

## **José A. Salinas “El Maestro” se hizo Ranchero**

By: María Irma Salinas de Saldaña

Born in a small municipality in the northeastern region of Nuevo Leon, Mexico, my great grandfather, José A. Salinas, has served as the epicenter of my genealogical studies, and who I refer to as Papá José. He was one of seven children born in Cerralvo on May 4, 1852 to José Salvador Salinas and María Margarita Barrera. He was an intelligent but modest man inspired to teach people to read and write in Spanish, “El Maestro.” Early in his career as a schoolteacher, he was recruited by the owner of a large ranch, Las Escobas, in Starr County to teach families who lived and worked on the ranch to read and write. José Felipe Guerra Hinojosa, respectfully revered as Don Felipe, owned approximately 46,450 acres of open ranchland that spanned from Las Escobas as far north as Cuevitas in Jim Hogg County. Don Felipe had established himself as one of the largest ranchers in Starr County with a reported net worth in 1880 of \$60,480, equivalent to approximately \$23 million in 1999. The modern use of “Don” before a person’s name shows a form of endearing respect, but in the late 1800’s the use of the term “Don” referred to someone of wealth who was worthy of respect. Don Felipe was both.

In those days there were no laws requiring children to attend school. In addition, it was very difficult to attend school in the city for children of parents who worked on farms or ranches. Most families in this situation lived on those farms or ranches, which made travel to and from city schools all but impossible. Books were hard to get and had to be transported hundreds of miles via the Camino Real from Mexico City. Don Felipe valued education not only for his own family, but for the children and families living and working on the ranch. He organized a school at Las Escobas headquarters and hired two teachers. José A. Salinas, Papá José, was hired as the Spanish-language teacher and was paid approximately \$5.00 a month for teaching. He was boarded on the ranch as part of the arrangement with Don Felipe, which was the custom in those days. There is no doubt in my mind that education was extremely important to Don Felipe. Ezra B. Houston was also hired by Don Felipe as the teacher who taught the children in English. Houston lived in Rio Grande City and traveled to Las Escobas to teach since he was also the 1880 census enumerator for Starr County. Las Escobas was likely one of the first ranches to have a bilingual education program. At that time, it took some 20-30 families to run the ranch and look after the livestock operation. Many of the ranch workers lived in jacales (huts) near the main house of the ranch headquarters. The headquarters was a hub for family, work, and education of everyone that lived on the ranch.

Since Papá José lived at the ranch while he was teaching, he met and fell in love with a young lady who also lived on the ranch. She would be my great grandmother, María Emilia Guerra, who happened to be Don Felipe’s daughter. Papá José had not intended to stay long at the ranch teaching, but upon falling in love with my great grandmother, he made Las Escobas his home. His career as a teacher and his life were about to change.

María Emilia Guerra and José A. Salinas were married in Roma, Texas on February 12, 1876. Papá José was 24 years old and Mamá Emilia was 21. Together, they had nine children, five boys and four girls. Their names were Salvador, Francisco (my grandfather; 10<sup>th</sup> generation), Zaragoza, José, Eduardo, Manuela, Margarita, Ramona, and Paula. Papá José and Mamá Emilia lived and raised their family at the ranch headquarters main house. Papá José learned ranching and many other valuable skills from his father-in-law, Don Felipe. He impressed Don Felipe with his intelligence and his vision of improvements at the ranch. He began to implement these improvements in the existing watering system for the cattle and started to modernize ranch operations. He began by building a trough 40 feet long between two shallow wells 50 feet deep. Ranch hands would stand at the wells all day lowering buckets into the wells and bringing them up one by one. A bucket at a time, they dumped water into the trough for the livestock to drink. Papá José may have been fortunate to have married the boss’s daughter; but his contributions to the family, his accomplishments, and improvements at the ranch were immeasurable. He went from teaching to ranching and earned respect from his father-in-law, Don Felipe, because he quickly learned how to manage the ranch. He later made greater improvements by introducing windmill systems to replace the older rope and bucket system. After Don Felipe’s death in May of 1891, Papá José and Mamá Emilia inherited 18,000 acres of land at Las Escobas. Papá José, known to others now as Don José, owner of Las Escobas built a reputation as a hard worker and a man with a vision. He was extremely successful in the management of the ranch. His humility for the place where he was in his life was evident with the following story told to me by my mother.

*One day your great grandfather, José A. Salinas was relaxing on a bench outside a General Store in Rio Grande City, Texas when a man approached him and asked him, “Señor, me puede ir a cortar leña?” Your great grandfather was a humble man, who didn’t dress fancy at all and never looked like a rich man. The man was unaware that he was asking a wealthy man to cut wood for him. Your great grandfather said, “Con mucho gusto” [with pleasure]. The irony of the whole thing was that your great grandfather had come to the city to buy supplies for many of his ranch workers that lived at the ranch. He went and cut wood for the man and received his wages. He walked into the store with pride and told the owner of the General Store, “Mira los centavos que me gané”. He put his hand in his pocket and proudly showed him what he had just earned cutting wood. The store owner shook his head in disbelief. You see, your great grandfather worked alongside his ranch workers doing the same jobs they were doing. He was not a supervisor but a hands-on manager of 18,000 acres of land. He taught his children to do the same.*

I was always confused when people would say, “Son codos de Monterrey los Salinas.” This phrase was, and still is, a stereotype of people from Monterrey, Mexico as being frugal and thrifty. In fact, the true meaning of “los codos” has its roots in Mexican cattle drives unique to the Mexican state of Nuevo León. Nonetheless, hearing those comments from time to time, I grew up thinking that Papá José was from Monterrey. Of course, I later learned the truth about his origins and the true meaning of the “dicho.”

Since Papá José went to the store often, the story circulated and the man who hired him to cut the wood was a bit embarrassed when he learned of it. In fact, the gentleman apologized to “Don José.” While humility is not genetic, it was certainly passed on to future generations. My grandfather Francisco Salinas, Papá Panchito, and grandmother Nicolasa always said, “No necesita saber la gente lo que ustedes tienen” which meant that you should not talk about what you own, no one needs to know.

María Emilia Guerra died on June 30, 1923. She was very supportive of her husband and took care of their nine children at the ranch headquarters. She is buried in front of my great grandfather's grave. José A. Salinas died on April 16, 1928 at the age of 76. The cemetery where my great grandparents lay in eternal peace is called “El Cementerio de los Padres” located in Rio Grande City, Texas. The legacy Papá José left for his children and children’s children goes well beyond the land and business he left behind. It is a legacy rooted in values, culture, education, and a humble lifestyle that spoke volumes while not speaking a word. The teacher became a rancher and served as the foundation of the modern-day Salinas heritage.

Las Escobas was partitioned again in 1931 equally among their nine children. My grandfather, Papá Panchito, inherited one ninth of “la partición.” Today, I am very proud to say that I own 500 acres of the original 18,000 acres passed down by my great grandparents, José A. Salinas and María Emilia Guerra. Education and ranching remains a focus in our lives today.

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**Felipe Hinojosa Guerra & Josefa Gonzalez**

Patriarch of the Guerra Family

**José A. Salinas & María Emilia Guerra**  
Patriarch & Matriarch of the Salinas Family



**Las Escobas Ranch Headquarters Main House**  
(Started in 1860, completed in 1880)



**José A. Salinas' Tomb at El Cementerio de los Padres**  
(Located in Rio Grande City, Texas)



**José Felipe Guerra Hinojosa's Tomb**  
(Located behind headquarters main house)

