

Did the Cavalry massacre civilians on the border?

Evidence collected at site of Porvenir massacre indicates what has been told isn't correct

By John MacCormack | April 1, 2016 | Updated: April 3, 2016 3:52pm

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Photo: Jessica Lutz
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Archeologist David Keller examines artifacts including bullets recovered from the probably massacre site.

When the shooting ended on the moonlit night of Jan. 28, 1918, the crumpled bodies of 15 unarmed Mexican boys and men between the ages of 16 and 72 lay scattered in the brush downriver from Porvenir.

After the killers rode off in the darkness, the panicked women, children and other survivors fled across the Rio Grande. The next morning, an old woman came from Mexico with a horse cart to retrieve the bodies.

Days later, the cavalry soldiers returned to the remote Texas border hamlet — which was home to 140 people — to knock down and burn the abandoned dwellings.

“The quiet little village of Porvenir with its peaceful farms and happy homes was no more. The Rangers and four cow-men made 42 orphans that night,” was the bitter summary of Henry Warren, the local schoolmaster, whose father-in-law, Tiburcio Jáquez, died in the massacre.

While the dogged efforts of Warren and others to find justice for those slain ultimately proved futile, the ghosts of Porvenir have refused to fade quietly into history.

Recent archaeological work, including analysis of slugs and shell casings found at the scene of the executions, is turning the long-accepted historical narrative of the event on its head.



The Texas Rangers had maintained they were fired upon from the darkness when they approached the village, and shot in self-defense. The U.S. Cavalry claimed it didn't kill anyone, but instead found the victims' bodies the morning after while on patrol.

The new findings tell a different tale.

"Artifacts on the ground where the massacre is believed to have taken place suggest that both the military and civilians participated. The .45 long Colts were typically used by civilians and Rangers. The .30-06 weapons were typically carried by the cavalry," said David Keller, an Alpine-based archaeologist, who has made several visits to Porvenir.

In November, Keller led a team of four archaeologists on a three-day scientific dig at Porvenir. They were joined by photographers, documentary filmmakers, a historian and others.

"The majority of the artifactual evidence we found is military, which is not what we should have found there according to the prevailing story, that the crime was committed by the Texas Rangers and local vigilantes," Keller said.



Archeologist David Keller (left) supervises the fieldwork while historian Glenn Justice looks on near the probable location where the victims were shot.

Doubt is cast

The bullets and cartridge casings they recovered, plus others found years earlier, later were turned over to battlefield archaeologist Douglas D. Scott, best known for his work analyzing the Little Bighorn Battlefield, site of Custer's last stand.

This week, Scott, also a firearms expert, released his findings on the ballistic evidence.

"Assuming one gun per shooter, Mr. Scott's analysis suggests a minimum of nine to 10 shooters, six or seven of whom were shooting military ammunition, and three of whom were

shooting civilian ammunition,” Keller reported.

Scott also determined that one bullet contained embedded bone material.

“We can’t definitely say it’s human, but considering the context, it’s likely a bullet that was used to shoot a person,” Keller said.

He said the new findings “cast significant doubt” on claims that the military was not directly involved in the massacre.

About a half-dozen heavily armed Texas Rangers, local cattlemen and U.S. Cavalry troops came to Porvenir that fateful night. The impetus for their visit was a murderous bandit attack on the Brite Ranch a month earlier on Christmas Day.

But according to Warren, the local schoolmaster, blaming those in Porvenir for the raid was a convenient fiction.

“The truth is the Mexicans were at Porvenir Xmas day, 1917, and Brite’s Ranch was 40 miles away, and there was no road, not even a trail between the two places,” he wrote in his contemporary account.

The Porvenir massacre was one of many deadly episodes involving residents of Mexican ancestry during the decade of the Mexican Revolution, which brought waves of violence and raiding along the U.S.-Mexico border.

The bloody incident now is featured in an exhibit called “Life and Death on the Border: 1910 to 1920” at the Bullock Museum in Austin. It examines the often violent measures used by vigilantes and American authorities.

“That decade saw a spike in Mexican killings by a bunch of law enforcement and people associated with them. It became an accepted idea that killing Mexicans was OK,” said

Trinidad Gonzales, a history professor at South Texas College in McAllen.

“The thing about the Porvenir massacre is that it created an international incident. The Mexican government started asking the U.S. State Department was what occurring,” said Gonzales, one of the scholars who conceived the exhibit.

“The immediate outcome of the Porvenir massacre was the state launching an investigation into Ranger activity. We call them the (José) Canales hearings, and the Porvenir massacre was a catalyst,” Gonzales said.

In addition to protesting through official channels, Mexico also held a court of inquiry in Ojinaga and took testimony from Porvenir survivors, transcripts of which were included in the Canales investigation.

A few Texas Rangers ultimately were fired or resigned over their actions in Porvenir, but no one was criminally charged. The cavalry largely avoided culpability.

The version of the massacre still found in the “The Handbook of Texas,” the official history of the state, cites sources who said “the Mexicans” were responsible for the violence.

One source accused Porvenir of being home to “thieves, informers, spies and murderers.”

The handbook also cites others, including Warren, who blamed the Rangers in the “wholesale destruction of these Mexicans.”

“The role of the United States Cavalry is unclear,” to the handbook citation notes, adding only: “Press reports at the time stated that the Army had nothing to do with the affair.”



Photo: David Keller/For The Express-News, Freelance / David Keller

Porvenir ballistic- BULLET FRAGMENTS AND JACKETS

Shocking local raids

Historian and author Glenn Justice, 67, who has spent three decades studying the killings and found the site of the shootings 15 years ago with help of a survivor, is leading the push for a re-examination.

"I haven't found any bandits or outlaws in Porvenir, or any evidence they had anything to do with the Brite Ranch raid. I have yet to find that they were anything but simple farmers and people trying to escape the war in Mexico," he said.

Only a couple of old guns — but no horses from the Brite Ranch or goods proven stolen from its general store — were discovered in the house-to-house search of Porvenir, he said.

“You have to consider there was a civil war going on in Chihuahua, the Mexican Revolution in which more than a million people died or disappeared. A lot of American ranchers along the border had to abandon their homes because of the violence,” he said.

An attack by Pancho Villa and 1,500 troops on Columbus, N.M., which took 19 American lives, made national news in 1916.

Border residents likely also knew about the “Plan of San Diego,” a revolutionary manifesto that called for the violent liberation of the Southwest from U.S. control, including the deaths of all white males over 16.

Locally, there were shocking raids by Mexican revolutionary forces or bandits at Boquillas, Glenn Springs, the Brite Ranch and elsewhere in Presidio County, which spread fear among West Texas residents, fueling an impulse to strike back.

At the time, Justice said, there also were numerous cattle thefts in West Texas, and a booming and illicit cross-border trade in which stolen Mexican cattle were exchanged for U.S. armaments.

“You could trade five rounds for a cow,” he said.

Justice puts the Porvenir raid — coming a month after the attack by armed horsemen on the Brite Ranch — into this general context, an ill-focused, punitive attempt at reprisal and deterrence.

“I think the reason it happened is they wanted to make an example of the people in Porvenir, and this happened in a number of cases. I feel there were as many as several hundred Mexicans killed on both sides of the Rio Grande by the U.S. Army and the Rangers in the

Upper Big Bend," he said.

While he cannot condone the deadly Porvenir raid, he said he can see how it happened.

"Just try to have an appreciation for both sides of this. I've lived on the border long enough, and I understand why they did it. They were trying to defend ranchers and innocents when there was a war going on across the river," he added.



Photo: Jessica Lutz

A helicopter provides a birds-eye view of the site for the film crew shooting a documentary about the massacre. Behind them, the Mesozoic-aged Sierra Pilares in Mexico create a dramatic backdrop for the project.

A survivor appears

Justice said he and former Texas Land Commissioner Jerry Patterson are partners in an effort to make a documentary film about Porvenir. A trailer is almost finished and a website will be created to raise money.

“Even if it’s not possible to do a documentary, because of the money, I’m going to do a book. The manuscript is almost ready to go,” he said. “This is how history works. Our job is to get it right, even if we’ll probably never know precisely who pulled the triggers that night.”

Patterson said he hopes to use the Porvenir Massacre as an entry point to a much broader documentary about that a violent chapter on the border a century ago, one very evocative of what is happening today.

“Today, we have rival cartels killing each other and civilians in Mexico. Back them, we had revolutionary groups fighting each other, and also fighting the gringos,” he said.

“The similarities are phenomenal, with one exception. Today, we have a lot of violence on the border, but it’s on the Mexican side. Back then, the Texas side was also truly a violent place,” he said.

And but for an unlikely and fortuitous encounter years ago with Juan Flores, an elderly survivor of the massacre, Justice never would have learned all he knows now about Porvenir.

Flores was 13 when he saw his father, Longino, led away to be shot to death. The next morning, the boy took Warren, the schoolmaster, to find the bodies, still guarded by soldiers.

For the next eight decades, he kept silent about the horrors.

“He had terrible nightmares about it, and his family did not understand why,” Justice said. But finally, in his late 90s, Flores began telling his story.

“When I found him in 2001, through a documentary filmmaker, he was living in Odessa with his family. He was 96 but as sharp as a tack,” Justice recalled.

After spending a day interviewing Flores at his house in Odessa, Justice accompanied him and several family members to Porvenir, where the old man led them to the site of the massacre, about a mile out of town.

“The very day we went out there, we started finding old shell casings, the .30-06 military casings, some still on top of the ground. Over the years, I’ve gone back with a metal detector, and every time, I’ve found more bullets and casings,” he said.

Flores died at 101, a few years after finally returning to Porvenir to reveal its secrets and perhaps bring some historic justice to its nearly forgotten victims.

“But for Juan Flores, I wouldn’t have found the killing site, and we wouldn’t have found the ballistic evidence that the army was involved,” Justice said.

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