

## Rancho El Milagro: A Legacy of Compassion Amidst the Border Battle

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A rooster crows in the distance as the jingle jangle of keys unlocks a gate, welcoming another sunrise over El Serape Ranch. It's just after 6 am as Cattleman Mario Garza III prepares for another day of tending to his herd and laying out food and water for immigrants this arid spring morning.

At just 2000 acres today, El Serape Ranch was once one of the largest ranches in the Valley. It stretched along the Rio Grande River from Mission to Roma and bordered Mexico for most of its history. It sits a mile from Mexico today, and it's been in the Garza family for over six generations, dating back to the American Revolution. For over 200 years, it's witnessed the migration of people south into Mexico and north into Texas.

Governor Greg Abbott launched Operation Lone Star in March 2021, inundating the area surrounding the ranch with officers of the Texas Department of Public Safety and the Texas National Guard patrolling the border. While Abbott's recent actions flood the headlines, the untold story of this parcel of land in the South Texas Wildhorse Desert endures. The Garza family continues its mission to care for thousands of immigrants crossing El Serape while writing their chapter on migration history in and out of Texas.

The ranch has been helping people in trouble get to safer places for nearly two centuries. In the mid-1860s, they helped enslaved people flee persecution by plantation owners during the Civil War. "My Grandfather told stories about how escaped slaves would cross through the ranch seeking freedom across the river in Mexico," said Garza, wicking away sweat with his red bandana. His great-great-grandparents provided meals and shelter along what he describes as "a makeshift stop on the Underground Railroad" as they avoided bounty hunters and slave catchers. "Our Christian faith guides us to be kind to others, and we pass these morals down from generation to generation."

As the winds of history changed direction, so did the flight of the people traveling through the ranch. The family's acts of kindness transitioned from showing empathy to enslaved people headed south into Mexico to being compassionate to migrants crossing the Rio Grande River headed north into the US by providing food and shelter.

Starting in 1910, during the Mexican Revolution, Mexican immigrants, comprised of war refugees and political exiles, began fleeing to the United States and traveling through El Serape. In the late 1940s, Mexican immigrants seeking stability and employment started crossing the ranch. Back then, it was Garza's mother who lived there.

On occasion, Garza's mother, the 92-year-old Estella Rodriguez-Garza, still accompanies her son to the ranch. She sits in the passenger seat next to Garza, gazing out at the old ranch house, and recalls living there right after marriage. "I was a city girl from Kingsville, and moving to the ranch was a culture shock," said Rodriguez-Garza.

"Along with all the house and ranch chores, my Mother-In-Law was very clear on how we were to treat migrants passing through the ranch. Before saying I was scared, she assured me they were harmless and that they'd known for generations that they'd find food and shelter here. The immigrants I met were some of the most

beautiful people,” said Garza. As a result, its passersby have affectionately nicknamed El Serape Ranch “Rancho El Milagro,” which translates to the miracle ranch.

From cooking homemade Pan de Campo and tortillas to making extra food and packing sack lunches for the migrants, Rodriguez-Garza said preparing food for them was less a chore and more of a calling. It’s a tradition she has since passed down to her daughter-in-law and now carries on with her granddaughters as they now cater to today’s visitors from Central America, Africa, and Asia.

Rodriguez-Garza has also seen how the political and public views toward immigrants have changed. Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor-Greene accused “the church” of being under “Satan’s control” and “not adhering to the teachings of Christ” by teaching Americans to “love migrants.” In response to the Congresswoman’s remarks, Rodriguez-Garza said, “Whether or not these migrants have come here legally, they’re still human beings, and God teaches us to love our neighbors whether they’ve been living next to us for years or just for one day.”

The coyotes begin to howl as the sun sets on another workday at El Serape. Garza points out a blue barrel with a flag waving as we drive off. “The church puts jugs of water in the barrel, and I fill it up when it’s low,” a chore he adheres to twice daily. Tears fill Garza’s eyes as his mother struggles to clear her throat. “Our efforts shouldn’t be a milagro. It’s a miracle that all of us aren’t as compassionate towards our fellow man,” said Rodriguez-Garza.