

Terrell County Memorial January, 2016  
Sanderson, Texas

# Museum News

## Scalp Hunter!

### The Notorius John Glanton



Illustration: M. Puncekar

Usually I write about noble characters who set an example for us all, but not everyone in Terrell County history was a good guy wearing a white hat. Someone who rode in the Big Bend and certainly the area of Terrell County, long before it was actually settled, was the notorious John Glanton, scalp

hunter. He and his gang of rogues traversed the Big Bend and northern Mexico taking Indian scalps for bounty. And when he couldn't fill his quota, he took Mexican scalps, since they were virtually indiscernible from Indian scalps.

Glanton was born in Edgefield



*John Glanton settles a controversy.*

County, South Carolina about 1820 and came with his parents as a young boy to Austin's colony in Texas. Contrasting greatly with his future life, Glanton was a rigidly moral and religious youth.

As the story goes, he fell in love with a young girl who had been orphaned by Lipan raiders. One day while the men of the settlement were away, the Lipans returned and attacked once again. In the aftermath, the old women and children had been killed and scalped and the young women taken away, including Glanton's girl. When the men returned they gave chase, overtook the Lipans and killed them. But, it was too late for the young girls, for they had been tomahawked and scalped.

Apparently, something snapped in John Glanton and he went on a vengeful killing spree. He would leave the settlement alone, and return with fresh scalps. He became a drunkard and hung out with despicable low life characters.

During the Texas war for independence he joined Colonel James Fannin's command as a "free scout" and barely got away with his life during the executions at Goliad. The gossip was that during battle he scalped his Mexican

victims and kept a stash of smoke-dried scalps in his getaway on the Guadalupe.

Surprisingly, in 1846 Glanton married into the respected Menchaca family of San Antonio. His wife, Joaquina, bore him two children. But even so, he had a terrible reputation in San Antonio as a violent killer.

In his excellent chapter on John Glanton, Elton Miles (*Tales of the Big Bend*, Elton Miles, College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1976) describes Glanton as "short, built solid, and burned brown by the sun, peered out of deep-set and bloodshot eyes; his coarse black hair writhed in snakelike hanks down his back and also formed equally ferocious mustachio and beard. He wore a leather jacket blackened by grease and blood and a serape over his shoulders."

During the Mexican War Glanton enlisted in the Texas Calvary, U. S. Army. A notorious "wild bunch," the Texas Calvary fought without uniforms, well-armed with firearms and Bowie knives and presenting a fearsome visage with their full, unruly beards and wild hair. General Zachary Taylor accused the group of being cutthroats and robbers. During this time

Glanton committed brazen murders but was never called into account for them.

After the war in 1848, the gold rush was on in California and Glanton decided to try his luck in the gold fields. To finance his trip he formed a scalp hunting troop of about thirty men and took Indian scalps for the bounty.

Being a very lucrative trade, Glanton and his gang went into Chihuahua, Mexico to offer their services to the governor. The legislature had authorized a bounty of \$200 for a warrior scalp, \$100 for women and children and a reward of \$150 for children under fourteen and women taken alive to be used as slaves. Apparently it was too much trouble to take them alive so he concentrated on taking scalps.

During this time they accumulated a large amount of Indian clothing and weapons and began to disguise themselves as Indians to raid the Mexican settlements for booty and scalps. Their actions outraged the Apaches, who heretofore had been friendly to white settlers. The Apaches went on the war-path, taking vengeance on all whites.

Glanton had become a serious impediment to American-Indian-Mexican relations.

The barbarity of Glanton and his scalp hunters was legendary. Armed to the teeth with guns and scalping knives, they had no regard for life and even held competitions to see who harvested the most scalps. They crisscrossed the Trans Pecos murdering and scalping Indians and Mexicans alike.

After his first sweep, Glanton returned to Chihuahua to collect his reward. His gang was treated to a fiesta and a grisly parade in which their trophies were displayed, to the cheers of the Mexican populace.

In their second foray into the Big Bend and northern Mexico, the scalp hunters gleaned even more scalps, at the expense of the local Mexican population. Rumors began to fly and the government turned against Glanton. He was reprimanded and fired, but his troubles were not over. Local vigilante justice was about to catch up with him and his men and they beat a hasty retreat by night to escape the retribution



Illustration: Life Magazine

of angry citizens.

Moving into the Mexican state of Sonora, Glanton made a deal with the governor there for \$50 per scalp, and now the Apaches of Sonora and Arizona were at risk.

Glanton's gang of cutthroats included some very salacious, unstable characters.

According to Elton Miles,

Crying Tom Hitchcock "would curse and converse in a mixture of English and Spanish (both bad), roar out his "Wild and woolly" boasts, bellow like a buffalo bull, and frequently burst into uncontrollable weeping."

Judge Holden, another unsavory gang member, was a man educated in geology, mineralogy and botany, could speak several Indian languages and played the harp and guitar. A large man with not a hair on his head, he presented a loathesome image. He raped and killed a ten-year-old girl being held hostage in their camp. Other members included Texans, Sonorans, Delaware and Cherokee Indians, French Canadians, a Negro, an Irishman and a full-blooded Comanche.

Eventually the gang decided it was easier to go to California and prospect for gold. They cashed in their scalps and held one last drunken party to celebrate their impending fortunes. Glanton got roaring drunk and began to preach to his men. He told them they



Illustration: Life Magazine

**JOHN GLANTON WAS A MOUNTAIN MAN AND SCALP HUNTER**

were brazen sinners and bound for Hell. He knelt in prayer and prayed for their souls, then arose and began to fire his pistol at them, wounding one. It was obvious to the cooler heads that Glanton was insane.

Glanton and his scalp-hunters met their end at the mouth of the Gila River in Arizona. They had taken over a ferry owned by the Yumas, killing the men and capturing young women. They erected a crude stockade which Glanton christened Fort Defiance and held out for days. Finally, the Yumas attacked, got the upper hand and smashed the scalp hunters' heads with stone axes and took their scalps. Five, including the notorious Judge Holden got away and finished their journey to California.

Glanton's end was just as gory and hideous as his life. It was the ultimate example of Karma that he should lose his hair and his life to a people who had been victimized by his cruel scalp hunters.

