENEDY'S



Like her grandfather, Mifflin Kenedy, Sarita suffered tremendous personal losses in the span of a few short years. Her father died in 1931, her mother just nine years later, her husband in 1944, and her beloved brother in 1948.

In 1947 Sarita struck gold of a different sort on the ranch, oil - Black gold, Texas tea (from the Ballad of Jed Clampett). The rich continue to get richer.

Sarita was the last surviving heir of Mifflin Kenedy. Along with her brother's widow, Elena Suess Kenedy, her holdings included La Parra, the great Kenedy Ranch, which totaled more than 400,000 acres and was second in size only to the King Ranch. But it was not the surface land and the cattle that ultimately were the source of her great wealth, rather it was oil, vast fields of it under the La Parra and San Pablo Ranches.

With no children to inherit her fortune, those vying for a share of the wealth appeared in great numbers. "Just kind of sitting on the fence like vultures" Sarita described many of them. Alone and lonely in the 30-rooms big house at La Parra, and perhaps drinking too much, she was painfully aware that she was the last of the Kenedy line.

On January 22, 1960 urged by Brother and others, Sarita established the John G. and Marie Stella Kenedy Memorial Foundation in honor of her parents. She named herself as the foundation's sole member, thereby retaining full control of the funds. That same day, she executed a new will that bequeathed 10,000 acres of La Parra, including the ranch headquarters, to the Oblate Fathers of Texas; 13,000 acres of the La Parra Grant to the Bishop of the Diocese of Corpus Christi; and the bulk of the estate to the foundation.

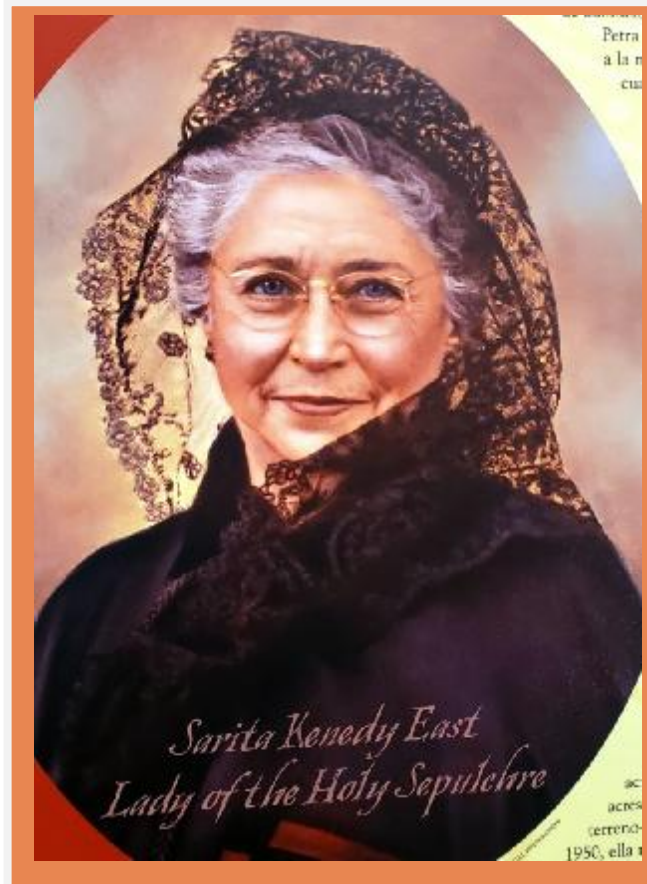
In April 1960, Sarita transferred three-fourths of the mineral rights under her portion of the ranch to the foundation. Eight months later, she was diagnosed with cancer. Flown to New York from South America in Peter Grace's private plane, Sarita died there in St. Vincent's Hospital on February 11, 1961.

When Sarita's will was admitted to probate in Kenedy County on March 6, 1961, it was discovered that she had executed four additional codicils to it before her death, with Brother Leo and Lawrence McKay as witnesses to the last three, which would have removed the requirement that funds be distributed within the State of Texas, canceled the first codicil naming the Bishop of the Diocese of Corpus Christi as the sole member of the foundation, and instead named Father Patrick J. Peyton, Christopher Gregory (Brother Leo) and Peter Grace as members.

For the next 25 years, the fight for the Kenedy fortune would rage through five state courts and six federal courts, including the Texas and the United States Supreme Courts. Litigants included the Diocese of Corpus Christi, the heirs, Brother Leo, Peter Grace, the Oblate Fathers of Texas, Alice National Bank, the Texas Attorney General, New York lawyers and Texas judges. The battle ranged from Texas to Rome to Philadelphia to New York.

Ultimately there were two foundations, one based in New York named for Sarita Kenedy East, and the second and by far the larger, the John G. and Marie Stella Kenedy Memorial Foundation, based in Texas.

The two institutions are handled by administrators and lawyers; together, they control assets valued between \$500 million and \$1 billion, of which about 80 percent of the income goes to the Catholic Diocese of Corpus Christi, the Christus Spohn Health System, and various Catholic charities.



This six foot tall safe in the Kenedy Pasture Building, which houses the museum, still works and looks great.



I believe it was in 1921 that Texas realigned all the counties in the state. The Kenedys were honored with the county being renamed Kenedy County.



Some things in Sarita have changed little since its early days. Even modern conveniences were slow to arrive—electricity in 1943 and telephone service in the late 1950s. Still here are the Kenedeños, the Kenedy ranch vaqueros or cowboys. But today there are no Kenedys left. Instead, they work for operations that lease Kenedy pastures or for other ranchers in the area. They no longer ride off to the cow camps on Sunday evenings, not to return until the next Friday. Now, they drive pickup trucks with horse trailers to the camp and return home the same evening.



The work is much the same and the cowboys hone the same skills their fathers and grandfathers did and pass them along to their children.

This way of life is changing, however. These days there are fewer jobs and therefore, fewer cowboys and their sons looking to ranching as a way of life..





For a three room museum it was quite interesting. I spent almost three hours there and it went by pretty quick.

I ate lunch in the parking lot and headed south for Raymondville and the Willacy County Historical Museum. As the sign says, open Tuesday thru Saturday 11-4. I arrived on Wednesday at 2:30. Just from the look of the place I could tell it probably wasn't open, and I was right.

Back on the road and headed to explore Harlingen tomorrow.

I pulled into the Sam's Club here, but it's a small parking lot and was pretty full, so I drove over to the visitor center, which is closed due to Covid. However, they had a table set up on the sidewalk with bags of brochures, calendars, post cards and stickers for different parts of Texas. I grabbed one and it looks like there are some interesting things to see I did not know about.

I stayed in the VC parking lot to write today's newsletter. I might move back to Sam's later, maybe not. A semi just pulled in and parked. If he sticks around here for the night I might as well also.

At this point I did a little more research and found the following article. It has some interesting info on a dirty little secret of the Kenedy's which was not revealed in the family museum. I wonder why not? The first third is pretty much what I have above, the middle gets to the meat, and the last third is about even more lawsuits.

<https://www.texasmonthly.com/articles/saritas-secret/>

Since that article is from 2004 I did a search for the final outcome and found it in this 2012 article.

<https://www.statesman.com/article/20120901/NEWS/309008802>

Until next time.....