



The Mexican Revolution

Confrontations during the Mexican Revolution temporarily derailed the cooperation that existed between Ambos Nogales. However, Mexican and American leaders proved adept at negotiating the troubled waters of the revolution. With access to arms, Nogales inevitably became a target for both revolutionary and federal forces. Fighting on the Mexican side between the forces of Alvaro Obregón and **Emilio Kosterlistky** in 1913 and between Obregón and Pancho Villa in 1915 spilled over to the American side. Along International Street, people ran for cover as "bullets fell on the American side."^[109] Neither encounter directly involved Mexicans and Americans.

In response to these early conflicts, the United States government stationed troops along the border to ensure that fighting in Mexico did not "spill over." Hundreds of soldiers from Utah, Colorado, California, and other states arrived at Nogales, Arizona. In addition, the army stationed a contingent of the **Buffalo Soldiers** in Nogales, to serve as border sentries. Soldiers bivouacked outside the town at a site known as Camp Stephen Little, named after an American killed by a stray bullet during the 1915 border fight between Villa's and Obregón's forces. With the experiences of Veracruz still fresh in their memories, many American soldiers did not hold Mexicans in high esteem. One publication which circulated among the soldiers in Nogales, Arizona, summarized the earlier American invasions of Habana, Manila, and Veracruz, and declared,

— 171 —

Out there are the dam' Mexicanos
That sneered at the Red, White and Blue,
Here's ten thousand Yanks, that's asking no thanks
But are spoiling for something to do.^[110]

Local Nogales authorities, who for years had managed to orchestrate relations between both towns, became subordinate to the new military commanders. Arizona's adoption of strict prohibition laws in 1914 also increased confrontations.^[111] With no liquor available in Arizona, those who wanted to drink, especially American soldiers, regularly crossed the border into Mexico and patronized the numerous cantinas that had opened along the international strip. Whether induced by alcohol or not, conflict between American soldiers and Mexicans became common.

With no barrier between both towns, the U.S. Army began stationing soldiers every one hundred yards along International Street, thereby ending random traffic between both communities. Border crossing became formalized and could only take place next to the railroad station, where Americans had established a new immigration checkpoint. The Mexicans followed suit and also established a border-guard station, and restrictive immigration policies soon went into effect. Mexicans who worked in the United States and lived in Sonora could only cross the border twice a day.^[112] Other Mexicans would only be allowed access to the Arizona side once a week. For a community long accustomed to free movement across the border,

these restrictions proved difficult to accept. Mexicans complained of the treatment they now received from the new military border guards who did not speak Spanish. A report prepared by Brigadier General D.C. Cabell affirmed the Mexican charges, indicating that "Mexicans are peculiarly sensitive to rude treatment and bitterly resent the loud, contemptuous and sometimes profane language of American customs guards."^[113] The Mexican consul at Nogales, Arizona, José Garza Zertuche, echoed these complaints, insisting that soldiers regularly ridiculed Mexicans unacquainted with the forms required to cross the border.^[114]

By the summer of 1918, clashes between border guards had already left two Mexican soldiers dead.^[115] For civilians the new restrictions also produced tragic results. Several Mexicans who continued to use the old Bonillas Bridge to cross over the border had been killed by American border guards. In one particular case, Gerardo Pesqueira, a deafmute who did not obey a command not to cross over the bridge, had

— 172 —

also been shot and killed by American soldiers.^[116] The death of Pesqueira, son of ex-governor Ignacio Pesqueira, sent shock waves through the Mexican border community. As border incidents became common, anti-American sentiment increased on the Mexican side.

On August 28, 1918, months of frustration exploded into open conflict. An altercation involving a certain Severiano Gil precipitated a fire fight between American and Mexican guards and brought both towns to the edge of war. In English, American guards demanded that Gil stop and submit to a search before he crossed the border into Mexico. The Mexican guards who witnessed the event urged him to continue. When an American soldier drew his pistol and pointed at Gil, the Mexican guards opened fire. After Mexican and U.S. border guards exchanged gunfire, American military troops joined the fracas and crossed over into Mexico.

The regular Mexican army stationed in Nogales under Captain Adalberto Abasolo refused to participate in the clash. With resentment already running high, Mexican civilians took up the fight against the Americans. One group captured the American consul and held him hostage. Amidst the chaos, Mexican snipers took aim at American businesses in Arizona. Bullets riddled most homes in the vicinity of the border, including the house of General Obregón. His wife and daughters, inside the house at the time, sought shelter with American friends.^[117] The Battle of Nogales, as it later came to be known, lasted until 5:45 p.m., when military officials on both sides agreed to a conference. The officers agreed to a cease-fire, and the American troops returned to the Arizona side. In the conflict many Mexicans and Americans died, including the municipal president of Nogales, Felix Peñalosa, and the American captain of the 10th Cavalry, J. D. Hungerford. The cease fire did not hold, and throughout much of the night Mexicans continued firing on the American community. Venustiano Carranza, the Constitutionalist president of Mexico, dispatched Plutarco Elías Calles, then governor and military commander of Sonora, to Nogales. The United States ordered General C. Cabell stationed at Douglas to the border.

On the afternoon of the twenty-ninth, Calles and Cabell conferred and tried to resolve the issue amicably. After several meetings in which both expressed regret over the course of events, Calles convinced Cabell that the entire incident had been the work of German spies and several disgruntled Mexicans who had since fled the area. Privately, however, American military communiqués continued to insist that

officer blamed Zerabia Aguirre, a customs agent who had been involved in a similar border clash at Ciudad Juárez and El Paso.^[118] Mexicans insisted the affair resulted from months of ill treatment on the part of Americans.^[119] The American consul in Nogales refused to acknowledge the pattern of abuse, focusing instead on the immediate border clash.^[120] Officially, however, both countries circulated the account of German spies, and slowly the hostilities ebbed. To ensure the peace, Calles declared martial law over the Mexican community and ordered all weapons held by civilians confiscated. To prevent future altercations, General Cabel recommended that a permanent fence be built to separate both towns. The Mexicans built a monument to honor their dead; American soldiers received "Mexican service badges" for their involvement in the incident.^[121] The most lasting legacy of this episode became the construction of a permanent fence separating both communities.

