

HISTORIC SENA PLAZA

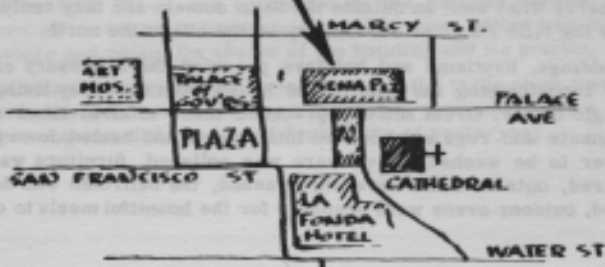
SANTA FE, N.M.



VILLAGRA
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SENA PLAZA

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For more than one hundred and thirty years, Sena Plaza has been a familiar landmark in the Ancient City, where guests were welcomed with Spanish hospitality and visitors could rest in the quiet of its placita, or patio. This large building was built in 1831 by Major Jose D. Sena, for his bride, Dona Isabel Cabeza de Baca.

The Sena name has long been identified with Santa Fe. In 1693, Bernardino de Sena came to New Mexico as a boy of nine, with his foster-parents, and became founder of the line. When Don Juan Sena inherited this land in 1796, Santa Fe belonged to Spain. When Major Jose D. Sena built this house in 1831, Santa Fe belonged to Mexico. In 1846 Santa Fe became part of the United States.

The house grew as the family grew (23 children were born under these roofs to the Major and his wife) and in the end there were 33 rooms. Like the Palacio Real, the Sena house was built of adobe brick. The family lived on the south and west sides of the placita. On the north side were stables, a coach house, store rooms and servants quarters. A well still standing in the north-east corner of the patio, provided the water supply for the household.

A large Ballroom was on the second floor of the west wing and this big room was also used as an assembly hall for meetings. Then, as now, it was reached by an outside stair. There were no interior hallways in the structure. One went by way of the portal from one room to another, or in bad weather directly from room to room, as each room had a connecting doorway to the next.

With corner fireplaces in the smaller rooms and log-size ones in the larger rooms, Summer was wood-chopping time. Great quantities of cut cedar and pinon, hauled from the hills, provided for Winter warmth. Thick adobe walls made the finest insulation against the cold and fire blazed merrily throughout the building. In the patio, two huge apple trees provided personal lookouts in their topmost branches, for the Sena children. Here they could observe what went on outside the Sena domain and they could even see the rifle range at Fort Marcy on the hill to the north.

Weddings, baptisms and holidays provided the necessary excuse for transforming the placita and house from everyday living to a magic castle. Great activity preceded these affairs. Hand-woven blankets and rugs were loaded into wagons and hauled down to the river to be washed. Silverware was polished, furniture was repaired, outside walls were whitewashed, the ballroom was decorated, outdoor ovens were prepared for the bountiful meals to come.

On the eventful day, relatives and friends rode or walked to the Big House. After morning services, a light repast was served and company gathered in the placita to visit and rest. In the afternoon, different sports and games were held in the placita and in the open field to the north of the house.

As early evening approached, a delectable aroma of things-a-cooking wafted teasingly over the grounds and soon enough the call to dinner was heard. Several rooms were set aside as dining rooms and tables groaned with culinary efforts of many cooks. In season, cabritos (young goats) may have been the meat course around which the feast was built. Always a part of any meal, large or small, would be chili verde con queso (green chili with cheese), chicos (dried, steamed green corn), canaigre (wild pie plant), and mounds and mounds of bizcochitos (sugar cookies) plus a variety of side dishes to tempt the jaded palate.

And finally the baile, or ball! Everybody attended, from grandparents to the newest baby. The musicians, usually a fiddler or two and a guitarist, sat on chairs which were placed on top of a long table at the head of the ballroom. Against the two side walls, sat the chaperones, and grandmothers cuddling sleeping babies under their black shawls while contentedly puffing their cigarettes.

Hundreds of candles in finely wrought hanging candelabra and intricately hammered silver wall sconces provided light for the gaily costumed dancers, who, with music in their feet, executed the intricate steps of the Handkerchief Waltz; El Fandanguito; La Polka Suelta; the Schottische; El Valse Despacio and many others.

Quickly the hours fled and too soon it was time for town guests to wend their way homeward; for others to retire to the rooms placed at their disposal by a gracious host. But the memories of their day at La Casa Grande de Sena would stay with them forever. Such was life in the sleepy little town of Santa Fe, many, many years ago.

When the Sena Plaza was purchased by the present owners and remodeled for business occupancy in 1927, every effort was made to restore and retain the charm of the building and its placita.

And if today's weary visitor, resting under the large plum tree of a quiet afternoon, shuts his eyes for a few moments, he too can recapture some of the magic of Sena Plaza of yesteryear.

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