

Doña Maria Gertrudis Barceló

By Orae Dominguez

Doña Maria Gertrudis Barceló, she preferred the name Madame La Tulas, was well known as an expert card dealer. Her fame as the best Monte dealer spread throughout the territories. She was literate, shrewd, and an independent businesswoman who had amassed wealth and power as a Mexican woman. Doña Tulas expressed the view of her life and her acquisition of her considerable wealth and property as being "accumulated by my own labor and exertions."

Doña Maria Gertrudis Barceló was a very significant and fascinating woman who lived during the Mexican and Euro-American transition in Santa Fe, New Mexico in the early to mid 1800s. Little is recorded about the origins of Doña Maria Gertrudis Barceló some early accounts stated that she was born in Sonora, Mexico, around the year 1800. The church registers at Tomé, a small village about thirty miles south of Albuquerque, contain this information on the family. On August 6, 1823 Don Pedro Pino, bachelor of the town of Valencia, married Doña Dolores Herrero widow of Juan Ignacio Barceló. Dolores and Juan's had one son Trinidad and two daughters Maria de la Luz Barceló who married Rafael Sanchez on November 3, 1822, the son of Manuel Sanchez and Gertrudis Chavez, and Doña Gertrudis Barceló who married one Don Manuel Antonio Sisneros, son of Hermenegildo Sisneros and Rita Juliana Lucero on June 23, 1823. The reference of "Don" and "Doña" indicated the high social standing of the couple at the time. This would suggest that myths of La Tulas spread by Josiah Gregg, as starting out lowly and gaining the prestigious title of Doña in Santa Fe by her "sinful" practices and acquired wealth are alluring, but untrue. Further records show that La Tulas and her husband had two legitimate sons Jose Pedro and Miguel Antonio Sisneros who both died in infancy. The death of her babies may have led Doña Tulas to change her roll as mother, to that of businesswoman. They relocated to Santa Fe, where her mother was living. The parlor games she may have played as a child became an extra source of income, for her and her husband.

Many chronicles wrote of Doña Tulas. One said, "When I saw her, she was richly, but tastelessly dressed, her fingers being literally covered with rings, while her neck was adorned with three heavy chains of gold, to the longest of which was attached a massive crucifix of the same precious metal." Susan Magoffin described her (in 1846) as "a stately dame of a certain age, the possessor of a portion of that shrewd sense and fascinating manner necessary to allure the wayward, inexperienced youth to the hall of final ruin." Magoffin and Gregg represent a Victorian and Puritanical point of view, intolerant of cultural standards dissimilar to theirs and unable to view Mexicans as equals. Other authors wrote that Doña Tulas Barceló was charming, beautiful, fashionable, shrewd, witty and also brilliant.

Politically she appeared quite influential and she conceded that U.S. occupancy meant survival for her people. As Mexico's power diminished the United States invaded the Mexican department of New Mexico in 1846. General Kearny gave Doña Tulas a military escort to the Victory Ball at the La Fonda Hotel. It was a lavish event attended by the cream of Santa Fe Society. Many modern historians give great credit to Doña Tulas for the cultural bridge her Sala provided accustoming Euro-Americans to the Nuevo-Mexicano life style.

La Doña Maria Gertrudis Barceló died on January 17, 1852, at the age of forty-seven. She had written a will the year before, she left her residence and most of her property to her "beloved sister", she also

gave to her brother Trinidad, and her two adopted daughters. Before she died she received the Sacraments of Penance, Extreme Unction, and Eucharist, by the priest Don José de Jesus Lujan (Santa Fe Bur.-53). She was given an elaborate church funeral (100-400.00) with all the luxury she deserved according to custom, for she was a *rica* (a rich woman) and gave liberally to her church and to the poor. She was the last person to be buried beneath Santa Fe's La Parroquia Church (now rebuilt as the St. Francis Cathedral) on this day.

Madame La Tulas was the proprietor and owner of a gambling house in Santa Fe the building she procured was a block long in length on Burro Alley between Palace Avenue and San Francisco Street. The inside decorations she created produced the most distinguished gambling house in the entire Southwest. La Tulas had the all floors covered with the finest *thick* European carpets. Elegant etched glass mirrors illuminated the entire setting. Crystal chandeliers, rich drapes and imported furniture were brought across the Santa Fe Trail by wagons from St. Louis, Missouri.

Madame La Tulas was very skilled with the game of Monte. She knew the betting habits of every player. Her manner never revealed emotions. She played with the expression of demure loveliness. A lonesome man could easily imagine himself in love with this amazing woman. Many were curious about the game and would try their luck. Some came only with the desire to see the beautiful red haired, green-eyed, fair complicated woman. Their eyes would stare unashamedly at her beautiful features. Many felt homesick for the women they left behind. The men who came to gamble gathered around the rich wood grained tables covered with red or green cloths that were divided in squares. The Spanish game of Monte, named from the mountain of cards left after a certain number had been dealt, is a simple gambling game played with a traditional old Spanish deck of 40 cards not having the eight's, nines and tens, made up of four suits: coins, cups, swords and clubs, each dedicated to the four parts of the world: America, Asia, Europe and Africa. In each suit there are three court cards (King, Knight and Jack) and seven pip cards. Any number of players may participate. Five cards are turned up in a particular order on the squares. If the fifth card matches the suit of any of the first four, those who staked a bet on that card would win. It has been said, the mysteries of Monte could be learned only by losing at it. Doña Tulas soon became very wealthy. Her finances were above her greatest expectations, and her establishment was the place to be for travelers and townsfolk alike.

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Gregg, Josiah – COMMERCE OF THE PRAIRIES (New York 1844) Vol.1 (source for tall tales and gossip)

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