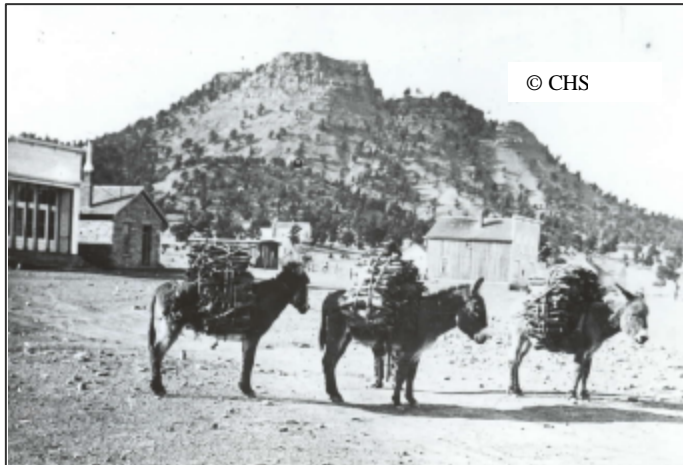


## A Frontier Life: The Trails and Trials of Juana Suaso Simpson

Juana Suaso Simpson was a person who got things done. With her sharp mind and strong will, nothing could stop her. Juana's mother, Teresita Sandoval, was the same way. "Like mother, like daughter" truly applies to these pioneer women.



Pack burros in Trinidad with Simpson's Rest in the background, late 1800s.

Juana was born in 1827 to Manuel Suaso and Teresita Sandoval in Taos, a small but busy New Mexican village. Spanish colonists built Taos close to an old settlement of Pueblo Indians. Between 1821 and 1848, Taos was a distant outpost at the northern reaches of Mexico.

Juana saw her hometown begin to change in 1821, when the Santa Fe Trail opened. Taos was not directly on the trade route but was close to it. Fur trappers and traders often stopped there. Some were heading south to the Mexican city of Santa Fe. Others went east to Bent's Fort, an American trading post near the Arkansas River.

In 1835 when she was eight years old, Juana's family moved a short distance away to Mora. Her parents had received land there as a grant from the Mexican government. Juana and her siblings, Cruzita, José, and Rufina, probably picked wild blackberries (*mora* in Spanish) that grew in the sunny valley.

In Mora, Juana's mother met Matthew Kinkead, and in 1841, they decided to move north with her children. The Sandoval-Kinkead family settled in Fort El Pueblo. The new trading center was in American territory near the Arkansas River. George Simpson, Alexander Barclay, James P. Beckwourth, and Joseph Doyle had just built the fort. Matthew and Teresita helped run the fort, which bustled with activity. Trappers, traders, settlers, and Indians exchanged hides, jewelry, metal tools, and food in the frontier village.

Adventure at the fort was endless. Young Juana met some of the western frontier's most colorful characters. Mountain men Jim Bridger, "Uncle Dick" Wootton, Kit Carson, and James Beckwourth, the famous African-American-Crow warrior, were all there.

Juana wed George Simpson one month before her fifteenth birthday. They were married at Bent's Fort by a notary public. The couple soon moved to Hardscrabble, a new farming community co-founded by George. In 1844, they traveled to Taos to be married by a priest and to baptize their daughter, Isabel.

Late in September, they left for Taos on horseback. Juana carried her baby in a sling made from a shawl. Juana's sister, Cruzita, and her husband, Joseph Doyle, also made the trip. They too wanted a Catholic marriage ceremony. Asa Estes was the group's hunter, and three other men packed and drove the mules.

The very first day the group was caught in an early snowstorm. For seven days they plodded through wind and snow. At night, they tended campfires to keep the baby warm. Estes shot three deer that had wandered out of the blizzard into their camp. The cold and tired travelers feasted on fresh meat in the midst of the storm.

After the blizzard passed, they headed to the Sangre de Cristo Pass. The men had to dig a path through a big snowdrift. Juana's horse, Comanche, stumbled, fell, and threw Juana and the baby into the snow. In the words of her husband, "she came up smiling with her babe in her arms, regained the track unaided, and when her horse was extricated, resumed her place in the cavalcade as if nothing had happened to disturb her serenity."

Later in the journey, they hid from Ute Indians who were moving cattle and sheep. George silently gave Juana his pistol and hunting knife. They had discussed what Juana should do to prevent capture, a fate they thought worse than death. The group hid in some willows until dusk and then rode in darkness and silence.

On October 6, 1844, they safely arrived in Taos. Father Antonio José Martínez baptized Isabel seven days later at Our Lady of Guadalupe Church. The next day, he married Juana and George, and then Cruzita and Joseph.

Juana's husband, George, was born in St. Louis, Missouri. His father, a physician, sent him west where he met fur traders and trappers. George became an adventurer, farmer, shopkeeper, civic leader, and poet, but he was also an alcoholic known to be abusive when drunk. At one point, George went to California for two years, leaving behind Juana and their children. Not wanting to depend on others any longer, Juana took steps toward independence. She learned to read, write and teach in Spanish. Someone said, "the way Mrs. Geo. Simpson earned money by teaching is a wonder."

Juana and George settled in Trinidad in 1865. Trinidad was a young but growing town on the Santa Fe Trail. "Uncle Dick" Wootton had fixed up the trail as it crossed nearby Raton Mountain. Thanks to his improvements, wagon caravans could safely negotiate Raton Pass. More and more people now moved to the town.

In Trinidad, Juana taught Spanish-speaking students and became friends with Blandina Segale. As a Sister of Charity, Blandina taught school at Saint Joseph's Academy, but she was keen to have a new school. She thought someone might help if they saw her on the roof. She climbed on top of the old building and began prying loose adobe bricks with a crowbar. Juana was the first person to see Blandina on the roof. In less than an hour, Juana returned with six men, tools, and supplies. Thanks to Juana's help, Trinidad soon had a new and bigger school.

Juana had the love and respect of all who knew her. She was a true lady who did charitable work at the church, school and hospital. Because of her kindness and accomplishments, the people of Trinidad called her "Doña Juanita." Juana Suaso Simpson died in 1916 at 89 years of age while with her daughter, Isabel, in California. George is buried on top of a sandstone bluff in Trinidad called "Simpson's Rest." Today, a sign that reads "Trinidad" lights up on the hill every night.

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BY PAULA MANINI, Director, Trinidad History Museum

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