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## My Men Are All Frontiersmen El Paso's Tejano Texas Rangers in the 1870s

by Paul Cool



Adapted from ***Salt Warriors: Insurgency on the Rio Grande***  
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During the 1870s, El Paso County was marked by wholesale political corruption and vicious, even violent, political rivalries. But while politicians and capitalists concentrated on schemes of riches and ruination, other El Pasoans contended with a land of lawlessness and barbarity that lay in all directions beyond the Pass. Texas Rangers like Gregorio Garcia, Telesforo Montes, Francisco Barela, and Sisto Salcido knew little of luxury and a great deal about searing heat, bitter cold, the taste of dust, the lack of water, and the precariousness of life.

The grassy bolsons, shrub-pocked limestone mountains, and dry heat of the Chihuahuan Desert shaped and toughened such men. Keeping their eyes open, their wits sharp, their horses fed and watered, their canteens filled, and their guns clean, loaded, and within easy reach, they learned how to stay alive and, on occasion, dish out death. For these "knights" of the Trans-Pecos, the land beyond the valley was a training ground, a military academy turning out the soldiers who answered the selfish personal squabbles of El Paso's politicians with a full scale war. These Tejano Rangers were inheritors of a nearly century-long line of citizen soldiers.

In *The Magnificent Seven*, John Sturges's translation of Akiro Kurasawa's *Seven Samurai* to the Western film genre, peaceful Mexican farmers rise up to save

their village from a small army of bandits. Roused from instinctive and comfortable docility, they hire professional gunmen from north of the border who teach them which end of a gun to shoot and how to find their courage. Unlike these movie farmers, the Mexican Americans of El Paso County, called Paseños, were anything but docile. Whereas Sturges's cinematic village had but one old man who knew how to fight, the real villages of San Elizario, Socorro, and Ysleta, Texas counted hundreds. It is the old man of *The Magnificent Seven*, not his frightened neighbors, who reflect the reality of the Paseño towns.

What Mexican revolutionary historian Rubén Osorio writes about the State of Chihuahua applies specifically to the Pass of the North: "The peasant class had come into being under very special conditions during the colonial period, as settler-soldiers, or literally as an armed peasantry living in presidios constructed by the Spanish government against the 'barbarous Indians.'" Ysleta and Socorro were organized around missions, but San Elizario began in 1789 as such a presidio, or fort, the town growing up around it. Presidio soldiers campaigned against Indians and regularly escorted caravans to the provincial capital in Santa Fe. Its troops also contributed to the wider defense of the Mexican Republic. After the garrison was permanently reassigned to Santa Fe in 1843, San Elizario became a farming center. Its residents tore down the old presidio's adobe walls and buildings to construct their own homes and pens. But since Apache depredations continued, these farmers, ex-soldiers and descendants of settler-soldiers, became citizen warriors frequently defending their homes against Apaches or taking the fight to their enemy's lair.<sup>2</sup>

In the years between the Mexican-American War and the coming of the railroad in 1881, El Pasoans were entirely dependent on grass-and grain-fed animals for travel and trade. Travelers, animals, and vehicles made attractive targets. Anything could happen during the long journey along the long miles from San Antonio or the stretch south from Santa Fe. The Federal Government's unwillingness to adequately fund either its Indian reservations or its Army encouraged renegade bands and whole tribes to periodically strike out in search of adequate food, the dignity of independence, and blood revenge. According to W.W. Mills, in 1858 "The Americans and Mexicans were secure only near the military posts, or villages, or large settlements, and when they traveled from place to place, they traveled in companies strong enough for defense, or at night and by stealth, trusting to Providence, or luck, each according to his faith." The garrison at Fort Bliss seldom included sufficient mounted troops to effectively counter the Indians. To bolster them, Paseños willingly joined the soldiers as guides and auxiliaries.

Not even the large towns were safe havens. The people and livestock of *la Isla*, the occasional island on the Rio Grande holding El Paso County's ethnic Mexican towns, presented prime targets for the Mescalero Apache. On one occasion in early 1859, word reached Fort Bliss that Apaches had stolen cattle, horses, and mules from San Elizario. First Lieutenant Henry M. Lazelle and thirty mounted rifleman pursued. They first stopped at San Elizario, where the officer added several citizens to augment and guide his command. Among these was Gregorio Nacienceno Garcia I. The chase stretched for 160 winding miles to New Mexico's Sacramento Mountains. On February 8, Lazelle's thirsty men

passed through towering cliffs into rock strewn and cactus choked Dog Cañon. Here thirty Apaches greeted the soldiers under a white flag. After a fruitless discussion, the shooting began. The soldiers were soon flanked, prompting their withdrawal. In a fighting retreat to the canyon's mouth, the pursuit party lost three men killed and six wounded, including Lazelle, shot twice through the lungs. The army's official report of the action failed to mention the Paseño role, but George Baylor later wrote that, "Garcia, with some citizens of San Elizario, prevented the massacre of the United States troops in Dog Cañon by his skill and courage." The survivors returned without the stolen livestock. The defeat illustrated both the difficulty of waging war on Apaches and the martial qualities of Paseño citizen soldiers.<sup>3</sup>

\* \* \*

Raiders struck the valley nearly every month in the years immediately following the American Civil War. March 1866 was the worst month. In two days, the citizens of *la Isla*, most of whom lived their lives on a thin margin, lost over \$5,000 in livestock and other property and twenty-three relatives and neighbors killed. Between March 1865 and January 1867, the people of *la Isla* reported the loss of more than 1,200 animals, plus wagons and equipment, a staggering loss. Even worse, thirty-five Paseños were reported to have lost their lives in Indian depredations in that time.<sup>4</sup>

To counter continuing Indian depredations, in the spring of 1870, Governor Edmund J. Davis signed the Frontier Force bill. El Paso County was allotted a sixty-man Ranger company (soon reduced to fifty). Its payroll promised \$3,000 per month in wages to a poor county (worth more than 100 times that amount in unskilled wages for 2006). El Paso's Company N was mustered into service on August 12. Its captain was an obvious choice, Gregorio N. Garcia I. The veteran Indian campaigner was trained in the soldier's craft by Captain Jose Ignacio Ronquillo, commandant of the Presidio after 1830 and the foremost Paseño soldier of the Mexican era. That officer ranged over large tracts of land in pursuit of Comanche, Kiowa and Apache war parties. He scored several notable victories, earning promotion and a sizeable land grant in what is now west Texas. Garcia, drafted for military service in his fifteenth year, learned from Ronquillo how to track and fight Indians. Garcia served in Mexico's army against the Americans, probably in the debacle at Brazitos on Christmas Day, 1846. In the 1850s he solidified his reputation as an Indian fighter. In 1862, Union Brigadier General James Carleton chose Garcia to command twenty Paseño scouts who would guide a column of cavalry deep into Mescalero territory. Fifty-eight Paseños plus Civil War veterans Caleb Miller and Charles Kerber (company clerk) completed the ranger roster. Though many in Garcia's company were related by blood and marriage, the presence of forty-two Mexican surnames on the rolls testified to a community-wide response to the needs for soldiers *and* income.<sup>5</sup>

Putting Texas Rangers into the field, armed, equipped, and mounted required money. When the Army reneged on its agreement to provide the Rangers with weapons and supplies, Garcia was forced to campaign with "brought [sic] carbines and shoulder guns." Garcia stressed his need for arms, ammunition and equipment "so I am able to chastise Indians," but did not wait to take the field. On

December 6, he received word that Apaches had stolen cattle at a ranch some twenty miles southeast of San Elizario. A sergeant and ten men pursued, but the Indians escaped. An unexpected call for help came from El Paso on the night of December 7. Albert French, at that time the local State Police chief, requested the Rangers' help to ensure order following the killings of Judge Gaylord Clarke and disgruntled office seeker Benjamin Franklin Williams. Garcia and his men saddled up at once, riding "25 miles in 2 hours and 15 minutes" from San Elizario to El Paso. The town remained quiet, and Garcia's men returned to camp two days later.<sup>6</sup>

In February 1871, Garcia's command cooperated in a winter campaign with four companies of the Ninth Cavalry under Major Albert P. Morrow. The Rangers still lacked arms, ammunition, and sufficient pack mules, but the experienced Garcia still hoped to "make good record for myself and Company." The formations linked at Independence Spring, near the Guadalupe Pass. Here Morrow lent the Rangers mules and armed them with Springfield needle guns. Though the ammunition was "quite unserviceable, not over half of them giving fire," at least the men were on campaign. While the cavalry scouted the center and east side of the Guadalupe and Sacramento Mountains, the Rangers scouted the west side. Garcia spotted the trail of a dozen or so Indians estimated to be eight days old. The Rangers followed the tracks as far as Dog Cañon. Here the trail split in two, some Indians going to San Andres, and others headed to the safety of Fort Stanton. Finding no more signs, the Rangers returned to Independence Spring, "having marched an average of 26 miles per day over rocky and steep mountains, with scarcity of water, being 78 full hours without a drop of water for man or beast, also under very cold weather." Another seven day patrol east to the Pecos river country also failed to turn up Indians. Garcia made the best of his obvious disappointment. "The reports of the murdering of 8 Americans & one white lady about 90 miles west of the Rio Grande, also of the many murders in New Mexico and Arizona makes all believe that the Indians are aware of our large command or fled to other parts."<sup>7</sup>

In April, nearly eight months after they were mustered in, Company D finally received arms, Winchester carbines instead of the promised rifles. Garcia also received 15,000 rounds of Winchester ammunition and 5,000 rounds of ammunition for pistols, but no pistols. Unfortunately, the Frontier Force was disbanded in June 1871. Captain Garcia's final report eloquently expressed his pride in the company's service as well as his many frustrations. Though his men had not met the Indians in battle, Garcia was confident the unit had performed a great service to Texas. "[T]housands of miles have been traveled by my Company under great wants of water and great cold so we could make drive [sic] the Indians for Arizona and Mexico. We succeeded in that." His boast was not idle. As Texas Ranger historian Frederick Wilkins noted, "Indians tended to avoid regions in which they observed the tracks of shod horses, and there is little doubt that Indian raids decreased in the districts patrolled by the Rangers." Indeed, the Apaches resumed their raids along the river once his unit disbanded.<sup>8</sup>

The company was discharged without having received any pay. Garcia advised the Adjutant General, "the majority of the Company are poor men and heads of



families; for most their horses and pistols I myself had to go security with the promise to pay them at the first payday." Garcia's warning that the Democratic Party would make hay with this non-payment of sixty *Paseños* at the next election had its effect. The Rangers finally received their full back pay, a small fortune for some. For others, perhaps even more valuable was the military experience gained.<sup>9</sup>

In the spring of 1874, the state government raised special companies of Texas Rangers called "Frontier Men" or "Minute Men" to meet emergencies on the frontier. El Paso's company included one officer and twenty-four enlisted men, all but one of them a *Paseno*. In the years since Garcia's company was disbanded, local politicians had learned the value of controlling an armed force on election day. In 1872 they had battled for control of El Paso's State Police unit. Now, local politician Louis Cardis endorsed the appointment of Albert French as Captain of the company. Instead, the commanding officer, a lieutenant this time, was selected by vote of the new recruits. The election went to Telesforo Montes, a leader in the community's opposition to a recent Texas school law, an experienced Apache fighter, and one of Captain Garcia's sergeants in 1870-1871. Rangers who later figured prominently in the Salt War included Sergeant Tomas Garcia, Corporal Francisco Barela, and Private Sisto Salcido, another veteran of Garcia's company. The outfit was something of a family affair. In addition to Tomas Garcia, Montes commanded son-in-law Carlos Garcia, their brother Secundio, and the lieutenant's own sons, Jesus and Severo, a fact that later caused complaint.<sup>10</sup>

Again, the El Paso Rangers lacked sufficient arms and ammunition. Echoing Garcia's earlier pleas, Montes prodded Adjutant General William Steele, "The Company are all anxious to go on a scout to prevent depredations from these marauding Indians, & to drive them from the Country or secure their capture..." Montes's Frontier Men did not wait long. In July the Rangers received twenty Sharps rifles. Texas was stingier with ammunition, furnishing only two boxes of a thousand rounds each. Supply snafus were repeated. The pistol cartridges were unsuitable for the Rangers' old Colt revolvers. Promised cartridge belts and boxes never arrived, prompting Montes to hire a local saddler to make them.<sup>11</sup>

In mid-September the Montes company rescued an eight-year-old boy. The Rangers first scouted to the Guadalupe Mountains, then struck a trail headed back toward the river. The Rangers came upon their quarry on the third day out, camped in a canyon inaccessible to horses. It was a party of seven, one of whom was the captive boy. Montes dismounted his men, left half with the horses, and took twelve with him into the canyon. The Rangers attacked, killing two men, scalping one. The boy, unharmed in the action, had been stolen from his parents near Presidio del Norte eight months earlier. The Rangers also captured five horses, gunpowder, lead, saddles, and "camp paraphernalia," all "divided among the men." Evidence of the Apache band's recent success was found in a pile of "dry goods, such as muslin, calico & evidently recently acquired which had not been unfolded." The captured horses were in poor condition, but one was in better shape than Montes's "exhausted" mount. With General Steele's permission, Montes later exchanged his horse for the captured animal.<sup>12</sup>

Just as it proved its worth, the El Paso company was ordered to disband. Montes warned that Indian raids would increase, leaving citizens defenseless. Opting to reinforce success, Steele kept the company in force for two more months. Unfortunately, the Rangers failed to catch the Indian parties they tracked to the Sierra Blanca Mountains in late October and to the Guadalupe Mountains in November.<sup>13</sup>

Budget cutbacks forced the disbandment of the emergency Ranger companies that winter. The Apaches thereupon resumed their attacks upon travelers and ranchers, raiding as far as *la Isla* in relative safety and with some success. The renewed depredations prompted Judge Charles Howard, a Democratic Party leader, to beg the governor in July 1875 to call the company back into service. But the judge had another motive: laying low his political rival, Louis Cardis, who had promised Ranger slots to political allies. As Howard laid bare to Governor Richard Coke, "As to matters political, both this and the San Antonio Senatorial Dist seem to have gone for the enemy. I can reclaim El Paso County if I can have the filling of the company that we talked of.... If you will let us have a company, and *let me name men and officers* (italics added), it will do more to break down Cardis, than any other one thing. The people will then see that he has lied to them."<sup>14</sup>

While the judge looked for political advantage, Sheriff Charles Kerber was motivated by a palpable dread of armed "Mexicans." The sheriff warned Coke that Cardis was already organizing a company of rangers "among his Mexican friends" in fulfillment of a campaign pledge. This was, against the peace — & dangerous for all white men of this County, which he threatens to punish personally for not voting for him. Even in his speeches to the Mexican population he... advises the latter to drive all Americans from this country or make use of the Lynch Law. Four years ago Cardis in company with a fanatic catholic priest had organized a company to drive all Americans, not his friends, from the Country or to kill them.... The same priest though now removed to Mexico still supports Cardis & helps him at every election by having nightly meetings on this side of the river. That's where Cardis' influence amongst the ignorant Mexican population lays! ... every white man, not Cardis' friends, has to expect to be assassinated.<sup>15</sup>

Left of Page 7 pp2

1 Manuela Cárdenas-Oellermann translated the correspondence of Telesforo Montes and Miguel Garcia from the original Spanish. 2 For a history of Mexican-Apache relations in Chihuahua, see William B. Griffen, *Utmost Good Faith* (University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque, 1988). See also Rubén Osorio, "Villismo: Nationalism and Popular Mobilization in Northern Mexico," *Rural Revolt in Mexico* (Duke University Press, 1998), 97; Rick Hendricks and W.H. Timmons, *San Elizario: Spanish Presidio to Texas County Seat* (Texas Western Press, 1998), 51-61; C. L. Sonnichsen, *Mescalero Apaches* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1958, 1973 reprint), 62; Frank Louis Halla Jr., "El Paso, Texas and Juarez, Mexico: A Study of a Bi-ethnic Community 1846-1881" (Ph.D. dissertation, UT Austin, 1978), 47.

3 W[illiam] W[allace] Mills, *Forty Years in El Paso* (Carl Hertzog, 1962), 22; *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, March 3, 1859; Richard Wadsworth, *Forgotten Fortress* (Yucca Tree Press, 1962), 261-262; George W. Baylor, *Into the Far Wild Country*, Jerry Thompson, ed. (Texas Western Press, 1996), p. 276.

4 Dorman H. Winfrey and James M. Day, eds., *Indian Papers of Texas and the Southwest 1825- 1916* (Texas State Historical Association, 1995), 4:169-172.

5 The captain was to be paid \$100 per month, the lieutenant \$80, the three sergeants \$54, the four corporals \$52, and the fifty privates \$50 each. Frederick Wilkins, *The Law Comes to Texas* (State House Press, 1999),

6. Bill Lockhart, "San Elizario Presidio History," *San Elizario Plaza*, John A. Peterson, Timothy B. Graves, and David V. Hill, eds., (UT El Paso, 2002), 58; Hendricks/ Timmons, *San Elizario*, 84, 115; Griffen, *Utmost Good Faith*, 30-32, 56-57; "Ronquillo Land Grant," *Handbook of Texas Online* (hereinafter "HTO"), [http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/ RR/mnr1.html](http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/RR/mnr1.html). 6 Wilkins,

7; Garcia to Adjutant General (AG), December 3, 1870; Garcia to A.G., December 6, 1870; Return of Company N, Texas Frontier Forces, December 1870, AG Records, Texas State Archives and Library Commission (All correspondence and other records related to the El Paso Texas Ranger companies of 1870-71 and 1874-76 are from the AG Correspondence or other AG Records, TSALC, unless otherwise noted). 7 "Needle guns" were cartridge conversions of the muzzle loading Springfield musket. Garcia

8 Garcia to AG to April 17, 1871; AG's Abstract of Articles transferred to Frontier Force, May 31, 1871; Garcia to AG, June 16, 1871; Wilkins, *Law Comes to Texas*, 16; Montes to AG, September 13-14, 1871; Indian Papers, 4:384.

9 Garcia to A.G. March 31, 1871; Garcia to A.G., June 16, 1871; Garcia and Montes Payment Vouchers.

10 Cardis to AG Steele, March 30, 1874, endorsing Letter of A.H. French, March 7, 1874, State Police Corr., AG Corr.; *Mesilla News*, March 7, 1874; Muster and Pay Roll of Company of FrontierMen, El Paso County, May 27, 1874.

11 In 1862, Steele led the Confederate rear guard in its retreat through El Paso following the debacle at Glorieta Pass. During their passage, his men engaged in several skirmishes with Pasaños angry over "contraband" stolen from the population. See Paul Cool, *Salt Warriors: Insurgency on the Rio Grande* (Texas A&M University Press, 2008), 29-30; Montes to A.G. William Steele, May 31, 1874; S. Schutz & Bro. voucher, June 15, 1874, Frontier Force records; Montes to Steele, August 5, 1874.

12 Montes to Steele, September 27, 1874.



13 Montes to Steele, September 27, October 20, October 28, and November 27, 1874.

14 Howard to Coke, July 2, 1875, August 16, 1875, August 19, 1875, Register of Letters Received, Governor Richard Coke Corr., TSALC (hereinafter Coke Corr.)

