

Museum News: Revolution comes to Terrell County

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No one characterizes the Mexican Revolution of 1911-1920 more than Pancho Villa. He gained notoriety along the Mexico-US border for the many incursions his men made into the US to gather arms and materiel for war. Many men (and women) of Mexico joined the *insurrectos* to free themselves from tyranny and political corruption.

Men of Mexican heritage in the US were also dedicated supporters of the fight. They contributed money, arms, ammunition, horses and equipment, as well as safe haven for those fleeing the government.

And beyond that, many men honored the call to arms and went to Mexico to fight for their ancestral homeland. Men from Sanderson and Terrell County also honored the call, working at home between battles and going to Mexico to fight when the need arose.



Pancho Villa and his men. Terrell County Memorial Museum

An engagement across from Comstock, Texas, in January of 1911, produced one fatality from Sanderson. Manuel Martinez was killed in a battle with a company of *federales* (federal troops) and 75 *rurales* (comparable to Texas Rangers.) The Sanderson group was composed of 18 men, hopelessly outnumbered, but reported to have performed brilliantly in the face of overwhelming odds. A few local newspapers had been reporting that the Texas *insurrectos* were poorly trained and bumbled through their operations, but this group proved that they were fearless fighters and had a good knowledge of military tactics. The only other Sanderson casualty was Manuel Bustamante, who was shot through both legs and required serious medical attention in San Antonio.

The Sanderson of 1911 was a hotbed of *insurrecto* activity. Just 20 miles from the river, it was close to border crossings frequented by both sides. It was fairly easy to ship arms by train to Sanderson, and then, haul them to the river for sale or for delivery to the *insurrectos*. And until neutrality laws were passed, it was quite legal to do so.

In early March, 1911, a one-ton shipment of rifles and ammunition was caught leaving the freight warehouse of the Sanderson depot, to be stored locally until transported to Mexico. Two detectives from San Antonio made the discovery and returned the shipment to that city.

A few days later three men were arrested at San Antonio when they boarded a passenger train bound for Sanderson carrying twelve rifles and a suitcase full of ammunition. According to the state and federal government they had broken no law, but the stationmaster disagreed and felt that ammunition should not be carried on a public passenger train.

The stationmaster discovered the arms when the men brought them aboard wrapped in blankets and set them in the aisle. When passengers stumbled over the items and complained, the stationmaster proceeded to lift them up out of the way. His suspicions were aroused when he barely could lift the extremely heavy suitcase filled with cartridges for the rifles. He immediately informed a special agent at the station, hired by the Mexican consul in San Antonio to watch for shipments of contraband to Mexico. The private detective, along with a Mexican interpreter, confiscated the armaments and delivered them to the Mexican consul, who vowed not to give them up unless ordered by a court.

The three men, Abram Ojedo, William Wildman and Leonidez Rios, claimed they were merely peddlers who were taking their guns to the border south of Sanderson to sell to the highest bidder. They were not taken into custody because they had broken no law. The US government had no problem with their acts, but it did have a problem with the Mexican consul for hiring his own police force. They claimed this was an unwarranted usurpation of police power.

Shortly afterwards, the US passed neutrality laws that prevented anyone from supplying the insurgents or the Mexican government with materials of war. But that was merely a formality, as the clandestine operations continued.

On March 25, US Secret Service men, along with Terrell County Sheriff J. J. Allen and his deputies, captured 15 revolutionists as they were leaving Sanderson for the river. The men were carrying 260,000 rounds of ammunition, fifty-six 30-30 rifles and twelve horses, eight of whom were animals smuggled from Mexico. With an infant FBI and no NSA at the time, the Secret Service was pressed into service for such missions.

Undercover Secret Service agents Wilbur, Scull and Cliett had worked up the case in Sanderson over a period of five weeks, posing as *insurrecto* sympathizers. Ammunition had been pouring into town over a period of ten days and agent-in-charge Wilbur knew who was collecting it. When the *insurrectos* left town for the river, law enforcement officials made the arrests and seizures of contraband materials.

Among those arrested were three well-known local men, Esteban Hernandez, a prominent businessman and Sanderson's first Hispanic photographer, Louis Mendez and Manuel Bustamante. Apparently Bustamante had recovered sufficiently from his January injuries to continue the fight.

The very next day, thirteen more men were taken into custody by US Secret Service and charged with violating the US neutrality laws concerning transportation of armaments and materials of war to the insurrectionists in Mexico. These men, recruited in San Antonio, were caught near Sanderson with fifty-six rifles and 30,000 rounds of ammunition.

The leaders immediately sent an urgent telegram to President Taft to save them from being turned over to the Mexican government for immediate execution. They claimed that the Department of Justice in Washington had sent them a memorandum listing the limitations of the neutrality laws and that, using the government's information, they had designed their mission in a way that did not violate the law. They claimed the arrests were "highhanded and illegal."

The Mexican government, on the other hand, claimed the men were Mexican citizens who had crossed over the border to secure arms and ammunition to take back to the *insurrectos*. They demanded the men be returned to Mexico, where justice would be swift and final.

According to the Secret Service, the group had mounted a proper guerrilla cavalry, complete with a camp wagon, fifteen horses, a commissary and all the appurtenances of a thoroughly outfitted detachment of professionals. The group was just about to embark on their mission when they were caught by Secret Service men and US Marshals.

But not all carried armaments. On March 27, four men were captured at Reagan Gap on the Rio Grande by the US Third Cavalry. These men, including Anglo-surnamed Americans, were trying to smuggle 1200 pounds of flour, a quantity of meat, onions, crackers and other provisions, and a few guns, but no ammunition. Of the twelve horses captured, eight were smuggled across from Mexico for the operation. As is the case today, any items seized by law enforcement and unclaimed by its owners was sold at public auction and the money funneled back to the state.

These are just some of the cases for the month of March, 1911. *Insurrecto* activities in the US continued for years. Although the Revolution is considered by most historians to be complete by 1920, hostilities continued until about 1929.

It is not known how many men from Sanderson and Terrell County participated in *insurrecto* activities, both north and south of the Rio Grande. But it is known that they came from all levels of Sanderson society and that they were able fighters and keen military strategists.