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Navigatin' with Nancy (~~Er Eddie, too!~~)



• • • the  
**Battle**  
**of Palo Alto**  
**Never Happened**  
???

**Nancy Ray**

Each year between November and May, the population in the Rio Grande Valley mushrooms! This increase is caused by people migrating to the Valley to escape the cold, harsh weather of the northern winters. Both Canadians and Americans inundate the South Texas valley, filling campgrounds with travel trailers and motor homes. These “winter Texans” make a major contribution to the Valley’s economy each year as they enjoy shopping, eating in restaurants, touring the area, fishing, birding, square dancing, and other forms of recreation.

People enjoy the Rio Grande Valley and the mild winter climate. But what if things were different? *What if . . .* the border between Texas and Mexico was near Corpus Christi instead of Brownsville? *What if . . .* the Rio Grande Valley was in Mexico and not the United States? *What if . . .* the Battle of Palo Alto had not occurred? If that conflict had never happened, what would be different in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas?

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In December 1845, President James K. Polk spoke to Congress and vowed to extend the United States to the Pacific Ocean as part of his campaign for the presidency. After Texas was admitted to the Union in 1845 as the twenty-eighth state, Polk believed he had achieved a significant part of his goal. However, there were problems because neither the U.S. nor Mexico agreed on the boundary between the two countries. Mexico considered the Nueces River near Corpus Christi as the boundary while the U.S. claimed the Rio Grande. That difference left a vast area in dispute.



**Palo Alto Battlefield**

Since neither country would concede, President Polk sent representatives to negotiate an agreement with Mexico, but that was unsuccessful. He then assigned General Zachary Taylor to lead an army to the area and persuade Mexico to agree that the Rio Grande would be the boundary. That, too, was unsuccessful and eventually led to the Battle of Palo Alto, which began on May 8, 1846. The objective of the combat was to establish the boundary between Texas and Mexico as the Rio Grande and to include as part of Texas the Nueces Strip, which was that area between the Nueces River and the Rio Grande.

At the scene of the battle, not only did Mexico's army outnumber the smaller U.S. army, but Mexico's officers were also more experienced in battle. While the U.S. leaders had not fought many battles, they were West Point graduates, and their training had sufficiently prepared them for combat.

There were other differences, too. Mexico used a large cavalry while General Taylor depended more on an infantry. The Mexican army also had more cannons in the field compared to the newer guns carried by Taylor's troops. However, the U.S. Army had something the enemy did not—the "Flying Artillery"—which was composed of troops carrying lightweight guns that could be moved and fired quickly. The Mexican cavalry was definitely at a disadvantage against this element.

The battle was near Fort Texas, which was later renamed Fort Brown in honor of Major Jacob Brown. Major Brown was killed in battle and the city of Brownsville, also bearing his name, developed near the fort. The fighting continued for six days from Point Isabel to Matamoros and other places along the Rio Grande. The harsh environment made conditions even worse for the armies as they coped with heat, snakes, stinging insects, prickly plants, and other uncomfortable nuisances.

Thankfully, the United States won the Battle of Palo Alto, and the war ended when both the U.S. and Mexico signed the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. This agreement not only established the Rio Grande as the boundary between the two countries, but it also enabled the U.S. to obtain additional land from Mexico, providing more expansion opportunities for President Polk.

Now, did the Battle of Palo Alto solve all the problems of the area? Definitely not!

The Nueces Strip between Corpus Christi and the Rio Grande was a dangerous place. The area was overrun with violent people who were stealing, killing, rustling, raping, and performing other acts of lawlessness.



Someone had to bring peace to the Nueces Strip, and that person was Leander McNelly. McNelly is the Texas Ranger credited for subduing the area between the Nueces River and the Rio Grande and thus known as the “Tamer of the Nueces Strip.” He was a small man in physical stature, but his attitude and accomplishments were bigger than life. He contracted tuberculosis at a young age and suffered from that disease for the remainder of his short life, but the disease did not stop him. He established himself as a well-respected man who was courageous, fearless, and dedicated. No job was too hard for Ranger McNelly, and he attacked all challenges with fierceness and determination.

In 1874, a special Ranger force was commissioned with Leander McNelly as the leader. This special unit faced innumerable hardships as they caught cattle thieves, solved saddle thefts, and confronted Mexican bandits. Ranger McNelly led his men against all lawbreakers because that was his objective: to bring peace to the lawless Nueces Strip.

Now let’s return from the past and dwell on the modern day. Think about the comforts and conveniences we enjoy in Texas or wherever we happen to be. We still have criminals, and that won’t stop. We still have Texas Rangers fighting crimes similar to ones that Leander McNelly faced. Of course, today’s Rangers have different techniques and technology, but the objective is the same: to keep peace and fight lawlessness. So what do we enjoy as the results of peace in the Rio Grande Valley?

- ★ The rich culture of South Texas.
- ★ Coastal areas for fishing, birding, recreation and more.
- ★ Vast ranch land for beef production, hunting, oil and gas exploration, etc.
- ★ The King Ranch and all the benefits it provides the state.
- ★ Rich soil for growing vegetables and delicious citrus fruit.
- ★ A diverse population contributing to the Texas economy.

Modern-day conflicts are as difficult as the ones faced by the McNelly Rangers, and they must seem overwhelming at times. The Rio Grande Valley has drug problems, illegal aliens, murders, and numerous other crimes, as does all of Texas. The battle to keep peace is ongoing.

What about today’s Rangers? How many of you have stories to tell that compare to those about Leander McNelly? If you are a Ranger, you are probably shaking your head right now, disavowing any similarities to the accomplishments of the old legends. I doubt Ranger McNelly recognized the significance of his accomplishments either.

George Durham’s book, *Taming the Nueces Strip: the Story of McNelly’s Rangers*, has the following note on the back jacket cover:

. . . George Durham [was] a Georgia farm boy in his teens when he joined the “Little McNellys” as the Captain’s band called themselves. More than half a century later, it was George Durham, the last surviving “McNelly Ranger,” who recounted the exciting tale of taming the Nueces Strip to San Antonio writer Clyde Wantland.

Here are some questions to consider:

- ★ *What if . . .* George Durham had not told these stories?
- ★ *What if . . .* these stories about Ranger history had been lost?
- ★ *What if . . .* today’s Rangers do not share their stories?





If today's Rangers do not share their stories, future generations will not hear about their cases and how they helped bring peace to Texas, just like Leander McNelly. If you are a retired Ranger, think about your career and what was accomplished. You might not think your stories are as exciting as Ranger McNelly's, but your story is important and it is part of Texas Ranger history.

So share your story. Who knows? People in the next century might describe your story as a spine-tingling thriller.

To learn more about the battles and the history of Texas, visit the Palo Alto Battlefield National Historic Site (NHS) near Brownsville, Texas. Viewing the battlefield now is very pleasant, unlike the harsh conditions the soldiers endured. Take time to browse the exhibits and photographs at the visitor's center to learn about the battle as well as the U.S. and Mexican War. Then stroll along the well-maintained walkways and view interpretive panels to learn about the courageous people and the battle they fought.



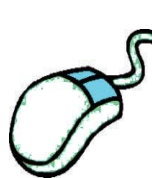
**Palo Alto Visitor's Center**

If possible, visit the battlefield during the winter months because the coastal prairie can be unpleasant during the summer heat. While there, try to envision hardships the soldiers faced on the battlefield: heat, humidity, desolation, snakes, insects, thickets, thorny plants, lack of water, and more. Some of the adversities were discussed in a document from the Palo Alto Battlefield NHS. This document included a quote from the *Memoirs* of Lt. Ulysses S. Grant:

The grass was tall, very stiff, and each stalk was pointed at the top, and hard and almost as sharp as a darning needle.

Another quote, by Captain Edmund Kirby-Smith, gives insight into some of wildlife in the area:  
I saw a rabbit, a rat, a rattlesnake, and a tarantula emerge from the very same hole. Near my tent I killed another rattler that was six-feet long.

Also, remember that you are visiting a battlefield where people sacrificed their lives for their countries. Visit with respect and gratitude.



### For More Information:

[npca.org/parks/palo-alto-battlefield-national-historic-site.html](http://npca.org/parks/palo-alto-battlefield-national-historic-site.html)

[texasranger.org/halloffame/McNelly\\_Leander.htm](http://texasranger.org/halloffame/McNelly_Leander.htm)

[theoutlaws.com/lawman3.htm](http://theoutlaws.com/lawman3.htm)

Photos courtesy of Nancy Ray. 