

# Luis Terrazas

## Lord and Master of Chihuahua

Jaime Abundis Canales\*



A deep blue sky frames the first rocky steps of the Sierra Madre Occidental where the Chihuahua highland ends, so blue and intense that it makes you inhale deeply in a vain attempt to fill yourself with infinity. Not far from places like La Angostura and its stone glyphs, Paquimé with its earth architecture, Dublán with its Mormons, Janos with its presidio and Menonites, Juan Mata Ortiz and the memory of the Apaches and Nuevo Casas Grandes, replete with hope, sits the grange of San Diego Hacienda in the middle of the plain, from where the peaks of the proud mountains can be seen toward the west. San Diego Hacienda seems to summarize the genesis and development of Chihuahua. In another time, it bubbled with activity; thousands of steers spread in all directions as far as the eye could see, grazing as they waited to be branded or herded to where they would be sold, while conflicts of all kinds

plagued cowboys, peons, indigenous, foremen and owners. Today, the big old house is empty and abandoned, but despite that, it still testifies to the opulence of the past; its triple central arches boast the name of the hacienda and two initials, L.T., the initials of its old owner, Luis Terrazas.

While in Mexico City the second presidential term after Independence was beginning immersed in the crisis of 1829, the state capital saw the birth of the man who would become the lord and master of Chihuahua. Educated in a seminary and the Literary Institute, as a very young man, Luis Terrazas would witness the invasion of U.S. troops and the impotence of his fellow Chihuahuans, headed up by Ángel Trías, in defending the semi-arid vastness of his state. Attracted to public affairs from 1851 on, he joined the Liberals who unveiled the Constitution of 1857. When the war of the Reform broke out, he took up arms and suffered his first defeat at the hands of the Conservatives at Tabalaopa Hacienda, in the suburbs of the capital in August 1860. Scant local support for the conservative side meant that it did not last in power very long, leaving the governorship to Terrazas. That was the beginning of a road that would indissolubly link his life to Chihuahua. In the prime of his youth, he was able to overcome his detractors' opposition and put an end to the influence of Ángel Trías, the previous caudillo.

Luis Terrazas' cousin, Colonel Joaquín Terrazas y Quezada, would leave a deep mark on Chihuahua history in this same period. Joaquín possessed virtues uncommon in those years: a faithful, loyal, indefatigable republican soldier, he became a true hero of the struggle against the barbarous Indians, to the point of definitively beating Vitorio's Apache forces in Tres Castillos in 1880, without ever aspiring to use his prestige or arms for personal gain. In clear contrast with Joaquín, Luis —or rather, Don Luis, as those he governed called him— was loyal to

\* Mexican architect. Researcher at the National Institute of Anthropology and History, INAH.  
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President Benito Juárez and the republic until the moment of the French intervention, although at the same time always manipulating the public coffers as though they were his own and politically manoeuvring to consolidate his power.

When the French occupation forced Juárez on his pilgrimage, Terrazas hesitated to support him at first, but he was able to act with sagacity to end up reconciled with the president and once again head up his state after recovering the capital city from the imperialists in March 1866. After the republican victory, he began his personal economic consolidation so that by 1873, at the end of his gubernatorial term, he was the great landowner of Chihuahua. Using public office to acquire lands and businesses put him on the road to economic success.

Luck did not turn its back on him despite his armed opposition to the Plan de la Noria rebels, promoted by Porfirio Díaz against Juárez. Once again, Tabalaoa Hacienda was the scene of another military defeat of Terrazas at the hands of rebel commander Donato Guerra in July 1872. However, in September, he was negotiating from a position of strength with Porfirio Díaz, whose enemy he became, so that when Díaz became president almost five years later, political misfortune seemed to hover over Don Luis' head.

Contrary to all expectations, Terrazas was able to wait for his moment. In 1880, he once again became governor of the state against the wishes of Díaz. The four years of his administration saw the state grow economically; the railroads, mining and cattle raising were intimately linked to this boom. But Díaz managed to put his close collaborator General Carlos Pacheco into the governor's seat in 1884 to counter Terrazas' influence. Terrazas, for his part, took defeat gracefully and devoted himself to his businesses with even more dedication. In addition to buying more lands, he ventured into finance with the Minero Bank and La Laguna and Monterrey investors.

The years of the *Porfirista* dictatorship marked the zenith of the big latifundia in northern Mexico when U.S. markets opened up to cattle exports and the federal government adopted the policy of privatizing unutilized lands to promote their productive use. Chihuahua was exemplary in this. Powerful foreigners and local families acquired lands using the facilities offered. The

Luján family accumulated almost 200,000 hectares on its Santa Gertrudis Hacienda; the Zuloaga had more than 600,000 in Bustillos and Satevó; Mexico Northwestern Railway acquired one million hectares; publisher Randolph Hearst had 350,000 in Bavicora; and T.O. Riverside was able to assemble 500,000 in the municipalities of Guadalupe and Ojinaga. But bigger than all of them was Don Luis Terrazas, who bought two million hectares between 1874 and 1907 alone, which he added to the land he already owned. He possessed 400,000 steers, 100,000 sheep and 25,000 horses.

This system of cattle ranches was hardly just or humane for the workers, whose precarious situation contrasted sharply with the luxurious lives of the owners. The hacienda owners' lands included towns, where inhabitants lived in a regime that differed little from that of the colonial *encomienda*. Permanent or temporary workers received ludicrous wages for an inhuman amount and kind of work: 15 to 31 cents a day. In addition, they were obliged to buy their goods in the hacienda's company store, driving them into debt and chaining them for life on survival levels.

The Terrazas' privileged position facilitated his getting closer to President Díaz and helped him return to the governor's mansion at the age of 73 in 1903. This marked the reconciliation between the two caudillos. He was also successful in making sure that his numerous offspring (14 children) consolidated his influence through alliances by marriage: his fifth daughter, Ángela, married Enrique C. Creel, son of the U.S. consul in Chihuahua, who would succeed Terrazas in the governor's seat in 1904 when he took a leave of absence. The harmonious relationship between Díaz and the Terrazas clan favored the expansion of the family businesses.

When the Mexican Revolution broke out in 1910, Terrazas decided to seek exile in the United States; he returned 10 years later and died in his native city in 1923. His life clearly reflected the model of development encouraged by the *Porfirista* dictatorship that allowed local elites to unrestrictedly enrich themselves, managing public affairs completely in their own interests.

The main buildings of San Diego Hacienda, one of the many Terrazas haciendas, are preserved in the northwest of the state, testimony to the era in which Luis Terrazas was recognized as lord and master of Chihuahua, a time of strong and keen-witted caudillos. ■■