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ADENA DE ZAVALA

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ADINA DE ZAVALA

Adina De Zavala was arguably the most influential Tejana of her time. From the moment of her birth, she was steeped in the overlapping histories of her family and the state of Texas and would make the latter her life's passion. Adina was particularly interested in and responsible for the early preservation of San Antonio's missions: Mission San Antonio de Valero (more commonly known as the Alamo); Mission San José y San Miguel de Aguayo (San José); Mission San Juan Capistrano (San Juan); Mission San Francisco de la Espada (Espada); and Mission Nuestra Señora de la Purísima Concepción de Acuña (Concepción).

Early Life

Adina Emilia De Zavala was born November 28, 1861 at Zavala Point in Harris County, Texas, one of six children of Augustine De Zavala and Julia Tyrrell. Her maternal grandparents were Irish immigrants to Texas. But it was her paternal grandfather, Lorenzo de Zavala¹—a Mexican statesman and the first vice president of the Republic of Texas—and other early Texas heroes like him that Adina would seek to emulate and memorialize throughout her adult life (Flores xi).

Lorenzo de Zavala was raised in the village of Tecoh, Yucatan. One of the most liberal statesmen of his country, Lorenzo held the office of governor of the state of Mexico at least twice and was chosen by Santa Anna to be minister to France in 1833. When he learned that Santa Anna had assumed dictatorial powers, Lorenzo broke with the Mexican government. By 1835, Lorenzo had left his homeland for Texas and had become a supporter of the independence movement. He helped draft the Texas constitution, designed the Texas flag, and was voted the interim vice president of the new Republic of Texas by his peers (Ables 2–5).

Stories of her illustrious grandfather filled Adina's home as a child and she soon became fascinated by the study of Texas history. "I do not remember," she told a journalist later in life, "when I could not read" (Howard 332).

My favorite storybooks were about history; myths came next. My sister and I produced "plays"—always scenes from history. All children are impressed by pageantry. I am a firm believer in the value of exact science, object lessons. This is why I consider historic shrines of inestimable worth. We can hear beautiful music in our minds, but it means much more to us when we hear the same music being played by a symphony orchestra.

If people—especially children—can actually see the door through which some noble man or woman passed, or some object he or she touched, they'll be impressed, they'll remember, they'll be inspired to read everything they can find in print about that man or woman. Inevitably, they'll be filled with high ideals, the desire to emulate. —Adina De Zavala (Howard 332)

¹ Lorenzo's son Augustine began the practice of capitalizing the "D" in De Zavala.

Adina was educated as a child by tutors at her home on Zavala Point and, in her teenage years, at the Ursuline Academy in Galveston. Her family moved to Shavano, TX, just north of San Antonio, while she was attending school in Galveston. At the age of 17, she enrolled in the Sam Houston Normal Institute in Huntsville, TX, receiving her Teacher's Certificate there in 1879. She began teaching in 1884, first in the public schools of Terrell, TX, then—starting in 1886—in San Antonio. By this time, Adina had most assuredly developed strong convictions about the preservation of historic sites and monuments (Flores xii; Ables 10–11).

At the end of 1906, Adina was censured by the school board for being too strict with pupils and for her “independent and insubordinate attitude toward the rules and regulations of the Board and her superior officers.” Rather than submit to the board, Adina resigned from teaching, effective January 2, 1907. From that time forward, she dedicated herself full time to historical research and preservation (Ables 14–16).

A Passion for Preservation

“Miss Adina,” as she would come to be known in the years ahead, understood almost before anyone else that the combination of technological and commercial “progress” with the unstoppable growth of the state’s vegetation was exacting a toll on the few remaining Mexican-Spanish historic sites in Texas. When she returned to San Antonio in 1886, she soon translated her beliefs into action and began working to preserve the city’s historic sites. Within a few years she’d formed a woman’s group dedicated to marking, preserving, and restoring the physical structures dating from earlier Spanish, Mexican, and Anglo eras (Ables iv; 23).

About 1889, a band of patriotic women in San Antonio, Texas, associated themselves and met occasionally to keep green the memories of the heroes, founders and pioneers of Texas; to formulate methods of arousing the dormant patriotism of the majority of their fellow-citizens; to devise ways of inculcating and disseminating a wider knowledge of the history of Texas; and of instilling a love and proper pride in town, city, county and State; acting on belief that patriotism, like charity, begins at home. —Adina De Zavala (De Zavala 208)

The group was the first society of women organized for patriotic purposes in Texas, predating the Daughters of the Republic of Texas (DRT) by at least two years (Ables iv; 23; Fisher 63).²

In April 1892, the DRT held its first state meeting. Shortly thereafter the organizers resolved that Adina’s San Antonio group should join them, since their purposes were basically the same. Adina and the other women agreed, forming the De Zavala Chapter of the DRT (the Daughters’ seventh chapter) in March 1893. They kept their original group, as well, having, in essence, two organizations comprised of the same, or nearly the same, members. Adina was named president of the DRT De Zavala Chapter and “reported on its plans to place tablets in historical buildings and places in and around San Antonio” (Ables 24–25).

² Although Adina lists the date of her group’s founding as “about 1889,” the specific year given in *The Handbook of Texas* is 1887 (Fisher 63, n.47).

In addition to commemorating acts of Ben Milam (a revolutionary hero killed during the capture of San Antonio)—holding services at his burial site each year on March 6, the day the Alamo fell to Santa Anna—the group soon made preservation of the city’s missions one of its priorities. Adina’s major project was “securing that part of the Alamo [mission] fortress adjoining the Alamo church . . .” but four other missions in the San Antonio area also received attention. Lacking funds to affect any long-term gains, in 1900 the De Zavala chapter nevertheless began working to rescue the missions, all of which had fallen into varying degrees of disrepair (Ables 25; 27–28).

Adina, a devout Catholic, was reportedly frustrated by the dilapidated state of the historic missions. With great zeal, she led her chapter in the first historic preservation campaign to save them and was endorsed by the DRT for purchase of the missions by the state (Fisher 47).

The Society started the campaign to save the Missions of Texas, and succeeded in awakening considerable interest, and Mission San José was repaired, and fenced, and a custodian employed by the Society at a cost of several hundred dollars. —Adina De Zavala (De Zavala 209)

Adina began her crusade in earnest in the spring of 1902. She and another De Zavala Daughter, Elizabeth Coppini, went door-to-door in the latter’s horse-drawn buggy, collecting donations of “bricks, lumber, cedar posts or wire”³ from San Antonio businesses. The Alamo Cement Company gave sixteen sacks of cement and lumberman Albert Steves contributed seventy-five fence posts. Another city businessman gave twenty-five more fence posts, four barrels of lime, and four barrels of sand. Soon, the supplies were ready and the chapter hired workmen, paying them for up to fifty-four days of labor to work on Mission San José. The men filled cracks in the mission walls, replaced fallen stones, and spent three days bracing the arch of the mission’s front door. The women purchased three coils of fencing wire and the workers enclosed the mission and adjacent square with a six-foot-high fence, “thus protecting graves which were being tramped down and keeping out those bent on destroying the beautiful carving.”⁴ Once repairs had been made, the chapter hired Ignacio Salcedo, a man living with his family nearby, to keep an eye on the place (Fisher 47).

Across the state, the DRT raised funds for the missions, as well. The De Zavala Chapter spearheaded the biggest campaign. Under the signature of Bettie T. Stevens, chairman of the chapter’s committee on missions, form letters went out to potential contributors, asking them to donate and to send “the names of five people whom you know have enough appreciation of art and history to do likewise” (Fisher 47).

Response to the appeal was light and most contributions were small. Bishop John Anthony Forest was concerned and asked how repairs to San José would be paid for, which he calculated at \$318.38, including \$45.00 of donated materials. Two thirds of that—\$207.88—remained unpaid. The next time he made a similar arrangement with the daughters (the following fall), he spelled out in detail which party would be responsible for any debts—namely, the De Zavala Chapter of the DRT (Fisher 47; 51).

3 From Pompeo Coppini, *From Dawn to Sunset* (San Antonio: The Naylor Co., 1949), 106.

4 From “Bill for the Work and Material for repairing San José Mission,” ADZ Papers, Box 2M164, UT Austin.

In October 1902, Bishop Forest gave the De Zavala Chapter a five-year lease on Mission San Juan, the complex in most dire need of repair. The agreement, signed by the bishop and Miss Adina, specified that the Church would not be responsible for any debts incurred by the Daughters. Otherwise, as long as Forest approved of the plans and the mission church remained open for public services, the Daughters were free to restore San Juan, hire a custodian, and keep any moneys received from charging admission fees (Fisher 51).

Adina's "Second Battle for the Alamo"

Since the earliest days of its founding, the De Zavala Chapter had as one of its chief aims the preservation of Mission San Antonio de Valero, better known as the Alamo. Under the auspices of the DRT, Adina hoped to convince the state to purchase the property and buildings adjoining the chapel (already owned by the state) that constituted the original mission grounds and "convento." Adina felt strongly that not only the chapel, but also the larger convent—the place where the fighting took place during the battle of 1836—must be preserved. The Daughters, she would soon discover, felt otherwise (Ables 42).

To help with these ambitious plans, Adina solicited the assistance and great wealth of Miss Clara Driscoll, a 22-year-old San Antonio socialite in need of a cause. Miss Driscoll donated more than nineteen thousand dollars toward the purchase of the convent (then known as the Hugo-Schmeltzer Building). The positive publicity statewide and constant prodding from the Daughters prompted the Texas Legislature to act. On January 26, 1905, they appropriated \$65,000.00 for the purchase, care, and preservation of the Alamo and provided that the governor must first approve any alteration to the buildings or grounds. The bill, written by Adina, made the Daughters of the Republic of Texas the custodians of the property (Ables 42; 45–46; 50).

Shortly after the legislation passed, a schism occurred among the Daughters over whom should control the site, with one group rallying behind Miss Driscoll—who had been appointed temporary local custodian by the state-wide executive committee of the DRT—and another smaller faction, comprised primarily of the De Zavala daughters, behind Adina. In typical fashion, Adina seized control of the situation. She secured the keys to the Alamo, under false pretenses, and would not give Miss Driscoll's appointee access to it until legally forced to do so. In response, the Daughters organized a second chapter in San Antonio in April 1906. They called it the "Alamo Chapter," a "loyal" group within the shadow of the site. Ultimately, the DRT regained control of the site, but after many years and only through the intervention of the Harris County District Court. The De Zavala Chapter was not legally forced out of the DRT until March 10, 1910. As far as the DRT was concerned, the turncoat De Zavala Chapter was out of existence, "and could no longer claim to be members of the organization" (Ables 53–56).

Before her official ouster, however, Adina would demonstrate to the entire nation her devotion to the Alamo property. In February 1908, Adina learned of DRT plans to remove the convent structure entirely, thereby "beautifying" the property and reorienting the visual focus on the more aesthetically pleasing mission church. She was outraged by such a desecration and complete disregard for historic fact. Adina took action. She presented "authorized" letters from the DRT, received the keys from the local authorities, and stormed the Alamo, placing three men as guards at the entrance to the building (Flores xviii).

[I] had learned on good authority that [the DRT] intended to seize the Alamo and tear it down, so as to use the space as part of the Plaza, a sort of front yard to the hotel or amusement palace which they expected to erect on the property back of the Alamo . . .

My lawyers on whom I depended were out of the city; but I had heard that possession is nine points of the law. Something had to be done and quickly. So I took possession, and engaged three men to guard the old mission-fortress night and day.

At dusk, just as I was giving them some last instructions, the raid was made. The agents of [the DRT] threw my men out bodily, expecting to take possession. They did not know I was in an inner room; and when I hurried out to confront them, demanding by what right they invaded the historic building consternation reigned. They withdrew outside the building for whispered consultation. The instant they stepped out, I closed the doors and barred them. That's all. There was nothing else for me to do but hold the fort: So I did! —Adina De Zavala (Ables 57–58)

Adina remained within the Alamo for three days, during which time newspapers throughout Texas and the rest of the nation reported on her cause. She told one reporter:

As representative of the De Zavala chapter I am in possession of the property, and here I will remain until justice is done our cause . . . I came here last night to see that our legal rights were secure and the sheriff and his deputies forced their way into the property. They have the might, of course, but we have the right, and you know Davy Crockett said, “Be sure you're right, then go ahead.” —Adina De Zavala (Ables 58–59)

The state took control of the property on February 13 and Adina left the premises. She had lost the battle for custodianship, but the publicity resulting from her bold move had secured the desired affect: the public was firmly against the destruction of any historic buildings on the site (Flores xix).

Governor Colquitt—at a final meeting on the issue, held December 28, 1911—declared:

I won't consent to tear down the [former convent]. (Applause) It is a part of the Alamo. Not all of the Alamo is there now; but as long as I can exercise the authority now vested in me, I will not consent to the tearing down of the walls that were there as part of the Alamo. (Applause) —Governor O. B. Colquitt (Ables 66)

After the Alamo

In 1912, after the De Zavala Chapter was disbanded, Adina formed two new organizations, both continuations of the groups founded by her in 1889 and 1893. The first group comprised the members of the De Zavala Chapter, renamed the “Daughters and Sons of the Heroes and Pioneers of the Republic of Texas.” Membership was limited to descendents of “heroes or pioneers,” but was open to men as well as women. The second group, which incorporated the members of the first, was a historical society, with membership open to any interested person. The “Texas Historical and Landmarks Association” did the majority of the historical and preservation work

and received most of the recognition for the group's accomplishments, except when Adina thought it best that both organizations be credited (Ables 31).

The first purpose of the Texas Historical and Landmarks Association was, as stated in its charter, "to work for the repair, restoration, and preservation of all the missions of Texas." The second was to turn the main building of the Alamo (the former convent) into a "Texas Hall of Fame" and museum. Association chapters were located in New Braunfels, Goliad, Refugio, San Patricio, Harlingen, Crockett, and San Antonio—the latter known as the De Zavala Chapter. Although other men and women were named as officers, Adina was the unchallenged leader of the group. Throughout the years she would hold different titles in the organization—state president, De Zavala Chapter president, historian—but there was never any question that she was the person in charge (Flores xxv; Ables 32).

Through the new associations, Adina continued to exercise her primary interest in the location and preservation of missions, particularly those around San Antonio. However, concrete results of her work were few. Lacking a large endowment, the group was limited to raising funds on an as-needed basis, making repairs, but only on a small scale. More important were the effects derived from Adina's countless newspaper and magazine articles. Her dedication to the cause molded public opinion in favor of preserving and restoring the missions for many years. "Miss Adina always was trying to get the bishop interested in restoring the missions," her friend Frances Donecker later recalled, "and much of the work done on missions was because of her ideas, writings, and talk on the subject" (Ables 79–80; 85).

In 1924, another group of local women formed the San Antonio Conservation Society (SACS), following in Adina's footsteps. At first, Adina—theretofore the chief guardian of the city's past—opposed the group, perhaps in part because the founders were also members of the DRT Alamo Chapter. "Miss De Zavala," SACS charter member Emily Edwards remembered, "called me up and told me that that was her field . . . there was just room for nobody else. She was just furious." Adina traveled to Miss Edwards's studio to discuss the matter in person, but found her gone. Later, another member of the group—Mrs. Lewis, who knew Adina personally—smoothed the waters. Edwards recalled that Mrs. Lewis "came back and she said, 'We will be permitted to exist. There were many tears, but we will be permitted to exist'" (Fisher 97).

Adina had flexed her conservationist muscles in the encounter and was motivated to claim the top spot for her organization, the Texas Historical and Landmarks Association. The group launched into a burst of activity. During the previous eleven years, they had placed a total of five historic markers. Within a few months of the SACS founding in 1924, six more were erected. The De Zavala group grabbed headlines in local and statewide papers when descendants and civic leaders delivered speeches at ceremonies observing the markers' placement. At one point, a member of the SACS suggested that the two groups hold joint meetings since they were both involved in the same cause. There was no second to the suggestion, but the SACS did pass a resolution "extending the Landmarks Association hearty appreciation and encouragement in the work they are doing and have done." From the time the first monument was erected in 1897, at the grave of Ben Milam, to her death in 1955, Adina, primarily under the auspices of the Landmarks Association, had placed a total of 38 markers at historic sites—far more than any other person in the state (Fisher 97; Ables 92).

Over the years, the SACS and Adina's groups would work together on many projects, including fundraising to purchase the Market House and the Spanish Governor's Palace, arguably the Landmarks Association's greatest accomplishment. It appears to have been the idea of the San Antonio Conservation Society women, as early as their founding in 1924, to purchase the four missions that make up what is now San Antonio Missions NHP—Concepción, San José, San Juan Capistrano, and Espada—and give them to the State of Texas as state parks. By mid-December, 1930, President Amanda Taylor announced that it owned \$4500 worth of San José mission property. The same year, Adina and the Texas Historical and Landmarks Association placed a pink granite and bronze tablet at each of the four missions (Ables 96; Fisher 153).

In an effort to protect the missions in perpetuity, San Antonio Congressman Maury Maverick introduced, in 1935, the Historic Sites Act in the House of Representatives. It passed, giving the United States its first national policy on historic preservation. The same year, Maverick began his bid to make San José Mission a national park. In 1941, through the combined efforts of the SACS, Bexar County, and the Catholic Church, San José Mission became a National Historic Site, the first to be so designated in Texas. Forty-two years later, on April 1st, 1983, the Society's hard work clinched congressional approval for San Antonio Missions National Historical Park—sixteen years after the first bill had been introduced and eighty-one years after Adina De Zavala—the missions' fist savior—had gathered materials from San Antonio businessmen in the back of a horse-drawn wagon (Ables 82; Fisher 501).

Lasting Effects

Perhaps because of her own mixed heritage, Adina felt keenly the history of San Antonio as a crossroads of Latino and Anglo cultures.

San Antonio has ever been a cosmopolitan place. Innumerable incidents prove this; for instance, the sign on the Commerce Street bridge many years ago was printed in three languages.

“Walk your horses or you will be fined,” read the sign in English, in German, and in Spanish.

—Adina De Zavala (Ables 102)⁵

Without her efforts, the predominant Anglo culture would have absorbed many of the Hispanic influences now visibly present in San Antonio and throughout Texas. Her writings, in particular, not only educated the public about the rich Mexican and Spanish heritage of the area, but also sparked the interest of countless others, who continue her work into the present. She wrote hundreds of articles, for newspapers and other periodicals, with subjects that were varied but always had one thing in common: they were all about history, from the founding of the Franciscan Order in the Thirteenth Century to the latest project being undertaken by one of her groups (Ables 103, 120, 124).

In the 1930s, for instance, Adina wrote a feature for the Sunday edition of the *San Antonio Express* on Rancho de las Cabras, the ranch for Mission San Francisco de la Espada.

⁵ *San Antonio Express*, Nov 26, 1940.

Adina interviewed what she called “old men” on the rancho and crafted a detailed, interesting history (Rock).

By the 1940s, Adina had slowed down and, by 1950, she had ceased active participation in the work of the Texas Historical and Landmarks Association. She remained intensely interested in their activities, however, and continued to write. In 1949, already in her eighties, she wrote an impassioned letter to Paul Adams regarding a school-age text about the history of San Antonio. In it, she revealed her strong convictions about the Mexican heritage of Texas (Ables 127–128).

Unfortunately, we, in Texas . . . have often placed in power persons who carelessly or heartlessly permitted neglect and abuse of our early settlers and their descendants—the real owners of the soil before our arrival. They have been for the most part, for years, a confused and “hurt” people. These underprivileged citizens—many descendents of early settlers—know they are NOT Mexicans, for to be one they would have to have been born in Mexico and now hold citizenship there, or have acquired it—yet, when they are questioned as to their citizenship and pressed for an answer they generally say “Mexican,” because they have been told continually that they *are* Mexican. Though puzzled—knowing that they are expected to give that answer—they obligingly do so.

. . . These people are “Americans” in every sense of the word.

. . . Should we not begin at once to let these under-privileged citizens know that we recognize them as Texans and fellow citizens and fellow Americans? Should we not strive to teach and inculcate a feeling of love, loyalty, and pride in our city, state, nation, and in all our citizens and young people? And try to instill a sense of responsibility and a desire and determination to work whole-heartedly and unselfishly for the good of all. We, as well as they, are suffering for our short sightedness—from our neglect in meeting our responsibility! Should we not, at once, try to repair our mistakes? It is LATE—but with God’s help we may not be TOO LATE! (Flores xliii–xliv)

In early February 1955, Adina fell and injured her hip. Three weeks later she slipped into a coma, passing away at 6:18 pm on March 1st—a few hours before the dawn of her favorite holiday, Texas Independence Day. During the funeral, held March 5th, Adina’s casket, draped with the Texas Flag, was brought from the church to the cemetery in a horse-drawn wagon, passing by the historic Alamo in a final tribute (Ables 129).

Throughout her life, Adina De Zavala dedicated herself to the work of memorializing others—particularly the deeds of Texans, of both Anglo and Mexican heritage—and to the saving of early Spanish missions across the state. In an article she penned in 1935, she wrote of the importance of such volunteerism, when done in a true spirit of service.

Persons . . . capable and willing to serve, who will devote themselves ideally to the ones served, will, in the end . . . reap a rich reward in joyousness of spirit, contentment and peace, and escape the heavy burden and the multitude of anxieties and cares which fall to the lot of those who must shoulder responsibility.

There should be a monument erected to the servitors in every sphere; not to the paid hirelings who serve without devotion—they are not servitors. But to the ones whose hearts and souls are

dedicated to the work in hand, to serve then becomes a noble occupation, the equal of the highest.
—Adina De Zavala (Ables 131–132)⁶

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6 *San Antonio Express*, 13 Feb 1935.