



## *Barefoot Dreams of Petra Luna - Inspiration*

I am blessed to have grown up listening to stories of my ancestors, especially stories of my grandmother, Güela Pépa, and my great-grandmother, Güelita Juanita. Both women grew up surrounded by harsh poverty and prejudice, but always faced adversity with bold spirits and resilience.

My great-grandmother, Juanita Martínez, inspired the core of Barefoot Dreams of Petra Luna. She, along with her family, escaped her burning village in 1913 during the Mexican Revolution. Unlike Petra, my great-grandmother was nine years old when she, her father, two younger siblings and two cousins, crossed the scorching desert by foot and reached the border town of Piedras Negras, Coahuila. At the border, their entry into the United States was denied along with hundreds of other refugees.

As a child, I sat mesmerized, listening to my great-grandmother recount the moment she and her family learned that the Federales were on their way to attack the town. "Los federales were evil," she'd say, "We knew they'd slaughter us." According to her, hundreds of people flocked to the international bridge and pleaded to the American soldiers to open the gates. The situation worsened when the rush of mounted Federales approached the town's small hills. My great-grandmother, despite the many decades having passed since that event, always recalled the fright in her father's eyes. "Then suddenly," my great-grandmother would say with nostalgic surprise, "the gates swung open." As she spoke, the joy and relief she'd experienced that day always came to life, making me feel as if I too had run across that bridge. At the end, she'd always remind us of her immense gratitude to the United States for having given her refuge.

I had always wondered about the validity of my great-grandmother's story. I wondered if some of the details had been stretched to give her story an edge. Had that many people, really all at once, rushed to the bridge? Had my great-grandmother and her family been that close to death? While contemplating writing a children's article about it, I embarked on a research journey to find out the facts. Not having an exact date, I searched through books on the Mexican Revolution and US-Mexican migration but found nothing. I began sorting through four major Texas newspapers beginning with the year 1910. After months of research, I found an article that described my great-grandmother's story. The event occurred in the early afternoon of October 6, 1913, and it wasn't hundreds of people who'd tried to flee across like she'd stated, it was thousands. Over six thousand, to be exact. Everything else, the desperation, the pleading, and the rage of the Federales, was exactly as she'd recounted it.





Working on this book has fulfilled me in many ways, and despite my grandmother and great-grandmother no longer living, I feel closer to them than ever. Thanks to them and my mother, I learned stories that I would have never learned from books or school.

Unfortunately, many stories like my great-grandmother's or like Petra's remain in the shadows. How do we fix this? I believe we fix it with curiosity. We need to be curious. We need to look to our ancestors and ask questions. We need to listen to their stories, write them down, on paper or on our hearts, and pass them on. By doing this, we bring stories of bravery, of humanity, and of great compassion to the light and, in turn, we learn more about ourselves and keep the bold spirits of our ancestors alive.

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*Conroe, Texas*  
*October 27, 2020*

