

Tale of Dead Texas Dog Bites Mayor Who Told It

By [RALPH BLUMENTHAL](#) *NY Times*

ALICE, Tex. — Rustling has been frowned upon in this South Texas cow and cotton town since long before it was named for the youngest daughter of the founder of the nearby King Ranch.



Michael Stravato for The New York Times



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First he was reported dead, then missing.
Now he's at the center of a custody dispute.

Grace Saenz-Lopez, ex-mayor, and Panchito, ex-Puddles

So when the mayor, Grace Saenz-Lopez, agreed to take care of her next-door neighbors' sick Shih Tzu and ended up keeping it, telling them the dog was dead and buried, it was bound to get ugly.

Particularly after the mop-haired critter, Puddles, turned up quite alive — and renamed Panchito — at Ms. Saenz-Lopez's twin sister's ranch 14 miles away.

Now Ms. Saenz-Lopez is the ex-mayor, charged with tampering with evidence — Puddles/Panchito — and fabricating a police report saying he was missing. Her sister, Gracy Garcia, is charged with concealing evidence. The felony charges could put the 64-year-old women behind bars for as long as 10 years.

Fending off demands for the dog's return by his original owners, Rudy Gutierrez and Shelly Cavazos, Judge Richard C. Terrell of District Court ruled last week that a pet, unlike property that can be returned to the likely owner pending adjudication, is not subject to a writ of attachment and may remain with the sisters until a hearing on April 24.

Mr. Gutierrez, 39, a handyman, said that his children were heartbroken but that from the start the family had been stymied by the mayor's power. "We're starting to figure the ways of the political world," he said.

Ms. Saenz-Lopez, breaking a long silence, said in an interview last week with her sister in their lawyer's office that she had acted to save the flea-infested dog from imminent death. "I made up my mind," she said, "this is where I draw the line."

She said she had no regrets. "If we can't be the voice of the people any more, let us be the voice of animals."

Her lawyer, Homero Canales, wearing a black T-shirt with the words "No Culpable" — Spanish for "Not Guilty" — quibbled slightly. "You could have handled it better," he said.

Ms. Garcia looked surprised. "Thank you, counselor," she said.

Puddles/Panchito had no comment. But he sniffed around Mr. Canales's desk and lifted a leg.

The drama began last July when the dog's family was leaving for an annual long weekend at a water park in the Texas Hill Country. They parked Puddles, whom they had bought for their son Joseph and three other children for \$500 the previous February, with Ms. Saenz-Lopez and her husband, Paco, a retired police officer.

The dog was suffering the dire effects of a severe household flea infestation, treated with strong chemicals, that left him in need of a \$700 transfusion the family could not afford. Still, they thought the dog was rallying, and they left medicine and food for him.

But when they called to check on him, said Ms. Cavazos, 37, a licensed vocational nurse, Ms. Saenz-Lopez reported that Puddles had died and been buried in the backyard of a new house she and her husband were moving into several doors down.

"Joseph took it hard; he cried," Mr. Gutierrez said. But he said he was dubious. His suspicions grew stronger, he said, after the family returned and he heard a familiar bark from the house next door. But it was not until Halloween, he said, that his aunt spotted Puddles at a dog groomer's outside town and took a picture.

Mr. Gutierrez said that Ms. Saenz-Lopez would not return his calls and that police officials had rebuffed his complaints.

Then things got zanier. Ms. Saenz-Lopez, confronted on her porch by a television reporter, insisted that she was actually her twin sister — until the reporter called out "Ms. Mayor," and she turned around.

As public pressure mounted, Ms. Saenz-Lopez reported her dog Panchito missing and pointed a finger at her neighbors. Mr. Gutierrez insisted that police officers search his house. No Shih Tzu. Then a crew from KZTV in Corpus Christi taped the dog on Ms. Garcia's ranch outside town.

The sisters said a woman had found it and delivered it to them just before the cameras arrived. But three days later, District Attorney Joe Frank Garza of Jim Wells County, running for his fifth four-year term, issued his indictments.

Last week, Mr. Canales, the lawyer, characterized the sisters' untruths as "white lies," adding, "There's no malice in these lies."

He called the family's placement of Puddles with Ms. Saenz-Lopez "tantamount to abandonment," and he denied that the mayor, who resigned Feb. 1 in the face of a recall petition, had benefited from special treatment. "Man," he said, "they nailed her to the cross."

The case, which has made headlines around the world, has left the sisters pariahs here and given Alice a new claim to fame 60 years after a suspiciously full ballot box in Precinct 13 gave [Lyndon B. Johnson](#) a disputed primary victory, setting him on the road to political stardom.

"Alice wants to be known," said Imelda Ramirez, in her shop, Action Sports and Awards, on frayed East Main Street. "It doesn't want to be known for a mayor who stole a dog."