

FYI on Texas History by Bob Heinonen

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*Elizabeth Seibert as
Mary Austin Holley*

INDEPENDENCE DAY UPDATE

As you already know, **Texas Heroes** will be performing again this year at the Texas Independence Day celebration at Washington-on-the-Brazos. On Saturday, March 5, there will be four performances. At 12:00PM and 4:00PM, LaJuanna Faught will portray Deliens Rose, a woman of the Texas Revolution. At 11:30AM and 3:00PM, Elizabeth Siebert and I will team up as Susannah Dickinson and William Barret Travis.

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

On Sunday, Elizabeth Seibert and I will team up as Mary Austin Holley and Stephen F. Austin at 11:00AM and 3:30PM.

Come on over to Washington-on-the-Brazos this coming Independence Day and help us celebrate. It is a truly unique event in a unique environment.

LEGENDS OF TEXAS

Legend: How Travis died (revisited)

Back in May, I addressed the rumor that Travis committed suicide while the final battle at The Alamo raged. In that article I said it would not have been easy to accomplish even if he decided to commit suicide because the only visible wound was in the middle of his forehead and trying to get one of those old guns into position to shoot yourself through the forehead and still pull the trigger would be almost impossible.

But, the question becomes, how did he die?

First, he was probably carrying his sword and a rifle as was reported by Joe, his servant, and by an unknown Mexican soldier who wrote a letter that he saw Travis with a rifle in his hands, lying dead, at the back of a cannon. There is no mention of a pistol by either man.

While Travis and Joe were fighting side-by-side, Joe claims that Travis received a shot in the forehead and went down, but when Joe left him to take refuge in their quarters, he said Travis was sitting up on the slopping ground inside the wall. If Travis was sitting, he probably wasn't dead; sometimes those old guns just bruised you instead of penetrating. Joe also says that after the battle they found Travis lying next to a big cannon. Apparently Travis moved after Joe left him, or was he both sitting up on the slopping ground and next to the cannon.

For the last twenty years, I have said that Travis died immediately from a gunshot wound through the center of his forehead, but now I believe he didn't die immediately. Did he end up dying of the initial wound or was he wounded a second time? If he was wounded a second time, was it a bullet or a sword? We will probably never know.

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THE LIFE AND TIMES OF RIP FORD

Part 25: The Cortinas Wars – The End

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The official “war” was over in December, 1859, but Cheno Cortinas was still alive and well in Mexico... and Old Rip Ford was alive and well in Texas. For years to come, Cortinas raided Texas but never with the boldness or number of men he had before. The raids had the intensity of guerilla actions and a group called the Texas Rangers fought them; Cortinas incited racial hatred at every opportunity.

A few months after the Cortinas War ended, “Ford was on the way back to the camp, after a short patrol with a small body of rangers and Don Savas Cavazos, a half brother of Cheno Cortina by a previous marriage of their mother. When they arrived at Mrs. Cortina’s ranch, about seven miles above Brownsville, Cavazos invited the officers of the party to go into the house. After doing so, they were introduced to Mrs. Cortina. She was a small woman, not weighing more than one hundred pounds, being at the time over seventy years of age. She was very good looking, had a pretty face, bright, black eyes, and very white skin. She was a lady of culture, and indicated as much in her actions, and had all the politeness of a well-bred Mexican. She was held in high esteem by both her Mexican and American acquaintances. She had taken refuge in Matamoros when Cortina commenced to make war upon the people of the United States, and had recently returned to her home. When introduced to Ford, she took his hand and looked appealingly into his face for several minutes. By and by tears were visible in her eyes; finally they wet her cheeks. All this was an appeal for her wayward son.”¹

“The writer [Ford] vividly remembers this meeting. He has never attempted to describe his feelings during the interview. He gave the lady assurance of protection, as far as lay in his power. His men obeyed his orders, and did not molest the lady. As long as she lived, when danger of any kind seemed to threaten her, she would go to Brownsville and appeal to Ford to aid her. If it were possible, he extended assistance to her. She was never troubled by American troops. They respected her and her property. They knew the mother was not to blame for the acts of her son.”²

For many years, Cheno Cortinas fought a guerilla action against the *gringos* north of the Rio Grande. And occasionally Cortinas was met by Texas Rangers, including Old Rip, south of the river. Within Mexico, Cortinas was popular, but like Santa Anna, would change sides when advantageous. Like Santa Anna, he became quite wealthy and a General in the Mexican Army. In the meantime, as always, Mexico was in a state of revolution.

“In 1876 General Diaz [who was organizing a revolution] came to Brownsville. In a conversation with Colonel Ford he stated that he had money enough to supply the wants of a gentleman, but not sufficient to wage a war. He inquired if Americans could be induced to loan him cash. The reply was:

‘You are, no doubt, fully aware of the trouble General Cortina is causing on this frontier. If measures are not taken to check his depredations, they are surely going to create hostilities between Mexico and the United States. If you will give your word that, if successful in the revolution you are to inaugurate, you will order Cortina to be removed from this frontier, Americans will loan you money.’

(continued on next page)

General Diaz gave his word as requested. He obtained money for American citizens. He was successful in his various engagements.”³ General Diaz went on to become President of Mexico.

During the revolution, Cortinas turned his support to Diaz, but unfortunately so did Cortinas’ enemy General Canales. Cortinas was arrested in Matamoros. “A court-martial was ordered. He was accused. The court, after trial and mature consideration, pronounced him guilty and worthy of death. Few were astonished. All knew that he had done as he pleased for many years and had probably wronged Canales and that the day of retribution had come.”⁴

Old Rip Ford advised General Canales: “It is known to everyone that yourself and General Cortina are deadly personal enemies. If you approve of the proceedings of the court-martial by which he was tried, and he is shot, it will be said that personal ill feeling actuated your approval. It will, in my opinion, be a stain on your memory for all time to come. Send the prisoner and the proceedings to President Diaz. Let him act as it may suit him. If he adjudges General Cortina worthy of death let him give the order or cause it to be done. If the contrary is his judgment let him turn Cortina loose.’

“After the writer [Ford] retired, a gentleman present reported that General Canales said: ‘Did you hear what that white-headed old man said? If there is a man in the world more opposed to Cortina’s mode of doing things than Colonel Ford, I do not know him.’

“Canales sent Cortina to the City of Mexico where President Diaz has kept him under surveillance for nearly twenty years. Can any gentleman dare say that President Diaz has not fully redeemed his pledge?”⁵ Cortina did not become a martyr; Cortina did disappear from the border area. What an interesting way for a Texas Ranger to remove a problem.

In the Year Of Our Lord 18 and 76, the “white-headed old man” was now 61 years of age. He had just served as mayor of Brownsville and as a representative to the Texas Constitutional Convention of 1875. “After the constitution was finished and adopted, he went back to Brownsville and campaigned for senator. He won with one of the largest majorities in the history of the Twenty-Ninth District. As a senator [in the congress of Texas], Rip Ford worked hard for a more efficient police force and for more and better public schools.”⁶

But what now that his term as senator is over? Old Rip had done a lot of things in his life, but the one that he was about to embark on was the most rewarding of his entire life.

Next Month – *Part 26: School for the Deaf and Dumb*

¹ *Rip Ford’s Texas* by John Salmon Ford edited by Stephen B. Oates, University of Texas Press, Austin, TX 1963, pp 281

² *ibid*, pp 282

³ *ibid*, pp 412

⁴ *ibid*, pp 413

⁵ *ibid*, pp 413-414

⁶ *ibid*, pp xliii-xliv