

RACKENSACKERS AND RANGERS: BRUTALITY
IN THE CONQUEST OF NORTHERN MEXICO,
1846-1848

By

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In 1846, American forces crossed the Nueces River and entered into a section of disputed territory north of Mexico. The Mexican War is significant for several reasons. First, it exemplified America's willingness to engage in an offensive military venture on foreign soil against a sovereign nation. Second, the success of the war reinforced the concept of Manifest Destiny—that by divine right, the United States should expand its territory from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean. Third, the Mexican War increased sectional strife due to immense territorial gains, which in turn upset the delicate balance between free and slave states. In this sense, the Mexican War can be considered an indirect cause of the American Civil War. Finally, the Mexican War gave practical military training and combat experience to numerous veterans who later fought in the Civil War.

Although the Mexican War was relatively short (1846-1848), the Americans faced considerable difficulty in achieving success. Some of the key battles, especially those in northern Mexico, were “near misses.” The capture of Monterrey and the Battle of Buena Vista are prime examples. American regular soldiers were mainly responsible for the army's success in the first two battles of the war (Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma). But for the remainder of the war, volunteer soldiers played an important role in assuring

American success. This was especially true in the northern campaigns led by General Zachary Taylor, General John Ellis Wool, and Colonel Alexander Doniphan. Volunteer units accompanied Taylor to Monterrey and contributed greatly to that city's capture. Volunteer units contributed equally to the United States Army's monumental victory at Buena Vista. Beyond their contributions to the pitched battles of northern Mexico, volunteers assisted in the transport of goods, the occupation of cities, and the pacification of guerrillas and civilians.

The civilian population of Mexico was not exempt from the sufferings faced by both the Mexican and American armies. The presence of volunteer units had a significantly adverse effect on the inhabitants of northern Mexico throughout the conflict. American volunteers serving in the United States Army during the Mexican War—many of them motivated by a thirst for adventure, and at times, personal vengeance—committed numerous atrocities against the civilians and non-combatants of northern Mexico. Two factors explain why such incidents occurred. First, the volunteers and their respective units were often beyond the control of the formal military discipline imposed upon army regulars. This military discipline, for the most part, espoused conciliation and proper treatment of Mexican civilians and non-combatants. Second, continuous harassment from guerrillas and irregular Mexican troops created frustrations among American volunteers that resulted in retaliatory actions, often directed—intentionally or unintentionally—at Mexican civilians and non-combatants. This situation was unique to the American army's northern campaign, and several first-hand accounts serve as evidence to the undisciplined nature of volunteer units and the

atrocities that resulted. A study of such behavior demonstrates that the Mexican War, despite its brevity, affected the civilians of northern Mexico in ways common to numerous other wars.

The significance of historical events is subject to differing interpretations, and the Mexican War is no exception. There are five main interpretive schools relative to the war. One interpretation adheres to the theories of “slavocracy,” “slave power,” and sectional interests. In other words, southern slave holders were responsible for instigating a war of territorial acquisition to expand the institution of slavery. A second interpretation attributes the war to western and New England commercial interests. A third interpretation focuses on the United States’ desire for territorial expansion, commonly referred to as Manifest Destiny. Manifest Destiny fostered patriotism by relating to the popular religious and ideological sentiments of 1840s America. A fourth interpretation accuses one specific person for the commencement of hostilities: President James K. Polk. A final interpretation deals with this question: Who was ultimately responsible, the United States, Mexico, or both?¹

Traditional Mexican War accounts focus on the causes and consequences of the war. Attempting to understand the consequences often involves placing the war within the context of later events, such as the American Civil War. Other accounts are written from an exclusively military perspective; they deal primarily with battlefield strategy and logistics. In dealing with the war, these accounts highlight civilian and military leadership, key battles, and the sufferings of soldiers.

In 1919, Justin H. Smith (1857-1930) completed his two-volume work entitled *The War with Mexico*. His research involved an examination of some 100,000 manuscripts, 120,000 books and pamphlets, and 200 periodicals.² His final analysis opposes prior assumptions of Mexico's "innocence" and the United States' unbridled aggression. In Mexico, Smith explains, "The press clamored for war; the government was deeply committed to that policy; and the great majority of those who counted for anything...were passionately determined that no amicable and fair adjustment of the pending difficulties should be made."³ Smith's scholarly inquiry and arguments culminated with his receiving the 1920 Pulitzer prize for the best study in American history.

Smith's conclusions countered the earlier ones of the nineteenth-century American historian Hubert H. Bancroft (1832-1918). In the fifth volume of his *History of Mexico*, published in 1885, Bancroft covers the Mexican War. In reference to the conflict, Bancroft states that "it was a premeditated and predetermined affair, the war of the United States on Mexico; it was the result of a deliberately calculated scheme of robbery on the part of the superior power."⁴ Obviously, his conclusion portrays Mexicans as innocent victims, and he does not hesitate to blame the war on land-hungry and pro-slavery Americans, whom he openly castigates with derogatory references.

In 1974, K. Jack Bauer presented a more balanced interpretation in his book *The Mexican War: 1846-1848*. Bauer portrays the war as one that was highly unpopular among American citizens, and he mentions the often overlooked difficulties that plagued the American army. Bauer finds it "difficult to envision any set of circumstances which

would have prevented an effort to add Mexico's northern regions to the American commonwealth."⁵ Mexico stood in the way of American interests; therefore, war was inevitable. Adding to traditional interpretations that connect the resulting sectional strife to the American Civil War, Bauer adds that "[the war's] effects in Mexico were nearly as great."⁶ He concludes that the conflict with Mexico "was the product of the conjunction of American and Mexican national aspirations brought together by the miscalculations of the leaders of both countries."⁷ Bauer believes the Mexican War resulted from a conflict of interests and lack of communication on both sides. In addition, the war helped to increase sectional strife present in both countries.⁸

Published in 1975, *Mexico Views Manifest Destiny, 1821-1846* offers perspectives on the origins of the Mexican War. Relying on Mexican sources, author Gene M. Brack examines the emergence of anti-American sentiment throughout the two decades preceding the war. During this time, Mexican admiration for American institutions was undermined by what many Mexicans considered to be threats to their national sovereignty. Mexican anxiety centered on America's desire to expand territorially; this represented a direct threat to Mexico's control of its northern territories. With the admission of Texas to the United States in 1845, Mexico's fears were confirmed, and as a result, Mexico's leaders were willing to confront the United States. Brack's belief is that when the Mexicans were "left with the choice of war or territorial concessions, the former course, no matter how dim the prospects of success, could be the only one."⁹ In addition to Mexico's growing resentment and fear of the United States, Brack also attributes the war to America's racist attitudes (Brack asserts that "Manifest Destiny was itself an

ethnocentric notion”).¹⁰ Brack’s presentation of Mexican public opinion proves the existence of specific apprehensions and resentments—directed at the United States—which increased the level of antagonism and ultimately led to the commencement of hostilities.

To understand the war within a broader context, it is necessary to include its impact on Mexican society. Writing a social history of the Mexican War, therefore, requires that adequate attention be given to civilians. Rather than asking who was responsible for the war, a social perspective probes into the consequences, and ultimately, the impact of the war on society.

In *A Short, Offhand, Killing Affair: Soldiers and Social Conflict During the Mexican-American War*, Paul Foos documents the war’s impact on both soldiers and civilians. Rather than rehashing the well-known events of the war, he highlights the lesser-known conflicts that involved guerrillas, civilians, and soldiers—both volunteers and regulars—that occurred beyond the field of battle. Foos mentions numerous atrocities committed upon the civilians of northern Mexico in Chapter Six, “Atrocity: The Wage of Manifest Destiny.”¹¹ Overall, *A Short, Offhand, Killing Affair* offers solid suggestions for the reasons that civilians suffered throughout the war. Foos accomplishes this by citing from the diaries and memoirs of Mexican War participants. Especially noteworthy are his perspectives on the motivations of American volunteers in the war, and how this affected their behavior during their time in northern Mexico.

Army of Manifest Destiny: The American Soldier in the Mexican War, 1846-1848, is an in-depth social history about the lives of soldiers who fought in the war. Author James M. McCaffrey also includes numerous references to the behavior of

American soldiers and their subsequent impact on Mexican society. Chapter Five, “Reptiles in the Path of Progressive Democracy,” deals with American racism (i.e., the description of Mexicans as “reptiles”) and how this contributed to civilian abuse.¹² Throughout the remainder of the book, McCaffrey portrays the trials and tribulations of individual soldiers in a foreign land and how these circumstances fostered atrocious behavior on the part of regular and volunteer soldiers alike.

Irving W. Levinson’s *Wars Within War: Mexican Guerrillas, Domestic Elites, and the United States of America, 1846-1848* also informs the reader of lesser-known conflicts and circumstances that adversely affected both soldiers and civilians. This account is especially helpful in understanding the frustrations that American soldiers faced in their quest to control both the civilian population and Mexican guerrillas. This frustration manifested itself in numerous atrocious acts perpetrated by select members of the United States Army against Mexican civilians. It also reinforces the notion that the war was not easily won; in reality, the war was a prolonged event that was won both on and off the fields of the better-known pitched battles. By focusing on those Mexicans who worked with the United States (elites), as well as those who opposed their conquerors (guerrillas), Levinson portrays the Mexican War as a complicated event, composed of various competing factions and interests. His realistic approach shows how Mexican society was affected from both within and without.¹³

The participants and observers of the Mexican War composed numerous journals, diaries, memoirs, dispatches, and narratives, many of which have been published. In many of these first-hand accounts, there appears to be a concerted effort to conceal

civilian atrocities or such incidents that would portray the United States military in a negative light. For example, many of the journals from the Doniphan expedition focus exclusively on the military exploits and bravery of Colonel Alexander Doniphan and his Missouri volunteers. According to such authors, the Mexican civilians who complied with the American forces received fair and just treatment. The researcher is left to wonder if indeed the Missourians were master conciliators or simply unwilling to acknowledge any negative impact their presence may have had on Mexican society. However, it is important to remember that Doniphan and the Missourians faced less resistance than did other American campaigns of the war. Also, the civilians of this part of Mexico (Santa Fe and El Paso) were more familiar with Americans and American society. Many of these Mexicans, suffering years of persecution at the hands of hostile Indians and bandits, welcomed the Americans as their new protectors. When viewed from this perspective, the journals and memoirs of the Doniphan expedition appear to be credible.¹⁴

The campaign of General John Ellis Wool is detailed in these two contrasting accounts: Francis Baylies's *A Narrative of Major-General Wool's Campaign in Mexico* and Jonathon W. Buhoup's *Narrative of the Central Division*. Baylies writes a very positive and romantically-inspired account of the journey from San Antonio to Saltillo, Mexico. However, his praise of General Wool is not unfounded; other sources allude to Wool's successful administration of justice and discipline throughout his service in the war. Buhoup's narrative, on the other hand, refers to numerous accounts of civilian atrocities and plunder. However, he fails to include the names of any of the perpetrators.

Instead, he uses the term “Indian” to signify any individual or group (or himself, maybe?) guilty of unjustified plunder, murder, or torture. Buhoup was one of several Arkansas volunteers who comprised Wool’s division. His use of the term “Indian” allowed him to report the misdeeds of Arkansans and other volunteers without divulging the guilty parties involved.¹⁵

American volunteers inflicted the most damage on Mexican society throughout the campaign of General Zachary Taylor. Nearly every account of the army’s movement—from the Rio Grande to the battle of Buena Vista—mentions the insubordination and lawlessness of the Texas Rangers. Their mistreatment of Mexican civilians and wanton plundering overshadowed their distinguished military service. The Rangers’ behavior cast all volunteer units in a negative light, and also contributed to strained relations with otherwise peaceful civilians. While other volunteer units were guilty of similar behavior, evidence suggests that the Texas Rangers participated in more acts of cruelty than any other single group of military personnel.

The accounts of officers, army regulars, volunteers, war correspondents, and army surgeons all provide valuable information relating to daily life in northern Mexico during the war. Depredations against civilians were very much a part of daily life. The memoirs of Samuel Chamberlain contain the most graphic and detailed descriptions of volunteer excesses.¹⁶ Although some of his accounts are obviously exaggerated, Chamberlain’s status as an army regular helped him to write a more objective account of the various volunteer units and their respective behavior. Equally revealing were the recollections of army surgeon S. Compton Smith. In *Chile con Carne*, Smith gives detailed descriptions

of vicious guerrilla warfare and its effects upon American troops, Mexican irregulars, and civilians.¹⁷ The misdeeds of volunteers also appear throughout the correspondence and memoirs of such military leaders as Zachary Taylor, Winfield Scott, Ulysses S. Grant, George B. McClellan, and George G. Meade.

Collectively, these accounts prove the prevalence of atrocities committed by the Mexican War volunteers against civilians during the conquest of northern Mexico. Although depredations were not necessarily restricted to any one particular group of volunteers, the atrocious actions of the Texas Rangers and the Arkansas volunteers (Rackensackers) exceeded those of other units.¹⁸ Chapter Two recounts specific atrocities committed by the Texas Rangers throughout the war, and also explains their reasoning and motivation behind such behavior. Chapter Three is a general study of the volunteer units that served under General Zachary Taylor's northern campaign. It exposes specific instances of violence perpetrated by volunteers against the civilian inhabitants of northern Mexico from the volunteers' arrival in Matamoros, through the occupation of Monterrey, and during the first half of 1847. Chapter Four focuses exclusively on the Arkansas volunteers serving under General John E. Wool. Wool's division traveled from San Antonio to Saltillo, Mexico, in the fall of 1846. Throughout the march and the subsequent occupations of Monclova and Saltillo, the Arkansas volunteers behaved in an atrocious manner only exceeded by the Texas Rangers. Their depredations were many, and the punishments they received few. This study exposes the effects that Mexican War volunteers had on the inhabitants of northern Mexico.

NOTES

1. Ramon Eduardo Ruiz, *The Mexican War: Was it Manifest Destiny?* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963), 2.
2. *Ibid.*, 95.
3. Justin H. Smith, *The War with Mexico*, 2 vols. (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1919), 1: 116.
4. Hubert H. Bancroft, *History of Mexico, 1824-1861*, 6 vols. (San Francisco: A. L. Bancroft and Company Publishers, 1885), 5: 307.
5. K. Jack Bauer, *The Mexican War: 1846-1848* (New York: MacMillan, 1974), 392.
6. *Ibid.*, 393.
7. *Ibid.*, 399.
8. *Ibid.*, 393.
9. Gene M. Brack, *Mexico Views Manifest Destiny, 1821-1846: An Essay on the Origins of the Mexican War* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1975), 179.
10. *Ibid.*, 182.
11. Paul Foos, *A Short, Offhand, Killing Affair: Soldiers and Social Conflict During the Mexican-American War* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 113-137.
12. James M. McCaffrey, *Army of Manifest Destiny: The American Soldier in the Mexican War, 1846-1848* (New York: New York University Press, 1992), 66-79.
13. Irving W. Levinson, *Wars Within War: Mexican Guerrillas, Domestic Elites, and the United States of America, 1846-1848* (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University Press, 2005), xiii-xviii.
14. Frank S. Edwards, *A Campaign in New Mexico with Colonel Doniphan* (Philadelphia: Carey and Hart, 1847); George R. Gibson, *Journal of a Soldier Under Doniphan and Kearney* (Glendale, CA: Arthur H. Clark, 1935); Adolphus Wislizenus, *Memoir of a Trip to Northern Mexico* (Washington, D.C.: Tippin and Streeper, 1848).

Of these accounts, Wislizenus's is the most objective, mentioning a few instances of conflict among civilians and American volunteers.

15. Francis Baylies, *A Narrative of Major-General Wool's Campaign in Mexico* (Albany, NY: Little & Company, 1851); Jonathon W. Buhoup, *Narrative of the Central Division, or Army of Chihuahua, Commanded by Brigadier General Wool* (Pittsburgh: M.P. Morse, 1847).

16. Samuel E. Chamberlain, *My Confession*, with an introduction and postscript by Roger Butterfield (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishing, 1956).

17. S. Compton Smith, *Chile con Carne* (New York: Miller & Curtis, 1857).

18. Samuel Chamberlain referred to the Arkansas volunteers as "Rackensackers" on numerous occasions but does not explain why. It is not known whether they were given this name or gave themselves this name. The fact that the Arkansans were widely stereotyped as wild and rough frontiersmen probably had something to do with the designation of this term.



Figure 1 The Campaigns of Generals Zachary Taylor and John Ellis Wool, 1846-1847. Charles M. Robinson, III, *Texas and the Mexican War* (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 2004).

CHAPTER II

A MISSION OF VENGEANCE: THE TEXAS RANGERS IN NORTHERN MEXICO

On December 6, 1847, the citizens of Mexico City greeted a company of Texas Rangers with shouts of “*Los Diablos Tejanos!*”¹ S. Compton Smith, a United States Army surgeon who served in the Mexican War, described the Texas Rangers as “very devils incarnate.”² Such derogatory and extreme references require explanation. During their military service in northern Mexico, the Texas Rangers tortured and killed civilians, destroyed property, stole from locals, and blatantly disregarded military authority. While other volunteer units and army regulars occasionally committed similar atrocities, the Texas Rangers’ behavior deviated from the norm.

Compared to other volunteer units that served in the Mexican War, the Texas Rangers shared a more extensive history with Mexico. This violent and conflicted past instilled many Rangers with hatred of and prejudice against Mexicans. The Rangers retained these feelings when they entered northern Mexico in 1846. Their primary mission was vengeance; this motivated them more than any allegiance to the cause of the United States and its armed forces.

Mexican War diaries and memoirs give first-hand descriptions of the Rangers’ participation in the conflict. By far, Samuel E. Chamberlain’s *My Confession* and S. Compton Smith’s *Chile con Carne* provide the researcher with the most thorough

accounts of the Rangers' involvement. In addition to these, General Zachary Taylor's letters contain several references to the behavior and attitudes of the Rangers.

Native Texan Walter Prescott Webb probably contributed more to the study of the Texas Rangers than any other scholar. In his Master's thesis, "The Texas Rangers in the Mexican War," he glosses over specific atrocities committed by the Rangers during the northern campaign. Although he included a few of Taylor's comments concerning the Rangers' unruly behavior and mistreatment of citizens, Webb generally praises the Rangers' military accomplishments. In his conclusion, he states, "They were the most daring and picturesque set of fighting men in all Mexico."³ In *The Texas Rangers: A Century of Frontier Defense*, Webb devotes several pages to the Rangers in the Mexican War.⁴ He reiterates many of his earlier conclusions. Webb writes from a military perspective, and his works fail to mention most of the atrocities committed by the Rangers during the Mexican War.

There are several recent publications that deal with the Rangers' participation in the Mexican War. In *The Highly Irregular Irregulars*, Frederick Wilkins utilizes a wealth of primary sources, many of which Webb failed to consult.⁵ Wilkins tells his story from a military perspective; but unlike Webb, he does not hesitate to mention the specific acts of the Rangers. He describes his book as "neither whitewash nor hero worship."⁶ In *A Short, Offhand, Killing Affair*, Paul Foos mentions numerous Ranger atrocities as well.⁷ Although restricting his treatment of the subject to a few pages, he mentions detailed events that involved Ranger injustices. By utilizing a wide variety of sources, Wilkins

and Foos prove that the Rangers caused considerable social conflict in northern Mexico during the war.

The first written reference to “ranger,” as it applies to Texas, occurred in 1823. Stephen Austin, acting independently of the Mexican authorities, called for the special services of ten men to act as rangers.⁸ They were to aid an existing militia attachment. At this point in history, “ranger” implied a body of men who operated apart from the regular military establishment, and whose tasks included scouting and reconnaissance missions.⁹ In the Mexican War, the role of the Rangers reflected Austin’s original intent.

On January 26, 1842, the Texan Congress, sensing a Mexican threat, passed a joint resolution. It established a “company of mounted men, to act as rangers on the southern frontier.”¹⁰ This new organization, created to assist and supplement local militias, became the Texas Rangers.

On March 5, 1842, Mexican forces commanded by General Rafael Vasquez invaded Texan territory. Thomas J. Green, a Texas politician and veteran of the Texas Revolution, claimed that “the plunder of San Antonio by General Vasquez, on the 6th of March, 1842, met a response in the bosom of every patriot Texian [sic].”¹¹ On April 1, an army of five thousand Texans assembled under the command of General Edward Burleson. Before the Texan militia reached San Antonio, Vasquez’s army evacuated the city and retreated to the Rio Grande. The Texans did not pursue. Soon after this, Burleson and most of the citizen-soldiers returned to their homes.¹²

Hostilities between Texas and Mexico continued into the fall of 1842. On September 11, a Mexican army under the command of General Adrian Woll entered San

Antonio. The Mexicans encountered slight Texan resistance and suffered only minimal casualties. On September 16, a group of Rangers commanded by Captain John C. Hays successfully lured Woll and his troops out of the city. The Mexican army engaged the Texans and suffered significant casualties. At this point, Woll decided to pursue another company of Rangers commanded by Captain Nicholas M. Dawson.¹³

The fate of Dawson's company contributed greatly to the Rangers' animosity toward Mexicans. In the ensuing conflict, the Mexican artillery overwhelmed Dawson's small company.¹⁴ According to Green — after the Texans had surrendered and given up their weapons — the Mexicans killed thirty-six, spared fifteen, and allowed two to escape.¹⁵ Of the Texans taken prisoner, several were “inhumanly butchered with swords and lances.”¹⁶ Green concluded, “Not only the officers... [but] the whole Mexican nation are responsible for this outrageous and savage butchery...but a day of retribution will assuredly overtake them, terrible though just.”¹⁷ Many other Texans shared in Green's outrage. Such an event led to increased Texan resentment of Mexican nationals. This provided further justification for the Rangers' atrocious behavior during the Mexican War.

Green described a “law of retaliation,” to which he believed the Texans, at this point in their history, had not yet resorted.¹⁸ This policy demanded equal retribution for each atrocity inflicted from one side to the other. He believed this policy worked to prevent “the excesses of an enemy.” Green cited the aftermath of the Battle of San Jacinto as evidence. In that instance, the Texans spared the life of Mexican General Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna. They did this in spite of Santa Anna's past slaughter of

Colonel James Fannin and four hundred Texan soldiers at Goliad on March 27, 1836. Lamenting the failure of Texans to live up to this policy, Green stated, “What has the reverse of this policy benefitted us? It has been, for the last seven years, an unlimited license for our enemy to plunder and murder!”¹⁹ Throughout the Mexican War, the Rangers often resorted to Green’s “law of retaliation.” In most instances, however, the actions of the Rangers failed to resemble any form of equal retribution for past injustices.

S. Compton Smith, in reference to an anticipated fight between Rangers and Mexican guerrillas near Monterrey in December 1846, said, “We remembered the affair of Mier; and had resolved to fight to the last man, and, should it be necessary, share the fate of the little band of heroes of the Alamo.”²⁰ Mier and the Alamo, in relation to this particular event, occurred four and ten years earlier, respectively. This statement suggests that the Rangers, while participating in the Mexican War, were motivated by specific events in their recent past.

The Mier Expedition resulted from Mexico’s two invasions of Texas. With the official permission of Texan President Sam Houston, General Alexander Somervell led 750 Texans to the border town of Laredo, Texas, on December 8, 1842.²¹ Their time in Laredo, however, proved to be short-lived. On December 19, Somervell ordered abandonment of the mission.²² Four hundred members of the expedition, including notable Ranger leaders Ben McCulloch and John C. Hays, returned home with Somervell. The remaining three hundred crossed the border into Mexico and attacked the town of Mier. However, the immediate arrival of Mexican troops sealed the fate of the Texans.

The Texans surrendered with the understanding that they would be treated as prisoners of war and kept near the northern border of Mexico.²³

The prisoners marched to Matamoros and then Monterrey. By early February 1843, they were one hundred miles west of Saltillo at the Hacienda Salado.²⁴ On February 11, Ranger leader Samuel Walker and several Texans managed to escape into the vast wilderness between Saltillo and the Rio Grande. Before the Mexicans recaptured them, five died of starvation, four reached Texas, and three disappeared; the remainder returned to Salado as prisoners.²⁵

Mexican President Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna originally decreed that *all* prisoners be shot. This did not happen. Green, in the *Journal of the Texian Expedition Against Mier*, describes the fate of the prisoners.²⁶ The Mexicans determined that every tenth man would be shot. One hundred and fifty-nine white beans were placed in a pot with seventeen black ones. Each prisoner drew a bean. The white signified exemption, and the black death. With a hint of irony, Green pointed out that the executioners were a company of Mexican soldiers “whose lives had been so humanely spared by our men at this place on the 11th of February.”²⁷

As noted earlier by S. Compton Smith, the Rangers remembered both the Alamo and the Mier Expedition while fighting for the United States in the Mexican War. The treatment of the Mier prisoners, more than anything, gave justification for the subsequent atrocities the Rangers committed against both Mexican soldiers and civilians. Two notable survivors of the “Black Bean Incident” — Rangers Big Foot Wallace and Samuel

Walker — returned to Mexico with the United States Army during the war. In *The Texas Rangers: A Century of Frontier Defense*, Walter Prescott Webb concludes, “In justice it must be said that the scores, if not perfectly balanced, were made less unequal by them and their comrades in 1846 and 1847.”²⁸

The Texas Rangers were most active in the north Mexican campaign commanded by General Zachary Taylor. From 1846-1847, the Rangers participated as loosely organized soldier-scouts for the main army that traveled southwest from Matamoros to Saltillo. Many of the Rangers serving under Taylor were former prisoners of the Mier expedition. For these individuals, the United States’ declaration of war was an opportunity to avenge past sufferings and deaths perpetrated by Mexicans. Nowhere is this better exemplified than in the words of a famous Ranger song: “Spur! Spur in the chase, dash on to the fight - Cry vengeance for Texas! And God speed the right.”²⁹

Soon after the United States annexed Texas, President James K. Polk sent Taylor and a small army to the mouth of the Rio Grande. Taylor and his army arrived on St. Joseph’s Island, off the coast of Texas, on July 25, 1845.³⁰ On August 6, the Secretary of War asked Taylor to “learn from the authorities of Texas what auxiliary forces, volunteers” were available for service in any future conflict with the Mexicans.³¹

On April 15, 1846, Taylor wrote to the Adjutant General in Washington, D.C.: “I shall authorize the raising of two companies of Texas mounted men, for service in this quarter, particularly for the purpose of keeping open our communication with Point Isabel.”³² By this time, Taylor’s army had moved inland and established itself across

from Matamoros, Mexico on the Rio Grande. The coastal city of Point Isabel served as the United States Army's supply depot. Taylor needed the Rangers to escort his supply trains between the two points.

On April 24, 1846, Mexican cavalry crossed the Rio Grande and engaged sixty-three American dragoons.³³ The Mexicans killed sixteen Americans and captured the survivors.³⁴ In response to this

incident, United States President James K. Polk issued his justification for war by stating, "Mexico has passed the boundary of the United States, has invaded our territory, and shed American blood upon American soil."³⁵ Two days later, Taylor proposed to call upon the Governor of Texas and request four regiments of volunteers — two mounted and two infantry.³⁶ After this, the Rangers joined the United States Army in significant numbers and served throughout the northern campaign.

The "shedding of American blood on American soil" by an enemy no doubt shocked and disturbed many Americans. The Texans, on the other hand, had experienced



Figure 2 A Texas Ranger during the Mexican War. John Frost, *A Pictorial History of Mexico and the Mexican War* (Richmond, VA: Harrold & Murray, 1848).

similar incidents throughout their history. Most likely, many Rangers viewed the skirmish on April 24th as a continuation of their long and troubled history with Mexico. The Rangers were fighting to avenge their past — as Texans — and defend their future — as Americans. In the case of the Rangers, a quest for historical vengeance and state loyalty exceeded any allegiance to the army they served.

The Rangers served as scouts and escorts for the United States Army as it traveled from Matamoros to Monterrey during the late summer of 1846. On June 30, Taylor expressed regret for “outrages committed by the Texas volunteers on the Mexicans and others” but acknowledged his inability to contain what he referred to as a “lawless set.”³⁷ Taylor believed that if the Texans could be made subordinate, they would be among the best volunteer units under his command.³⁸ But he concluded that they were “too licentious to do much good.”³⁹ Despite his reservations, Taylor readily accepted the services of the Rangers throughout his campaign. He needed them to counter the guerrilla war the Mexicans waged after the defeat of their regular army. Taylor overlooked the Rangers’ imperfections because they were a valuable asset; they were willing and able to do what his regular cavalry could not.⁴⁰

The Rangers helped the United States Army capture Monterrey in September 1846. Interestingly enough, many of the Rangers’ three-month enlistments expired before the actual battle took place.⁴¹ Ranger Buck Barry was among those Rangers, but he continued the journey because “some of us had traveled six hundred miles to kill a Mexican and refused to accept a discharge until we got to Monterrey where a fight was

waiting for our arrival.”⁴² Soon after the Americans subdued the city, the Rangers began to display the type of notorious behavior that overshadowed their contributions to the war effort.

Mexican War participants singled out the Texas Rangers as one of the primary sources of fear among the Mexican civilians. S. Compton Smith cited evidence of this in his memoirs. In December 1846, Smith and eight other military personnel attended a *fandango* in the small town of San Francisco, near Monterrey. Smith described their reception by the villagers as “hearty and warm.” However, the festive mood of the dance subsided with the arrival of a dozen Rangers. Smith explained the great fear the Mexicans held regarding the Rangers. He attributed this to their rough handling of Mexicans before and during the war. But this occasion proved to be exceptional. The festive atmosphere eventually returned to the *fandango*. Smith’s account shows that the Mexicans, overall, were contemptuous and fearful of the Rangers; this was the direct result of the Rangers’ behavior — on and off the field of battle.⁴³

Smith best illustrated Ranger animosity towards Mexicans in his description of a Texan volunteer named Connelly. According to Smith, this soldier had lost three brothers — all killed prior to the war by Mexicans in Texas. In *Chile con Carne*, Smith stated, “Connelly’s hatred towards the entire Mexican people was naturally intense. This had led him to enlist; and he gladly hailed the present as a good opportunity to revenge his murdered brethren.”⁴⁴ This “opportunity” occurred while Connelly defended an army supply train. Despite the Americans’ success at the Battle of Buena Vista, bandits and

guerrillas roamed northern Mexico in significant numbers. One such group attacked Connelly's wagon train in early March 1847. So intense was Connelly's hatred that he ran — armed only with several stones — headlong into a company of lancers and managed to kill two or three before the Mexicans stopped him.⁴⁵

Smith did not mention Connelly's status as a Texas Ranger. "Texan volunteer" does not necessarily signify "Texas Ranger." However, given the fact that the Rangers were exclusively assigned to the defense of army supply trains, it is likely that Connelly at least had contact with them. In any case, it is certain that the average Ranger had much in common with Connelly. Because of this, there is reason to believe that many Texas Rangers similarly shared a hatred for Mexicans. Although Connelly's behavior was extreme, it exemplified the contempt that some Texas volunteers, including Rangers, held for Mexicans. This incident also proves that many Rangers participated in the war to avenge their troubled and violent history with Mexicans.

Smith described the Rangers as "such an assemblage of extraordinary and eccentric characters...men from all ranks and conditions of society."⁴⁶ He also noted educated individuals, such as doctors and lawyers, among the ranks of the Rangers.⁴⁷ However, Smith's overall analyses adhere to popular notions and stereotypes associated with the Rangers. He described young men who sought to escape "artificial society," and in so doing, developed the necessary survival skills required in a time of war.⁴⁸ In reference to a few Rangers, Smith hinted at a troubled and violent past; he suggested they came to Texas to escape justice.⁴⁹ Individual backgrounds aside, most of the Rangers

came from an unsettled and violent frontier. This common background was instrumental in the development of Ranger units. During the Mexican War, it served to unify the Rangers into a highly-identifiable group; a group characterized by a penchant for violent and atrocious attacks on the general population of northern Mexico.

Smith divided the Rangers into two groups. He identified the “first Rangers” as the veterans of the north Mexican campaign. Smith acknowledged their participation in every battle from Palo Alto (May 8, 1846) to Buena Vista (February 22-23, 1847). Many in this group also fought for Texan independence. Smith had nothing but praise for these Rangers. But he described another group of “so-called Rangers.” He noted their later entry into Mexico, soon after formal military operations ended. According to Smith, they “were mostly made up of adventurers and vagabonds, whose whole object was plunder.”⁵⁰ Under the leadership of the infamous Mabry B. “Mustang” Gray, these Rangers committed acts of needless violence that prolonged the conflict in northern Mexico.

On February 24, 1847, Mexican guerrillas attacked an American army supply train.⁵¹ In *My Confession*, Samuel Chamberlain described a most horrifying and unbelievable scene following the Mexican submission of the train. He estimated that the Mexicans destroyed 130 wagons and killed 110 teamsters. In response, Taylor assessed one million dollars in damages to the inhabitants of Nuevo Leon and Tamaulipas.⁵²

To secure these reparations, Chamberlain claimed that General Taylor “let loose on the country packs of human bloodhounds called Texan Rangers.”⁵³ Throughout the summer of 1847, Rangers and guerrillas alike terrorized the citizens of these two Mexican

states. Atrocities committed included murder, plunder, and rape. According to Chamberlain, “The names...will always remain fresh in the memory of the Mexicans, as the fearful atrocities committed by them now form part of the Nursery Legends of the country.”⁵⁴

In his correspondence, Taylor referred to a brutal massacre that occurred in the area of the February 24 supply train attack. He noted that on March 28, 1847, a party composed of Texas Rangers and others attacked a small town and put twenty-four men to death.⁵⁵ Chamberlain recounted a similar incident at the San Francisco Ranch. He placed the blame on a group commanded by the notorious Mustang Gray. He claimed that Rangers murdered thirty-six unarmed Mexican men and burned several houses.⁵⁶

Chamberlain’s memoirs offer further insight into the reasons for such behavior. He attributed Ranger leader Mustang Gray’s ferocity to a particular incident from his childhood. According to Chamberlain, Gray witnessed the murder of his parents and the violation of his only sister at the hands of General Antonio Canales and his gang. Canales, the most sought after of all Mexican guerrillas throughout the Mexican War, supposedly committed these atrocities in 1840. If this account of Gray’s youth is accurate, it offers a plausible explanation for his behavior. This indicates that Gray’s primary mission in the war was to inflict vengeance upon the Mexicans.⁵⁷

One of Taylor’s most trusted scouts, Captain Ben McCulloch, shared sentiments similar to those of Mustang Gray. Samuel C. Reid was a Louisiana native who joined McCulloch’s Ranger company at the beginning of the war. In *The Scouting Expeditions*

of McCulloch's Texas Rangers, Reid described the primary objectives for a reconnaissance mission in June 1846. The Rangers were supposed to find the best route from Matamoros to Monterrey, and if possible, locate the Mexican forces under the command of General Mariano Arista. Beyond this, the Rangers sought to capture the "Chaparral Fox" – the nickname of General Canales. Canales and his men continually harassed the American supply trains. Reid claimed that "to strike the 'chaparral fox' in his own hills – slaughter his band...was a thing above all others McCulloch desired to do."⁵⁸

As was common on these missions, the Rangers mixed their own personal goals with those of the United States Army. While Taylor also desired Canales's capture, his primary focus was defeating the Mexican army. The Rangers' search for old enemies sometimes caused them to stray from their mission. In the desolate wilderness of northern Mexico, free from army discipline, the Rangers avenged past and present injustices on their own terms.

Many American soldiers entering Mexico were ignorant of the Catholic faith.⁵⁹ However, they held deep-seated prejudices and opinions regarding Catholicism; this was the result of anti-Catholic rhetoric found in popular literature, histories, and second-hand accounts of the time.⁶⁰ Many soldiers equated Catholicism with anti-republicanism.⁶¹ Sentiments such as these worked to justify any disrespect or abuse shown to Catholic institutions. These types of derogatory attitudes, prevalent throughout the United States before and during the war, contributed to violent and atrocious behaviors directed at

Mexican religious institutions. In northern Mexico, American volunteers, including Texas Rangers, were responsible for such incidents on numerous occasions.

Chamberlain recalled a disturbing incident involving a Ranger at the Hacienda de Patos, a short distance from Saltillo. One late afternoon, an army supply train escorted by Rangers camped outside the small community. For unknown reasons, one of the Rangers remained in town, indulging himself in mescal. The drunken man entered a church and lassoed a wooden crucifix. He then proceeded to mount his horse and ride around the plaza, dragging the image of Christ roughly along the ground. The village priest, attempting to salvage the crucifix, fell down and was trampled under the Ranger's horse. The enraged observers eventually subdued the Ranger and brutally flayed him. When the other Rangers saw their nearly-dead companion, they charged into the square "with yells of horror...sparing neither age or sex in their terrible fury." News of the incident reached General John E. Wool, but according to Chamberlain, the army kept the matter quiet for the sake of its reputation.⁶²

Frank S. Edwards, a member of Colonel Alexander Doniphan's Missouri volunteers, recalled an encounter with a Texas Ranger near the end of the northern campaign in May 1847.⁶³ The Ranger introduced himself as John Smith, and told Edwards that he and his fellow Rangers subsisted by coercing Mexican locals to provide necessary food and material goods.⁶⁴ According to Smith, when the Rangers needed something they would "start off to some rich hacienda...and tell the proprietor that in half an hour [they] must have so much of provisions."⁶⁵ If the hacienda owner failed to comply, Smith claimed that the Rangers would lasso the owner's neck and temporarily

suspend him from a tree, and “after a few such swings, he soon provides what we have called for.”⁶⁶ After listening to this account, Edwards asked, “Who can wonder at the Mexican becoming a guerrilla?”⁶⁷

Edwards accused the Rangers of murdering Mexicans who helped the United States Army. He recalled instances where Mexican guides—hired out to Ranger scouting parties—never returned from their missions because “the Texians [sic] always shoot [them] on some pretext or other before [they get] back.” Edwards cited as evidence a particular story he had heard. A group of Texas Rangers had lost their way and hired a Mexican to lead them to their camp. Upon arrival at the camp, one of the Rangers murdered the unsuspecting Mexican. Mexican civilians, friendly or otherwise in their contact with the Texas Rangers, were in many instances needlessly murdered. To some Rangers, murder of Mexicans resembled some form of recreation. Edwards told how the Rangers “drew lots” to decide who should shoot the guide.⁶⁸

Backtracking over Taylor’s path of conquest, Edwards noted the destructive tendencies of the Texas Rangers. He attributed their behavior to the fact that many of them had been former prisoners in Mexico, or perhaps injured in past skirmishes before the war. The Rangers “spare none, but shoot down every one they meet.” Edwards described the road from Monterrey southward as being littered with the remains of thousands of dead Mexicans. To Edwards, the Rangers were little more than “desperados.” After witnessing the execution of an accused guerrilla, Edwards “turned

from the scene sickened at heart.” He claimed that the Rangers’ accusations were unfounded, and fabricated to justify the killing of an innocent Mexican.⁶⁹

By the end of May 1847, Taylor appeared to lose patience with volunteer units, especially the Texas Rangers. While expressing regret for his volunteers’ atrocious actions, he readily admitted his inability to control their behavior. Due to deficient numbers of regular forces, Taylor was unable to contain the Mexican guerrillas and insubordinate troops that roamed the countryside.⁷⁰ In regard to the Texans, Taylor clearly distinguished between the volunteer infantry and the Rangers. He claimed that the Rangers “scarcely made one expedition without unwarrantably killing a Mexican.”⁷¹ Taylor relocated the remaining Rangers to Saltillo, in hopes that they would cause no more problems. Although the war was far from over, he formally requested that no more Texan troops be sent to northern Mexico.⁷²

Both during and after the war, Chamberlain encountered Texans who refused to answer to any form of civil or military discipline. The atrocious actions of these individuals were far more severe than any such incidents committed by the average Mexican War volunteer or Texas Ranger. Chamberlain described a Texan named John Glanton. Glanton served as a “free scout” during the war for Texan independence. He was known to scalp anyone—Mexican and Indian alike—who fell victim to him. Chamberlain stated that “any other man in Texas would have been lynched...[but] his services in the Mexican and Indian wars, made him respected by the masses and gave him strong friends of men in power.” During the Mexican War, Chamberlain considered

Glanton a “free Ranger,” who was always “hanging around our army without belonging to it, often going out with scouting parties but always independent of all authority.” This special status, no doubt, allowed him to inflict any manner of suffering upon the civilian population of northern Mexico during the war. Glanton was loyal only to himself, as evidenced by his service to the famous Mexican guerrilla leader General Jose Urrea at the end of the war.⁷³

Certain Texans associated with the Rangers remained in Mexico after the war and continued to plunder and violate the inhabitants of the former Mexican territories. Chamberlain accompanied a group of “Scalp Hunters” from Monterrey to California in the fall of 1848. In addition to John Glanton, Chamberlain also spent time with a Texan named “Judge” Holden. Chamberlain accused Holden of raping and murdering a ten-year-old girl in the town of Fronteras. While Chamberlain and Holden were in Fronteras, Glanton and ten others spent five days “scalp hunting.” The expedition turned into a bloody fiasco for the “Sonorans” (Mexicans) whom Glanton encountered. Glanton and his men attacked the Sonorans’ camp by night, killing and scalping three men as well as “three of the women, who being old and ugly were knocked on the head.” All valuables in the camp were plundered, and two young women were taken captive and repeatedly raped and later “brained.” Glanton later sold the scalps of several Mexicans to their fellow countryman, General Urrea, who failed to discriminate between Mexican and Apache scalps.⁷⁴

The actions of “Judge” Holden and John Glanton document civilian atrocities and depredations that continued well after the close of the war. The Mexican War allowed selected Texan volunteers to reap the benefits of material plunder and satisfy their desire for vengeance and bloodlust. These volunteers were beyond the control of the American military both during and after the war. The success of the United States Army in the Mexican War allowed groups such as the Texas Rangers to gain a foothold in the newly-acquired territories of northern Mexico. Although plundering of the inhabitants of these territories occurred in the years leading up to the war, the war itself increased the likelihood that foreigners like the Texas Rangers would remain in Mexico after the war for the sake of adventure and material gain.

The Texas Rangers were well known for their brutality throughout the Mexican War. Taylor confirmed the Rangers’ consistent insubordination and reckless behavior on several occasions. Diaries and other contemporary sources cite numerous instances of civilian atrocity and property damage perpetrated by the Rangers. Volunteer and regular army troops were sometimes guilty of similar behavior. However, evidence proves that the Texas Rangers participated in more acts of cruelty than any other single group of army personnel.

Texas existed as an independent country for nine years; but even after the United States annexed Texas in 1845, Texans maintained their identity and autonomy. Under the guise of fighting for their new country, the Texas Rangers terrorized the inhabitants of northern Mexico during the war. The Rangers were a valuable asset to the United States

Army; for this reason, the military commanders did little to stop the Rangers' destructive behavior. This unique circumstance allowed the Texas Rangers to use the Mexican War as a means to avenge past wrongs inflicted upon them by Mexicans.

NOTES

1. Stephen B. Oates, "Los Diablos Tejanos!" *American West* 2 (Summer 1965): 46-47. "Los Diablos Tejanos" is Spanish for "The Texan Devils."
2. S. Compton Smith, *Chile con Carne* (New York: Miller & Curtis, 1857), 281.
3. Walter Prescott Webb, "The Texas Rangers in the Mexican War," (Master's thesis, University of Texas, 1920), 87.
4. Walter Prescott Webb, *The Texas Rangers: A Century of Frontier Defense* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1935), 91-113.
5. Frederick Wilkins, *The Highly Irregular Irregulars: Texas Rangers in the Mexican War* (Austin, TX: Eakin Press, 1990), 217-219.
6. *Ibid.*, viii.
7. Paul Foos, *A Short, Offhand, Killing Affair: Soldiers and Social Conflict During the Mexican-American War* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 113-137.
8. Eugene C. Barker, *The Life of Stephen F. Austin* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985), 92.
9. Frederick Wilkins, *The Legend Begins: The Texas Rangers, 1823-1845* (Austin, TX: State House Press, 1996), 7.
10. *Ibid.*, 117.
11. Thomas J. Green, *Journal of the Texian Expedition Against Mier* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1845), 25.
12. *Ibid.*, 25-26.
13. *Ibid.*, 29-32.
14. *Ibid.*, 32.
15. *Ibid.*

16. Ibid., 32-33.
17. Ibid., 33.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
20. Smith, *Chile con Carne*, 114-115.
21. Webb, *The Texas Rangers: A Century of Frontier Defense*, 74-75.
22. Ibid., 76.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid., 76-77.
26. Green, *Expedition Against Mier*, 169-170.
27. Ibid., 169.
28. Webb, *The Texas Rangers: A Century of Frontier Defense*, 77.
29. Stephen Hardin, *Texas Rangers* (Oxford, United Kingdom: Osprey Publishing, 1991), 15.
30. Zachary Taylor to the Adjutant General of United States Army, July 28, 1845, *House Executive Document No. 60*, 30th Cong., 1st Sess., 97.
31. Adjutant General of the United States Army to Zachary Taylor, August 6, 1845, in *ibid.*, 83.
32. Zachary Taylor to the Adjutant General of United States Army, April 15, 1846, in *ibid.*, 139.
33. James K. Polk to Congress, May 11, 1846, in *ibid.*, 8.
34. *Ibid.*
35. *Ibid.*

36. Zachary Taylor to the Adjutant General of United States Army, April 26, 1846, in *ibid.*, 288.
37. Zachary Taylor, *Letters of Zachary Taylor from the Battlefield of the Mexican War*, ed. William H. Swanson (Rochester, NY: The Genesee Press, 1908), 22.
38. *Ibid.*, 24.
39. *Ibid.*
40. Wilkins, *Highly Irregular Irregulars*, 142.
41. James Buckner Barry, *Buck Barry: Texas Ranger and Frontiersman*, ed. James K. Greer (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1978), 40.
42. *Ibid.*
43. Smith, *Chile con Carne*, 102-104.
44. *Ibid.*, 261-262.
45. *Ibid.*
46. *Ibid.*, 265.
47. *Ibid.*, 268.
48. *Ibid.*
49. *Ibid.*, 267.
50. *Ibid.*, 294.
51. Samuel E. Chamberlain, *My Confession*, with an introduction and postscript by Roger Butterfield (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1956), 175-176. Most likely, this is the same incident referred to earlier by S. Compton Smith, although Chamberlain gives the more general date of early March.
52. *Ibid.*
53. *Ibid.*, 176.
54. *Ibid.*, 176-177.

55. Zachary Taylor to the Adjutant General of the United States Army, May 23, 1847, *House Executive Document No. 60*, 30th Cong., 1st Sess., 1138.
56. Chamberlain, *My Confession*, 177.
57. *Ibid.*, 177-178.
58. Samuel C. Reid, *The Scouting Expeditions of McCulloch's Texas Rangers* (Philadelphia: G.B. Zieber, 1847; reprint, Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1970), 46-47.
59. John C. Pinheiro, "Extending the Light and Blessings of Our Purer Faith: Anti-Catholic Sentiment Among American Soldiers in the U.S.-Mexican War," *Journal of Popular Culture* 35 (October 2001): 130.
60. *Ibid.*
61. *Ibid.*
62. Chamberlain, *My Confession*, 173-174.
63. Frank S. Edwards, *A Campaign in Northern Mexico* (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms, Inc., 1966), 153-154.
64. *Ibid.*, 154.
65. *Ibid.*
66. *Ibid.*, 155.
67. *Ibid.*
68. *Ibid.*
69. *Ibid.*, 156.
70. Zachary Taylor to the Adjutant General of United States Army, May 23, 1847, *House Executive Document No. 60*, 30th Cong., 1st Sess., 1138-1139.
71. *Ibid.*
72. *Ibid.*
73. Chamberlain, *Memoirs*, 269-270.

74. Ibid., 271-274.

CHAPTER III

A PATH OF DESTRUCTION—MATAMOROS TO MONTERREY

Four months elapsed between the war's initial two battles and the capture of Monterrey. The victories at Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma allowed the Americans to cross the Rio Grande and begin the conquest of northern Mexico. The summer of 1846 was a time of preparation for the American army. Aside from establishing a secure supply line inland to Monterrey, the main concern facing the army was its size. With the official declaration of war, the United States Government called for volunteers. S. Compton Smith, referring to his country's anticipation of the Mexican War, stated, "The American people were aroused by the familiar sound, and war!—war! Was on every tongue, and in every ear."¹ Smith explained that war enthusiasm went beyond mere patriotism. He described a generation of Americans eager to experience war for themselves, and motivated by a "spirit of enterprise and curiosity."² Patriotic fervor led to the formation of numerous volunteer units from all over the country; quotas were easily filled, and in many instances, exceeded. But most volunteers were ill-prepared for war. Their initial enthusiasm and patriotism quickly subsided when they arrived in northern Mexico.

After the American victory at Resaca de la Palma on May 9, 1846, volunteer troops began arriving at Matamoros, which had surrendered peacefully on May 18.³ In his



Figure 3 This illustration of “The Young Volunteer” conveys the patriotic fervor that swept through the United States at the beginning of the Mexican War. Motivated by such sentiments, Americans volunteered for the war in great numbers. Time-Life Books, *The Mexican War* (Alexandria, VA: Time-Life Books, Inc., 1978). Original lithograph by Nathaniel Currier, presumably on the eve of the war.

correspondence, Lieutenant Napoleon Dana recorded the arrival of some six hundred volunteers on the afternoon of May 24.⁴ This created a unique set of circumstances for the army regulars, many of whom had been in the field for several months. Regulars were solely responsible for American success in the first two battles of the war. Proud of their accomplishments, they did not look forward to sharing their battlefield success with any newcomers. Lieutenant George G. Meade expressed concern over the competence of the volunteers. "I fear our volunteers," he lamented, "will not only prove inefficient...but will prove a serious obstacle to our efficiency....I fear the glory we have acquired at the Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma will be somewhat dimmed by our apparently tardy operations succeeding them."⁵ Dana "heartily" wished the volunteers would return home; in his mind, the American regulars had successfully subdued the enemy and needed no help.⁶ Beyond this, the presence of volunteers threatened the internal harmony and stability of the American camp—something that the army regulars had worked so hard to create. But the arrival of volunteers would do more than create competition and disruption within the camp. The undisciplined nature of the Mexican War volunteer had its greatest impact upon the civilian inhabitants of northern Mexico.

The sudden influx of volunteers into the Matamoros camp was a cause for concern to both the American regulars and Mexican civilians. Many army regulars, like Meade, resented the arrival of volunteers. He described them as a "disorderly mass...perfectly ignorant of discipline, and most restive under restraint," who would create "more trouble than the enemy."⁷ Dana's initial impressions of the volunteers were

negative as well. He described them “as [a] perfectly used-up set of fellows as you ever saw, completely broken down and disgusted.”⁸ Meade was worried that the misbehavior of volunteers would strain relations between the army and civilians. The volunteers’ behavior, he feared, would cause the Mexican civilians “to rise en mass [sic] [and] obstruct our progress.”⁹ The newly-arrived volunteers created immediate disturbances within the American camp and the city of Matamoros.

Volunteers entering Matamoros often became drunk and unruly, committing atrocities on the Mexican citizens.¹⁰ These offenders were usually retained in guardhouses, which according to Meade, were filled on a daily basis.¹¹ Crimes among volunteers often exceeded drunken and disorderly conduct. In his correspondence, Lieutenant Ulysses S. Grant wrote:

Since we have been in Matamoros [sic] a great many murders have been committed, and what is strange there seems to be but very weak means made use of to prevent frequent repetitions. Some of the volunteers and about all the Texans seem to think it perfectly right to impose upon the people of a conquered City to any extent, and even to murder them where the act can be covered by the dark. And how much they seem to enjoy acts of violence too! I would not pretend to guess the number of murders that have been committed upon the persons of poor Mexicans and the soldiers, since we have been here, but the number would startle you.¹²

The behavior of the volunteers was well known back home in the United States. In his memoirs, General Winfield Scott stated that “reliable information reached Washington, almost daily, that the wild volunteers as soon as beyond the Rio Grande, committed, with impunity, all sorts of atrocities on the persons and property of Mexicans....”¹³ The problem was that volunteers, overall, were not subject to the same

measure of discipline as the regular troops stationed along side them.¹⁴ Scott explained that there were no legal measures on record by which to punish the offenses of volunteers; he further noted the absence of “any court for the trial or punishment of murder, rape, theft...no matter by whom, or on whom committed.”¹⁵ In an attempt to restore discipline among the volunteers, Scott drew up an elaborate document titled “Martial Law Order.”¹⁶ The Secretary of War William B. Marcy refused to approve the order, saying it was “too explosive for safe handling,” and General Zachary Taylor sarcastically dismissed it as another of “*Scott’s Lessons*” or “*Novels*.”¹⁷ In the absence of courts, offending volunteers were generally sent to New Orleans where, in the absence of witnesses, they were released on *habeas corpus*, and thus, rarely punished.¹⁸ Scott’s “Martial Law Order” was not published until much later in the war.¹⁹ As a result, those in command of the “Army of Occupation” in northern Mexico failed to control the behavior of the volunteers throughout 1846.

With the American occupation, Matamoros quickly became “Americanized.”²⁰ Trains of sutlers (American merchants who followed the army) provided regulars and volunteers alike with goods from home, although often at incredible prices. Theater companies performed for troops; one such actor described the audience (most likely composed of volunteers) to which he performed as “the most motley that ever filled a theater.”²¹ Meade attributed the misbehavior of volunteers to the other forms of entertainment found within Matamoros. Among these were grog-shops, gambling-

houses, and an abundance of liquor. He hoped that upon leaving town, the absence of these diversions would help to restore and maintain discipline and order.²²

By the end of June 1846, Meade's fears concerning the volunteers and Mexican civilians came to fruition. He believed that a force of fifteen thousand regulars would be capable of marching to Mexico City and successfully conquering it. He did not believe, however, that it would be possible with a force mainly composed of volunteers. He explained that the regulars had been trained to wage war against the Mexican army and government—not the civilians.

According to Meade, the volunteers, within a month of their arrival, had already “commenced to excite feelings of indignation



Figure 4 American regulars serving in the Mexican War were highly-trained and disciplined. K. Jack Bauer, *The Mexican War: 1846-1848* (New York: Macmillan, 1974). Original painting by H. Charles McBarron.



Figure 5 Mexican War volunteers were easily distinguished from army regulars due to their less formal military attire. John Taylor Hughes, *Doniphan's Expedition* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1997).

and hatred in the bosom of the people, by their outrages on them.” Volunteers destroyed crops by allowing their horses to roam freely in farmers’ fields. They dismantled fences for use as firewood. Innocent persons continued to suffer at the hands of drunken volunteers. Texans arriving in Matamoros continued to hold grudges against Mexicans, and used this to justify their outrageous behaviors. All of these offenses, Meade believed, severely threatened a successful invasion of the Mexican interior.²³

From early on, Meade and other army regulars recognized that one of the keys to American victory depended upon restraining the

volunteers and convincing them to treat the civilians in a humane manner. In many ways, the misbehavior of the volunteers represented as great a threat to the American army as

did the Mexican army. But due to the small size of America's standing army, volunteer services were deemed necessary throughout the war. American regulars withstood Mexican resistance north of the Rio Grande, but as the army moved inland toward Monterrey, the value of volunteers was more easily perceived. This fact, however, did not mean that the overall behavior of the volunteers improved.

Seventy miles upriver from Matamoros was the town of Reynosa. At the request of the mayor, who offered the city's surrender for a guarantee of protection from Mexican army stragglers and *rancheros*, Taylor sent four companies of infantry, a section of artillery, and a group of Texas Rangers to occupy the city in June 1846.²⁴ Ranger Samuel Reid explained, "our orders were most strict not to molest any unarmed Mexican." He went on to note, however, that any "villains" found dead were assumed to have succumbed to suicide.²⁵ Soon after this, Ben McCulloch's company of Rangers spent the Fourth of July holiday indiscriminately killing and eating the locals' pigs and chickens, all the while drinking whiskey. They justified this slaughter by joking that the animals had wandered into their line of fire as they discharged their guns in celebration. Rather than allow the meat to go to waste, they cooked and ate it immediately.²⁶

In some instances, the volunteers' interactions with Native Americans contributed to civilian discontent. In August 1846, Comanche Indians raided the town of Mier, killing several of the inhabitants and taking others as prisoners. American commanders, considering it their duty to protect Mexican civilians, commanded a force of Texas Rangers to pursue the retreating Comanches. Contrary to their orders, the Rangers

ultimately refused to take any actions against the Comanches. Instead, the Rangers claimed the Comanches as allies in their fight against Mexico. Meade claimed that unnamed American citizens incited this particular Comanche raid. He alluded to an unspecified peace treaty, supposedly made between Americans and Comanches. Apparently, certain Comanches understood the treaty to mean that the United States would support any action they took against the Mexicans—civilian or otherwise.²⁷

The expulsion of the Mexican army from the territories north of Monterrey gave the Comanches more liberty to plunder the unprotected inhabitants of these areas. Meade felt it essential to protect civilians from such actions. He believed that any alliance with the Comanches—traditional enemies of the Mexican people—would further incite ill feelings toward the American army. On the other hand, American willingness to protect Mexican lives and property would foster popular support for the Army of Occupation. The previous incident involving the Rangers exemplifies an inconsistency in policy, partially brought about by contrary attitudes and insubordination on the part of volunteers. Under such circumstances, Mexican civilians found little reason to trust American volunteers.²⁸

The Mexicans distinguished between American regular troops and volunteer units. Writing from Matamoros, Meade explained,

“You will hear any Mexican in the street descanting on the good conduct of the *‘tropas de ligna’* as they call us, and the dread of the *‘volontarios.’* And with reason, [the volunteers] have killed five or six innocent people walking in the streets...they are always drunk...they rob and steal the cattle and corn of the poor farmers.”²⁹

Writing from Camargo, Lieutenant George B. McClellan made similar distinctions. He related that the Mexicans were “polite” to the regulars, while they “hated” the volunteers. He claimed never to have heard of a Mexican being murdered by a regular or vice versa. He described the volunteers’ behavior as “shameful and disgraceful.” The volunteers, he stated, “thought nothing of robbing and killing the Mexicans.”³⁰ Even though McClellan himself eventually succumbed to dishonest foraging (such as killing a “slow deer”), the typical behavior of him and the other regulars was easily distinguished from that of the volunteers serving in northern Mexico.³¹

The journey from Matamoros to Monterrey covered 150 miles, most of it a barren wilderness. The transport of several thousand troops in such an environment required careful preparations on the part of administrators, and the conservation of supplies by soldiers. Army regulars noted the general wastefulness and inefficient consumption of the volunteers. Meade blamed the shortage of provisions on both governmental shortsightedness and the volunteers. He described the volunteers as “some twenty thousand men rushing into the country, who not only consumed supplies as fast as they arrived, but had to be taken care of, as you would so many children.”³² Too many volunteers had arrived too fast, creating a potential shortage of supplies. This fact, combined with the daunting overland trek to Monterrey, no doubt worried many army regulars and administrators.

Regardless of any essential shortages, impatient volunteers demanded to move forward. They believed it nonsense to carry large quantities of supplies, and suggested

living off the land. This, of course, meant foraging the property of any civilians they might meet between Camargo and Monterrey. Many volunteers looked to the Texans as model survivors. In their numerous campaigns against the Mexicans, Texan soldiers generally traveled without supply trains, depending solely upon hunting and foraging. Meade, however, did not hesitate to point out the futility of such operations. He attributed the Texans' ultimate failure in subduing the Mexicans to what he called "badly designed and worse executed forays." Ultimately, Meade blamed governmental shortsightedness for the immediate problems the army faced. Supply problems not only threatened the army, but the Mexican civilians as well. In times of need, volunteers often did not hesitate to take from civilians what they had either squandered or not received from the government.³³

The American army was assembled and ready to leave Camargo on August 19, 1846.³⁴ Exactly one month later, a force of some six thousand volunteer and regular troops encamped twelve miles northeast of Monterrey at Agua Fria.³⁵ In his diary, army Lieutenant Rankin Dilworth chronicled the army's journey to Monterrey. As the army entered Agua Fria, he noticed the rampant pillaging of the volunteers.³⁶ Taylor threatened to send home four volunteers arrested for attempting to break into a private residence.³⁷ A captured Mexican, presumed to be a spy and attempting escape, "got some distance [before] a crowd got around him and beat his brains out."³⁸ Dilworth does not specify the members of this "crowd," but he mentions this incident alongside his previous accounts of the volunteers' misdeeds. Such incidents as he witnessed at Agua Fria became

commonplace after Monterrey's surrender on September 25.

The reputations of the volunteers preceded them. Many residents of Monterrey abandoned their homes immediately following the city's capture; some hid in the general vicinity of the city, while others relocated to Saltillo.³⁹ Meade blamed this fear on the volunteers, "[who] have made themselves so terrible by their previous outrages as to have inspired the Mexicans with a perfect horror of them, and until [the Mexicans] are assured of their security they will not return from their hiding places."⁴⁰ A resident of Monterrey described the American regulars as "well-disciplined, subordinate, and under excellent officers." The volunteers, on the contrary, were "unbridled...much like Comanches in their appearance, ferocity, and customs."⁴¹ One observer noted that the departure of the Texas troops, which "caused the town to be more tranquil than ever," did little to encourage Monterrey's residents to return because "they [were] yet afraid."⁴²

Descriptions of Monterrey during the occupation vary. Some observers chose to downplay fear among the residents. After the exit of Mexican troops from the city, Thomas Bangs Thorpe, a notable author serving in the American army, noticed that citizens returned to the streets and "opened their stores for traffic with the invaders."⁴³ Thorpe described the scene at a church service, which took place only three weeks after the battle, in which he found it "a curious spectacle to witness...veterans of our army...now kneeling beside their enemies, acknowledging the same Supreme power, and evincing that they were children of the same father."⁴⁴

Thorpe accused those citizens who left Monterrey, only to return later, of succumbing to “a spirit of exaggeration.” He could not understand why the residents had so little faith in the Americans’ promise to protect them. Thorpe went on to criticize what he considered ungrateful behavior on the part of Mexicans. Apparently, the Mexican army, while occupying Monterrey, spread rumors concerning the conduct of the American army. Thorpe defended the Americans’ actions by noting their fair treatment of Mexican wounded and captured, as well as their willingness to pay fair prices for the acquisition of all private goods. After invading Mexican territory and inflicting significant damage upon Monterrey’s people and property, Thorpe failed to understand the natural resentment of the conquered population.⁴⁵

To prove his point, Thorpe included a letter in his narrative *Our Army at Monterey*. By sharing it, he hoped to expose what he considered Mexican propaganda with regards to the American occupation; the letter, he stated, “illustrates this singular feature of Mexican character.” The author of the letter contradicted Thorpe on many points. He commented on the vandalism of the volunteers, and claimed that army personnel forcibly occupied numerous houses throughout the city without paying any type of rent or compensation. Despite the assurances of Generals Zachary Taylor and William J. Worth, American troops committed numerous outrages against persons and property, and in many instances failed to respect the laws and religion of Mexico. The author of the letter blamed these depredations on the “unbridled volunteers, who, let loose upon the whole city, commit excesses which decency and shame prevent me from specifying.” As

for the residents who fled Monterrey, he did not anticipate their return until the departure of the volunteers.⁴⁶

Meade was confident that the army's respectable behavior would encourage the return of Monterrey's inhabitants. By limiting the number of military personnel permitted within the city limits, army regulars initially maintained the peace and security of Monterrey. Liquor and gambling—considered to be the root causes of criminal activity—were either prohibited or curtailed. But despite the best efforts of army administrators, the volunteers who managed to access Monterrey and the surrounding areas created an atmosphere reminiscent of Matamoros and Camargo.⁴⁷

Barely one week after the city's capture, Monterrey Mayor Francisco P. Morales sent this plea to Taylor: "Multitudes of complaints have been made to this Government against excesses committed upon persons and property against Mexicans daily by the volunteers...and I am this moment informed that three of our citizens have been killed by them...only because they possess the power to do so..."⁴⁸ Taylor promptly expressed his condolences to Morales, but explained the difficulty of controlling the volunteers. He acknowledged that "excesses have been committed," but maintained that none were of "grave character."⁴⁹ Taylor promised to remove the volunteers from Monterrey within a few days, which he hoped would restore peace and order.⁵⁰

A letter written from Monterrey by "an actor" further illustrates Taylor's inability to control his forces. The actor attributed Taylor's leniency to his desire to remain popular with his troops, which he accomplished by neglecting any harsh forms of

discipline or punishment. According to the actor, guards were actually prohibited from sending out patrols to enforce order within the city. The result, as in Matamoros, was murder, robbery, and rape—sometimes committed in open areas during daylight hours. Volunteers burned peasants' huts, and a Texan murdered a Mexican soldier on a main street in the middle of the day.⁵¹

The actor further deduced that these outrages, committed on helpless and unoffending Mexicans, would ruin any chances for a successful and prompt termination of the war. He claimed that northern Mexico, on the eve of the war, was “ripe for revolt and annexation to the United States.” He blamed the volunteers for destroying any possibility of American conciliation with civilians. Many army regulars shared similar concerns. It was one thing for the volunteers to disregard military authority at home or within the army, but quite another to expand this insubordination among a hostile population, which in turn, threatened the safety and security of everyone involved.⁵²

General William J. Worth, the American Military Governor of Monterrey, supervised municipal regulation and military discipline within the city. Lieutenant Daniel Harvey Hill claimed that Worth, like Taylor, many times failed to enforce order during the American occupation. In addition to occurrences of rape and robbery, he estimated that volunteers murdered one hundred inhabitants of Monterrey. As a result of this, Worth placed guards in front of selected buildings and throughout the city streets.⁵³ General John Ellis Wool expressed similar sentiments. He spoke of “deserters...and dishonorably discharged soldiers” who committed “every species of atrocity on the

defenseless inhabitants.”⁵⁴ He ordered his officers to “make all possible exertions to apprehend [these] villains and bring them to punishment.”⁵⁵

Meade accused the volunteers in Monterrey of creating such disturbances as to prompt Taylor to action, even though Taylor many times did nothing to discipline volunteers in such instances. One particularly disturbing set of circumstances occurred during the occupation. An unknown regiment of volunteers forced themselves into a house on the outskirts of Monterrey. After forcibly removing the husband, the volunteers proceeded to “commit outrages” on his wife. Following this incident, a member of the Kentucky Regiment was found dead, supposedly at the hands of the husband whose wife had been raped. Kentucky volunteers retaliated by murdering two Mexicans as they worked in a cornfield. This was followed by more murders on the part of Kentuckians and Mexicans alike. Ignoring Taylor’s strict orders—that no man should be allowed to go out with arms—members of the Kentucky Regiment, in bands of twenty to thirty, left their camps fully armed with intentions of killing Mexicans. After two more shootings, including the wounding of a twelve-year-old boy, Taylor took decisive action. On this particular occasion, he ordered the First Kentucky “foot” to march in the rear of the army, which apparently was a means of disgrace to both their unit and respective state. Meade, however, did not consider this punishment enough. He would have preferred to see the entire regiment disbanded and sent home “as a disgrace to the army and their state.”⁵⁶

One observer described the same conflict as “the war between the Kentuckeyians [sic] and the Mexicans.” He claimed that volunteers killed forty Mexicans within five days. This observer acknowledged the atrocities committed by both sides, which had commenced with the occupation of Matamoros and continued through the capture of Monterrey. He recognized a retributive system of justice, in which American retaliation was generally “two for one.” He further admitted that in many cases, innocents were made to suffer for the crimes of the guilty. The “war” between Kentucky volunteers and Mexicans appeared to be the result of excessive atrocities and depredations on the part of both sides, committed from the time of the arrival of the volunteers through the capture of Monterrey. Such incidents, which became almost commonplace in the long months leading up to Monterrey’s capture, created tension that inevitably manifested itself in numerous vicious acts during the city’s occupation.⁵⁷

The volunteers’ careless behavior and negligence to health and hygiene caused rampant sickness and death among them.⁵⁸ In some instances, their diseases affected the civilian population as well. While stationed at Camargo in November 1846, Illinois volunteer Thomas Tennery observed the corpse of a young Mexican boy who had succumbed to measles.⁵⁹ He further noted that “[measles] are very fatal at present among the Mexican children, who have caught them from the soldiers.”⁶⁰ Three months earlier, Lieutenant Napoleon Dana noticed an epidemic among the Mexican infants of Camargo. He attributed this widespread mortality to whooping cough. Dana did not say if the American troops were responsible for the spread of this sickness. However, he noted that

many of the babies had died since the army's arrival.⁶¹ Throughout the summer and fall of 1846, both the volunteers and residents of Camargo suffered greatly from the ravages of sickness and disease.

Because they lacked proper military discipline and survival skills, volunteers often wasted food and other provisions. As a result of this (or many times regardless of this), Meade stated that the volunteers "plunder the poor inhabitants of everything...and shoot them when they remonstrate...making us a terror to innocent people."⁶² Drunkenness often led to fights, and when volunteers were killed in such instances, their respective units retaliated with wanton murder and cruelty. Much of this was due to volunteer officers' inability to control their subordinates.⁶³ The unnamed actor from Monterrey recounted an "unsoldierly" scene in which volunteers chased their commanding officer through his own camp.⁶⁴ While such a scene may seem comical, this blatant disregard for authority exemplified the larger problem facing the volunteer units in northern Mexico. This lack of discipline directly affected the volunteers' ability to care for themselves properly, and further, created an increasingly hostile atmosphere among the civilian population. The consequences were this: the wastefulness and misbehavior of volunteers placed an undue burden upon both the army regulars and the civilian population of northern Mexico.

Returning to Matamoros several months after Monterrey's capture, S. Compton Smith contrasted the devastation and destruction of the countryside with his initial passage through the same area. Upon his first visit to the village of Puntiguda (en route

to Monterrey), he described a place containing fifteen hundred *rancheros*, all of whom welcomed the Americans and provided the army with necessary provisions. A few months after Smith's initial passage, however, Ohio volunteers led by Colonel Samuel Ryan Curtis destroyed the village in retaliation for guerrilla harassment of American supply trains. In relation to the crimes of guerrillas, Smith was confident that the people of Puntagorda were entirely innocent. He claimed that the Ohioans, on their passage to Monterrey, destroyed crops and burned villages and ranches. "Such are the horrors of war," concluded Smith. "The innocent and friendly peasantry are often made to suffer its penalties."⁶⁵

The incident to which Smith most likely referred happened on March 1, 1847, as recorded in Curtis's diary. On that day, Curtis ordered the removal of some huts, which he believed to interfere with the duties of his pickets.⁶⁶ He explained that an officer set one of these huts on fire, which appeared to initiate a chain reaction. Another officer ignited twelve more huts, and before Curtis could regain control of the situation, more than one hundred were completely destroyed. Curtis lamented the consequences by stating that "the town is now, indeed a widespread ruin...the silly and wicked distinction of property must exasperate the Mexicans."⁶⁷

Samuel Chamberlain claimed that by the summer of 1847, the entire area between Monterrey and Camargo was depopulated as the result of a vicious guerrilla war. He pointed out that both sides involved were equally guilty of creating and sustaining a conflict that was "no longer war but murder." "Our officers became disgusted,"

Chamberlain concluded, “with the many revolting acts committed by volunteers and Rangers, and no reports were ever made of these cruel raids.”⁶⁸ Taylor likewise reported that during his campaign, many of the volunteers “committed extensive depredations and outrages upon the peaceful inhabitants” and that “there is scarcely a form of crime that has not been reported to me as committed by them.”⁶⁹ But by this time, the need for volunteers in northern Mexico had passed, and with their departure returned a semblance of normality.

Obviously, it is impossible to determine the actual extent of civilian atrocities committed by the volunteers who served under Taylor in northern Mexico. But the accounts of army regulars, casual observers, and the volunteers themselves attest to the commonality of such incidents, especially during the first year of the war. In *Army of Manifest Destiny*, James M. McCaffrey concludes that “American soldiery during the Mexican War was not very different from the volunteer soldiers throughout American history...they viewed the enemy as being on a lower plane, and they therefore found it easier to hate and to kill in far-off Mexico.”⁷⁰ One can only speculate as to how the volunteers’ treatment of civilians compared to that of other nineteenth-century armies. One Mexican observer, noting the volunteers’ incredible appetite for both food and liquor, commented that their behavior consisted of “mingled barbarism and restraint.”⁷¹ Any “restraint,” however, did little to quell the overall rebellious nature of the Mexican War volunteer. Regardless of any comparisons to soldiers in general, the fact remains that the behavior of American volunteers serving in northern Mexico had a detrimental

effect upon the lives of numerous civilians. For the United States Army, at least initially, it seemed in many instances that the benefits (or the actual necessity) of having volunteer units were overshadowed by the disruptions their presence created in northern Mexico.

NOTES

1. S. Compton Smith, *Chile con Carne* (New York: Miller & Curtis, 1857), 1-2.
2. Ibid, 3-4.
3. Samuel Ryan Curtis, *Mexico Under Fire: Being the Diary of Samuel Ryan Curtis*, edited and annotated by Joseph E. Chance (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1994), 19.
4. Napoleon Jackson Tecumseh Dana, *Monterrey is Ours! The Mexican War Letters of Lieutenant Dana, 1845-1847*, ed. Robert H. Ferrell (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1990), 83.
5. George Gordon Meade, *The Life and Letters of General George Gordon Meade*, vol. 1 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1913), 120.
6. Dana, *Monterrey is Ours!*, 83.
7. Meade, *The Life and Letters of General George Gordon Meade*, 91.
8. Dana, *Monterrey is Ours!*, 83.
9. Meade, *The Life and Letters of General George Gordon Meade*, 110.
10. Ibid., 91.
11. Ibid.
12. Ulysses S. Grant, *Memoirs and Selected Letters: Personal Memoirs of U.S. Grant; Selected Letters 1839-1865* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1990), 918.
13. Winfield Scott, *Memoirs of Lieutenant-General Scott* (New York: Sheldon, 1864), 392.
14. Charles M. Robinson, *The Men Who Wear the Star: The Story of the Texas Rangers* (New York: Random House, 2000), 80.
15. Scott, *Memoirs*, 393.

16. The entire document, known also as *General Orders #20*, can be found in Scott, *Memoirs*, 540-546.
17. *Ibid.*, 393-394.
18. Rankin Dilworth, *The March to Monterrey: The Diary of Lieutenant Rankin Dilworth, U.S. Army*, ed. Lawrence R. Clayton and Joseph E. Chance (El Paso: Texas Western Press, 1996), 113; Curtis, *Mexico Under Fire*, 20.
19. Scott, *Memoirs*, 395.
20. George B. McClellan, *The Mexican War Diary of General George B. McClellan*, ed. William Starr Myers (New York: Da Capo Press, 1972), 12.
21. K. Jack Bauer, *The Mexican War: 1846-1848* (New York: Macmillan, 1974), 83.
22. Meade, *The Life and Letters of General George Gordon Meade*, 110.
23. *Ibid.*, 108-109.
24. Bauer, *The Mexican War*, 87.
25. Samuel C. Reid, *The Scouting Expeditions of McCulloch's Texas Rangers* (Philadelphia: G.B. Zieber, 1847; reprint, Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1970), 53.
26. *Ibid.*, 60-61.
27. Meade, *The Life and Letters of General George Gordon Meade*, 122-123.
28. *Ibid.*
29. *Ibid.*, 109-110.
30. George B. McClellan, *The Mexican War Diary of General George B. McClellan*, 18.
31. *Ibid.*, 57. "Slow deer" obviously referred to some type of Mexican-owned livestock; Smith, *Chile con Carne*, 51-52. Smith relates the story of a volunteer butchering a yearling calf, which he referred to as a "slow kind" of deer.
32. Meade, *The Life and Letters of General George Gordon Meade*, 121.
33. *Ibid.*, 121-122.
34. Dilworth, *The March to Monterrey*, xx.

35. Ibid.
36. Ibid., 65.
37. Ibid.
38. Ibid., 66.
39. Meade, *The Life and Letters of General George Gordon Meade*, 147.
40. Ibid.
41. Thomas Bangs Thorpe, *Our Army at Monterey* (Philadelphia: Cary & Hart, 1847), 120.
42. "Letter reporting that the Mexicans had evacuated Saltillo to stand at San Luis Potosi," *Niles' National Register* (Baltimore), November 14, 1846, <http://www.history.vt.edu/MxAmWar/Newspapers/Niles/Nilesd1846NovDec.htm> (October 7, 2006).
43. Thorpe, *Our Army at Monterey*, 118.
44. Ibid.
45. Ibid., 119.
46. Ibid., 120-121.
47. Meade, *The Life and Letters of General George Gordon Meade*, 147.
48. "Correspondence between General Zachary Taylor and General Francisco P. de Morales respecting the conduct of volunteers; Correspondence relative to supplies of provisions," *Niles' National Register* (Baltimore), November 7, 1846, <http://www.history.vt.edu/MxAmWar/Newspapers/Niles/Nilesd1846NovDec.htm> (October 7, 2006).
49. Ibid.
50. Ibid.
51. "Affairs from Monterrey by 'An Actor,'" *Niles' National Register* (Baltimore), November 21, 1846, <http://www.history.vt.edu/MxAmWar/Newspapers/Niles/Nilesd1846NovDec.htm> (October 7, 2006).

52. Ibid.

53. Daniel Harvey Hill, *A Fighter From Way Back: The Mexican War Diary of Lt. Daniel Harvey Hill, 4th Artillery, USA*, ed. Nathaniel Cheairs Hughes, Jr. and Timothy D. Johnson (Kent, OH: The Kent State University Press, 2002), 27-28.

54. Irving W. Levinson, *Wars Within War: Mexican Guerrillas, Domestic Elites, and the United States of America, 1846-1848* (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University Press, 2005), 98.

55. Ibid.

56. Meade, *The Life and Letters of General George Gordon Meade*, 161-162.

57. "Further details of the guerrilla war at Monterrey between Kentucky volunteers and Mexicans," *Niles' National Register*, January 9, 1847, <http://www.history.vt.edu/MxAmWar/Newspapers/Niles/Nilese1847JanFeb.htm> (October 7, 2006).

58. Meade, *The Life and Letters of General George Gordon Meade*, 162.

59. Thomas D. Tennery, *The Mexican War Diary of Thomas D. Tennery*, edited and with an introduction by D. E. Livingston-Little (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1970), 38.

60. Ibid.

61. Dana, *Monterrey is Ours!*, 104.

62. Meade, *The Life and Letters of General George Gordon Meade*, 162.

63. Ibid.

64. "Affairs from Monterrey by 'An Actor,'" *Niles' National Register* (Baltimore), November 21, 1846, <http://www.history.vt.edu/MxAmWar/Newspapers/Niles/Nilesd1846NovDec.htm> (October 7, 2006).

65. S. Compton Smith, *Chile con Carne*, 315-316.

66. Curtis, *Mexico Under Fire*, 140. Commonly referred to as *jacals*, these small huts consisted of close-set poles tied together and filled out with mud, clay, and grasses.

67. Ibid.

68. Samuel E. Chamberlain, *My Confession*, with an introduction and postscript by Roger Butterfield (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1956), 177.
69. Zachary Taylor to the Adjutant General of United States Army, June 16, 1847, *House Executive Document No. 60*, 30th Cong., 1st Sess., 1178.
70. James M. McCaffrey, *Army of Manifest Destiny: The American Soldier in the Mexican War, 1846-1848* (New York: New York University Press, 1992), 210.
71. Jose Fernando Ramirez, *Mexico During the War with the United States*, trans. Elliot B. Scherr, ed. Walter V. Scholes (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1950), 161.

CHAPTER IV

RACKENSACKERS AND THE CENTRAL DIVISION

For Samuel Chamberlain, Christmas 1846 was anything but uneventful. His company of dragoons were stationed at Agua Nueva, a cattle ranch seventeen miles south of Saltillo and near the site of the future battle of Buena Vista. On Christmas Day, Chamberlain and his comrades prepared an elaborate holiday meal for the regulars in camp. Just as they prepared to eat, a mounted Texas Ranger rode through the camp, signaling the approach of the Mexican army. Chamberlain's dragoons, along with the infantry and artillery, promptly prepared for battle. No sooner had the order been given to march, than Chamberlain witnessed an unruly mob of volunteers descending upon his precious meal. The regulars, now confined to their ranks, watched helplessly as the volunteers consumed their entire Christmas dinner. Chamberlain bitterly lamented the injustice of "regulars [being] robbed of their dinner by volunteers!"¹ However traumatic the circumstances, the regulars maintained order and marched toward their picket lines, only to be met by a gang of "Rackensackers."² Observing a cloud of dust in the distance, an Arkansas officer claimed to have frightened the enemy into retreat. However, further observation revealed the source of dust—a herd of wild mustangs. "Cursing all

volunteers,” Chamberlain and his fellow dragoons returned to their camp for a Christmas dinner of hard bread and salt pork.³

Chamberlain’s Christmas story might be considered just another one of his amusing anecdotes were it not for what he witnessed en route to meet the “enemy.” Passing the Agua Nueva Ranch, the regulars found the place overrun by volunteers, who were “committing all manner of outrages on the few women left in the ranch, fighting over their poor victims like dogs.” Chamberlain and his fellow dragoons literally attacked the volunteers with swords and drove them away. After placing the women—some of whom were stripped naked—in a carefully-guarded house, the dragoons resumed their march to the sight of the false alarm. Certainly, Chamberlain viewed the incident at Agua Nueva with horror, but he also seemed to welcome it as an opportunity to avenge the volunteers for their raid on his Christmas dinner.⁴

Chamberlain’s memoirs introduce the reader to the Arkansas volunteers, whom he refers to on numerous occasions as “Rackensackers.” The previously mentioned account was only one in a long series of atrocious acts committed by volunteers from Arkansas. Chamberlain accompanied the Central Division, also known as the Army of Chihuahua (even though they never reached Chihuahua), from San Antonio to Saltillo, Mexico. Throughout the journey, Chamberlain was often absent from the main army due to his duties as forager, dispatcher, and scout.⁵ However, he spent enough time with the Rackensackers to confirm their notorious reputation.

In his genealogical study *Arkansas' Mexican War Soldiers*, Desmond Walls Allen lists a total of 1,552 Arkansans who served in the war, all of whom comprised eighteen companies.⁶ Ten of these companies formed the Arkansas Regiment of Mounted Volunteers, who were commanded by Colonel Archibald Yell.⁷ Yell's companies were notorious for their unruly behavior. General John Ellis Wool, commander of the Central Division, contemptuously referred to them on occasion as "Colonel Yell's Mounted Devils."⁸ Their blatant insubordination resulted in numerous depredations committed against the inhabitants of northern Mexico.



Figure 6 Colonel Archibald Yell commanded Arkansas's "Mounted Devils." Fay Hemstead, *A Pictorial History of Arkansas from Earliest Times to the Year 1890* (New York: N. D. Thompson, 1890).

Prior to the war, Archibald Yell served as both governor and congressman in Arkansas. After his death at the Battle of Buena Vista, a Little Rock newspaper printed a lengthy obituary.⁹ The obituary states that as a member of Congress, Yell was a prominent advocate of the admission of Texas and asserted the United States' right to the Oregon Territory. In addition, he was among the "fast and reliable friends of the administration, and was honored in a high degree with the confidence of the President...he was for a vigorous prosecution of the war." This statement identified Yell as an expansionist-minded member of the Democratic Party, and most likely an ardent defender

of southern interests. His obituary concludes: “When the news reached Washington that the Mexicans had dared to cross the Rio Grande, and spill the blood of our citizens upon their own soil, he was among the most active in bringing forward measures...to drive them from our soil and punish their insolence.” Throughout the war, Yell and his Mounted Devils “vigorously prosecuted the war” by punishing Mexican soldiers and civilians alike for this apparent “insolence.”¹⁰

The Arkansans’ motivations for volunteer service bear some similarities to those of the Texas Rangers. No doubt one of the first casualties of the war affected the mentalities of many Arkansas volunteers. On May 6, 1846, during the Mexican siege of Fort Texas, Major Jacob Brown of Arkansas was mortally wounded.¹¹ General Zachary Taylor later renamed the garrison Fort Brown in honor of this fallen hero.

Taylor and his army first arrived at the Rio Grande, across from Matamoros, on April 10, 1846.¹² On May 1, Taylor and his main force departed Fort Texas for Point Isabel to secure the American supply line and also to obtain necessary provisions.¹³ Upon the army’s departure, Major Brown assumed command of the fort. A few days later, on May 3, the Mexican siege of Fort Texas began.¹⁴ The siege continued until May 8, two days after Brown’s death. After the battles of Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma (May 8-9), Taylor’s army crossed the Rio Grande and settled into the newly-occupied city of Matamoros.¹⁵ Although most Arkansas volunteers reported to San Antonio several months after these events, the memory of Brown’s death and the circumstances

surrounding it created a desire for vengeance among them.¹⁶ These motivations—although existing to a lesser degree—were similar to those of the Texas Rangers.

The Arkansans were greatly influenced by the patriotic fervor that swept over the United States. They volunteered in great numbers; quotas were rapidly filled, and many prospective recruits were turned away.¹⁷ At a farewell ceremony in Little Rock, Josephine Buckner and Judith Field presented two volunteer companies with flags inscribed “Up guards and at ‘em” and “Extend the area of freedom.” Buckner presented her flag with these words: “When on the weary march, or in the thick of the fight you will look unto your standard, let it serve to remind you of home and all its associations...think of parents and children, wives and relatives who watch with trembling anxiety, ready to weep for your fall, or exult in your fame!” Field expressed her patriotism by expressing her desire to fight alongside the “stoutest warriors.” This jubilant atmosphere further encouraged the Arkansans to join the war effort for state pride and visions of military glory.¹⁸

The Central Division, including 417 Arkansas volunteers, departed San Antonio on September 26, 1846.¹⁹ Before entering Mexican territory, General John Ellis Wool announced the United States Army’s conciliatory objectives to his troops. He stressed the importance of distinguishing between enemy troops and the native inhabitants. His overall policy promised that “[those] who do not take up arms against the United States...will not be molested or interfered with, either as regards their persons or property...and whatever is received from them will be liberally paid for.” Wool

threatened severe punishment on anyone violating this ordinance. Despite this stern warning, the volunteers accompanying the Central Division inflicted numerous atrocities upon the inhabitants of northern Mexico.²⁰

Throughout his *Narrative of the Central Division*, Arkansas private Jonathon W. Buhoup refused to record the names and identities of those who committed atrocities and depredations against Mexican civilians. Such incidents occurred from the very beginning of the campaign. In one outrageous story, an individual referred to by Buhoup as an “Indian,” stole a Mexican mayor’s blanket.²¹ The story is significant not so much for the deed itself, but for Buhoup’s introduction of the term “Indian.” By blaming all of the ensuing war crimes on an unnamed Indian, Buhoup successfully related the realities of military and civilian interactions to his audience while protecting the reputations of Arkansas volunteers (and perhaps himself). The Indian’s motto was this: “Anything is fair in war.”²²

In *A Short, Offhand, Killing Affair*, Paul Foos comes to similar conclusions. He accuses Buhoup of presenting the widespread atrocities of Arkansas volunteers in a deliberately veiled manner. He asserts that Buhoup expressed this undesirable behavior in racial terms. For example, any volunteer guilty of theft and violence was referred to as the “Indian.” Foos suggests that this Indian may have been either a composite of individuals or the alter ego of Buhoup. This theory is justified by the fact that Buhoup related so many crimes in remarkable detail. Beyond this, he also provided elaborate justification for such behavior. Foos concludes that Buhoup’s use of racial stereotypes

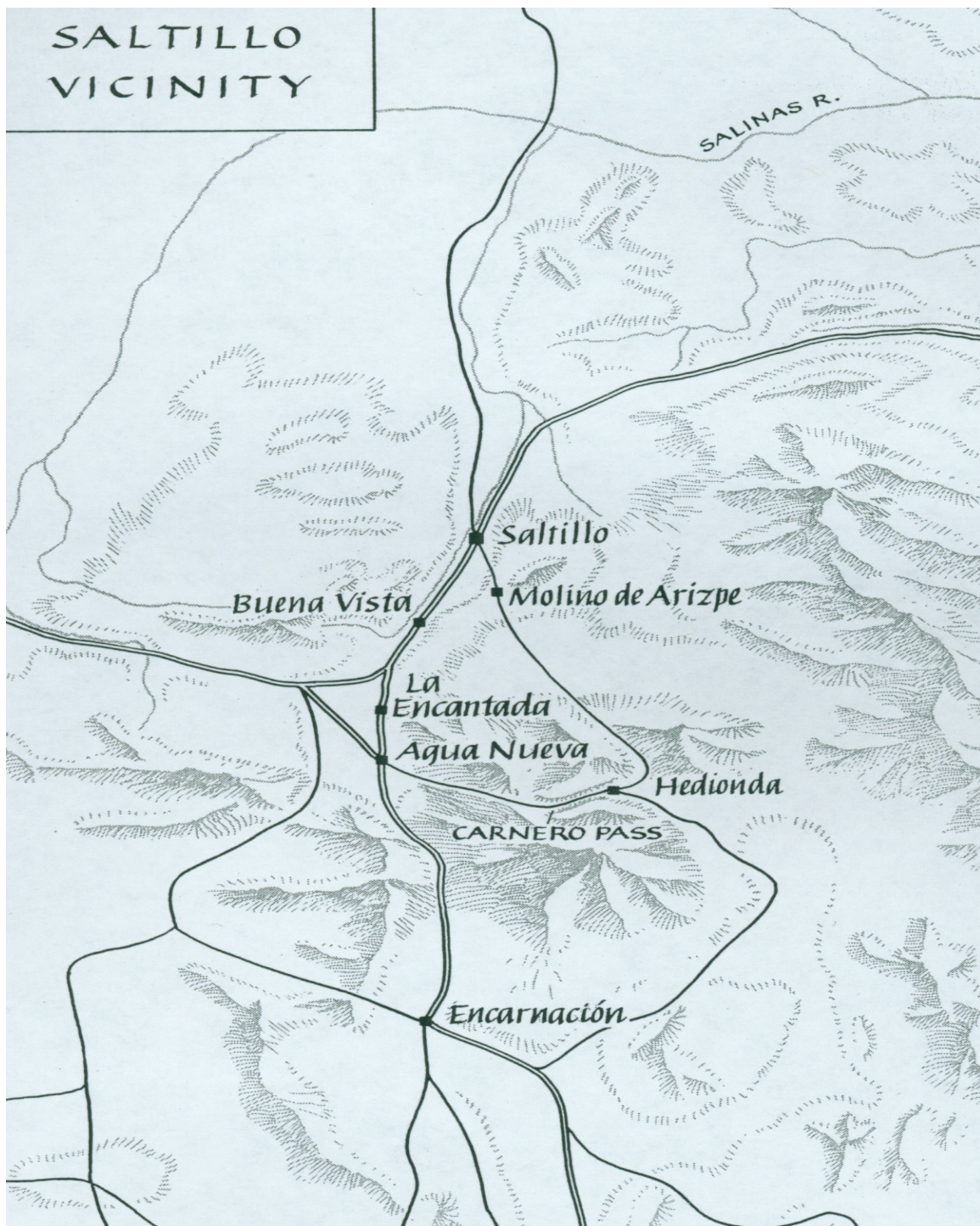


Figure 7 The Arkansas volunteers spent considerable time in the areas surrounding Saltillo. K. Jack Bauer, *The Mexican War, 1846-1848* (New York: Macmillan, 1974).

made it possible for the narrator to separate “the ‘white’ or noble aspects of his peers from the ignoble behavior that accompanied the regiment from San Antonio to Saltillo.”²³

The Arkansans showed little regard for civilian property or possessions. Two weeks after Wool’s decree, the volunteers entered San Rosalia and raided a field of sugar cane.²⁴ A few days prior, unnamed Americans robbed and severely beat four Mexicans. Buhoup was “pretty confident” they were not volunteers, and claimed he would have named the perpetrators if he had such knowledge.²⁵ Officers committed similar offenses. One particular officer stole a valuable gourd owned by an elderly Mexican lady.²⁶ Buhoup refused to release the individual’s name, thus protecting the reputation of the unit.

Outside San Rosalia, American soldiers mistook a civilian camp for that of the Mexican army. The camp was actually a group of Mexican traders, transporting cartloads of apples into town. However, this discovery did little to dissuade the volunteers from “unceremoniously charging” the small wagon train. In the absence of Wool, moneyless volunteers “did not exactly steal [the apples],” but “mustered them into service.” Buhoup blamed this blatant robbery on “our Native American friend.” In one instance, the Mexicans charged soldiers who were willing to pay in excess of twelve cents for three apples. Such unfair pricing, in Buhoup’s opinion, justified this seizure of Mexican goods. He hoped that this logic would persuade his readers to overlook the Rackensackers’ behavior.²⁷

The Central Division reached Monclova on October 31, 1846. A few miles from the city, Wool met with the mayor of the city. Wool requested the formal surrender of both the city and all public property. In addition, Wool held the mayor responsible for the “good behavior” of the Mexicans. The mayor consented to Wool’s demands, or as Buhoup explained, “[he] agreed, or rather had to agree.” However, Wool’s penchant for discipline—from the conquered Mexicans and his own troops—ultimately failed to contain the actions of certain volunteers.²⁸

Before entering Monclova, Buhoup observed his Indian friend in possession of a freshly killed kid goat. Upon inquiry, the Indian explained that he wanted to empty his gun without needlessly wasting the cartridge, so he “tried [his] sight on this young goat.” Although not condoning such behavior, Buhoup and his comrades were more than willing to help the Indian partake of the meat. In most of his Indian stories, Buhoup tended to frown upon the questionable behavior while freely sharing in any material gain that resulted. Most likely, this was the means by which Buhoup and his comrades justified any atrocities that they committed throughout the campaign.²⁹

After Wool established himself within Monclova, he appointed two companies of Illinois volunteers to enforce his orders. Despite these measures, American soldiers freely stole from the local merchants. As previously mentioned, money was in short supply, especially among volunteer units. Due to what Buhoup described as exorbitant prices, he explained that “some of the boys were compelled to adopt the old mode of mustering into service.” Judging from the actions of his Indian friend, it appears that the

volunteers in Monclova managed to secure a wide variety of delicacies without purchase. Buhoup's Indian was said to ambush unfortunate residents under the cover of darkness, thereby avoiding detection by the authorities. Buhoup's main justification for such blatant thievery seemed to be related to his belief that Mexican merchants took advantage of desperate troops by overcharging for essential goods. In any case, it appears that Mexican merchants were among the first residents of Monclova to suffer at the hands of volunteers and other American troops.³⁰

On November 3, victorious American troops paraded through the streets of Monclova en route to their new camp a mile outside the city. This elaborate display of military pomp allowed the Mexicans and Americans to see one another in close proximity. Buhoup marveled at the beauty of the town's cathedrals and plazas. Departing town, the troops made their way across a barren landscape, devoid of significant vegetation. Before reaching the new camp, they discovered a grove of young cottonwood and fig trees. In need of firewood, the volunteers descended upon the grove and proceeded to destroy several trees. These particular trees, however, had been planted by Mexicans, and therefore, were considered private property. Wool paid \$400 in reparation, and required the purchase of all wood in the future. The troops now depended upon Mexican merchants, who transported the wood overland a distance of ten miles. Scarce money and high prices caused resentful troops to quarrel with their suppliers. This was remedied, according to Buhoup, by depending upon the Indian.³¹

Members of the Central Division suffered daily from a lack of money, provisions, and other such essentials. They were also eager to engage the enemy. These circumstances at times caused the Arkansans to react impulsively to any perceived dangers or threats. On one such occasion, a rumor circulated that Mexicans held several American prisoners in a nearby ranch. Enraged volunteers began destroying the ranch's buildings. The interference of some regular officers prevented what Buhoup described as a potentially "awful catastrophe." Unfortunately, extensive damage was already done; any destroyed buildings served to satisfy the volunteers' need for firewood. In another instance, the owner of a hacienda invited American officers to join him for a glass of wine. However, his invitation did not extend to the volunteers present. The volunteers viewed their exclusion as an insult, and "some very hard remarks were made concerning him." Buhoup's Indian friend stated that the hacienda owner might find some of his sheep or goats missing. Apparently this came to pass, as Buhoup explained that the Indian "was generally a man of his word."³²

Mexican prisoners of war were not safe around Arkansas volunteers. Samuel Chamberlain recalled a scouting expedition that resulted in the capture of seventy enemy soldiers. He and his comrades tied the prisoners to horses and escorted them to the army's camp at Monclova. Nearing the town, a volunteer regiment of Arkansas Cavalry surrounded the pack train and threatened harm to the captured Mexicans. As Chamberlain explained, "Their officers had no control over them, and only our bold front saved our defenseless prisoners from being massacred." But Chamberlain's party could

do little to defend anyone else coming in contact with the overenthusiastic Rackensackers. Unable to wreak vengeance on Chamberlain's prisoners, they went elsewhere. Upon their departure, Chamberlain commented, "Woe to the cripples and sick women who fell in their way, for their cruelty was only exceeded by their insubordination." From this account, it does not appear that the Arkansans necessarily distinguished between able-bodied men and women and children.³³

The Arkansans' behavior were in many ways attributable to their racist attitudes and feelings of southern superiority. Chamberlain described them as "wild and reckless young fellows...many of them duelists and desperadoes of the frontier...to whom the wholesome restraints of discipline seemed tyranny in its worst form...[who] while in camp were a perfect nuisance." According to Chamberlain, the Arkansans regularly raided local ranches, committing all manner of outrages on the inhabitants. This made extra work for the army's dragoons, who were required to patrol the countryside and protect the civilians from the misdeeds of these volunteers. The Arkansans referred to the Mexicans as "greasers." In Chamberlain's opinion, the Arkansans' viewed "the 'greasers' as belonging to the same social class as their own Negro slaves," and as a result, "they plundered and ill-treated them."³⁴

The commander of the Arkansas Cavalry, Colonel Archibald Yell, did little to restrain his volunteers; neither did he care to receive advice nor orders from General Wool. Part of this had to do with Yell's status as ex-governor of Arkansas. Concerning the behavior of Arkansas volunteers, Chamberlain commented that "this shameful state of

affairs seemed to have no remedy; the war was a southern democratic one, and ex-Governor Yell of the great and sovereign state of Arkansas...[was] of too much importance to take advice, much less orders, from a little Yankee general like Wool.”³⁵ Wool described the Arkansans as being “wholly without instruction,” which he attributed to Yell’s “[determination] to leave [them] in that condition.” Yell, he concluded, had a “total ignorance of his duties as Colonel.”³⁶

The worst atrocity of the Mexican War directly involved Arkansas volunteers. Chamberlain devoted an entire chapter of his memoirs to the “Massacre of the Cave.”³⁷ In mid February, Chamberlain, accompanying Wool’s escort, was returning to Saltillo from a trip to the Encantada Ranch. Hearing the discharge of firearms in the nearby mountains, Wool’s entourage followed the reports, fully expecting to engage the enemy.³⁸

Steep terrain caused the party to dismount and continue on foot. Soon after this, Chamberlain encountered a wounded Mexican; not only was he shot, but viciously scalped as well. Following the sounds of “shouts and curses, cries of women and children,” the group came upon the entrance to a cave. What Chamberlain recorded next seems beyond belief. He claimed that the cave was full of volunteers, mostly Arkansans, murdering Mexican civilians indiscriminately. Chamberlain guessed as many as twenty Mexicans lay murdered on the floor of the cave, most of them scalped.³⁹

Chamberlain’s party surrounded the Arkansans, and at gunpoint, ordered the massacre to cease. Army regulars escorted the perpetrators back to camp where they were held prisoner. Chamberlain and several army surgeons returned to the cave in an attempt

to save any Mexicans left alive. They found a most tragic scene—women and children sobbing and wounded men groaning. Those still alive panicked at Chamberlain’s return; they assumed that he and the others had returned to “finish the work.”⁴⁰

Buhoup gave a less detailed account of this event. He believed most of the correspondence surrounding the massacre to be exaggeration. Quoting Captain Crow of the Illinois volunteers, Buhoup estimated the number murdered to be between twenty-five and thirty. In reference to women and children, he stated, “We do not think that during the whole march of the Central Division, anyone belonging to it ever heard of a woman or child being murdered.” “If such atrocities were committed,” he continued, “no one is the wiser of it.” However, Buhoup failed to comment on the status of the men killed—whether or not they were armed or guilty of any crimes against the Arkansans.⁴¹



Figure 8 Chamberlain’s painting of the “Massacre of the Cave.” Samuel Chamberlain, *My Confession* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1956).

Many years after the war, an Arkansas volunteer related a similar story in his memoirs. He claimed that Mexicans regularly lassoed and dragged to death American soldiers. Such was the fate of a lone Arkansas rider in early 1847. In retaliation, several Arkansas volunteers “got permits to go deer hunting...and [finding] a camp of Mexicans and believing them to be the guilty ones, they shot all, about seventy-five in number.” The narrator claimed that many of the Mexicans fell to their knees and begged for mercy. Although he does not mention anything about a cave, this account –with the exception of an exaggerated number of victims–bears striking resemblance to Chamberlain’s “Massacre of the Cave.”⁴²

Wool formally reprimanded the Arkansas Cavalry, but Chamberlain claimed that no individual received any direct punishment. The event that sparked this incident was the murder of an Arkansas volunteer. However, Chamberlain concluded that this murder was directly related to the events at the Agua Nueva Ranch on Christmas Day. In retaliation for the rampant rape of numerous women at Agua Nueva, Mexican men murdered an Arkansas volunteer, thus prompting the Arkansans’ retaliation that resulted in the cave massacre. Both incidents prove that retaliatory actions among civilians and volunteers were quite common, often resulting in horrific actions on the part of both sides. However, if Chamberlain’s accounts of the occurrences at Agua Nueva and the cave are accurate, it appears that the actions of the volunteers many times exceeded mere retaliation.⁴³

Word of the massacre reached General Taylor, and he initiated a court of inquiry into the matter. However, the testimony of witnesses failed to identify any specific individual participating in the incident. Taylor's only option was to punish the entire Arkansas Regiment, which never happened. By claiming ignorance, the volunteers successfully withheld the identities of the guilty parties, thus rendering Taylor helpless in his attempt to administer justice. Buhoup believed that "anyone who had seen the murdered man, and could not feel himself inspired with the feelings of revenge, was not the man qualified to be in Mexico." To him, the brutal murder of an Arkansas volunteer necessitated an equally vicious act of revenge. The Arkansas volunteers, similar to the Texas Rangers and other volunteer groups, found ways to avoid military discipline, and thus, were free to conduct their own form of justice upon the civilian population of northern Mexico.⁴⁴

The American victory at Buena Vista did little to curb the rampant plundering and foraging of Arkansas volunteers. The two-day battle (February 22-23, 1847) had taken its toll on volunteers and regulars alike. Short on such essentials as coffee and fresh meat, Buhoup related the following story as a type of Biblical analogy: "Suddenly, as if providentially sent, like quails to the Israelites, a drove of sheep came running into the camp. It is needless to say that without ceremony the sheep were dispatched, and not one remained or escaped." Buhoup failed to mention the Indian in this case; perhaps he expected the reader to sympathize with the needs of soldiers who endured the recent hardships of battle.⁴⁵

After Buena Vista, most of the Arkansas regiments posted at the ranch of Encantada. Here they amused themselves with horse racing and gambling. It is here that Buhoup's Indian reappeared, engaging himself in the capture of "stray" horses and mules. He was able to profit by selling the captured animals to foot soldiers at bargain prices. Mexican ranchers countered this by matching their branding irons with that of the brand on the horse in question. When this occurred, American officials returned the stolen animals to their rightful owners and sentenced the Indian to several days in the guard-house. However, the Indian remedied this situation by creating his own branding iron, which he then used to alter the mark on stolen animals, thus confusing the rightful owners.⁴⁶

On May 31, 1847, the Arkansans participated in one final massacre. Two Mexicans stabbed an unsuspecting Arkansas cavalryman as he rode past them. The murderers threw the wounded man in a ditch and stole his horse. The wounded Arkansan lived long enough to explain the event to his companions, who promptly captured the members of the guilty party. The Arkansans suspicions were confirmed when they found one of the Mexicans in possession of the murder weapon. After executing the murderers, the Arkansans spent the day killing Mexicans, regardless of any crimes committed. An unknown witness guessed the Arkansans killed seventeen.⁴⁷ Commenting on this matter, Ohio volunteer Samuel Ryan Curtis hoped that in the future, the Arkansans would "cease to seek indiscriminate or doubtful vengeance."⁴⁸ Curtis's wish soon came true; on June 5, 1847, the last Arkansas volunteers departed Saltillo and headed for home.⁴⁹

On June 22, 1847, the Arkansas regiments received their final pay and left Camargo for Reynosa. Having reached the end of a long journey, Buhoup and his comrades bid good-bye to the Indian. When asked of his reasons for staying, the Indian simply replied, "Great country, this." Buhoup concluded: "We do not know what his intentions were, but we think, should he commit any depredations on the Mexicans while not belonging to any corps, General Wool will skeer an Injin [sic] very bad."⁵⁰ Discharged volunteers, free of army discipline, would have been at liberty to commit any depredations they saw fit. Discharged volunteers either found employment with the army or opened their own small businesses.⁵¹ If any members of the Central Division chose to return to Saltillo, they did so at the risk of being attacked by the guerrillas or irregular Mexican troops who wandered the countryside during the summer of 1847. But if the account of the Indian is true, it proves that some were willing to take this risk.

Of all the volunteer units that served in the Mexican War, only the Texas Rangers exceeded the Arkansans in the number of atrocities and depredations committed against the civilians of northern Mexico.⁵² Like most volunteer units, the Rackensackers were caught up in the patriotic fervor associated with the spirit of Manifest Destiny. As previously mentioned, the death of Major Jacob Brown at Fort Texas early in the war created a martyr who inspired many Arkansans to volunteer for service. The Rackensackers came from a frontier slave state; this, no doubt, contributed to their contempt for anyone they considered their inferiors—in this instance, the Mexicans.⁵³ In addition to racism, attitudes of state sovereignty and southern superiority influenced their

behavior as well.⁵⁴ Finally, volunteer officers such as Colonel Archibald Yell fostered attitudes of insubordination among their troops. The officers' unwillingness or inability to control their respective volunteers created an environment hostile to military discipline, which resulted in needless acts of violence directed at the civilians of northern Mexico.

But beyond any other possible reasons for their behaviors, the Arkansans appeared to commit atrocities for the same reasons other volunteer units did. In times of need, the Arkansans did not hesitate to steal what they needed from locals. They raped Mexican women, as witnessed by Samuel Chamberlain on Christmas Day, 1846. However, the Arkansans' acts of murder probably do more to explain the reasons for their behavior than anything else. When a Mexican murdered an Arkansan, the Rackensackers were sure to seek retribution. In this sense, the Arkansans differed little from the Texas Rangers. The main difference, of course, was the fact that the Texans had a long history of retaliatory actions against the Mexicans. But none the less, when the Arkansans finally reached Mexico, and were placed in similar circumstances, they lashed back at the civilian inhabitants with equal fury; or at times exceeded such, as evidenced by the "Massacre of the Cave."

NOTES

1. Samuel E. Chamberlain, *My Confession*, with an introduction and postscript by Roger Butterfield (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1956), 83.
2. *Ibid.*, 84. "Rackensacker" was army slang for Arkansan.
3. *Ibid.*, 84-85.
4. *Ibid.*, 83-84.
5. *Ibid.*, 53-57. A few weeks into the march, Chamberlain was ordered to carry dispatches overland two hundred miles to General Zachary Taylor's headquarters at Monterrey. It appears he spent at least two weeks there before reuniting with the Central Division sometime in November at Monclova.
6. Desmond Walls Allen, *Arkansas' Mexican War Soldiers* (Conway, AR: Arkansas Research, 1988), 1; Fay Hemstead, *A Pictorial History of Arkansas from Earliest Times to the Year 1890* (New York: N. D. Thompson Publishing Company, 1890), 303. Hemstead states that a total of fourteen hundred Arkansans enlisted.
7. Allen, *Arkansas' Mexican War Soldiers*, 1, 32.
8. James M. McCaffrey, *Army of Manifest Destiny: The American Soldier in the Mexican War, 1846-1848* (New York: New York University Press, 1992), 124; Walter Lee Brown, "The Mexican War Experiences of Albert Pike and the 'Mounted Devils' of Arkansas," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 12 (Winter, 1953): 305.
9. Hemstead, *History of Arkansas*, 309-310. According to Hemstead, Yell was killed by a lance wound that he received in hand-to-hand combat during the Battle of Buena Vista. Buena Vista was the only battle in which Yell's regiment participated.
10. Allen, *Arkansas' Mexican War Soldiers*, 19. Desmond Walls Allen reprinted Archibald Yell's obituary from the *Arkansas Banner*, Little Rock, Arkansas, April 21, 1847.
11. K. Jack Bauer, *The Mexican War, 1846-1848* (New York: Macmillan, 1974), 50.
12. *Ibid.*, 46.

13. Ibid., 49.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid., 81
16. The Old State House Museum, "Battles on the Rio Grande," The Old State House Museum, 2005, <http://www.oldstatehouse.com/exhibits/changing/mexican-war/05c.asp> (October 7, 2006).
17. Hemstead, *History of Arkansas*, 299.
18. The Old State House Museum, "Call to Action," The Old State House Museum, 2005, <http://www.oldstatehouse.com/exhibits/changing/mexican-war/06.asp> (October 7, 2006).
19. Jonathon W. Buhoup, *Narrative of the Central Division* (Pittsburgh: M. P. Morse, 1847), 19; Chamberlain, *My Confession*, 46; Hemstead, *History of Arkansas*, 303. Chamberlain lists September 25 as the date of the Central Division's departure.
20. Buhoup, *Narrative of the Central Division*, 27-28.
21. Ibid., 16, 36-39. Before leaving San Antonio, Buhoup introduced a "tall Cherokee belonging to the regiment." The story of the mayor's blanket is the first recorded act of treachery associated with the Central Division.
22. Ibid., 39.
23. Paul Foos, *A Short, Offhand, Killing Affair: Soldiers and Social Conflict During the Mexican-American War* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 144-145.
24. Buhoup, *Narrative of the Central Division*, 43.
25. Ibid., 40-41.
26. Ibid., 46-47.
27. Ibid., 49-50.
28. Ibid., 52.
29. Ibid.
30. Ibid., 55.

31. Ibid., 55-57.
32. Ibid., 88, 91-92.
33. Chamberlain, *My Confession*, 63-64.
34. Ibid., 89-90.
35. Ibid., 90.
36. Bauer, *The Mexican War*, 146.
37. Chamberlain, *My Confession*, 86-88. In addition to his story, Chamberlain includes a very graphic color painting of the Cave Massacre.
38. Ibid., 86.
39. Ibid., 87.
40. Ibid., 88.
41. Buhoup, *Narrative of the Central Division*, 108-109.
42. Allen, *Arkansas' Mexican War Soldiers*, 39.
43. Chamberlain, *My Confession*, 88.
44. Buhoup, *Narrative of the Central Division*, 109.
45. Ibid., 129.
46. Ibid., 133-134.
47. "Murder of an Arkansas Volunteer by Guerrilla, Retaliation," *Niles' National Register* (Baltimore), July 3, 1847, <http://history.vt.edu/MxAmWar/Newspapers/Niles/Nilesh1847JulAug.htm> (October 7, 2006); Samuel Ryan Curtis, *Mexico Under Fire: Being the Diary of Samuel Ryan Curtis*, edited and annotated by Joseph E. Chance (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1994), 194-195. Curtis only mentions the deaths of the two Mexicans accused of murdering the Arkansas volunteer.
48. Curtis, *Mexico Under Fire*, 195.
49. Buhoup, *Narrative of the Central Division*, 142.

50. Ibid., 148.
51. Foos, *A Short, Offhand, Killing Affair*, 146.
52. Charles M. Robinson, *Texas and the Mexican War* (Austin, TX: Texas State Historical Association, 2004), 83.
53. Foos, *A Short, Offhand, Killing Affair*, 144.
54. Chamberlain, *My Confession*, 89-90.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

The Mexican War volunteers inflicted great suffering upon the inhabitants of northern Mexico throughout the war. Overall, their presence had a significantly adverse effect upon the civilian population. In terms of individual groups, the Texas Rangers and the Arkansas volunteers seemed to commit more civilian depredations than any others. The cruelty of their acts also exceeded that of other volunteer units. The Arkansans' "Massacre of the Cave" and the Rangers' attack on the San Francisco Ranch provide solid evidence for such a conclusion.¹ An examination of General Zachary Taylor's northern campaign, however, proves that civilian atrocities were not only common, but committed by volunteers other than those previously mentioned. Civilian atrocities were widespread and resulted from the insubordination and lack of discipline—throughout the entire war—on the part of numerous volunteers from many different units.

There are two main reasons for the misbehavior of the volunteers. First, they were not required to adhere to the strict military discipline imposed upon army regulars. This military discipline, which promoted conciliation and proper treatment of Mexican civilians and non-combatants, was absent from most volunteer units. The volunteers' refusal to model their behavior after army regulars created a noticeable rift in the army. Civilians especially took note of this, and learned to fear and despise Mexican War

volunteers. Second, continuous harassment from guerrillas and irregular Mexican troops created frustrations among American volunteers that most often resulted in retaliatory actions. In many instances, Mexican civilians and non-combatants found themselves in the midst of a conflict that they neither wished nor asked for.

In his book *To Conquer a Peace*, author John Edward Weems deduces that “many [Mexican War] volunteers had joined the army for fun and frolic more than for fighting, and their revelry got out of hand. Their own officers were reluctant to discipline them for fear of reprisal later, upon return to civilian life; for all personnel in volunteer regiments came from the same localities.”² That is a valid conclusion. Mexican War volunteers were not prepared for a war in a foreign land. Patriotism and the spirit of Manifest Destiny encouraged many to join in the war effort, but beyond this, the Mexican War also provided volunteers with an opportunity for excitement and adventure. When their patriotic fervor and quest for adventure subsided, they looked to other sources to satisfy their desires. Boredom, alcohol abuse, supply shortages, the unwarranted murder of comrades, and feelings of desperation caused volunteers to commit numerous injustices against the civilians of northern Mexico. When such things occurred, volunteer officers refused to take disciplinary action for fear of reprisal. This explains why atrocities became prevalent among the volunteers. They were accountable to no one except themselves and their comrades. Their loyalty to their home states and respective units took precedence over the army’s mission and created problems with regard to discipline and unity. This insubordination—which inevitably extended into the civilian sector—had a

detrimental effect on the inhabitants of northern Mexico, who suffered greatly due to the presence of volunteers. It is safe to assume that many Mexicans—long after the culmination of this brief conflict—remembered and resented the conquest of northern Mexico, and that their lives were never quite the same.

NOTES

1. Samuel E. Chamberlain, *My Confession*, with an introduction and postscript by Roger Butterfield (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1956), 87, 177. In both of these incidents, Chamberlain guessed that volunteers murdered some twenty to thirty Mexican civilians.
2. John Edward Weems, *To Conquer a Peace: The War between the United States and Mexico* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1974), 280.

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Scope and Method of Study: This study exposes the atrocities and depredations committed by American volunteers serving in the Mexican War, 1846-1848. These behaviors are documented in the memoirs, narratives, and correspondence of Mexican War participants and observers.

Findings and Conclusions: The presence of volunteer units had a significantly adverse effect on the inhabitants of northern Mexico throughout the conflict. American volunteers serving in the United States Army during the Mexican War committed numerous atrocities against the civilians and non-combatants of northern Mexico. This situation was unique to the American army's northern campaign, and several first-hand accounts serve as evidence to the undisciplined nature of volunteer units and the atrocities they committed.

ADVISOR'S APPROVAL: Dr. L.G. Moses
