

**MARIA LEÓN ORTEGA COLLECTION**  
Finding Aid

Compiled by  
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2013

Margaret H. McAllen Memorial Archives  
Edinburg, Texas



*Founded in 1967 as the  
Hidalgo County Historical Museum*

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**MARIA LEÓN ORTEGA COLLECTION**

1924-1983

Acc. # 1989.069

**MHMM Archives****SUMMARY**

<b>Size</b>	3.28 cubic feet
<b>Geographic Locations</b>	Mexico; Germany; Lerado, Texas; Corpus Christi, Texas; McAllen, Texas; Austin, Texas
<b>Inclusive Dates</b>	1924-1983
<b>Bulk Dates</b>	1955-1968
<b>Languages</b>	Spanish, English, Italian, Portuguese, German
<b>Summary</b>	The collection includes correspondence, photographs, newspaper clippings, sheet music, teaching materials, and some memorabilia relating to Maria León Ortega's life and family, and to her work as a folk singer and music teacher.
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<b>Related Collections</b>	
<b>Citation</b>	Maria León Ortega collection. Margaret H. McAllen Memorial Archives, Museum of South Texas History, Edinburg, TX.
<b>Stack Location(s)</b>	RGDOC 149, D:3; RGDOC 150, E:8; RGDOC 586, L:13; RGDOC 587, L:13; RGDOC 589, D:4; RGDOC 591, D:4; RGDOC 594, D:4; RGDOC 597, L:13.

**BIOGRAPHICAL/HISTORICAL NOTE**

Maria de León Ortega, known professionally in the United States as Maria León Ortega, was born Maria de los Angeles Falfari Alvarez in Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico, on August 1, 1906. Her mother was of Spanish and French descent, and her father was Italian diplomat Augusto Falfari Landini.

Maria graduated from Mexico City College, and was on its faculty in the late 1940s and early 1950s as a teacher of music and dance. In the United States during the 1950s and 1960s, she sang folk songs (primarily Mexican) while accompanying herself on guitar. She usually did that as small group entertainment. She also taught for short periods in various colleges, including The University of Texas at Austin and Texas A&M University.

In 1927, Maria married Manuel León Ortega (born 1896), a civil engineer who had graduated from Texas A&M University in 1920. They had a son, Augusto M. "Gus" León Ortega, born in Mexico City on October 20, 1929. Gus studied business management at Texas A&M University from 1950-1955. In 1964 he became a public relations officer for Hotel El Mirador in Acapulco, and an English teacher in 1969 at the Cultural Institute in Mexico City.

In 1956, Manuel and Maria divorced, and she then moved to Texas and married Joseph Adams Billings, a business economics professor at Corpus Christi University. They later moved to Austin, where Billings worked on his PhD at The University of Texas. They divorced in 1960.

In 1961 she married John G. Riemann, a scientist with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. They moved from New Orleans to McAllen in 1962, and then to Fargo, North Dakota. In early 1968, they separated, and she returned to live in McAllen, where she later became a U.S. citizen. She passed away in February, 1982.

León Ortega gave the material in this collection to a neighbor, Beulah "Tommy" Beardsmore, who was caring for her. After León Ortega's death, Beardsmore, upon moving to a retirement home, gave the material to Geraldine Duke, who, in 1989, donated it to the Museum.

### **SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE**

The Maria León Ortega collection consists of correspondence, photographs, newspaper clippings, sheet music, teaching materials, and some memorabilia relating to her life and family, and to her work as a folk singer and music teacher. The bulk of the documents are correspondence, teaching materials, and music. Most of the correspondence is from her son and her ex-husband, John G. Riemann, but other correspondence is from her friends and neighbors in McAllen, Texas.

The photographs make up 1.83 cubic feet of the collection. Most of them are in albums with fairly good documentation relating dates, locations, and people. The collection also includes a scrapbook, dated 1957-1960 and 1968-1969, containing newspaper clippings, correspondence, memorabilia, event programs, and a few photographs.

**LIST OF SUB-GROUPS, SERIES, AND SUBSERIES**

- I. Folklore notes**
- II. Biographical materials**
- III. Correspondence**
  - a. Augusto "Gus" León Ortega
  - b. John G. Riemann
  - c. Various people
- IV. Music**
  - a. Teaching materials
  - b. Librettos
  - c. Scores and songs
- V. Newspaper clippings**
- VI. Photographs**
  - a. Albums
  - b. Loose photographs
- VII. Scrapbooks**

## SERIES DESCRIPTIONS

### I. Folklore notes

This series includes fifteen notecards on Uruguay covering its culture, folklore, history, geography, economy, and government. There is also an essay titled, "American Folklore."

### II. Biographical materials

Programs, memorabilia, and newspaper clippings are found in this series. The programs are from several conferences, plays, and musical presentations. In addition to tickets and other travel items, the memorabilia includes a chalk pastel sketch of León Ortega. The series also contains a congratulatory message dated July 23, 1927, from the Royal Minister of Italy to Augusto Falfari on the marriage of the Signorina Maria de los Angeles Falfari Alvarez.

### III. Correspondence

Most of the correspondence consists of letters León Ortega received from others. The exception is two letters León Ortega wrote to her son in 1957. There are three subseries in this series: correspondence from Augusto "Gus" León Ortega, correspondence from John G. Riemann, and correspondence from various people.

Augusto "Gus" León Ortega was Maria's son and their correspondence covered the years 1957 through 1968. One of the topics covered in the letters is Gus's English/Spanish language school, the Instituto Augusto León Ortega (IALO). The letter from Gus to Maria dated May 9, 1960 provides a timeline of some events in Maria's life in the 1950s.

John G. Riemann was León Ortega's husband from 1961 to 1968. The correspondence in this subseries is dated 1968-1970. Also found here is a delayed bill dated 1963 for moving expenses from New Orleans, Louisiana, to McAllen, Texas, with an attached check for 1962 showing that the bill had been paid.

The bulk of the correspondence from various people is dated 1968 and mentions a hard time or illness that León Ortega is experiencing then. The formats include cards, letters, and newsletters. Also found here is a reprint of three articles from the June 17, 1968, *Austin Daily Herald* (Austin, Minnesota) about the death of longtime *Herald* publisher (and a friend of the Riemann's) Harry E. Rasmussen.

### IV. Music

Teaching materials, librettos, and scores and songs are the three subseries of the Music series. Formats include a grade book, worksheets, song lyrics, sheet music, music books, and a poster.

The teaching materials are dated 1948-1949 and 1955 for Mexico City College. Items include a questionnaire for the class of Mexican folk music, an attendance chart for students, undergraduate class lists, a faculty directory for summer 1955, a Texas Longhorns notebook with handwritten lyrics, fingering charts for the guitar, music worksheets, lyrics that include chords and fingering charts, handwritten sheet music, and the booklet "Music Teaching in New Mexico in the Seventeenth Century." The grade book relates to a 1948 course on Mexican music.

Among the typed song lyrics found in Librettos is also a posted titled, "The Folk Song Sing Along," dated 1962.

Scores and Songs include music books and sheet music the bulk of which were copyrighted in the 1940s. Languages of the lyrics are Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, and English.

#### **V. Newspaper clippings**

The newspaper clippings are from English- and Spanish-language newspapers from the 1960s.

#### **VI. Photographs**

The photographs series includes six albums as well as loose photos.

The first album has a black cardboard cover and is tied with a cord. The inscription on the inside of the front cover states, "Maria de los Angeles Falfari Alvariez, Mexico D.F." The photos show León Ortega as a young, unmarried woman from 1924 to 1926. Most of the photos are identified with a date and location but not the names of the people.

The next album has an orange cover decorated with paisley and glitter. One photograph is dated June 2, 1964, but none of the others have any identification. One item is a picture of Augusto M. León Ortega that may have been cut from a directory or yearbook with information stating, "Teacher of English and Spanish. Originating in: Mexico, D. F. likes to: travel, music, painting, theater, reading, the breeding of tropical fish and underwater fishing."

A brown alligator-skin design album has a torn page from a book adhered to the outside of the front cover. The photographs document the childhood of León Ortega's son Gus beginning when he was age three and a half months. Other photographs are of mostly unidentified groups of people gathered at different locations in Mexico.

The brown photograph album that has photos dated 1943, 1955-1958, includes a mix of subjects. Some of the photographs show León Ortega performing



with her guitar at different locations. Others are family photos taken with homes, cars, and friends. There is also a number of school events portrayed. Documented locations of the photos include Laredo, Texas; Merida, Yucatan; Chevy Chase, Maryland; Mexico City; Parque, Mexico; Austin, Texas; Corpus Christi, Texas; and Atlanta, Georgia.

A red album dated 1961-1962 includes family as well as travel scenes. Some of the locations where photos were taken are Port Isabel, Texas; New Orleans, Louisiana; Kingsville, Texas; and McAllen, Texas. Three packages of guitar strings and one eyeglasses lens was removed from the album and stored separately.

The last album/scrapbook contains memorabilia as well as many photographs. It arrived at the archives with no cover and all the pages loose. It includes items dated 1950-1955 and documents Gus León Ortega's time at Texas A&M where he earned a business degree. There are many travel as well as school scenes, and many of the people in the photographs are identified. There is also an autograph written by Gus when he received a scholarship.

A number of loose photographs are included in the collection. They are some studio portraits as well as copies of a few of the photos in the albums. None of them have been labeled with identification or dates.

## **VII. Scrapbook**

The scrapbook has a brown cover with an address sticker on it which says, "Maria Leon-Ortega, Univ. of Corpus Christi, Corpus Christi, Texas." It contains newspaper clippings, correspondence, memorabilia, event programs, and a few photographs. Most of the material is related to León Ortega's life in Corpus Christi, Texas, but some pertains to travel in Mexico and Germany. Much of the material is dated 1957-1960; however, news clippings near the back of the book, describing her activities in McAllen, Texas, are dated 1968-1969.

**INDEX TERMS**

Billings, Joseph Adams  
Falfari Landini, Augusto  
Folk music--Mexico.  
León Ortega, Augusto M. "Gus," 1929-  
León Ortega, Manuel, 1896-  
León Ortega, María, 1906-1982  
McAllen Music Club  
Mexico City College (*Universidad de las Americas*)  
Riemann, John G.  
Texas A&M University

CONTAINER LIST

<u>Stack Location</u>	<u>Box</u>	<u>Folder(s)</u>	<u>Contents (with dates)</u>
D:3	RGDOC 149	1	Folklore notes: note cards, undated
		2	Folklore notes: "American Folklore," undated
		3	Biographical materials: portrait, 1983
		4	Biographical materials: news clippings, 1957-1968
		5	Biographical materials: newsletters, 1951, 1969
		6	Biographical materials: programs, 1950, 1957-1959, 1963, 1965, undated
		7	Biographical materials: congratulatory note for marriage, 1927
		8	Biographical materials: memorabilia
		9	Correspondence: Augusto "Gus" León Ortega, 1957, 1965, 1968
		10	Correspondence: John G. Riemann, 1962, 1963, 1968-1970
		11-12	Correspondence: various people, 1960-1962, 1965-1968, undated
		13	Correspondence: postcards, 1968, undated
		14-16	Music: teaching materials, 1948-1949, undated
E:8	RGDOC 150	1	Music: librettos, undated
		2-4	Music: scores and songs
		5	Newspaper clippings
L:13	RGDOC 586-587		Photographs: album – Gus at Texas A&M
D:4	RGDOC 589	1	Photographs: album – family and travel (red cover), 1961-1962
		2	Photographs: album – family, travel, and school events (brown cover), 1943, 1955-1958
D:4	RGDOC 591	1	Photographs: album – unidentified and undated photographs (orange cover)
		2	Photographs: album – León Ortega as a young unmarried woman, 1924-1926 (black cover)
D:4	RGDOC 594		Photographs: album – Gus León Ortega's childhood (brown cover)
D:3	RGDOC 598		Photographs: loose
L:13	RGDOC 597		Scrapbook