SOLEDAD CHÁVEZ CHACÓN
A New Mexico Political Pioneer
1890-1936

Dan D. Chávez
DEDICATION

This study of Soledad Chávez Chacón is dedicated to her daughter, Mrs. Adelina (Lena) Chacón Ward, whose commitment to preserving her mother's legacy as a New Mexico political pioneer was demonstrated by her enthusiastic support for the study. Her assistance is acknowledged and greatly appreciated by the writer.
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CHRONOLOGY

DATE OF BIRTH: August 11, 1890
Albuquerque, NM

PARENTS: Melitón Chávez
Francisca Baca

EDUCATION: Albuquerque High School
Albuquerque Business College

HUSBAND: Ireneo Eduardo (Ed) Chacón

CHILDREN: Adelina (Lena) Chacón Ward, B.A.E.
Santiago (Jim) Chacón, LL.B.

POLITICAL CAREER: NM Secretary of State: 1923–24
NM Acting Governor: 1924: June 21–July 5
NM Secretary of State: 1925–26
NM State Representative: 1935–36

DATE OF DEATH: August 4, 1936

BURIAL SITE: Mount Calvary Cemetery
Albuquerque, NM
INTRODUCTION

This is a study of Soledad Chávez Chacón (SCC), a New Mexico (NM) political pioneer: she was the first Hispana to be elected to a state office, namely, the office of secretary of state; the first woman to preside as NM governor (as acting governor); and the first Hispana NM state legislator from Bernalillo County.

The writer’s interest in SCC was spurred by two major factors: first, an article about SCC by Melissa Howard in the weekly magazine section of the ALBUQUERQUE JOURNAL (ll-2-1982); and second, two photographs of SCC—with captions noting her historical acting governorship: a 1906 photograph of SCC in the “Albuquerque Yesterday” page of the ALBUQUERQUE JOURNAL (6-20-1990), and a photograph of SCC in the Soledad Chávez Chacón Room of the María Teresa Restaurant in Old Town (Albuquerque, NM). The writer’s interest in SCC was also whetted by conversations with Mrs. Paul (Eva) Larrazolo, the daughter-in-law of Octaviano Ambrosio Larrazolo, a proponent of women’s suffrage during his tenure as NM governor. His gubernatorial role in support of women’s suffrage is noted in this study.

Sources of Data for the Study

The data noted in this study were secured from archival materials housed in the NM Records Center and Archives; the official returns of NM elections; the personal papers of SCC; and several interviews with SCC’s only daughter, Mrs. Adelina (Lena) Chacón Ward.

Contents of the Study

Women’s Suffrage in NM
Personal and Family Background
Political Career
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WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE IN NM

Prior to the adoption of the women's suffrage amendment to the U.S. Constitution (in 1920), NM women, unlike women in a few states, did not have the right to vote—or run—for local, state, and federal elective positions—with the exception of three school-related positions: school board member, school director, and county school superintendent.

There was only one NM state governor—prior to the adoption of the women's suffrage amendment to the U.S. constitution (in August 1920)—who made an effort to grant NM women the right to vote—and run—for all elected positions. That governor was Octaviano Ambrosio Larrazolo (1859-1930).

Octaviano A. Larrazolo and Women's Suffrage

Octaviano Ambrosio Larrazolo (OAL), who emigrated from Mexico to the United States at the age of eleven in 1870, was elected NM governor in November 1918 for a two-year term (1919-20). OAL, an attorney, made two major efforts in behalf of women's suffrage while serving as governor: he proposed an amendment to the NM state constitution, and he supported the ratification of the women's suffrage amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

OAL Proposed Suffrage Amendment to NM Constitution

At the regular legislative session of 1919, OAL (who was a registered Democrat until 1911) addressed a legislature in which both chambers were dominated by his political party—the Republican Party. In his message to the state legislature, he proposed amending section one (right to vote) and section two (right to hold office) of Article VII. Section one had very stringent amendment requirements: namely, an amendment to this section required "a vote of three-fourths of the members elected to each house and be ratified by a vote of the people of this State in an election at which at least three-fourths of the electors voting in the whole State and at least
two-thirds of those voting in each county in the State shall vote for such amendment."

The state Senate passed the resolution with the necessary three-fourths vote required, but the state House failed—by two votes—to cast the necessary three-fourths vote required.

OAL Supported Suffrage Amendment to U.S. Constitution

At the special session (in 1920) of the same legislature, OAL again strongly supported women's suffrage; in this session, he supported the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment (the women's suffrage amendment) to the U.S. Constitution, which was subsequently ratified by the legislature.

Women's Suffrage and SCC

The Women's Suffrage Amendment, upon being ratified by three-fourths of the states (including NM, as noted previously), was adopted in August 1920. The adoption of the Amendment gave all American women the right to vote for all local, state, and federal officials—but the Amendment did not give the country's women (including NM women) the right to run for all of these offices. Thus SCC and other NM women did not have the right to run for all public offices until an amendment to section two of Article VII (Elective Franchise) of the state constitution was ratified by the NM voters (which then included women) in the special election of September 20, 1921: the vote tally was 26,744 votes for the amendment, and 19,751 votes against the amendment).¹

PERSONAL AND FAMILY BACKGROUND

SCC (who was known as “Lala” to her relatives and friends) was the descendent of two NM colonial families; a graduate of Albuquerque (NM) High School and a business college; a wife; the mother of two children; and a member of literary, artistic, and issues-oriented organizations.

Birth Date and Birthplace

SCC was born on August 10, 1890 in Albuquerque, NM. Her parents were Melitón Chávez (1856-1932) and Francisca Baca (1864-1923). SCC's maternal great-grandfather, Salvador Armijo, built the Salvador Armijo House, which presently houses the María Teresa Restaurant in Albuquerque's Old Town. The House, built in the 1840s, was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1976. The House was at one time owned and occupied by SCC's parents and their two daughters: SCC and Piedad Chávez.

Sibling

SCC had only one sibling, Piedad Chávez (1888-1969), who married Alejandro Sandoval (1887-1958). Their first-born, Frances Sandoval (1908-1991), was raised as a daughter by SCC's parents. (It was not uncommon for Hispanic grandparents to raise the eldest grandchild as their own child.) Frances Sandoval married Frank Romero; they adopted Rose Marie Torres, who, with her children and grandchildren, were—until recently—the last family owners of the Salvador Armijo House.

Education

The Albuquerque High School yearbook of 1909 notes SCC (known as “Sallie” to her fellow-students) as a 1908 graduate.²

¹ Erastine Durán Evans, New Mexico Secretary of State, Compilation of New Mexico Election Returns: 1011-1000 (Santa Fe: Office of the Secretary of State, 1970), Special Election Returns of September 20, 1921.
² La Reata, Albuquerque (NM) High School 1909 Yearbook.
1909 yearbook, which appears to have been the first AHS yearbook published, notes the 79 graduates of AHS's first sixteen graduating classes (1892-1909). The 79 graduates comprise 64 women (including SCC and one other Hispana) and fifteen non-Hispano men. It is intriguing to speculate on the reasons for the low ratio of men to women graduates (1 to 4), the almost total absence of Hispana graduates (2 of 64), and the total absence of Hispanics among the fifteen male graduates. Further research may reveal the reasons for these particular statistics.

SCC's high school diploma certifies her successful completion of "the Latin Spanish Course of Study," which may reflect a college preparatory curriculum. After graduation from high school, SCC pursued and completed the accounting curriculum at the Albuquerque Business College.

Marriage and Children

In 1910 SCC married Ireneo Eduardo (Ed) Chacón (1885-1969) of the well-known Chacón family of NM. They had a daughter and a son: Adelina (Lena) Chacón Ward (who was noted previously as a source for this study) and Santiago (Jim) Chacón.

Adelina (Lena) Chacón Ward

The Chacóns' daughter, Lena Ward, born in 1911, was one of the first Hispanic graduates of the University of New Mexico (UNM)—and the only Hispana in the June 1932 UNM graduating class. She married the late David Ward, son of James Thomas and Josephine Martínez (and later the stepson of Harold Ward, Josephine's second husband). Lena Ward has been a teacher, a legal secretary, a businesswoman, a candidate for NM secretary of state (1948), and a long-time employee of the Albuquerque office of the NM Bureau of Revenue. Mrs. Ward is now retired and living in Albuquerque.

Santiago (Jim) Chacón

The Chacóns' son, Santiago (Jim) Chacón (1912-1973), a 1934 graduate of the National Law School in Washington, D.C., was a businessman in Albuquerque. He was married to Melita Sedillo; they had two children: Jaime (Jim) Chacón and Yvonne Chacón Pitts. (Melita Sedillo is not to be confused with her first cousin with a similar name, Mela Sedillo, who was one of the first UNM Hispanic graduates and, also, one of the first Hispanic professors at UNM.)

Personal Interests

Lena Ward says her mother was "full of life and very active." SCC was a mandolin player; a piano teacher; an expert bridge player; an exceptional crocheter; an enthusiastic cooke; and a parent who highly valued education and encouraged her children to pursue a college education. SCC was also an active member of literary, artistic, and issues-oriented clubs: El Club Literario, El Club Latino, the Minerva Club, and the Women's Club.
POLITICAL CAREER

SCC was a New Mexico political pioneer. First, she was the first Hispana elected to a state office in NM (she may also be the first Hispana to be elected to a state office in the country). Second, SCC was the first woman to preside as governor of NM—as acting governor (she may also be the first woman to preside as a state governor in the country). And third, SCC was the first Hispana NM state legislator from Bernalillo County (she was the fourth Hispana to be elected to the NM legislature—after three previously-elected Hispanics from other counties).

First Hispana Elected NM State Official

SCC was the first Hispana elected to a NM state office, namely, the office of secretary of state. Her vote-getting ability was impressively demonstrated in both her initial election and in her re-election bid. Furthermore, SCC demonstrated unusual leadership in the administration of the office of secretary of state.

Nomination and Election

During the 1922 NM Democratic State Convention in Albuquerque, according to Lena Ward, five men (all of whom were probably convention delegates) visited SCC at her Albuquerque home to ask her to permit her name to be entered in nomination for the state office of secretary of state. The men included her brother-in-law, Felipe M. Chacón (a Spanish newspaper editor and writer) and three future state and federal political office holders: Dennis Chávez (future U.S. Representative and U.S. Senator), John E. Miles (future NM commissioner of public lands, NM governor, and U.S. Representative); and Thomas J. Mabry (future NM governor).

SCC consented to have her name placed in nomination at the 1922 Democratic State Convention—after securing the approval of her father and husband. She was subsequently nominated, thus becoming the first Hispana to be nominated by a major party for a
NM state office. In addition to SCC, the Democrats nominated another woman for a state office at their 1922 state convention: Isabel L. Eckles for superintendent of public instruction. The Republicans also nominated two women at their state convention in 1922: Maude L. Blaney to oppose Democrat Eckles for superintendent of public instruction; and Adelina (Nina) Otero-Warren, a leader in the women’s suffrage movement in NM, for NM’s only U.S. Representative seat—the first woman to be nominated for a NM congressional seat.3

All of the Democratic candidates for state and federal offices were elected in the general election of 1922.4 Thus, SCC (who defeated Republican J. A. Des Georges) became the first Latina elected to a NM state office—and one of the first two women elected to a NM state office, the other woman being Isabel Eckles (SCC and Eckles became good friends during the Fall 1922 campaign). In regard to the election of SCC, further research may reveal that SCC was the first Latina to be elected to a state office in the history of the United States.

Analysis of 1922 Election Returns

SCC was the 8th highest vote-getter in the winning field of 12 candidates, and the highest vote-getter of the three Hispanics defeating non-Hispanic opponents; of the five winning Hispanics in the state of 12 winners, SCC missed being the highest Hispanic vote-getter by 52 votes.5

Assistant Secretary of State Position

After SCC’s election, Lena Ward states that SCC selected her very close friend, Imelda Espinoza Chávez, wife of Dennis Chávez, to the position of assistant secretary of state. But shortly before SCC took office, Chávez decided he did not want his wife living in Santa Fe while he continued to reside and practice law in Albuquerque. Since the appointment of an assistant was urgent, SCC and two fellow-Democrats, namely, governor-elect James M. Hinkle and attorney general-elect Milton J. Helmick, prevailed upon SCC’s husband to become SCC’s assistant, namely, the assistant secretary of state. Mr. Chacón, who was looking forward to opening and managing a Santa Fe branch of the Albuquerque-based furniture store where he was employed, reluctantly consented to become his wife’s assistant.

Re-Nomination and Re-Election of SCC

In 1924, SCC was re-nominated by her party by acclamation and subsequently re-elected over Republican Joaquín V. Gallegos by a margin of 4774 votes, thus making SCC the third highest vote-getter of her party that year (Democrats won ten of the twelve state and federal elective positions in 1924). SCC’s election is even more impressive in light of the fact that three of her nine victorious fellow-Democrats won with slim margins; Democrat Arthur T. Hannett defeated Republican Manuel Basilio Otero (II) for governor by 199 votes; Democrat Justiano Baca beat Republican Prager Miller for commissioner of public lands by 383 votes; and Democrat Ed C. Tafoya beat Republican Thomas McGrath for state corporation commissioner by 411 votes.6

Evaluation of SCC as Secretary of State

Regarding SCC’s competence as secretary of state, New Mexico historian Charles F. Coan, states: “It is generally understood that the affairs of the office of secretary of state were never in better order than under Mrs. Chacón’s administration....”7 He goes on to say:

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3. Georgia L. Lusk was the second woman to be nominated (in the 1946 Democratic primary election) for a NM congressional seat; Lusk was subsequently elected in November 1946 to the U.S. House of Representatives, thus becoming the only NM woman—to this day—to be elected to a congressional or senatorial seat. In her bid for re-nomination, Lusk lost to John E. Miles in the 1948 Democratic primary election.

4. Evans, op. cit., General Election Returns of November 7, 1922.

5. Ibid.


"...Mrs. Chacón possesses an unusual fitness for public office, being painstaking and careful, prompt and courteous and inspired.... As secretary of state she equipped her office with a force of subordinates ready for the service of the public, and put the office on a basis of self-acting efficiency so as to run without friction and without jar." As SCC's leadership was also exhibited by the fact that she made recommendations to the state legislature regarding the election code. ¹⁰

**First Woman to Preside as NM Governor**

SCC was the first woman to preside as governor of NM (as acting governor). It appears that SCC may also have been the first woman to ever preside as governor in the history of the United States.

**Circumstances Leading to Acting Governorship**

An unusual set of circumstances led to SCC's acting governorship. Governor Hinkle was out of the state for two weeks during the summer of 1924 attending the National Democratic Convention. Normally, the lieutenant governor would have been acting governor during this period, but the person elected lieutenant governor in 1922, José A. Baca, died in the spring of 1924. Since the secretary of state is second in succession to the office of the governor, SCC was acting governor during the two-week absence of Governor Hinkle—namely, from June 21 to July 5, ¹⁰ thus becoming the first woman acting governor of NM. Accordingly, her husband, the assistant secretary of state, became the acting secretary of state during this period, thus attesting to his wife's acts as governor.

According to several NM and non-NM newspaper articles found in SCC's personal papers, SCC was also the first woman in the history of the United States to ever preside as governor of a state. NM historian Coan appears to support the newspaper accounts: "As a result

²⁴. Ibid., 362.
³⁰. New Mexico Blue Book—1020-27 (Official State Register), (Santa Fe: Office of the Secretary of State, 1927), 40.

of the elections of [November] 1924, two women [Nellie Tayloe (not Taylor) Ross of Wyoming and Mariam Ferguson of Texas] achieved the dignities and responsibilities of governors of state [upon being inaugurated in January 1925, namely, January 5 and 20, respectively]. These states are west of the Mississippi River, where the essential spirit of democracy has always been strong and where the practical recognition was given to the qualifications of women for public position. It is probable, however, that New Mexico was the first state to acknowledge a woman as its chief executive."¹¹

**SCC's Actions as Acting Governor**

SCC was very active while serving as NM governor. Coan notes that SCC, as governor, "sign[ed] a requisition on the war department for funds for the use of the New Mexico National Guard. On June 28, acting upon the recommendation of the Board of Trustees of the New Mexico Industrial School and the Superintendent of that institution, she conditionally pardoned Joseph Maloney."¹²

In the writer's investigation of the official record of SCC's tenure as acting governor, he found documentation of the Maloney pardon and the following actions: SCC issued several notary public certificates, and appointed Dr. William K. Woottan to the NM Board of Chiropractic Examiners. The record also shows that on July 3, "the governor [of NM] issued requisition papers on the governor of Kansas for the extradition and rendition of one Frank Shadows alias Frank Ellis, who stood charged in the State of New Mexico for the crime of grand larceny."¹³ Since SCC was acting governor on the above date, it may be safely assumed that "the governor" noted above was SCC.

**First Bernalillo County Hispana Legislator**

Seventeen women (16 state representatives and one state senator) were elected to the NM legislature in the first seven elections after the
passage of the universal suffrage amendment—beginning with the 1922 election and ending with the election of 1934, when SCC was elected to the state House; SCC was the fifth woman elected to the legislature from Bernalillo County.14

Election and Legislative Service

SCC was the first—and only—Hispana elected to the NM state legislature from Bernalillo County in an at-large election. She was elected in 1934 as a state representative for a two-year term (1935-36); the other three Bernalillo County state legislators elected at that time (two state representatives and one state senator) were non-Hispanic male Democrats15. SCC was appointed to the following committees of the NM state house of representatives by the Speaker of the House, Alvan N. White: Rules and Orders of Business (Chair); Appropriations and Finance; Ways and Means; Education; and Irrigation, Drainage, and Conservancy.16

The second—and only other—Hispana state legislator who has been elected from the county was not elected until after the county was divided into legislative districts: Adele Baca Cinelli Hundle, who represented District 14, served four two-year terms (1975-82).

SCC and Four Other Early Hispana Legislators

Three Hispanics were elected prior to—and another Hispana was elected shortly after—the election of SCC to the state legislature. The three previously-elected Hispanics were all state representatives: Mrs. Ezequiel Gallegos represented Mora County (1931-32); Mrs. P. Sáiz represented Socorro County and Catron County (1931-32); and Mrs. Susie Chávez represented San Miguel County for two consecutive terms (1933-36). The fifth Hispana legislator—elected shortly after SCC’s election—was Concha Ortiz y Pino, who represented Santa Fe County for three consecutive two-year terms (1937-42).

Death of SCC

SCC died on August 4, 1936—one week short of her 46th birthday—of peritonitis. She was serving the second year of her two-year term as a NM state representative from Bernalillo County.

14. The information in this section regarding NM women legislators was secured from the compilation(s) of laws enacted by each of the seven state legislatures (beginning with the legislature of 1923-24, and ending with the legislature of 1935-36).
16. Ibid., 48-50.
ADDITIONAL INFORMATION RE SCC

Among SCC’s personal papers are newspaper clippings noting the naming of a National Guard Camp in her honor, her second acting governorship, and her settlement of an election dispute. Also among SCC’s papers are materials noting her participation in the first presidential inauguration of Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Camp Chacón and Second Acting Governorship

A newspaper clipping regarding SCC notes that a camp was named in her honor: “The camp of the New Mexico National Guard at Fort Bliss, Texas, has been named Camp Chacón in honor of Mrs. Soledad Chacón, Secretary of State, who, during Governor Hinkle’s recent absence from the state [attending the National Democratic Convention in the summer of 1924], stepped into the position of first woman governor of the country.” The same clipping also notes that Governor Hinkle—but not SCC—was present at the camp dedication ceremonies (thus making SCC acting governor for a second time): “Mrs. Chacón was urgently requested to be present with Governor Hinkle at the review of state guardsmen this past week, but her duties at the capitol prevented her from attending.”

Another newspaper clipping relating to the camp dedication notes SCC’s second acting governorship (and her actions) during the time Governor Hinkle was out of the state attending the ceremonies: “Again acting governor while Gov. James F. Hinkle was in El Paso a few hours today, Mrs. Soledad C. Chacón, secretary of state, today pardoned Lorenzo Maestas, Eduardo Maestas, and Seferino Maestas who had been committed to the Santa Fe county jail in lieu of payment of fines by Justice of the Peace Cruz Frésquez of Lower Santa Cruz. It appears, according to Mrs. Chacón, that others implicated in the offense for which these three men were fined were not apprehended. The nature of the offense is not made known. It also appears, she says, that the term of commitment is uncertain.”
San Miguel County Sheriff Election Dispute

A newspaper clipping notes that shortly after the election of November 1926, SCC, as secretary of state, traveled to Las Vegas with the official poll books to settle a bitter dispute regarding the winner of the San Miguel county sheriff race between Lorenzo Delgado and Cleofas Romero (Delgado was declared the winner with a margin of six votes).

Presidential Inauguration Materials

All of the presidential electors from throughout the nation who voted for Roosevelt were special guests at his first presidential inauguration (in March 1933). In connection with this inauguration, SCC’s personal inaugural materials include the following: first, an official invitation to the inaugural; second, a card (#282) made out to “Mrs. I. E. Chacón, Presidential Elector, State of New Mexico” (asking the card bearer to “Present this Card at all Electoral Occasions”); and third, an inaugural publication purportedly listing the electors of the various states. NM was entitled to three electors in the 1932 election; inexplicably, five New Mexicans are listed as electors in the inaugural program, including SCC—who is not one of the three elected presidential electors noted in the 1932 NM election results. It may be that SCC was an alternate or substitute for one of the three NM electors elected in 1932, who were Democrats Carl A. Hatch, Enrique Trujillo, and Mrs. J. L. LaDriere.17

WRITER’S COMMENTS RE SCC

SCC’s untimely death at the relatively youthful age of 46 ended a political career which may very well have resulted in a governorship or a congressional or senatorial seat. The writer’s belief is based on three factors: first, the leadership skills and administrative competence SCC demonstrated as secretary of state and acting governor; second, her experience as a state legislator (which included the chairing of a legislative committee); and third, the high regard in which SCC was held by the politicians and the voters of the state, as reflected in their support of, loyalty to, and trust and confidence in SCC.

Support of SCC by Politicians

The Democratic Party state convention delegates nominated her as the first Hispana for a state office (secretary of state) and re-nominated her for a second term—by acclamation. During her tenure as secretary of state, Governor Hinkle entrusted her with the governorship on two separate occasions. Later, the Bernalillo County delegates at their county convention nominated her for state representative; upon being elected, House Speaker White appointed her (a first-term state representative) to the chairmanship of a House committee.

Support of SCC by Voters

The voters of the state elected and re-elected her (by impressive margins) for secretary of state. Later, the voters of Bernalillo County elected her the first Hispana state legislator to represent the county.

17. Evans, op. cit., General Election Returns of November 8, 1932.
ABOUT THE WRITER

Dan D. Chávez was born in 1933 in Bernalillo County, NM. He attended Pajarito Elementary School and Northern New Mexico High School in El Rito, NM.

After graduating from high school, Chávez attended the University of New Mexico and graduated in 1955 with a degree in science education. Upon graduating from UNM, he volunteered in the U.S. Navy, completed the Navy Officer Candidate School (OCS) and was commissioned a naval officer.

After serving in the military, Chávez taught science in the Albuquerque (NM) Public Schools and enrolled in the master’s program in educational administration at UNM. Upon receiving his M.A. in 1960, he was appointed principal of the Bernalillo (NM) Junior High School.

In 1962, Chávez became the state director of the New Mexico Small Schools Project—an instructional improvement program for the small elementary schools and small high schools of rural NM. The Project was funded by the Ford Foundation and administered by the NM State Department of Education.

In 1965, Chávez enrolled in the doctoral program in educational administration at the University of Michigan under Mott and NDEA fellowships. After graduating with a Ph.D. in 1968, he was affiliated with UNM as a professor and administrator for twenty-two years. As a professor, he taught in the Spanish-language master’s degree program in educational administration for Latin-American educators.

As a UNM administrator, Chávez was an associate director of the Division of Continuing Education in 1968-70. In 1970, he became the director of the College Enrichment Program (CEP)—a recruitment, retention, and placement program for low-income and minority NM high school graduates. CEP was recognized as an “exemplary program for college-bound minority students” by the Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education (WICHE) in
1988, CEP was also recognized as "one of the better recruitment and retention systems of its kind in the country" by the National Center for Student Recruitment/Retention in 1990, when he retired from UNM.

Since retiring from UNM as professor emeritus of Educational Foundations, Chávez has been researching the political history of NM— in particular, the early statehood years.
Soledad Chávez Chacón

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