

Dow Jones Reprints: This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers, use the Order Reprints tool at the bottom of any article or visit [www.djreprints.com](http://www.djreprints.com)

[See a sample reprint in PDF format.](#)

[Order a reprint of this article now](#)



U.S. NEWS | OCTOBER 22, 2008

# In Old El Paso, This Detective Story Is Written in Pictures

*Studio Left 50,000 Portraits Without Names; Mr. Gallegos Spots His Grandfather*

By **STEPHANIE SIMON**

EL PASO, Texas -- Claudia Rivers is a librarian by trade, but lately she has become a detective hot on the trail of 50,000 mysteries.

Her quarries are the names behind the faces in 50,000 antique negatives left in the town's shuttered Casasola photography studio.

Who was the middle-aged matron flirting under a sombrero? Why did the young man with the butterfly tattoo pose bare-chested, clutching a can of spinach? What became of the grim-faced bride?

To identify them, Ms. Rivers has turned to the community. She's displaying the portraits -- many of Mexican immigrants taken as early as the 1920s -- on college campuses, at shopping malls and online. She also has turned the mystery into a weekly feature in the El Paso Times that asks, "Do you know the people in this photo?"

The answers roll into the University of Texas-El Paso library, five or six a week. Residents discover their jujitsu teacher or their choir director. At a mall one afternoon, two elderly sisters saw a photo on display and shouted, "That's our sister Mary."

Ms. Rivers has learned that identifications of nuns are suspect. "Everyone thinks it's their fourth-grade teacher," she says. Still, she's matched names to nearly 350 photos.

When someone calls to identify a portrait, the library staff tries to coax a story from them. Their memories -- about the bridesmaid who assembled telescopes, or the priest who kept a parrot that cursed -- paint a textured history of this sprawling city between the Franklin Mountains and the Rio Grande.

The photo project has helped restore El Paso's pride in its past and present. The portraits showcase illegal immigrants who went on to serve in the U.S. Army and farm laborers who worked in cotton fields to send their children to college. They

remind residents that, even in this seemingly transient border town, roots stretch back generations.

"It would have been wonderful for each photo to come with an ID, but there's something kind of nice about the mystery," says Diana Natalicio, president of the University of Texas-El Paso. "We've made detectives out of a whole lot of people."

The stories behind the photos have been published in the El Paso Times and worked into museum exhibits at the university. Ms. Rivers is developing a new exhibit she hopes to display at Ellis Island.

When Alfonso Casasola opened his portrait studio in the early 1920s, the name had instant cachet. Agustin Casasola, his cousin, had been a famed photographer of the Mexican revolution, a decadelong struggle against dictatorship that began in 1910.

Wedding parties took the trolley to Alfonso Casasola's to pose by a painted backdrop of white pillars. Parents trotted in girls in lacy First Communion gowns. Some customers were too poor to pay for prints; they came for the experience. One woman who identified her parents' wedding portrait from 1934 said it took them 15 years to save enough money to buy the print.

Alfonso Casasola died in 1948, but his widow and daughter kept the studio open until 1992. When it closed, the construction crew hired to gut it found boxes crammed with negatives and hand-tinted prints. They were neatly bundled, tied with ribbon and grouped by category -- farmworkers, women, weddings and children. But none was identified by name.

Workers brought the collection to a pawn shop, where a local artist picked it up. In 1996, with the collection decaying badly, the artist sold it to the university library for preservation. Ms. Rivers declined to disclose the price but said it was a minimal amount.

Ms. Rivers, the head of special collections, sorted through the brittle negatives, her fingertips burning from the decaying nitrate film. She had them cleaned and stored. She wasn't sure what else to do with them.

In 2002, an editor at the El Paso Times requested an old photo to illustrate a story on immigration. Ms. Rivers pulled one at random from the Casasola collection. Within days, a reader identified the portrait that appeared in the paper.

The response showed Ms. Rivers that publicizing the photos could unlock the collection's secrets.

A dapper young man in a tuxedo, photographed at a 1937 wedding, turned out to

be José Cruz Burciaga. His daughter identified him and told the library he'd raised his family in the basement of a synagogue, where he worked for 40 years as a custodian.

Edie Rubalcaba spotted her grandmother, Gertrudis Maldonado, in a photo from the 1940s. Ms. Rubalcaba called the library to reminisce about Sunday afternoons long ago when she and her sisters would sit on the floor eating Mexican sweets as Grandma braided their hair.

"It's like getting a present every Tuesday when we put the picture in the paper," Ms. Rivers says. History books chronicle "the so-called important people," she says, "but it's the ordinary people who are the community."

Last fall, Adrian Gallegos was flipping through the paper when he spotted a picture of a mustachioed man with a receding hairline. As always, the caption asked: Do you know this man?

It was his grandfather.

"It made me sad," Mr. Gallegos says. "It was almost like they were asking, 'Who is this guy? Does anybody claim him?'"

Mr. Gallegos told the library that Mario Acevedo had little schooling but taught himself physics, accounting and four languages. His grandfather earned his high-school equivalency degree at age 77. Mr. Acevedo also taught martial arts in Mexico, kept the books for the sheriff in El Paso County and served with the Texas National Guard.

"He was the most influential man in my life," Mr. Gallegos says.

**Write to** Stephanie Simon at [stephanie.simon@wsj.com](mailto:stephanie.simon@wsj.com)

Copyright 2008 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. Distribution and use of this material are governed by our [Subscriber Agreement](#) and by copyright law. For non-personal use or to order multiple copies, please contact Dow Jones Reprints at 1-800-843-0008 or visit [www.djreprints.com](http://www.djreprints.com)