

## **The History of Orfanatorio Mazatlán**

In the early twentieth century, many of Mazatlán's children became homeless when their parents died due to an outbreak of Bubonic Plague. Although the exact point-of-contact of the plague remains unknown, the outbreak has been attributed to infected passengers on a ship who passed the plague on to the local population while their ship was docked in Mazatlán. Unfortunately, there was no place to provide care for the children who were orphaned when their parents died as a result of the plague.

The children's plight, however, did not go unnoticed.

Romanita de la Peña was born in Mazatlán August 24, 1876, the youngest of five children, to Romana Inzunza and Antonio de la Peña.

Her father was a successful businessman who owned mines and a mercantile with several branches throughout Mexico. Throughout her young life, her philanthropic parents set a good example of helping those less fortunate than they were.

Not only did the good character of her parents influence her in her early years; but also the death of her mother – when Romanita was only six years old – gave Romanita even more empathy for those who had suffered such a loss. Though very young herself, she learned to be responsible for household chores as well as to care for young children. Some of the servants working in the Peña home also succumbed to the plague and Romanita took care of their children. Romanita even had the children sleep in beds in her bedroom and referred to them as her own children.

Beginning in 1891, when Romanita was only 15-years old, she sought to be active on a broader scale addressing the needs of the community's poor. She became involved in the Ladies of the City Committee, comprised of women from many of Mazatlán's elite and influential families.

This committee was responsible for the establishment and construction of St. Vincent's Hospital, where Mazatlán's poor were able to come for care at no cost to them. It was located around the corner from where Colegio del Pacifico is now located, and, over the years this hospital became el Hogar San Pablo, later known to many, as Father Tovar's Home for Boys. In 1900, while still a hospital, Romanita stepped down from the presidency of the board to devote her focus on her goal of an orphanage for Mazatlán.

As a result of the plague in the early twentieth century, Romanita saw the disgrace the orphans of Mazatlán were suffering, living on the streets without a roof to call their own or the love of parents which children so desperately need. This motivated her to move forward with a plan to establish an orphanage for these children.

Due to their successful fundraising efforts in support of the celebration of the 100th anniversary of the birth of Benito Juárez, the Ladies' Committee won over many in the community to help them with their goal of building an orphanage, including General Cañedo, the organizer of that celebration.

The general had given 1000 pesos in gold to most everyone who would engage in some sort of an enterprise to provide services to members of the community during the celebration.

Romanita surprised the general when she informed him that the women's' group had been able to raise 500 pesos over the seed money. Earlier, the general said whatever was earned over the seed money could be used for another fiesta or celebration of some sort. Romanita, however, had other ideas. She believed that as years passed, fiestas would be forgotten; a better idea would be to spend the money on something that would be a source of pride and would pay homage to the government and community for years to come.

Some members of the Ladies' Club wanted to use the money to provide a Christmas celebration for the poor children of Mazatlán. However, after serious consideration, they concurred founding an orphanage would be the best "gift" they could give the community after Romanita addressed the group of women, who became then known as, "Junta de Caridad" (Team for Charity) and charged them to work together to realize the construction of an orphanage that would be suitable to meet the needs of Mazatlán's poor children.

(Also, as a historical note, during this period, on May 19, 1903, Romanita married Carlos Careaga. Over the years, the couple had eight children of their own.)

The ladies endeavors to raise money to build the orphanage wouldn't be easily accomplished. On August 2, 1906, with 526.67 pesos (about \$50 US by today's exchange rate), there was a meeting of many of the most influential women in the community, including, of course, Romanita.

The amount of money available was far from what was needed, and over the coming years, it was supplemented by funds raised through social events, raffles, dinners and Romanita's continual pursuit of donations. In an effort to raise funds, Romanita also brought operas to the Rubio Theatre, which was built in 1874 (it was renamed the Angela Peralta Theatre in 1943). However, these efforts were interrupted by revolutions and in 1914, Military Commandant General Miguel Rodríguez asked members of the community to donate money to buy arms to defend against revolutionaries. In response, however, some wealthy families converted their cash to land and invested out of country, including the United States of America. (San Francisco was a popular choice many chose to migrate!)

The general asked Junta de Caridad to contribute their money to buy food for the poor of the community but the women resisted, saying

that the money was designated for an orphanage. However, the women did promise to provide food on a daily basis until the circumstances changed.

During this time, due to extenuating family circumstances, Romanita began caring for three nephews and nieces, whose needs and education kept her very busy. She faced many challenges during this time, including caring for her husband, who by then was in poor health, as well as working on the orphanage project.

Finally, in 1915, construction of the first wing of the Orfanatorio de Mazatlán began. German Evers, a very successful businessman, donated the land located at Zaragoza No. 227-A in downtown Mazatlán. Architect Baltazar Inzunza oversaw construction on a volunteer basis, without receiving any compensation. It is also worthy of note that the construction laborers, knowing the purpose of this building, voluntarily gave up their much needed salaries.

In addition to her volunteerism, devoting the majority of her endeavors to erecting the orphanage, professionally, Romanita became what is referred to as a "normal" – an unlicensed and informally trained teacher. Despite her informal training, she received her honorary degree in education on September 3, 1920 from the rector of National University, José Vasconcelos, in recognition of her selfless, volunteer services.

Still, it would take until 1921 for construction of the remaining orphanage to begin, but at last, on June 8, 1921, German Evers, philanthropic businessman and donor of the property, placed the cornerstone on the larger portion of the building. Construction continued until 1926.

Throughout these years, Romanita and the other members of Junta de Caridad continued to seek financial support for the project. Romanita gave thanks for all donations – from a few centavos to twenty pesos.

These were very difficult times for the community. Donors often gave their donations, which resulted in great sacrifices of their own lives. Various fundraisers, including selling items at the construction site, continued. An interesting note: some members of the community passed rumors that Romanita was building a fine home for herself with the money she raised. During the regional expositions (similar to a state fair), Romanita opened a booth at the construction site so the public could support the project with their purchases – as well as verify the construction taking place, was indeed, her beloved dream of an orphanage for Mazatlán in the making.

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Now, over 80 years later, Orfanatorio Mazatlán continues to be the dream Romanita envisioned. Alive with children, the orphanage serves as home to between 25 and 40 children at any given time.

Under the care of its devoted directors, Orfanatorio Mazatlán is a model orphanage for the care given to its resident children.

The outstanding board of directors includes: Cristina Peña de Herrera, President; Mari Henderson, Vice-President; Consuelo Virissimo, Treasurer; Lydia Solis de González, Vice-Treasurer; Leticia Velásquez de Jaber, Secretary; Alma Luz Favela de Molina, Coordinator of Volunteer Efforts; Bernice de Estrada, Dental Care; Mónica Vellatti de Igartua, Special Events; Rocio Perencelis de Reyes, Board Member; Elisa Guzmán, Board Member; Gloria Camelo de Coppel, Daily Menu; Alma Barazza, School Uniforms; Karina Pelayo de Romaro and Sucel Ayala de Rosete, Outings; Consuelo Elias de Pelayo, Maintenance; and Maria Cristina Miranda de Peña, psychological concerns.

The excellent daily caregivers include: Diana Cristina Romero Saénz, Rafaela Cornejo Valdovinos, Lucila “Luci” Aguiar, “Chuyita” Maria de Jesús Rodríguez Galván, Maria “Chayito” del Rosario Garcia Ramos and Maria Apolinaria “Ploy” Diaz Gonzalez.

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Hand-in-hand, the board of directors if Orfanatorio Mazatlán, the board of directors of the Tres Islas Orphanage Fund and Tres Islas Orphanage Fund donors make a positive difference in the valuable lives of the children residing at Orfanatorio Mazatlán.

It is a joy, an honor and a blessing to work together with the stellar orphanage board of directors to provide a healthy environment for the precious children to grow up in.

We thank the board of directors for the opportunity they give us to help serve the needs of the children.

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The Tres Islas Orphanage Fund began in the mid-1980s as a one-person effort to help orphaned children in Mexico when the Fund’s founder, who at the time was a newspaper reporter, was sent to Old Mexico with a bag-full of film and an assignment to "photograph the children of Mexico."

Little did the reporter know at the time, how that one assignment would change her life.

She photographed children everywhere: on the beach, in the plazas, in the church, on the street.

Then one day she sought out an orphanage after learning that there are thousands of orphanages throughout Mexico. Of course, the

children in the orphanage had to be represented in her photographs as well.

That day, she visited Orfanatorio Mazatlán, and the Tres Islas Orphanage Fund began.

She found it to be primarily, a girls' orphanage; however little boys may also stay there, especially when they have sisters living there – to maintain a sense of family.

The conditions at the orphanage that day back in the 1980s were sad. While the good people of Mexico give all they can to support orphanages, due to their own family needs and an economy that is far less than ours, they often cannot help as much as they would like.

The Mexican government provides some assistance to orphanages but not full-time support for orphanages, or, as the Fund likes to refer to it, as "carte blanche" assistance.

The first time she went to the orphanage, she asked the children what they were going to eat for dinner that evening. They replied, "No se." ("I don't know.") She looked through the kitchen cupboards and found only a few eggs, some tortillas and a few small bags of beans – certainly not enough food – and not enough nourishing food to feed 25 hungry children.

She immediately went out and, with the help of the lady who today buys food for the orphanage through the Tres Islas Orphanage Fund, bought as much food as she had pesos in her pocket, about \$250.00 worth.

Six months later she returned to Mazatlán and the orphanage to visit the children. She found the situation the same: little food for many children. She then realized that her "assignment" was not only to photograph the children in the orphanage but to help them, as well.

Back home, she began having photo art shows and poetic art shows where she would sell her photography and poetry with all proceeds going to buy food for the children.

Then she began to tell friends and family.

She began treks to Mazatlán four times a year to buy food for the orphanage.

One day, she decided that perhaps others would want to help on a regular basis. The fund she envisioned to help these precious children would need to be different because so much money donated in the name of "charity" actually goes for administration and not solely for helping others who truly are in need.

So, the Tres Islas Orphanage Fund was founded on the premise that 100 percent of all money donated goes directly to help children in orphanages in Old Mexico - first to buy nourishing food for the children, second, medical and educational and last, shoes, clothes and other supplies as conservatively needed and then, to make needed repairs to orphanages to maintain a sanitary premise, updated so it may properly function.

In return for each and every donation, a copy of the store receipt - signed by the director of the orphanage or the principal care giver who is at the orphanage at the time of delivery - is sent to donors to verify their money was spent to help needy children in orphanages.

The name, address and telephone number of each orphanage served is provided to each donor and, donors are encouraged and welcome to visit the orphanages and participate in the children's lives.

This way, donors will know - because they can verify for themselves - there is no "pie in the sky" child and no "pie in the sky" orphanage.

Each year, donors are provided an annual report wherein it is detailed exactly how much was spent for groceries, shoes, clothes, medical and educational and other needs with the name, address and ages and names of children in the orphanages provided to donors.

The name and location of the banking institution, how much money is in the account and what interest accrued on the money earned is also provided to the donors.

The Fund was founded on the basis of being totally honest - down to every penny and having an open-door policy with all contributors. And, it is believed that because of this, that donors will genuinely feel good about making contributions to the Fund because of the way the Fund is conducted: with 100 percent of every donation going toward orphaned children in Old Mexico, because of the verification for each donation and lastly, because of the detailed accounting provided to donors.

And so, the Fund received a charitable, not-for-profit, tax-exempt status by the U.S. IRS based on these intentions which were soundly written in the Fund's by-laws.

Since the late 1980s, thanks to the Fund's wonderful donors, the Tres Islas Orphanage Fund has helped buy food for Orfanatorio Mazatlán each week.

Each Thursday, \$130.00 worth of food is purchased for the children at Orfanatorio Mazatlán through the Tres Islas Orphanage Fund.

A typical week's worth of food includes: four servings each of vegetables and fruits, four servings of meat, including chicken, pork and beef, pasta and pasta sauce, six dozen eggs, four boxes of cereal, pancake mix and syrup, six loaves of wheat bread and marmalade and seven large boxes of Jell-O.

The Fund also buys all school supplies, school shoes, school uniforms and backpacks for the children each year and one pair of sandals each summer, as needed.

At Christmas, the Fund buys the children all the makings for their Christmas dinner and the Christmas tree.

In the early 1990s, the Fund created, "Adopt-a-Child" for Christmas, where people would learn the clothing size of each child and

their “wish list” for Christmas. People would buy the children presents where before, they had little or none.

To date, the Fund has helped restore the kitchen, purchasing a commercial grade stove, refrigerators, freezers and washing machines.

Recently the bathrooms needed repairing and, thanks to generous donors, the Fund purchased new toilets, sinks, faucets and tile to bring the bathroom up to par.

Thus far, approximately \$140,000.00 U.S. dollars has been devoted to helping orphaned children in Mazatlán, Mexico, including Orfanatorio Mazatlán, Hogar San Pablo, the Salvation Army Children’s Home and Alburgue Infantil.

Help is needed every day and in many ways. Please feel welcome to make a positive difference in a child’s life by sending your tax-deductible donations to:

Tres Islas Orphanage Fund  
3717 Monroe Avenue  
Cheyenne, WY 82001

Please feel welcome to visit the Tres Islas Orphanage Fund website at [www.orphanagefunds.org](http://www.orphanagefunds.org) or, phone the Fund at 1-888-459-TIOF – TIOF for Tres Islas Orphanage Fund – (1-888-459-8463) to learn how you can make the difference of a lifetime.

Thank you, and May God Bless!