

Massacre

Continued from Page 4A

As the violence grew, the United States sent troops to patrol the border and Texas leaders increased the presence of Rangers in the region.

"So, you have, from both the federal, state and local level, a call to police people who look like they're bandits or Mexican revolutionaries," said Monica Muñoz Martinez, a professor at Brown University who has studied this era of violence in West Texas. "It's really this period of pervasive profiling."

When raiders believed to be supporters of Mexican revolutionary Pancho Villa waged a deadly attack on the Brite Ranch in Presidio County, law enforcement looked for the bandits at nearby Porvenir.

While there was no evidence linking the villagers of Porvenir to the raid, 15 men and boys between the ages of 16 and 72 were killed in retaliation.

Ranger Capt. J.M. Fox, who led the company that came to Porvenir, offered a different explanation for the attack and said residents of the village fired upon his company when they approached.

As the 15 men were executed, the survivors fled, fearing more violence at the hands of law enforcement officers or vigilantes. Many crossed the river into Mexico.

Harry Warren, a local schoolmaster who wrote an account of the massacre, summarized the events:

"The quiet little village of Porvenir with its peaceful farms and happy homes was no more!" he wrote. "The Rangers and four cow-men made 42 orphans that night."

Warren lived several miles away from Porvenir, but was notified of the massacre the following day by Juan Flores, who was 13-years-old, and another one of his students.

He returned to the village with the boys and discovered the bodies of the 15 victims. Warren recorded their names and details from the scene.

"He was a scholar and he was a very able historian," said Glenn Justice, a historian and author who has studied Porvenir since the 1980s. "He is probably the best contemporary source on the massacre."

Justice said Warren was also a licensed attorney and he eventually took depositions from many of the survivors.

The morning after the massacre, a survivor returned for the bodies, which were buried in a mass grave across the river in Pilares, Chihuahua, in Mexico.

In the days that followed, troopers returned to the scene of the massacre and burned the village to the ground.

Motivated in part by the destruction of Porvenir, state Rep. José T. "JT" Canales of Brownsville launched an investigation into the actions of Texas Rangers in 1918.

A select committee heard weeks of testimony from people who were victims or witnesses of violence at the hands of the Rangers. Detailed testimony from those hearings is now available online.

As a result of the investigation, the size of the Texas Ranger force was reduced significantly and new recruiting standards were implemented. The Legislature also established a better system for Texans to file complaints about potential misconduct.

No criminal charges were filed against the Rangers involved in the Porvenir massacre, but the company was later disbanded by Gov. William P. Hobby. The five rangers connected to the incident were dismissed.

In 1935, the state combined the Texas Rangers and the Texas Highway Patrol, creating the Texas Department of Public Safety.

A spokesman for the department said the massacre "has no relevance to the modern day/current Texas Rangers or to DPS."

Canales was the only Mexican-American lawmaker in the Legislature at the time, and he was threatened for his push to investigate the violence.

"His role and who he is more important now than ever," said his great-nephew, state Rep. Terry Canales, D-Edinburg. "Texas has come far, but not that far."

Canales said he always heard stories about his great-uncle growing up and learned about the anti-Mexican violence that was rampant in the early 1900s.

"It gives me pride that I have that heritage and that history and I'm able to continue that fight," Canales said. "The sad part is that this fight still exists."

Canales said he "invoked the name of JT" once during last year's legislative session, when the House debated a controversial law to ban so-called sanctuary cities.

Opponents of the law, largely Democrats, argued that it is discriminatory and could lead to racial profiling.

"The Porvenir massacre is an example of the worst type of oppression, the worst type of retaliation against somebody because they are minorities," Canales said. "It's a reminder of just how bad things can get and it's a reminder to



The grave containing the remains of 15 boys and men massacred in Porvenir, Texas, is at a cemetery across the border in Mexico. Family members took the remains there for burial. ARLINDA VALENCIA/SPECIAL TO THE TIMES



An archaeological dig is conducted in November 2015 at the Porvenir massacre site. JESSICA LUTZ/SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

not let it happen again."

For decades, little was known about this period of violence — especially of violence perpetrated by the Texas Rangers.

Many early accounts echo the stance of the Rangers: the residents of Porvenir were thieves and when officers approached the village, they were met by gunfire from the village's residents.

Some residents were wearing clothing from the store at Brite Ranch, which led officers to suspect that they were responsible for the raid. Other accounts suggest that the residents of Porvenir, like people in neighboring communities, shopped there.

Today, the Texas State Library and Archives Commission website says the Rangers of that era "wrote a black chapter in the history of their organization."

Justice, the historian, said the massacre was misunderstood for so long because government officials wanted the truth to stay under wraps.

"This thing has been covered up very successfully for 100 years now," he said. "I'm a careful historian, and there is no question that the massacre took place. The only thing now we don't know is exactly who pulled the triggers that night."

Until recently, it was believed that the attack was carried out by the Texas Rangers and local ranchers with weapons. New evidence uncovered from the site by Justice and other historians revealed the presence of U.S. cavalry forces in the village, too.

Justice first discovered the site of the massacre with the help of Juan Flores, who had given an interview to a filmmaker at the request of his family, which had only recently discovered the truth about his childhood.

In 2015, Justice returned to the site with a group of historians and archaeologists — including Patterson. David Keller was the principle archaeological investigator on the project.

The group discovered bullet and cartridge casings belonging to weapons that were typically carried by the U.S. cavalry.

"There's enough ballistic evidence to make a court case about it," Justice said.

Standing at the site of the massacre now, Patterson said it would be almost impossible to tell that a village stood there 100 years ago.

"There's nothing there and it's a very desolate area," he said. "If you were in Mexico and you wanted to sneak into the U.S. and you're standing on the south banks of the Rio Grande, when you wade across that shallow river and you're standing on the U.S. side, you're no better off than when you were standing in Mexico. There's no place to go and the terrain is pretty unforgiving."

Descendants of the men killed that January night in 1918 gathered at the Texas Capitol on Sunday to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the Porvenir massacre.

State Sen José Rodríguez, D-El Paso, presented Senate proclamations commemorating the massacre and a staff member with the Mexican American Legislative Caucus shared House resolutions with a similar message: "Texans won't forget the massacre."

Valencia, who organized the centennial event, addressed the crowd and shared a saying she grew up hearing, that people die three deaths — the first when the body stops functioning, the second when the body is buried and the third when a person's name is said for the last time.

To remember those who were killed that night in Porvenir and keep them alive another day, Valencia read aloud all 15 names as descendants lit a candle in their honor.

Brandi Tobar, the great-great-granddaughter of Juan Flores' father, shared an original song with attendees.

"Porvenir, where 15 men died in cold blood," she sang. "Porvenir, a village of hope turned to dust."

Valencia said uncovering the truth about her family's history has, in a way, resurrected the community of Porvenir, which was lost so long ago.

"We were all kind of lost and had gone our separate ways," she said. "This has

brought us together. I am now in contact with my relatives across the country, people I never knew before I started looking into this."

Amanda Shields moved to Florida with her family in the late 1970s, putting more than 1,500 miles between them and the site of her great-grandfather's death: Porvenir.

Her great-grandfather was Manuel Morales, who owned ranchland in Porvenir, as well as other property in the area. Her grandfather was young at the time and survived, along with several other siblings.

Unlike Valencia's family, Shields' family spoke frequently of the massacre. Her father grew up hearing about it from his grandmother, who survived the killing, and he was sure to share the story with his children.

"I don't ever remember not knowing about it — this story has been a burden of my father's for a long time," she said. "It was a horrific thing that happened and our family lost a great deal."

Shields and her father traveled to Texas in the 1980s to research the massacre and try to track down other descendants, but they were largely unsuccessful.

"Everywhere he turned, there was a closed door; there was no information. He kind of put it to rest back in the '80s, because of that."

She said the recent archaeological discoveries at the site of the massacre and the new historical resources available online have given her father and her family closure and a chance to connect with other descendants.

"When you think about the relationships that our families had 100 years ago — if that tragedy had not happened, our families would still have been connected in one way or another," she said. "There are bonds and friendships there that will be lifelong-lasting."

Madlin Mekelburg is a reporter with the USA Today Network Austin Bureau; she may be reached at 512-479-6606; mmekelburg@elpasotimes.com; @madlinmek on Twitter.