

The Catarino Garza War

Norman Rozeff, September 2011

The reason that this history didn't glean the attention that it deserved is that the nation's attention was primarily focused on the tragic Wounded Knee Massacre at the end of 1890.

Since the mid-1700s when the written history of the Rio Grande Valley began, that history is filled with warfare and gunplay. This account offers no exception. It deals with a largely ignored action and period of the Valley's event-filled history. Even Mary Margaret McAllen Amberson in her very comprehensive book "I Would Rather Sleep in Texas" fails to note the unusual events of the Garza War. Its history has largely been recorded by those in power at the time, so it now has to be examined with greater scrutiny and revised.

Catarino Erasmo Garza Rodriguez was born near Matamoros, Tamaulipas, on November 24, 1859, to J. Encarnación and María de Jesús Rodríguez de la Garza. For the period and prevailing circumstance we can consider him well-educated. He was schooled at Gualahuises, Nuevo León, and San Juan College, Matamoros. Garza moved to Brownsville in 1877 to work as a clerk for Bloomberg and Raphael's Casa de Comercio. This firm for decades was the leading wholesale and retail merchandiser in Brownsville and also had an outlet in Matamoros. Catarino's brother Caledonia had preceded him to Brownsville and over time created a thriving grocer business and became engrossed in Democratic Party politics.

Once in the United States, Catarino was obviously ambitious and moved from job to job in Brownsville, Laredo, and San Antonio. In about 1880 Garza married Caroline Conner (Connor?) She was the niece of Joseph "Pepe" Webb, longtime Cameron County Clerk and Blue Club leader, who would from 1888-1891 serve as Brownsville City Marshal. The Garzas soon had two daughters. They would divorce in 1889. Garza seemed also to possess a wanderlust over the nine-year period that he came to the U.S. He visited Mexico City and in 1882 was employed by the Singer Sewing Machine Company as a traveling agent and lived in Tamaulipas and Nuevo León.

In the year 1885 he was living in St. Louis, no less. There he was appointed Mexican consul, a post he held for a short time. In St. Louis he worked on *La Revista Mexicana* and served as delegate to the National Convention of Wool Industries in 1886. It is surprisingly that the number of Hispanics in the area would warrant a Spanish-language publication. Prejudices and bigotry were already present in this middle America city, for here he was angered by an Anglo lawyer who said that "One white life is worth 10 Mexicans." Nevertheless Garza was widely exposed to American freedoms and enterprise, and these may have planted the seed for his discontent with the increasingly dictatorial regime of Porfirio Diaz in Mexico.

Elliot Young, in his book "*Catarino Garza's Revolution on the Texas-Mexico Border*," writes: "Over the next 30 years after Diaz took office in 1867, he ruled Mexico as president or as the power behind the presidential seat. It was after the generally recognized fraudulent re-elections of Diaz that Garza started calling for revolution against the Diaz regime. However, while in the United States, he also witnessed racism against Mexican-Americans and condemned racist Anglo Texans and Mexican police alike." He was the target of two assassination plots because of his articles on "*El Libre Pensador*" against Coahuila Gov. Garza Galan. He "antagonized all sides by criticizing everyone," wrote Young. For his part, Garza wrote that Diaz and his collaborators "are not the country, nor the laws, nor the people; but are truly only servants."

In 1877, Garza said that when Mexico came under Diaz it was: "The moment when the sun disappeared and oppression reigned." He also said in his autobiography *La Logica de los Hechos*: "*Mi pluma no sabe pintar, pero si reproducir, fotografiar y estampar verdades* (My pen does not know how to paint, but knows how to reproduce, photograph, and imprint truths)." Also in 1877, he served 31 days in Maverick County Jail on a charge of libel. That year, he was in Corpus Christi to found the club, Politico Mutualista, and newspaper *El Comercio Mexicano*."

With his keen intellect and flair for oratory Garza was a natural to become a leader. Early on he sought to promote issues of social justice. "He promoted *sociedades mutualistas* and helped found them [two] in Brownsville [Hidalgo and Juarez], Laredo, and Corpus Christi in 1880, 1884, and 1888, respectively."

It was however through print media that he found his strongest voice. León A. Obregón and Garza founded *El Bien Público* in Brownsville in 1877 (another source says 1879). On June 20, 1886, Garza published the first issue of *El Comercio Mexicano* in Eagle Pass. In its timeline the Eagle Pass Library states: 1886 Catarino Garza started his inflammatory Spanish language publication at Eagle Pass "*El Comercio Mexicano*" and used it to attack the person and policies of Coahuila Governor Jesus Maria Garza Galan. It was the first rumbling of revolution on the border against the Mexican Government. The following year he and Gabriel Botello published *El Libre Pensador* to also publicize abuses by the Mexican government under President Porfirio Díaz and Coahuila governor José María Garza Galán. Gilbert Culbertson tells us "Mexican authorities threatened his Eagle Pass and Piedras Negras readers and encouraged them not to buy or read *El Libre Pensador*. Because of its contents, the newspaper and Garza's equipment were confiscated; Garza was prosecuted for criminal libel and jailed for thirty-one days s [in the Maverick County jail]. He was afraid of extradition, so he moved after December 19, 1887, to Corpus Christi, whence Botello had fled and where they resumed publishing *El Comercio Mexicano* in March 1888." This publication became very influential among Valley Texans of Mexican heritage.

However, Garza's cross-border activism was creating for him as many enemies as he was making friends of the Mexican-American Valleyites, whom he sought to defend. He would soon be propelled into the forefront of border politics. It began in 1888 with the killing of Abraham Resendes (Recendez) at Rio Grande City. There, inspector of cus-

toms, and former Texas Ranger, Victor Sebree and A. Dillard, a deputy United States marshal were involved. When the trial venue was moved from Starr County to Duval County, the Mexican-American population of Rio Grande City became "overly restive" and even more so when the two were acquitted. The subsequent transpiring history by Alicia A. Garza published as the *Rio Grande City Riot of 1888* in "The Handbook of Texas Online" is that in May of that year "Abraham Recéndez, a Mexican-American resident of Rio Grande City had been arrested for robbery by Starr county sheriff W. W. Sheley and after the arrest was killed by Victor Sebree, United States Inspector of Customs and Sheley's companion, while allegedly attempting to escape. The incident led to public anger, particularly against Sheley, who previously had been implicated in the lynching of several Mexicans. Agustin and Silverio de la Peña organized a faction to oppose Sheley and used the murders to argue that he was a racist. They employed journalist Catarino Erasmo Garza, a Mexican who was in Corpus Christi agitating for opposition against Porfirio Díaz, to mount an editorial campaign against their political opponents. In editorials that appeared in *El Comercio Mexicano*, Garza charged that Sebree had assassinated an unnamed Mexican prisoner. Garza then moved to Rio Grande City and encountered Sebree during the September 1888 election, at which time Sebree shot and injured him. Garza sympathizers threatened to lynch Sebree and pursued him when he fled for refuge to Fort Ringgold. The post commander there ordered the 200-man mob to disperse, which they did. News stories, however, leaked that anarchy had broken out in the city and that armed men roamed the streets ready to cause havoc. News of the riot reached as far as Great Falls, Montana, where the *Tribune* headlined "Rumors of War" between white and Mexican citizens in Rio Grande City. The governor's office received a deluge of telegrams reporting on the bloody war being fought on the border and testifying that white lives were endangered. The secretary of state requested aid from the troops at Fort Ringgold, and the United States government ordered part of the Third Cavalry to reinforce them. Gen. David S. Stanley notified the governor that as commander of United States troops in Texas he was responsible for protecting lives and property at the scene and requested that the entire Texas Ranger force be sent to Rio Grande City. The governor wired the sheriffs of Cameron, Hidalgo, and Zapata counties to proceed to the city. He also ordered the San Antonio Rifles, the Belknap Rifles, and the Houston Light Guards to be ready to march on a moment's notice. The Bexar county sheriff joined the sheriffs of Hidalgo, Cameron, and Zapata counties, and eventually they had 250 men under their command ready to move into Starr County. The riot soon dissipated, threatened by the reinforced troops. Sebree remained in the position of United States inspector of customs."

Garza, in fact, had been arrested by Texas Ranger captain John R. Hughes, charged with libel for criticizing former Texas Ranger Victor Sebree for killing Abraham Reséndez, and taken to Rio Grande City. Garza, had indeed, "penned scathing articles denouncing the defendants, the Duval County jury, and "Anglo" justice." Lt. W.H. Chatfield in his 1893 publication *"The Twin Cities of the Border—Brownsville, Texas & Matamoros, Mexico-- and the Country of the Lower Rio Grande"* relates a little about the confrontation of Garza and Sebree. Chatfield's account is not sympathetic to Garza as Chatfield was trying to downplay negative border incidents in order to raise money for his giant irrigation project. To quote" ...he [Garza] came in contact with two of the parties of the

parties whom he had attacked in the columns of his paper—Messrs. Sebree and Norris; the former was a United States marshal at the time, and had been repeatedly warned that Garza would shoot him on sight; so upon seeing Garza come towards him on Laredo street, he was prepared for an attack. Sebree was alone at the time, while Garza had one of his followers with him; the battle opened on both sides simultaneously, the odds being two to one, but Sebree stood off both men slightly wounding Garza. [Garza's companion, a man named Lopez, was also wounded.] The affair caused the wildest excitement, the Mexican population arming themselves, and for several hours the town was given over to mob rule. Sebree and Norris were threatened with vengeance dire, and were fired upon while proceeding to Fort Ringgold, in a carriage [another account has Sebree mounting a horse and fleeing to the fort] to lay their case before the commanding officer, Colonel Clendenin (sic). The mob pressed at their heels and demanded the refugees, but this was refused, peremptorily and prompt dispositions were made to oppose force with force. Indictments were issued against a number of rioters and the cases are still pending in the District Court at Brownsville, although Mr. Sebree has repeatedly requested quashals in all of them."

The riot made state and national news. *The New York Times* of September 25, 1888 ran three back-to-back stories datelined Rio Grande City, San Antonio, and Brownsville. The first one was headlined MEXICANS VERY AGGRESSIVE RIO GRANDE CITY ASKING FOR TROOPS TO PROTECT IT The accompanying story read: Catrino (sic) Garza, who was shot Friday last at this place by Victor Sebree, is still living and has a chance of recovering, as the surgeon at Fort Ringgold says the ball struck no vital part. Sebree, who was pursued and shot at by the Mexican friends of Garza, reached Fort Ringgold in safety and surrendered himself to the commanding officer, Col. Clendenning (sic). He will be kept in military custody until the Sheriff of this county feels that he can protect him. The Mexicans made a demand on the military for Sebree, but Col. Clendenning refused to deliver him up, and notified them that any attempt to take him by force would draw the fire of the Gatling guns and of the entire command on them. The soldiers of the garrison were each served with 100 rounds of ball cartridges and slept on their arms Saturday night. In order to prevent the ordering of more Rangers and any communications between Fort Ringgold and the department headquarters, the Mexicans tore down the telegraph wires between this place and Fort Ringgold. Wiser counsel in connection with the possible recovery of Garza, has had the effect of restoring order." A second article put the number of rioters at 200. As serious as the incident was, media publicity blew it all out of proportion to its significance. As a result law enforcement personnel soon inundated the town.

Hughes in his own book, *Captain John R. Hughes Lone Star Ranger*, writes that on 9/26/88 Lt.-Col. David R. Clendenin sent a dispatch which calmed the nerves of the new governor, Lawrence Sullivan Ross. It read "I have protected Sebree and others from the mob. No property has been destroyed or depredation committed in Rio Grande City. Affairs are not so bad as represented. If any real danger had existed I would have used the troops to prevent bloodshed. Poses from adjoining counties arrived last night and to-day. All quiet.". Hughes goes on to relate: "On September 29 Sheriff Brito and his posse left Rio Grande City for Brownsville to deliver Sebree there for safety. Garza continued to improve. It was, in the opinion of his doctors, "his critical day", but if he should die then

it was expected that the riots would resume. Garza did not die and things remained peaceful. During the next few weeks Rangers investigated the "shooting scrape which had caused such trouble" and arrested two dozen men on charges of conspiracy to murder and for assault to murder. They appeared in court and were released on bail in amounts of \$500 to \$5,000 to appear before the next term of district court. Again this was the combined efforts of companies D and F together. In this matter no individual Ranger's name appeared, merely that men from both companies made the arrest."

While recuperating, Garza commenced writing an autobiography focusing primarily on the last twelve years of his life. Titled *La Logica de los Hechos* (or the Logic of Acts) it was acclaimed positively in South Texas and stamped him as an intellectual. More than that, it helped to portray the difficult situations that the Mexican faced in Texas. He was, therefore, one of the first to use print media to defend the interests of Mexicans in Texas.

Garza's life and endeavors had been suspect from 1886 when rumors began to that he was recruiting a revolutionary army to act against Mexico. The Mexican consul at Brownsville, Manuel Trevino, quietly approached James Wells, the political boss of South Texas, to probe the possibilities of bringing charges against Garza associates that were purported to be violating the Neutrality Act. Wells concluded that although Garza was a critic of the establishment, he had no military following and gave no intention of plotting a revolution. When the rumors resurfaced in 1888, Wells traced them to a Republican opponent, R. B. Creager of Brownsville, who hoped to use the Starr County turmoil to elect Republican sheriff candidate, Don Lino Hinojosa, over Democrat W.W. Sheley.

After his divorce from Caroline, Garza moved to Palito Blanco, Texas. Here he met, fell in love with, and married Concepcion Gonzales, a daughter of the highly-regarded rancher, Don Alejandro Gonzales. Catarino and Concepcion would later have a daughter. Upon settling in at the rancho Garza began publishing *El Libre Pensador* (The Free Thinker), along with *El Baluarte* (The Bulwark). In these publications he increased his criticism of President Diaz. He condemned him for "abandoning his pledge not to seek re-election, for establishing a military dictatorship, and for abolishing freedom of the press, liberty of speech, and the right of *amparo* (sequestration)." Even more pointedly he charged "that Mexican elections had become a farce and that Diaz was the tool of the church party, the old Centralists, and the Imperialists."

In 1890 Garza would hit closer to home by joining with General D. Ignacio Martinez, who was editor of the Laredo newspaper *El Mundo*, in attacking, in a war of invectives, the governor of Tamaulipas, General Bernardo Reyes. The two overstepped the bounds when they promoted a revolution to be led by Francisco Ruiz Sandoval. Subsequently Martinez was assassinated on February 3, 1891. When, in a biography titled *El Burro del Oro* (The Golden Ass), Garza satirized Reyes, the general endeavored to bring libel charges against him. Garza, fearing for his life, then hid out in the brush country.

Non-violent confrontations by Garza were not affecting changes in Mexico. He would turn to physical action. He reputedly began to organize a force to invade Mexico. On September 15, 1891, he led a group of twenty-six armed men across the Rio Grande at

Mier, Tamaulipas, and proclaimed the "Plan Revolucionario." The revolutionaries returned to Texas after nine days and a brief engagement with Mexican forces. Over the following months, the Garcistas made at least two more incursions into Mexico. According to Garza's own records, by the end of 1891 his army had 63 commanders, 186 officers, and 1,043 soldiers.

There is no way to verify actual numbers and speculation was rife. As an example: The *Brenham Weekly Banner* reported on September 24, 1891: "A special from Rio Grande City says Garza and nearly 200 revolutionists were seen Sunday night sixty miles south of Carmargo, pressing for the Rio Grande river and pursued by Mexican troops."

There were repercussions, so negative, that they may have brought more followers of Garza into the fold. In short, the Mexican government moved soldiers under the command of General Lorenzo Garcia into the border area. Under orders from the general, dissent was brutally suppressed. A special agent of the United States treasury was said to have reported "no less than eighty people shot because of suspected pro-Garza sympathies." This transpired before the end of November 1891.

With Texas Rangers having been withdrawn to confront Knights of Labor activity, the U.S. Army had to be used to breach the gap in law enforcement. By December 1891 United States Army troops had been sent to patrol the border to supplement the available troops from Forts Brown, Ringgold, and McIntosh (in Laredo). In search of neutrality violations they accomplished little. The army generally was ineffective as it didn't have the mobility and horsemanship of Garzas mounted revolutionaries. They did learn that "on September 15, approximately 60 men had crossed the Rio Grande, engaged Mexican troops in battle, and afterwards, had disappeared into southwest Texas."

One short skirmish occurred, at Retamal Springs. On December 22, a detachment under Captain John Gregory Bourke of the Third Cavalry met a party of armed men. After a short skirmish in which one soldier was killed, the band fled into the brush country. The Handbook of Texas Online tells us a little about Bourke. It relates " Bourke was a well-known Indian fighter, writer, crusader for Indian rights, and anthropologist before he reported to Fort Ringgold, Rio Grande City, Texas, in 1891. He had already fought Indians in the Southwest and on the Great Plains and had served on the staff of Gen. George Crook from 1871 until 1886." Joseph C. Porter then perhaps exaggerates Bourke's effectiveness here when he states " Bourke's two-year tour of duty along the lower Rio Grande established his significance in Texas history. He became pivotal in the suppression of Catarino Garza's effort against the government of Porfirio Díaz in Mexico. The Mexican government demanded that the United States act because Garza had based his force in Texas. In turn, the federal government instructed the state of Texas, federal marshals, and the United States Army to stop the Garzistas. Initially Bourke noted that many South Texans—Mexican Americans and Anglos—openly supported Garza and that Fort McIntosh in Laredo and Fort Ringgold together mustered only two troops of cavalry and two companies of infantry with which to patrol an area of 500 square miles. Nonetheless, Bourke followed orders, and his raids on ranches suspected of harboring Garzistas earned him the undying enmity of many South Texans."

One other Army soldier deserves note here. It is Allen Walker , who was awarded the Medal of Honor for his heroic action in the Valley. His story is " Allen Walker was born in Patriot, Indiana, on January 19, 1866, the son of William and Eveline Walker. He enlisted in the army at Indianapolis in 1884 and served in the Nineteenth United States Infantry Regiment in South Texas. He was discharged at San Antonio in 1889 and promptly reenlisted in Company C, Third United States Cavalry. In December 1891 he was involved in a series of skirmishes during the Garza War in southwest Texas. On December 30 he was acting alone as a courier from Fort Langhorne when he saw three armed Mexicans ahead of him. After they refused to stop, he fired, killing one of their horses. The riders escaped, but left behind papers including a proclamation inciting revolution. Capt. John Gregory Bourke stated, "This man exhibited so much courage, efficiency, coolness, and self-reliance while away from his command that I feel constrained to recommend he be awarded the Medal of Honor." Walker married Alvina Fuentes at Fort Ringgold; she died in 1898. Walker was later commissioned as a first lieutenant in the Philippine Scouts during the Philippine Insurrection and was awarded the Silver Star. He was promoted to captain in the scouts on August 14, 1908. He retired from the military soon after the scouts were disbanded in 1911, and resided in Laredo. Walker became a deputy U.S. marshal for the Southern District of Texas in 1914 and went on to serve as marshal for the same district. Allen Walker was married to Enriqueta Peña in 1926; they had seven children. He died at Brooke Army Hospital on September 10, 1953. He is buried in the Catholic Cemetery at Laredo.

Garcistas soon left the area as newly appointed special rangers proved effective and potential recruits opted for neutrality. In 1892 Garza reportedly learned that he was wanted by the special rangers and fled Texas. Garza's departure did not immediately stop the rebellion that had enlisted " a broad cross-border alliance of ranchers, merchants, peasants, and disgruntled military men." By 1892 they may have deteriorated into a "bandit horde" and soldiers of fortune.

James Wells worked diligently to influence his *ranchero* friends to remain neutral in the matter. Wells didn't have much faith in the Army's ability to cope with the guerrillas in brush country. " He contemptuously charges that the soldiers frequently passed along *senderos* (trails) within "arms length" of their quarry without knowing they were there." Working with Governor Hogg, the two initiated a secret Ranger task force that one by one tracked down and killed or harried the offenders out of Texas. As an example of its effectiveness, on December 10, 1892 an armed body of riders crossed into Mexico at San Ygnacio, fifty-three miles below Laredo. They surprised a Mexican army encampment and killed two officers and four enlisted men. While some blamed Garza, the Mexican government fingered bandits Mangas de Agua and Francisco "El Tuerto" [one-eyed] Benavides as the culprits. They were arrested in Texas and subsequently depredations sharply diminished. Eventually after two years of sporadic fighting, the combined efforts of the U.S. and Mexican armies, Texas Rangers, and local police finally succeeded in crushing the rebellion. Years later, among Well's papers was found a "hit" list of thirty names, Catarino Garza among them. All had been eventually arrested or killed, except Garza.

The true story of Garza's last years is shaky. One historian writes: "After leaving the state in 1892, Garza traveled to various places, including Nassau, Jamaica, and possibly Cuba and Florida. By March 28, 1893, he moved to Matina, near Limón, Costa Rica, and a San José press published his pamphlet indicting the Díaz regime, *La Era de Tuxtepec en México o Sea Rusia en América*. Garza participated in a revolutionary uprising in Colombia. Official sources report that he was killed in storming the jail at Bocas del Toro, Colombia (now in Panama), on March 8, 1895."

Catarino Garza was obviously a man before his time. It would take 30 more years before Mexico became a true republic following the revolution of 1910-1920. He was an idealist who disclaimed any enmity towards the United States or its troops. Joe Robert Bauch notes that the Catarino Garza or Tin Horn War "left no deep scars and, consequently, was soon forgotten, its details hidden in misleading and hearsay newspaper accounts, self-serving military reports, generally inaccurate recollections, and a few grossly erroneous histories." This explains why Garza's efforts are unfortunately not well known, even today. The legacy that he initiated was to speak up for Tejanos being oppressed in South Texas and Mexicans in Mexico. That took courage and entailed personal risk. It took decades before others, such as Jose T. Canales, would follow in Garza's footsteps.