

POLITICAL INTRIGUE AT TUCSON: THE MEXICAN GARRISON AND THE MORMON BATTALION

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When the Mormon Battalion approached Tucson, the Mexican garrison stationed there fled. Battalion journalists accused the Mexicans of cowardice. A common belief among Battalion members was that the Mexicans had at least two hundred armed soldiers; and, with support from four other Mexican garrisons, there was the possibility that the total number of defenders approached a thousand. In reality, it is doubtful the Mexican garrison had a hundred soldiers who could fight.

The Battalion strength consisted of about 330 fatigued, worn, travel-weary, ill-equipped, starving citizen soldiers, who were not physically or mentally seasoned to fight the Tucsonenses. On the other hand, perhaps the battle did not take place because of the ingenious maneuvering of the Mexican comadante, Captain Antonio Comaduran, and the Battalion commander, Colonel Philip St. George Cooke.

First Settlers at Tucson

When the U.S. Army entered Tucson in December 1846, the small pueblo of about five hundred citizens was almost seventy-one years old. It was still a frontier community isolated from Mexico and the United States by the desert. The presidio was originally founded to protect the communities and missions in Sonora from the Indians.

Before the founding of the Spanish presidio at Tucson, the Pima Indians lived in the Santa Cruz Valley along the Santa Cruz River. This was long before Father Eusebio Francisco Kino settled a mission ten miles away at San Xavier del Bac in 1687.¹ Father Kino, a Jesuit Priest, moved into the Bac area with several soldiers,

perhaps eight or ten, as was customary when Spain sought to expand its frontiers in the New World.² With soldiers and several families of Christian Indians, they built homes and a church, and they farmed. The friars sought to pacify the local tribes and convert them to Christianity. This approach accomplished two purposes. It brought the Indians to Christ according to the tenets of the Catholic faith, and it enabled Spain to extend her frontiers into new territory.

When Padre Kino entered Pimeria Alta, later known as the Mexican state of Sonora, and founded the Mission of San Xavier del Bac, there is no evidence that Father Kino attempted to settle present-day Tucson, even though he visited the site.³ The purpose of his visits seems to have been to acquaint himself with the Pima Indians and to entice them to settle near the mission ten miles away. The Pimas called their settlement at Tucson "Tautaukwany" or "Kokololoti." These Papago words sounded like "schook shon" or "stukshon," which the Spanish pronounced and wrote as "Tucson."⁴

The Presidio at Tucson

The Spanish did not begin to settle Tucson until 1775 when Hugo O'Connor, an Irishman in the service of the King of Spain, established a presidio.⁵ He built the presidio for two reasons. First, the King of Spain commissioned him to reorganize the fortifications on Spain's northern frontier to make them more efficient in fighting the Indians and others, such as the British, the Americans, and the French who encroached on Spanish territory. Second, it was a natural spot for a community because of the Santa Cruz River.⁶

When O'Connor organized the presidio, he trans-

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ferred men from the Tubac garrison a dozen miles south to Tucson. These people were Sonoran desert dwellers.⁷ “Some were Spaniards born in the New World. Others were called moriscos, mulatos, or coyotes, products of the racial mixture that characterized Spain’s North American frontier.”⁸ All of them had grown up in the desert and had learned to live with privation. The Tucson presidio consisted of a commander, five corporals, thirty-seven heavy cavalry, and seventeen light cavalry. A total of seventy men comprised the original garrison at Saint Augustin del Tucson.⁹ Along with the soldiers came farmers, merchants, and Indianos mansos, or tame Indians. Sheridan observed, “Tucson’s presidio not only guarded the Hispanic and Pima communities of the middle Santa Cruz valley but also served as a base of operations for offensive actions against the Indians as well.”¹⁰ If it hadn’t been for the marauding Apaches, it is doubtful the Tucson presidio would have been established.

The first commander of the presidio, Juan Maria de Oliva, built much of the town from adobe.¹¹ At first, Tucson was an open presidio. It was not until Don Pedro Allande y Saabedra took command two years later, in 1777, that walls were built around the presidio to withstand the Apache raids.¹²

Settlers were not attracted to Tucson because of gold, silver, and wealth but because of the fertile valley.¹³ Life in the small frontier community was characterized by shortages and adversity. So great was the Indian threat that when the women left the presidio to wash their clothes, soldiers accompanied them to the river to protect them.¹⁴ During these years, few settlers lived outside the walls of the city. Those who tried were most often driven back to the presidio by the Indians. For example, haciendas such as Babocomari and San Bernardino were abandoned and their cattle herds left to wander southern New Mexico and Arizona when their owners were forced to leave them because of Indian pressures.¹⁵ In 1782, the pueblo of Tucson was almost wiped out when several hundred Indians attacked it.¹⁶

By 1797, Friar Pedro de Arriquibar estimated the population of Tucson—Spanish-Mestizo and Indian—to be 784 persons.¹⁷ There were 389 Indians (Apaches, Papagos, and Pimas) and 395 Spanish and Mestizo.¹⁸ In 1817, Jose de Zuniga reported that the garrison at Tucson numbered “122 enlisted men.”¹⁹

During the War of Independence, 1812-21, in which Mexico declared itself free from Spanish rule, Tucson’s problems remained the same—Indians and survival. Jose Maria Elias Gonzales served as garrison commander until his appointment as military commander of the El Paso District.²⁰ While Spanish soldiers fought several skirmishes against rebels in the north, most of the garrison was transferred to southern battles that were of more consequence as the Spanish sought to maintain their foothold in America.

In 1779, Captain Allande had seventy-seven men under his command—but “only 59 effectives.”²¹ The number of soldiers in the garrison dropped from seventy-seven in 1779 to sixty-two in 1783 and then leveled off at sixty-five in 1784.²² By 1817, just before the Mexican War of Independence, the garrison had been strengthened, and the soldiers numbered ninety-two.²³

During the decades, the number of soldiers at St. Augustin de Tucson increased or decreased according to Indian pressures along the frontier. Following the Mexican War of Independence, which depleted Tucson of its military strength, the pueblo was almost destroyed when ninety-two Apaches attacked the community. Each time the garrison or community was raided, the Tuconenses, even though at this time outnumbered, retaliated against the Apaches by trying to reclaim stolen goods and prisoners taken by the Indians. During these formative years, capable Spanish/Mexican military leaders Pedro Allande y Saabedra, Manuel de Leon, Manuel Y. de Arvizu, and Juan Alexo Carillo commanded the small garrison.²⁴ These men, although outnumbered, were successful in keeping the Apaches from driving the settlers from the Santa Cruz Valley. The soldiers in Tucson were “seasoned desert warriors who defended Tucson in the face of enormous odds.”²⁵

After the Mexicans won their independence from Spain, the presidio was no longer used as a frontier institution. Under the Mexican government, Tucson became a military outpost.²⁶ By 1817, the garrison at Tucson had grown to ninety-two men.²⁷ Still following the custom of the Spanish frontier, about a dozen soldiers were stationed at San Xavier del Bac to protect the friendly Indians and the priests from Apache attacks. On the muster roll for the 1818 military post at Tucson, a young lieutenant, Antonio de Comaduran, appeared as third in command of the garrison.²⁸

Tucson in the 1830s and 1840s

In the 1830s, the leadership of Tucson and of the military post changed hands. Two qualified men, Teodoro Ramirez and Antonio Comaduran, governed or led the Tucsonenses.²⁹ These men were brothers-in-law, and while Antonio ascended the military ranks to become captain or commadante of the garrison, Teodoro became the pueblo's leading merchant. It is clear that by 1831, Comaduran had been promoted to the rank of captain and commander of the Tucson garrison, which position he held until 1851 when he apparently died during a cholera epidemic that devastated Tucson's population.³⁰

In the 1830s and 40s, when supplies did not arrive from Mexican military leaders in Sonora to feed and cloth the garrison, Antonio appealed to his brother-in-law, Teodoro, for help. Teodoro always provided for the soldiers' needs and then collected payment from the Mexican military command in Sonora.³¹

By the 1840s, when the United States and Mexico went to war, it is doubtful that the Mexican garrison at Tucson exceeded a hundred men.³² Undoubtedly, some of the fighting men had also been transferred to fight with Santa Ana's Army and to defend the Mexican capital of Mexico City against Admiral Scott and the U.S. Fleet

The Antagonists: Comaduran and Cooke

Antonio Comaduran was the commadante when Philip St. George Cooke and the Mormon Battalion entered Tucson on 17 December 1846.³³ As they approached Tucson, the Battalion suffered for want of food, clothing, and water.³⁴ In addition, Battalion members suffered from overexposure to hot days and extremely cold nights. On 10 December, Colonel Cooke recorded, "It was exceedingly cold last night. I believe Fahrenheit's thermometer would have stood below ten degrees."³⁵ In Santa Fe, New Mexico, the Battalion had been given enough supplies for the sixty-day march to California.³⁶ By the time they approached Tucson, they had been traveling sixty-six days, they had exhausted most of their supplies, and they were living on short rations. The Battalion men and the four women who accompanied them were exhausted, and the lack of grass and water left their animals weak. Only the fish they caught at the San Pedro River and the meat they acquired during the Battle of the Bulls the week before their arrival at Tucson had replenished some of their food

stores.

As the Battalion members traveled toward Tucson, they encountered friendly Indians who told them that the garrison at the military post exceeded two hundred men and that soldiers from the presidios and missions of Tubac, Tumacacori, Guevavi, and Calabazas were on their way to help the Tucsonenses defend their city against the invading U.S. army. Battalion journalists recorded this information and also noted the fear that existed among its members. What they did not know was that the garrison at Tubac had been abandoned in the eighteenth century and its soldiers transferred to Tucson and that the others were Indian missions with only a few soldiers each when they were occupied. These missions had also been abandoned before the U.S.-Mexican War.³⁷

Both commanders proceeded with diplomatic guile as the invading army approached Tucson. Cooke sent several scouts, among whom was Stephan Foster who spoke Spanish, to reconnoiter Tucson and to try to ascertain its strength.³⁸ At the same time, Comaduran sent several soldiers, among whom was his son, Corporal Joaquin Comaduran, to spy out the Battalion's strength.³⁹ Both commanders detained the envoys and briefly held them prisoners. Within a day or two, each side released its prisoners, and the frontier diplomacy continued.

A message sent by Comaduran to Cooke asked Cooke not to enter Tucson but to go around it—and promised that the Tucson Garrison would not delay or molest the Americans.⁴⁰

Cooke considered the request and then, with the aid of his officers and scouts, determined that either of the alternate routes would add an additional eighty miles to their journey. Besides the mesquite being bad, they had to cross and recross the river. There was no grass for the animals, and the road was rougher.⁴¹

With this information, Cooke decided to proceed through Tucson, and he notified Comaduran. However, he also reassured the Tucson commander that he would not molest his garrison unless the Mexicans provoked an incident. He explained that he had no desire to fight anyone whose sole existence was to protect a community against the Indians. He further explained that his mission was to open a wagon road to California, which would benefit both Sonora and the United States. Cooke

called the Mexican commander's attention to the fact that Sonora favored association with the United States rather than with Mexico.⁴² Colonel Cooke proposed that the Tucson commander surrender two or three muskets and half a dozen lances in token of their intention not to interfere with the Battalion's march through their city.⁴³

As the Battalion drew closer to Tucson, Commander Comaduran notified Cooke by courier, "a fine looking cavalry-man well armed," that he could not honorably accede to Cooke's request.⁴⁴ A short time later, "two Mexicans were met" who reported that Comaduran had left the area with his troops and most of the citizens of Tucson.⁴⁵ Journals indicate that only about a hundred old men and women remained in Tucson. Although it may appear in Battalion journals that the Tucson garrison abandoned the pueblo when the U.S. Army marched through, such is not the case. They simply moved, along with most of the pueblo's citizens, to the San Xavier del Bac Mission ten miles away and waited for the U.S. soldiers to leave. Once the Battalion had departed, they returned to their homes in Tucson; and life continued until the Mexican military post at Tucson formally surrendered to the U.S. Army in 1856.

As the U.S. soldiers moved closer to the pueblo with primed weapons ready to fight, about a dozen Mexicans met them and escorted them into town. Although the men wore civilian dress, the soldiers and officers in the Battalion thought them "to be soldiers."⁴⁶ Just before entering the pueblo, Cooke gave orders to his men that "The people of Sonora are not our enemies" and that the soldiers must hold the citizens' property "sacred."⁴⁷ Cook ordered his men not to molest the citizens, and it is clear that he held his men responsible for the community's well being.⁴⁸

As the Battalion entered the pueblo, they found that "like Santa Fe, Tucson is not seen until very close by. Of course, its adobe houses are the same in appearance but inferior." They observed "a wall with abutments and battlements in bad repair" that surrounded the barracks—"located on the highest ground. The town . . . is a more populous village than . . . supposed, containing about 500" people.⁴⁹ Robinson also estimated the population of Tucson at this time at about five hundred people, with about one-fifth remaining when the Battalion passed through the pueblo.⁵⁰

On 17 December 1846, Cooke's battalion marched through Tucson and camped on the riverbank about half a mile from the city. When the Mormon Battalion entered Tucson, they were greeted by the older citizens, who offered them water, flour, beans, and other foods.

Once preparations for camp had been made, Cooke asked for fifty volunteers to investigate another nearby community, the Mission of San Xavier del Bac. They set out but soon returned to Tucson, as the mesquite brush was too thick and offered the enemy too great an opportunity for ambush. During the night of the 17th, a picket, Redick N. Allred, fired his rifle and aroused the soldiers to battle stations.⁵¹ It was learned that some of the town's inhabitants, who had fled when the Battalion approached, were returning to their homes. The men returned to their beds and slept peacefully.

Because of exhaustion, Colonel Cooke ordered his command to lay over the 18th. Cooke felt that such a respite was needed, for his scouts had reported that the Battalion had to cross a desert where there was no water. During the one-day rest, the soldiers traded with the citizens for additional food, and Colonel Cooke wrote letters to Captain Comaduran and to Governor Manuel Gandara, the governor of Sonora, in which he apologized for the inconvenience he may have caused by passing through Sonora. He assured Governor Gandara that the citizens "received only kindness at my hands" and explained that his objective was to open a wagon road to California that "I trust, will prove useful to the citizens of either republic, who, if not more closely, may unite in the pursuits of a highly beneficial commerce."⁵²

The forced march, which began on 19 December, took several days, during which the soldiers walked about ninety miles without water.

Tucson's Return to Normalcy

After the departure of the Battalion, the Tucsonenses returned to their pueblo.⁵³ In 1848, Captain Comaduran led a raid against the Athabaskans. His unit was ambushed in the Whetstone Mountains, and fifteen soldiers were killed, among whom was Rafael Ramirez, his wife's nephew.⁵⁴

Life continued as before the U.S.-Mexican war until 1854, when Mexican President Santa Ana sold the terri-

tory known as the Gadsden Purchase to the United States.⁵⁵ In 1856, the Mexican garrison at Tucson was relieved of command by the U.S. military, and the former Mexican soldiers either returned to Sonora or became private citizens in Tucson.⁵⁶

Conclusions

Unfortunately, the records of the Mexican garrison at Tucson in 1846 are lost, so an exact disposition of the Mexican soldiers is unknown. However, the Mexican garrison probably had fewer than a hundred soldiers. If the Mexican garrison, regardless of its numbers, had chosen to fight, they undoubtedly were better prepared than the Americans. They had been raised in the desert, and they were used to privation and hardship. They were seasoned soldiers who were used to encounters with enemy forces of superior numbers, and they had enough food stores to sustain themselves through a prolonged siege.

The soldiers in Cooke's command had suffered greatly in their march from Santa Fe. The men and animals were weakened by the extremes in temperature as they traveled. They suffered greatly from the hot days followed by severely cold nights. They lacked provisions and had been reduced to starvation rations. They had not grown up in the desert; and even though many had been driven from their homes in Missouri and Illinois and had crossed the wilds of Iowa, they were still Easterners and Europeans. For them, the cactus, mesquite, and constant lack of water proved to be almost insurmountable problems.

Perhaps Comaduran and Cooke realized the weaknesses of their respective positions, which caused them to pursue a position of honorable peace. Their desert diplomacy allowed the Tucsonenses and the Battalion men to benefit from the peaceful passing of the Battalion through Tucson. The Battalion soldiers obtained food by trading personal articles, which were in constant demand because of the shortages suffered by the Tucsonenses. Each side benefited from the wise negotiations of their commanders.

Notes

1. Henry F. Dobyns, *Spanish Colonial Tucson: A Demographic History* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1976), 4.

2. The Spanish used the missionaries to expand their frontiers in the new world. They accomplished this by using small detachments of soldiers to protect the Catholic missionaries. Usually, one or two missionaries, several families of Indians already converted to Catholicism, and seven or eight soldiers protected the priests and colonizers.

3. Dobyns, 4-6.

4. *Ibid.*, 3.

5. Thomas E. Sheridan, *Los Tucsonenses: The Mexican Community in Tucson, 1854-1941* (Tucson: University of New Mexico Press, 1986), 9.

6. *Ibid.*, 10.

7. *Ibid.*

8. *Ibid.* The Spanish social system was a rigid, stratified structure consisting of Gachupines—people who were born in Spain but who immigrated to New Spain; Criollos—those of pure Spanish blood who were born in New Spain; Mulatos—those of Spanish-Indian mixture; and Coyotes or Zambos—people of Indian-Black mixture.

9. Dobyns, 65.

10. Sheridan, 11.

11. Dobyns, 56-60.

12. *Ibid.*, 60.

13. Sheridan, 14.

14. *Ibid.*, 17.

15. James E. Officer and Henry F. Dobyns, "Teodoro Ramirez: Early Citizen of Tucson," *Journal of Arizona History* 25 (Autumn 1984): 230; Kieran McCarty, *Deseret Documentary: The Spanish Years, 1767-1821* (Tucson: Arizona Historical Society, 1976), 7.

16. Sheridan, 12.

17. Dobyns, 143.

18. *Ibid.*, 142-43.

19. McCarty, 111.

20. Dobyns, 110.

21. *Ibid.*, 154; Medina in 1779.

22. Ibid., 157-59.
23. Ibid., 160-62.
24. Ibid., 109.
25. Sheridan, 18.
26. Dobyns, 124.
27. Ibid., 162.
28. The Roster of the Royal troops at Tucson lists Antonio Comaduran as second ensign; McCarty, 137.
29. Sheridan, 18; Dobyns, 109.
30. Tucson Census of 1831, 10; Officer, 227, 232. The total population of Tucson in 1831 was 554, of which 161 are listed as children. There were 143 women, and 113 of these women were married. Of the 232 men listed in the census, 119 were bachelors and eight had fought in the Mexican war of independence. The census enumerators listed 272 military personnel, which presumably includes the families stationed in Tucson to defend the settlement but does not give the actual number of soldiers. However, it may be assumed that at least 127 men were assigned to the Tucson garrison. Antonion Comaduran is listed as the military commander, but he and his family are absent. Don Jose Maria Villaescusa was "temporary commander of [the] Tucson presidio" during Comaduran's absence.
31. Officer, 229.
32. Ibid.
33. In a document signed by Comanduran and other officers and noncommissioned officers on 20 January 1845, the garrison at Tucson agreed to defend Tucson and the Mexican Republic against foreign invasion.
34. Ralph P. Bieber, ed., *The Southwest Historical Series* (Glendale, California: Arthur H. Clark Co., 1945), 141.
35. Ibid., 142; Phillip St. George Cooke, *Exploring South Western Trails, 1846-1854*, Ralph P. Bieber, ed. (Glendale, California: The Arthur H. Clark Co., 1938), 139.
36. They required 120 days to reach California.
37. Edwin Corle, *The Gila: River of the Southwest* (New York: Rinehart and Co., 1951), 148; McCarty, 34, 87.
38. David Perry Wilson, "The Mormon Battalion," (master's thesis, University of Utah, 1941), 55-56.
39. Ibid.
40. Paul Dayton Bailey, *The Armies of God* (New York: Doubleday Publishers, 1968), 165, 167.
41. Bieber, 141.
42. Cooke, 151-53.
43. Ibid., 149-50.
44. Ibid.
45. Ibid.; Officer, 229: "Captain Comaduran, whose forces were heavily out-numbered, withdrew the soldiers to the San Xavier" del Bac Mission, a short distance from Tucson.
46. Cooke, 149-50.
47. C. L. Sonnichsen, *Tucson, the Life and Times of an American City* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1982), 30-31.
48. Cooke, 148-49.
49. Edward P. Murray, "Tucson: Genesis of Community," *History Today* 17 (December 1967): 844.
50. William H. Robinson, *The Story of Arizona* (Phoenix: The Berryhill Co., 1919), 95.
51. Daniel Tyler, *A Concise History of the Mormon Battalion in the Mexican War, 1846- 47* (Chicago: The Rio Grande Press, Inc., 1881), 229.
52. Ibid., 230-31.
53. William Bryan Pace, "Diary of William Byran Pace and Biography of His Father, James Pace" (Provo, Utah: BYU Special Collections, 1941), 14.
54. Sheridan, 22; Officer, 230.
55. Officer, 23. Several years following the War with Mexico in July 1853, James Gadsden acting under directions from U.S. President Franklin Pierce made a treaty with Mexico to settle existing disputes and to acquire enough land to build a railroad. After much debate, the Senate ratified the treaty 25 April 1854. With this action 45, 535 square miles were added to the United States (*Concise Dictionary of American History*, 394).
56. *Tucson, A Short History* (Tucson: Southwestern Mission Research Center, 1986), 69-70, 72, 87