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John B. ARMSTRONG

Texas Ranger and Pioneer Ranchman

John B. Armstrong, Texas Ranger and Pioneer Ranchman is the latest book by regular *Texas Ranger Dispatch* writer/historian Chuck Parsons. It is a long overdue work on one of the most legendary Texas Rangers of all time. Though best known for capturing the notorious Texas gunman John Wesley Hardin, Armstrong had a fabled career not only as a Texas Ranger, but also as a pioneer Texas cattleman.

As a Ranger, Armstrong served under the renowned Captain Leander McNelly. While a "Little McNelly," Armstrong and his fellow Rangers almost caused an international incident when McNelly led them in the invasion of the Mexican bandito stronghold at Las Cuevas, Mexico.

With the permission of the Texas A & M University Press, we proudly present an excerpt from this important addition to Texas Ranger history.

Excerpt from *John B. Armstrong* by Chuck Parsons

Chapter 3

Gunfire at Las Cuevas

Orders were received to ride rapidly to Las Cuevas, alias Robber's Roost. We obeyed them to the letter; we rode rapidly; fifty-five miles in six hours, each man carrying one hundred rounds of ammunition.

—Lt. T. C. "Pidge" Robinson

McNelly and his men had little to be proud of following the resounding victory over the bandits on the Palo Alto Prairie; there were no more significant victories against the raiders. Cortina's thieves were wary of these new *diablos tejanos* (Texan devils) from the north and rather than chance being run down and killed like the men on the Palo Alto Prairie they abandoned the stolen herds to escape with their lives.

What frustrated McNelly most was not that he couldn't locate bands of cattle thieves, Mexican or Anglo, but that the Rio Grande was an international boundary which law officers could not legally cross without expecting repercussions. His success on the Palo Alto

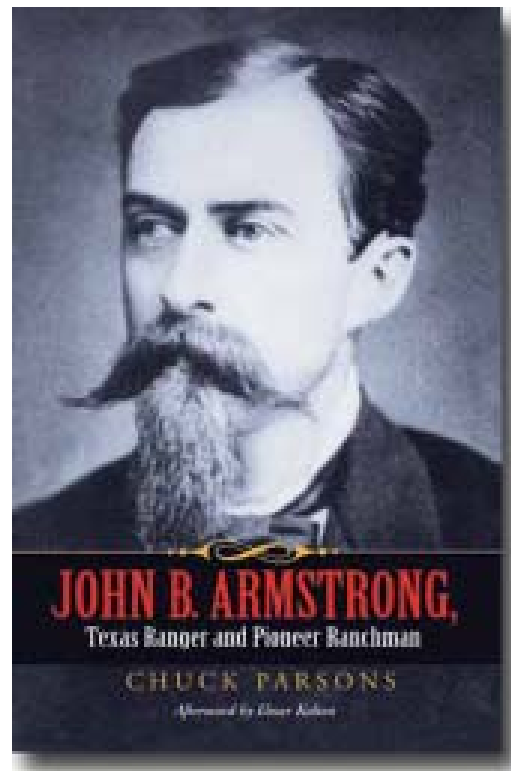
Prairie would not be easy to duplicate; in fact, the thieves were in such awe, or fear, of McNelly that they would not cross the prairie at night.

McNelly continued to work on his spy system and managed to locate a number of the bandits who were willing to provide information—for a price. He was able to inquire into the character of the men who made up the bands of raiders and “selected those whom I knew to be tricky, and secured interviews with them.” The result was that he was able to proposition a few to sell out their companions, promising to pay them more for their betrayal than they could make by continuing to raid. McNelly knew that in order to stop the raiding he cross the river with their stolen stock. McNeil), noted that all of these potential traitors whom he approached readily entered into his plans and that without exception he found them to be “reliable and trustworthy.” McNelly depended so much on these traitors that he agreed not to “interfere with their own individual stealing at all. I gave them liberty when I was not there in their neighborhood, to cross over with their friends.”

Not only did McNelly establish a successful spy system, he also managed to get one of his own men, Sgt. George A. Hall, infiltrated into Cortina’s organization. McNelly testified before the U.S. House of Representatives that he “sent” Hall on board the vessel that was to deliver some five hundred or six hundred head of Texas cattle, “for the purpose of taking down the brands. He went in the character of a spy. . . . Cortina was present himself, with a force of probably 150 or zoo men, delivering these cattle.”

During the months following the Palo Alto victory McNelly worked on improving his spy system, actually getting some raiders to betray their comrades in an effort to smash the raiding rings. Results were not satisfactory, however, as too many times McNelly and his small band of Rangers managed to catch up with the raiding parties only after they had crossed the river. Rather than give up, he chose to solve the problem in typically dramatic McNelly fashion: ignoring international law, he followed the raiders into their own land. For McNelly, Sergeant Armstrong, and the other young Rangers, this would be their first venture into Mexico.

T. C. “Pidge” Robinson, now writing for the Daily State Gazette of Austin, some six weeks after the late November invasion, provides an account of the venture into Mexico in his humorous style: “I would have sent you an account of the invasion long, long ago, but was compelled by special orders to write out a true account of it, which has been awful straining to the, mind; I am not accustomed to this, and have scarcely recovered from it





yet; besides, I think I must have been sun struck in Mexico, or received some kind of shock; I have not felt well since; it may be the effect of the heavy dew on the river; but every time a shot is fired in my vicinity, a disagreeable chilly sensation starts with lightning speed from the back of my neck, and comes out at my boot heels." Robinson was rarely serious in his contributions to Austin's newspapers, but he did provide a firsthand account of the invasion to recover stolen cattle.

McNelly gave considerable thought to invading a foreign country, even if "in hot pursuit." He met with Maj. A. J. Alexander from Fort Brown regarding the problem of raiders, and, according to McNelly, Alexander advised him in writing that he could "follow raiders anywhere." McNelly, eager to catch raiders and knowing his men wanted action as badly as he did, hoped to put Alexander "to the test in a few days." Further, writes McNelly, "I heard that the parties who buy most of the stolen cattle "[sic] have contracted to deliver (18,000) eighteen thousand head" to Monterrey "within the next ninety days." Eighteen thousand head would mean an average of two hundred head of cattle stolen from ranches in Texas and delivered every day."

On November 18 McNelly sent word to his Rangers to prepare to ride hard for the Rancho Las Cuevas, on the Mexican side of the river, as there was a herd about to be crossed. "Orders were received," writes Pidge, "to ride rapidly to Las Cuevas, alias Robber's Roost. We obeyed them to the letter; we rode rapidly; fifty-five miles in six hours, each man carrying one hundred rounds of ammunition."

McNelly was not alone in trying to stop the thieves. Lt. Col. James F. Randlett from Fort Brown had learned from an unidentified "Mexican Citizen of Texas" that a party of fifteen thieves had crossed and would probably recross with stolen cattle soon. Randlett intended to intercept them while they were still on U.S. soil. Thus, at almost the same time, two military forces had the best of intentions to get to the river before the bandits could cross. Randlett with some thirty men actually did catch up with the raiders shortly after they crossed but did not pursue them into Mexico. He did fire on them, killing two and wounding another, at which time the thieves retreated further, leaving only a few head of cattle which had gotten stuck in the river's sand.

McNelly arrived and heard the shooting but, unlike Randlett, chose to cross over with his twenty-six Rangers. Although he did manage to commandeer a boat, it was an unworthy affair as it leaked badly. Writes Pidge of the crossing, "In single file and leading the horses, we gathered at the beautiful, the beautiful river and in silence commenced the embarkment; on each side of the crossing crouched the men, gun [rifle] in hand, to protect the passage of the first boat; from below at another crossing echoed the sullen roar of the Springfields, where the regulars [under Randlett] were making a feint, while we went over undiscovered; with a very little assistance I could have made a feint myself about that time. After crossing two horses and getting them through the quicksands, it was calculated that with the best of luck and no accident all of them could be safely landed on the Mexican bank by Christmas Eve."

Nevertheless, McNelly and his men did manage to cross over in the dilapidated vessel

without incident. Pidge writes that the “tub” was in such poor condition that “it kept four men busy bailing to keep the nose of the man who paddled above the water. It only carried four; it might have carried more had there been room enough for them to bail, but there wasn’t.” Finally, all were crossed over, McNelly, guide Jesus Sandoval, and interpreter Tom Sullivan going over first, followed by Armstrong, Robinson, and George A. Hall, who got across with their horses.’ The remainder were on foot. On the Mexican side they rested until dawn, then proceeded to march toward Las Cuevas, the rancho which Pry. William Callicott called the headquarters of all the thieves. Pidge describes the exhausting march: “We . . . marched to Las Cuevas, said to be one mile distant; after we had walked about three, we concluded there must be a mistake somewhere, or that the town was marching too; a little further and we ran full upon the ranche.”

At the ranch which McNelly believed to be Las Cuevas, orders were given to ride in and shoot everyone except old men, women, and children. McNelly, Armstrong, Robinson, Sandoval, Sullivan, and Hall galloped through shooting and yelling, followed by those on foot. Pidge records that seven Mexicans were killed and nine wounded. But McNelly had attacked the wrong ranch. Sandoval had not been on the Mexican side for quite some time and instead of leading McNelly and the Rangers to Las Cuevas had led them to a ranch close by, Las Cucharas. When McNelly realized his mistake he could only gather his forces and anticipate the worst. He had not only killed possibly innocent people but he had lost the element of surprise. Juan Flores Salinas, titular head of the bandits around Las Cuevas, was close enough to have heard the shots and no doubt was preparing to attack the invaders.

Pidge estimated that there were at least two hundred men ready to defend their country and their honor and protect the stolen herd as well. Callicott estimated the number at 250. Whatever the number, they vastly outnumbered McNelly and his twenty-six.

There was little cover now for McNelly and his Rangers so the only sensible thing to do was to retreat back to the river, where the bank would give them some protection. This they did, with Lieutenant Robinson leading the way and McNelly bringing up the rear. Pidge wrote later of the retreat: “I was awfully fatigued, but I scorned to let this interfere with my duty; and stepped up with much alacrity; such fiendish yells I never heard, but I could see very little; where the smoke came from the guns it hung like a pall, and I was not



Leander McNelly
Renowned Texas Ranger Captain



sorry to leave, for it had a very offensive odor to me. Back to the river we went, and waited further developments.”

The “further developments” were unexpected, as now, with Mexicans charging him, Captain Randlett came to the rescue with some forty soldiers of the 8th Cavalry. With all the gunfire Armstrong’s and Hall’s horses panicked and jumped out from under them, leaving them afoot. The two horses were taken by the Mexicans. McNelly now brazenly ordered his men to “open up.” In the firefight which followed Juan Salinas was killed, resulting in the Mexican line’s breaking and retreating. McNelly bent down and picked up Salinas’s fancy pistol, a Smith & Wesson inlaid with silver and gold. The captain, having survived the first onslaught, was determined to stay in Mexico until he recovered at least some of the stolen cattle. No doubt, Armstrong and Hall, now on foot, were just as determined to stay until they recovered their horses.

And stay they did. McNelly crossed back to the Texas side of the river to communicate with President Grant about his actions in crossing and creating a potential political crisis. During his absence a group of Mexicans under a white flag and led by Dr. Alexander Manford Headley, an English doctor who practiced on both sides of the river, approached the troop with the intention of convincing the Rangers to return to Texas soil to save their lives. The doctor and his group were rebuffed.

Three times the truce party approached the Rangers, each time requesting the same thing: return to Texas. But each time the response was the same: they would leave only with the stolen cattle. Ultimately, McNelly did agree to return to Texas on condition that the stolen cattle and the horses and saddles of Armstrong and Hall be returned the next morning at Rio Grande City, a few miles up the river. McNelly almost certainly agreed to this because of Dr. Headley’s involvement. It was Dr. Headley who negotiated the terms of peace which allowed McNelly to save face by returning to Texas and who promised that at least part of the stolen herd would be returned.” McNelly recorded this in a telegram dated November: “I withdrew my men last night upon the promise of the Mexican authorities to deliver the cattle to me at Rio Grande City this morning.”

But when the next morning came no cattle were produced, so again McNelly crossed, but this time he met with a delegation of citizens who informed him that the cattle could not be crossed because they had not been inspected. McNelly saw this as a delaying tactic and threatened that he “would kill the last one of them” unless the cattle were produced within five minutes.”

Pidge recalled that the Mexicans needed assistance to cross the cattle, and McNelly and ten men, Armstrong one of them, went over.” Then another excuse was provided, that there was no permit allowing the cattle to be taken across the river. Pidge Robinson was one of the ten who helped with the crossing and recalled the following: “Capt. M[cNelly]—exhausted all arguments with these gentlemen, except one, which he reserved for the very last, and which, as a dernier resorte [sic] in this country, is considered ‘a clincher;’ then he exhausted that; ‘Prepare to load with ball cartridges—load!’ The ominous ‘kerchak’

of the carbine levers as the long, murderous looking cartridges were chambered home, satisfied them as to the permit and the cattle were allowed to cross over without one; such is the power of a fifty-calibre argument, such the authority of Sharp on International law.” The cattle were miraculously produced under this threat, although the number amounted to only sixty-five head. McNelly telegraphed Adjutant General Steele that the Mexicans would produce “more [cattle as] soon as captured and the delivery of the thieves.”

The sixty-five head of cattle were delivered, and Armstrong and Hall recovered their horses, saddles, and bridles without further incident. No thieves were delivered, however, in spite of the promise of the Mexicans. The cattle were returned to their owners, many of them ranchers in the immediate area. Those of cattleman Richard King were also returned, with volunteer Rangers Durham, Callicott, Rudd, and Pitts herding them back to the Santa Gertrudis Ranch. A greatly surprised King had never expected to see them or any of the Rangers again, as he anticipated that McNelly and his invading force would become “another Alamo.” He was so grateful that he ordered the right horn of each of the recovered cattle to be sawed off and the cattle turned loose on the range to live out their days in peace. King’s vaqueros called these special cattle los viejos (the old ones).

It is unfortunate that during the tumultuous affair no single incident resulted in Armstrong’s receiving any special attention. He was one of the first to cross the Rio Grande and among the first to attack, although unintentionally, the Rancho Las Cucharas. Even though a sergeant, he, as well as Sergeant Hall and the privates, were merely following orders and had no opportunity to display heroics. He received some little attention when his horse was recovered. However, all this would change in 1876 and 1877. Glory enough would be his.

Chuck Parsons

Author

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