

# FYI on Texas History by Bob Heinonen

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## ANOTHER GREAT IDEA FROM TSHA

I must sound like I work for the Texas State Historical Association because I sing their praises so often. But here I go again.

I recently discovered on their website a place called **My Texas**. It is <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/mytexas/> which is a new interactive Web site where visitors can share the stories and reminiscences that make Texas and its history special.

These stories are collected in an online database that is fully searchable, sorted by category (such as small-town Texas, famous Texans, Texas sports, and others), and linked to relevant entries in the *Handbook of Texas Online*. Users thus participate in the construction of a new Texas history, unprecedented in its depth and richness, that adds to the existing core scholarly narrative in the award-winning *Handbook*.

Based on my own experiences, I submitted a story called ***That Boy Got Around!*** You can find it under Famous Texans.

*Life is too short  
not to live it as a  
Texan!*

## LEGENDS OF TEXAS

Legend: The Alamo flag was the Mexican tri-color flag with 1824 in place of the eagle

Various flags have been suggested as the flag that flew over The Alamo. We know there was one flag representing The Alamo defenders because on February 24, 1836, Travis wrote, "...our flag still waves proudly from the walls." Notice the use of the singular word "flag." That doesn't mean, however, there was only one flag at The Alamo.

The flags that have been suggested as being at The Alamo are the flag of the New Orleans Greys (two volunteer units from New Orleans), the Mexican flag itself, a modified Mexican flag with the year 1824 (or maybe *Constitution of 1824*) on it in place of the eagle, a flag with *Sam Houston for Independence* on it, and a modified Mexican flag with the eagle replaced by two stars.

For many years, most have thought that The Alamo flag was sent to Mexico City by Santa Anna and that the flag was the New Orleans Greys flag. In fact, Santa Anna did send the New Orleans Greys flag to the government in Mexico City but the

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point of the letter was the flag is proof of involvement by Americans. He wrote, "The bearer takes with him one of the flags of the enemy's Battalions, captured today." One of the flags, not *the* flag.

Colonel Juan N. Alamonte's accounts of what happened at The Alamo have seemed to be the most accurate. He says, "The enemy, as soon as the march of the division was seen, hoisted the tri-colored flag with two stars...." The eye witness accounts of two young Tejano boys indicate a tri-colored flag was being flown, but they were probably too far away to discern the two stars.

For reference, Thomas Ricks Lindley addresses the issue in detail in his book *Alamo Traces*.

## **PLANS FOR TEXAS INDEPENDENCE DAY?**

It is never too early to start planning for at Texas Independence Day event. And what could be better than a field trip to Washington-on-the-Brazos where the Texas Declaration of Independence was signed. This coming spring, the **Texas Independence Day** celebration at Washington-on-the-Brazos will be on March 5-6. The event and the site are amazing.

We will be performing there again this year so come see us....and them....and it.

# ***THE LIFE AND TIMES OF RIP FORD***

## **Part 23: The Cortinas Wars – The Start**

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Old Rip Ford, at sixty, was still in command and continued to influence the destiny of Texas. But Old Rip didn't influence just Texas...he still had influence with the people in power south of the Rio Grande. This episode in his life actually started when he was only 43 years old.

“John S. Ford and others have described the 1850's as the great days of Brownsville, then the gateway city to Mexico. At least six men made fortunes that added into millions of dollars, but very little of this trade affected the 2,000 inhabitants of the Mexican lower class. Meanwhile, the American newcomers jostled uncomfortably upon the old Spanish *hacendados*, most of whom were gradually dispossessed.”<sup>1</sup>

All classes of Mexican-Americans were treated with contempt; American law did nothing to protect them even though they were American citizens. “The imposition of American law infuriated most Mexican landowners. They had to defend their ancient [Spanish] titles in court, and they lost either way, either to their own [American] lawyers or to the claimants.”<sup>2</sup> “One particularly angry member of the upper class was Juan Nepomceno [“Cheno”] Cortinas who saw his mother surrender [to lawyers] a square league [over 5,700 acres] of her patrimony in order to keep the rest.”<sup>3</sup>

Cheno Cortinas was not like the aristocratic blue-bloods of his family. Born in 1824, “He was wild. He was of average size for Spanish stock, with brown hair, gray-green eyes, and a reddish beard. He had the manners of a gentleman, but he was uneducated by choice, and a *vaquero*, rather than a border aristocrat, by personal taste. Cortinas liked to ride with a roistering crowd of lowly cowmen.”<sup>4</sup> “His enemy, Adolphus Glavaecke, records that during the Mexican War [Mexican-American War] Cortinas murdered his employer, stole his mules, and then sold them to the United States Army. Later he captured Charles Stillman's freighting carts and took the goods to Mexico, but in 1852 was back in Texas stealing horses and killing sheep.”<sup>5</sup>

“In 1859 he was living at his mother's ranch on the Texas side about nine miles northwest of Brownsville, and he was a fuse waiting to be lit. Each morning Cortinas liked to canter into the town to sit at a café and sip coffee with his friends. On the morning of July 13, 1859, the city marshal, Robert Shears, whom Cortinas called ‘the squint-eyed sheriff,’ arrested a drunken Mexican on the streets. This man had once been a Cortinas servant. The marshal, all accounts agree, was unnecessarily brutal; he gave the drunken Mexican the standard treatment. Cortinas protested, apparently reasonably, and was rewarded with an insult no *caballero* could take. Guns were drawn; the marshal fell with a bullet in his shoulder, and Cheno Cortinas put his rescued servant up behind his saddle and galloped out of town.”<sup>6</sup> A folk hero is made.

“High and low were ready to support a champion of Mexican rights, one who would throw off American domination, redress grievances, and punish their enemies; and just such a champion arose in the person of Juan Nepomuceno Cortinas.”<sup>7</sup>

For the next months, Cortinas stayed at his mother's ranch. “That Cortinas was planning some move was indicated by the fact that he was gathering horses and men, sometimes in Texas and sometimes in Mexico. Thus things went along until the early morning of September 28 [1859]. On the night before, a fashionable ball was held in Matamoros and attended by many from the Texas side of the river; there was much noise and merrymaking by belated parties who were returning to their homes, and consequently, when at about three o'clock in the morning, wild yells and screams awoke the citizens of Brownsville, they thought little of it until they heard above the clamor and hoofbeat of horses such sounds as ‘Viva Cheno Cortinas! Mueran los Gringos! Viva la Republica de Mexico!’

By daylight Cortinas with his hundred men had complete possession of the town. He came to kill the Pole, Adolphus Glavaecke, and Robert Shears, whom he called the ‘squinting sheriff.’ Though both of these escaped, he killed three Americans whom he described as ‘wicked men, notorious among the people for their misdeeds.’ He killed one Mexican for shielding one of the Americans. Part of his band broke open the jail, liberated ten or a dozen prisoners, and killed the jailer. Others took possession of Fort Brown which had but recently been

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evacuated by United States troops who had gone to the Reservation war. The Mexicans attempted to break open the magazine where one hundred and twenty-five barrels of powder were stored. They tried to hoist the Mexican flag over the fort, but failed for want of tackle. During this time the Americans dared not appear on the street with arms or to gather in groups while Cortinas continued to search for his personal enemies. Finally, through the influence of Miguel Tijerina and General Caravajal, Cortinas was induced to gather his followers and move out of the city without doing more damage. 'Thus was a city of from two to three thousand inhabitants occupied by a band of armed bandits, a thing till now unheard of in the United States,' wrote Major S. P. Heintzelman to Colonel Robert E. Lee."<sup>8</sup>

Incursions in Texas...there was to be a fight but who would know this fight would go on for 17 years. And who would be right in the middle of it from start to finish? Who else but Old Rip Ford.

**Next Month – Part 24: *The Cortinas Wars – The Early Years***

<sup>1</sup> Lone Star – A History of Texas and the Texans by T. R. Fehrenbach, American Legacy Press, New York, NY 1983, pp 509

<sup>2</sup> Lone Star – A History of Texas and the Texans by T. R. Fehrenbach, American Legacy Press, New York, NY 1983, pp 511

<sup>3</sup> Lone Star – A History of Texas and the Texans by T. R. Fehrenbach, American Legacy Press, New York, NY 1983, pp 511

<sup>4</sup> *Lone Star – A History of Texas and the Texans* by T. R. Fehrenbach, American Legacy Press, New York, NY 1983, pp 511

<sup>5</sup> *The Texas Rangers* by Walter Prescott Webb, University of Texas Press, Austin, TX 1935, pp176

<sup>6</sup> *Lone Star – A History of Texas and the Texans* by T. R. Fehrenbach, American Legacy Press, New York, NY 1983, pp 512

<sup>7</sup> *The Texas Rangers* by Walter Prescott Webb, University of Texas Press, Austin, TX 1935, pp176

<sup>8</sup> *The Texas Rangers* by Walter Prescott Webb, University of Texas Press, Austin, TX 1935, pp178-179