

## The New World - El Nuevo Mundo

Voices from the South Texas Archives, Texas A&M University-Kingsville

One of the most important goals of people who come to South Texas is a better life for themselves and their family.

**Pat Allison**

No matter where one comes from, South Texas requires hard work to succeed.

Luis Fuentes Sr. was born in 1905, in Dolores Hidalgo, Guanajuato, Mexico. His father died when he was 8 years old. Support of his mother and sisters fell on the shoulders of his older step-brother Ignacio, age 19, and Luis.

The Luis Fuentes Family Collection was donated to the South Texas Archives in 2013. This collection is relatively small in volume, but very rich in the courage and determination that makes South Texas strong. The Luis Fuentes family contributed to the Mi Familia-Mi Comunidad Collection at the South Texas Archives and the National Endowment for the Humanities Common Heritage Project, which is now on display at the John E. Conner Museum on the Texas A&M University-Kingsville campus.

When Luis was 12 years old the family immigrated to Laredo. Work was his life and the tool to reach his goals. By age 18, Luis Fuentes' work ethic earned him an adventure that put him on a life-long career path. A Laredo merchant asked Mr. Fuentes to partner with him to sell clothing in Benavides, an oil boom town.

Young Mr. Fuentes dressed professionally in a suit, vest and tie. He packed suitcases with clothing that he was to sell door-to-door and traveled to Benavides. Upon arrival he quickly recognized the contrast between how he was dressed and the garb of the oil rough-necks, ranchers and cowboys. Mr. Fuentes had to summon his courage, "after talking to himself and conquering his fears" he proceeded to sell the clothing.

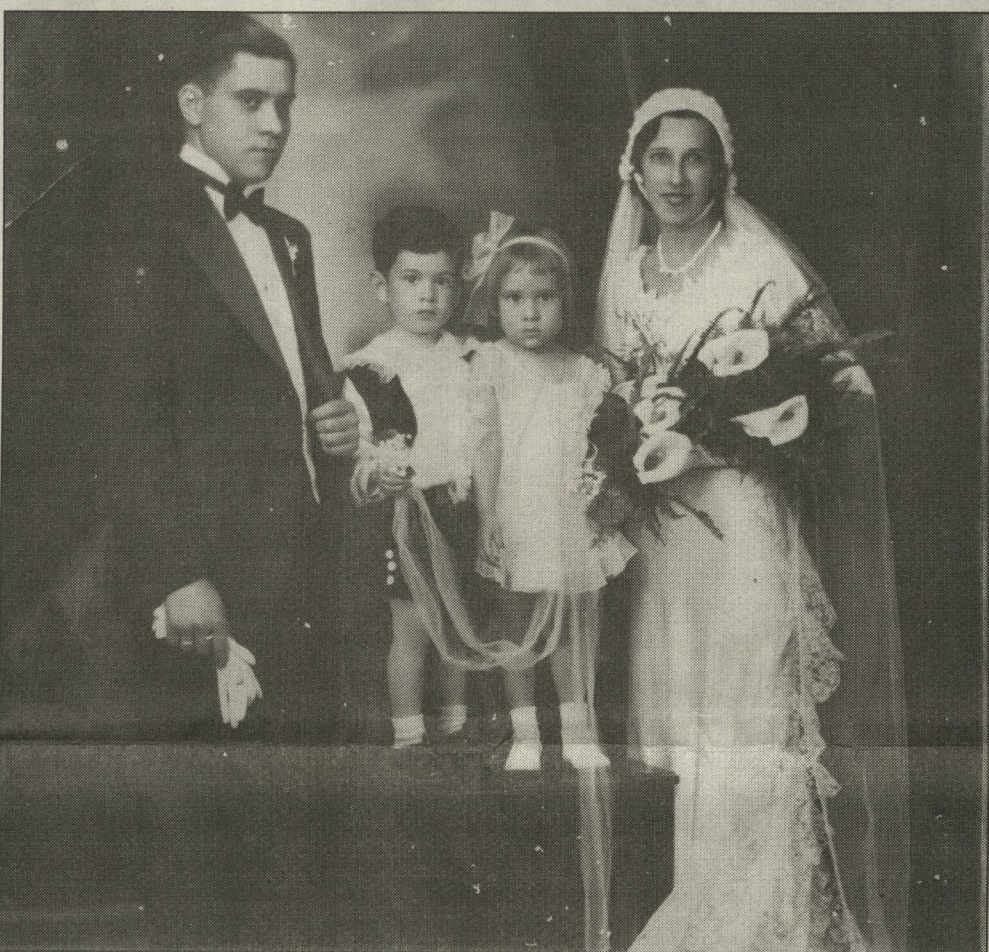
The venture was a success. Mr. Fuentes sold all of his goods in two days. The profit was split 50/50 between Mr. Fuentes and the merchant. Luis Fuentes was now a businessman. But times changed, and the partnership ended when the merchant went bankrupt. Mr. Fuentes was out of a job and out of money. He still wanted to sell clothing.

Mr. Fuentes was telling "Tia Poncha", one of his good customers, about his situation. Tia Poncha gathered up cash from hidden places in her home and made a \$300 loan to him. There was no paperwork for this loan. Tia Poncha said it was between Luis, herself and God. That \$300, about \$4,000 in inflation adjusted money, was the seed for beginning a store.

The first store was a small 14-foot by 14-foot location in Benavides. The merchandise was purchased from a Laredo store named "El Nuevo Mundo." The owner, Mr. Nicolas Hachar, and Mr. Luis Fuentes became good friends. Mr. Fuentes named his new store El Nuevo Mundo after his friend's store.



The Grand Knights. Knights of Columbus Council 2623 at St. Martin's Church in Kingsville. Luis Fuentes Sr. is on the far right of the front row. A2016-051.0010.0025, Mi Familia-Mi Comunidad Collection, South Texas Archives, James C. Jernigan Library, Texas A&M University-Kingsville.



Luis Fuentes and Manuela (Meme) Canales Fuentes on their wedding day. The children are Romulo Garcia (ring bearer) and Alicia Aguilar (flower girl). They are nephew and niece of Luis Fuentes. A2013-034.0009, Luis Fuentes Collection, South Texas Archives, James C. Jernigan Library, Texas A&M University-Kingsville.

Business went well so Mr. Fuentes purchased a Ford Model T truck, which he used to take merchandise to surrounding communities. Mr. Hacher wanted Mr. Fuentes to become a manager of his store, but he declined saying, "Es mejor ser la cabeza de un ratón que la cola de un león." It is better to be the head of a mouse than the tail of a lion.

The economy changed again and Mr. Fuentes moved his store to Hebbronville in the 1930s. There he met Manuela Canales ("Meme"). They married in 1934. Meme was an excellent seamstress and had been supporting her own family with her sewing skills. Luis and Meme had three children; Luis Jr., Jose Eliud and Ruth Maria. Luis and Meme became citizens, active voters and participants in church and community organizations.

With the beginning of World War II business began to slow down in Hebbronville. Luis Fuentes visited Corpus Christi to look for a new location for El Nuevo Mundo. He didn't find what he wanted in Corpus Christi. On his way home to Hebbronville he stopped in Kingsville. There he found a location for rent at 305 E. Kleberg Ave. He also met with friends for coffee at the George Café. They told him that the arrival of the Navy base would keep Kingsville's economy strong.

Before leaving Kingsville that day Mr. Fuentes signed a five-year lease. El Nuevo Mundo was the

first Mexican-American owned business on Kleberg Avenue. The success of El Nuevo Mundo in Kingsville allowed for two additional store locations: one in Bishop and one in Hebbronville. The El Nuevo Mundo name was later changed to Fuentes - El Nuevo Mundo Department Store.

The Fuentes family lived in an 800 square-foot loft at the back of the store. The children played behind the store turning empty shipping boxes into tanks, and other joys of childhood imagination. During the war years many goods were rationed. Edwards Grocery was their neighbor at 301 E. Kleberg. They sometimes exchanged rationed sugar for silk hose.

Meme's seamstress skills were put to use doing alterations at the store. Years later when it was time for Eliud to marry, it was Meme who made the wedding dress for her future daughter-in-law. Meme lived to be 105 years old.

It was very important to Mr. Fuentes to pass on to his children the important life skills of hard work, quality and determination. The first paying jobs in the store for the children were sweeping the floors, and that had to be done to their father's satisfaction. With increasing experience the sons became managers; Luis Jr. manager of the shoe department and Eliud manager of the warehouse. The children attended H.M. King High School, but the ultimate goal

was a college education for each one.

Luis Jr. earned a degree in business administration and continued to work at Fuentes Department Store with his father. Eliud did not enjoy selling things. With his father's blessings he earned a degree in pharmacy and later a M.D. degree specializing in ophthalmology. Daughter Ruth Maria obtained a degree in education.

Sometimes people would come to Mr. Fuentes asking to borrow money. Instead of directly lending money to the person, he would suggest that they go to the bank, where Mr. Fuentes co-signed on the loan. This achieved two benefits. Mr. Fuentes would be helping the borrower to get the funds they needed and, by working through the bank, the borrower was creating a good, formal credit history when the loan was paid off at the bank.

Luis Fuentes Sr. retired in 1960. He didn't stay away from business for long. He and Luis Fuentes Jr. opened an office at 918 E. King Ave. Mr. Fuentes Sr. sold automobiles and took care of his real estate investments. Mr. Fuentes Jr. obtained his real estate license for Fuentes Insurance and Realty.

Kingsville Mayor Mary Clair Hill signed a proclamation designating June 28, 1981, as Mr. Luis Fuentes Sr. Day to honor this successful businessman and active community member. At that time Mr. Fuentes had been a member



Luis Fuentes Sr. going door to door selling his wares. A2016-051-0010-0021, Mi Familia-Mi Comunidad Collection, South Texas Archives, James C. Jernigan Library, Texas A&M University-Kingsville.



Luis Fuentes Jr., Ruth Maria Fuentes and Jose Eliud Fuentes. A2016-051.0010.0001, Mi Familia-Mi Comunidad Collection, South Texas Archives, James C. Jernigan Library, Texas A&M University-Kingsville.

of the Knights of Columbus for 42 years. He served as the Grand Knight several times. Mr. Fuentes told Kingsville Record reporter Susan Baker that he didn't run for the office of Grand Knight but was elected by the members and talked into taking on the job.

Ms. Baker then quoted Luis Fuentes Sr. in the article, "When I took over in 1955, we were about to be suspended from the national council for a \$700 debt. I used some of my own funds to start bingo games so we could make some money. We paid back the debt after the first game."

The Fuentes family and about 23 other Kingsville families contributed their stories for the Mi Familia-Mi Comunidad project now on display at the John E. Conner Museum. The project is ongoing. Sandra Rexroat and Lori Atkins of the South Texas Archives joined with Jonathan Plant, Museum Director, and Ralph Cuevas, Museum Curator, of the Conner Museum to write a grant request to National Endowment for the Humanities and the Common Heritage Project.

The first part of the project was a fiesta-style promotion of Mi Familia-Mi Comunidad with Mariachi music, refreshments and a speech by Carmen Lomas Garza, a world-renowned artist and illustrator and an alumna of Texas A&I University.

For the second part of the project Conner Museum and South Texas

Archives set up to collect and preserve family stories. The community was invited to bring family photos and heirlooms to the Conner Museum to have them scanned and digitized. The staff of the South Texas Archives brought equipment to do oral histories. Families kept their original photographs and heirlooms. Participants received a high resolution digital copy of their photos on a thumb drive and a copy of the digital image will be preserved in the South Texas Archives. The digital images and oral histories are available to future researchers and genealogists.

The third part of the project is underway right now, until May 25. Many of the beautiful pictures have been reproduced and put on display for Kingsville families and community visitors to enjoy.

If you enjoyed reading about the Luis Fuentes Family Collection or would like more information on the Mi Familia-Mi Comunidad Project, drop an e-mail to Lori Atkins at [lori.atkins@tamuk.edu](mailto:lori.atkins@tamuk.edu) or make a call to the South Texas Archives at (361) 593-2776. The keepers of your history would like to hear from you. Check their web page at <http://archives.tamuk.edu/>.

Pat Allison has been doing research at the South Texas Archives for several years. If you want to know more about South Texas Archives you can contact Lori Atkins at (361) 593-2776 or [lori.atkins@tamuk.edu](mailto:lori.atkins@tamuk.edu).