



postscript.

The Peña Mystery

Fathers have their family tales to tell. But in the retelling over time, those stories tend to morph into family legends. It is left to the sons or daughters to accept as fact or verify. Such was the choice facing Francisco José Peña Valdés, a McAllen, Texas, attorney, as he recounted for his children the life of his late father, the noted Mexican-born artist, Rafael Peña.

Embedded in Rafael Peña's oral history were episodes from his student years as a "promising young painter" at the University of Oklahoma's Fine Arts School, where he earned a degree in 1931. Subsequently he became a prominent artist, commissioned by the Mexican government to execute a number of murals, but he recalled for his family with great pride and affection his OU experience and the works he left on the Norman campus.

A son born late in his father's life from a second marriage, Francisco realized that a great deal of time had passed—Rafael would be 100 now—but he nevertheless wanted to visit the University on the chance that the stories were true and that something remained of his father's early legacy. His inquiry found its way to the OU Visitor Center and became a project for staff member Andy Taylor, who mobilized several University departments to unearth the details of Rafael Peña's days as a Sooner.

When Francisco arrived at Jacobson Hall in late July with wife Verónica and sons Daniel, 13; Patricio, 11; and Diego, 5, he was amazed at what he found waiting. Jacobson, now the Visitor Center,



The family of Francisco and Verónica Peña visit Jacobson Hall.



Rafael Peña (Mexico)
Tamales, n.d.
Drawing, 10x14 in.
Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art
The University of Oklahoma, Norman

originally housed the School of Art and later the art museum. The school's current director, Mary Jo Watson, provided the historical background for a tour of that building, followed by a campus tour that ended at the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art, on the day when the facility is normally closed. Nevertheless, the accommodating staff was able to show the family three works by Rafael Peña from the permanent collection.

Watson then arranged for the Peñas to visit a studio where a student was working in a medium much like Rafael's wood-cut press process. The student was making an artist's proof—a first, test print—which he signed and presented to the family as

a keepsake of their OU day.

Taylor was able to show them two articles from the *Sooner Magazine* archives, the first alluding to a one-man show held at the School of Art in 1932, featuring a black and white painting titled "Maternity." The other item concerned a Peña mural, "NEWS," commissioned by the University in 1931 for the University Press Building, later the School of Journalism and today called the NEL Building, east of Oklahoma Memorial Union. The mural disappeared as the building changed occupants, but on the theory that nothing is ever completely lost, Taylor has taken up the challenge and is engineering an art search of OU warehouses.

It was a day to remember for Francisco Peña and his family, a validation of the stories he heard from his long-deceased father, a deepening of their connection. Rubbing his hands up and down his arms, he commented, "I have the chills!" Meanwhile his son Patricio already was negotiating the number of visits his parents might make should he decide to follow his grandfather to the University of Oklahoma to create some memories of his own. —CJB