

Stolen Cattle, Bleeding Borders & the Texas Rangers

*The story of the McNelly Rangers' raid into Mexico in 1875.
Words by Dan Gagliasso. Illustrations by Western historical artist Dave Powell.*

According to an 1874 Congressional report, from 1865 to 1874, more than 240,000 head of Texas cattle worth nearly \$30,000,000—in 1870s dollars—were stolen by organized bandits and driven across the Mexican border. Today that loss would amount to over \$600,000,000.

Like a modern-day border drug lord, one man was largely responsible for most of these thefts, Mexican General Juan Nepomuceno Cortina. In 1872, the Adjutant General of the State of Texas concluded that: “The cutthroats and thieves who have collected on the border think the killing of a Texan something to be proud of, and will kill anyone, even their own nationality, should he encounter them with stolen cattle. Cortina is the recognized head and protector of all the cattle thieves and murderers from Carmargo to the mouth of the Rio Grande. His armed adherents are said to number over two thousand.”

Congressional investigators themselves witnessed firsthand 500 head of stolen Texas beef crossing the Rio Grande River right in front of their river steamer, the *San Juan*.

**“In 1875, in
southwest Texas,
cattle were worth
\$25 a head.
Men’s lives were
worth nothing.”**

Another American traveler during the period reported seeing a Mexican Army captain on the Mexican side of the river commanding a herd of 400 stolen Texas cattle declaring glee-

fully, “The gringos are raising cattle for me.” Like his drug cartel counterparts today, Cortina became fabulously wealthy while southwest Texas ranchers hemorrhaged cattle, horses and corpses. Unfortunately, the U.S. Army was always a day late and a bullet short in pursuing Cortina’s hordes.

On March 26, 1875, 35 of Cortina’s bandits, including several American outlaws, rode into Nuecestown almost one hundred miles deep into Texas, a mere 14 miles from the thriving city of Corpus Christi. These cutthroats proceeded to murder a handful of local citizens—including a Tejano—kidnapped and abused several women, looted the local mercantile of a number of fancy Dick Heye saddles and finally burned much of the town. Even for a wealthy rancher like Captain Richard King, founder of the King Ranch and his famous Santa Gertrudis, the situation was perilous. One visitor described

King's main headquarters building as "being more like an army arsenal inside with an over 80 stand of Henry repeating rifles and hundreds of boxes of ammunition all within easy reach."

Local Anglos soon organized into vengeance seeking vigilante groups who wantonly killed or drove off many innocent Tejano ranchers and vaqueros in misplaced indignation. Only Richard King's loyal "Kineno" vaqueros and a few other Texas Mexicans were held beyond suspicion.

Finally, in 1875, Texas had had enough. The Texas Rangers, then a civilian volunteer militia which had been disbanded during Reconstruction, were reinstituted for two reasons, "To protect citizens from Indian attacks in West Texas and to bring order to South Texas where the bandit war is raging."

The border assignment fell to former Confederate cavalry officer Leander McNelly, described as "having the demeanor of a Methodist preacher and the heart of a fighting game cock." Like the notorious Doc Holliday, the 32-year-old McNelly's health was fading fast from tuberculosis. But leading men in combat without a hint of fear or hesitation was McNelly's stock in trade.

By the spring of 1875, McNelly had enlisted 42 men, mostly under the age of 25 in Company "A" Washington County Volunteers, Texas State Militia. But, make no mistake, to themselves, friends and foe they were Rangers, Texas Rangers. These young men, one of whom was only 16, were cut from just as tough of whip leather as their predecessors. Mounted on top horseflesh provided by Richard King and armed with Sharps carbines and Colt revolvers they were anxious to prove their worth.

McNelly first broke up the rampaging Anglo vigilante groups at the end of his men's carbine barrels declaring, "Any such bands operating without authority of law will be arrested. Keep your weapons but only use them to defend yourself and your families."

The Ranger captain recognized the delicate balance of the volatile situation that the honest Tejano rancheros operated under, writing the Governor's office that, "The Mexican owners of ranches on this side of the border, those who are Texas citizens, are almost to a man as much opposed to this raiding as the American citizens are."

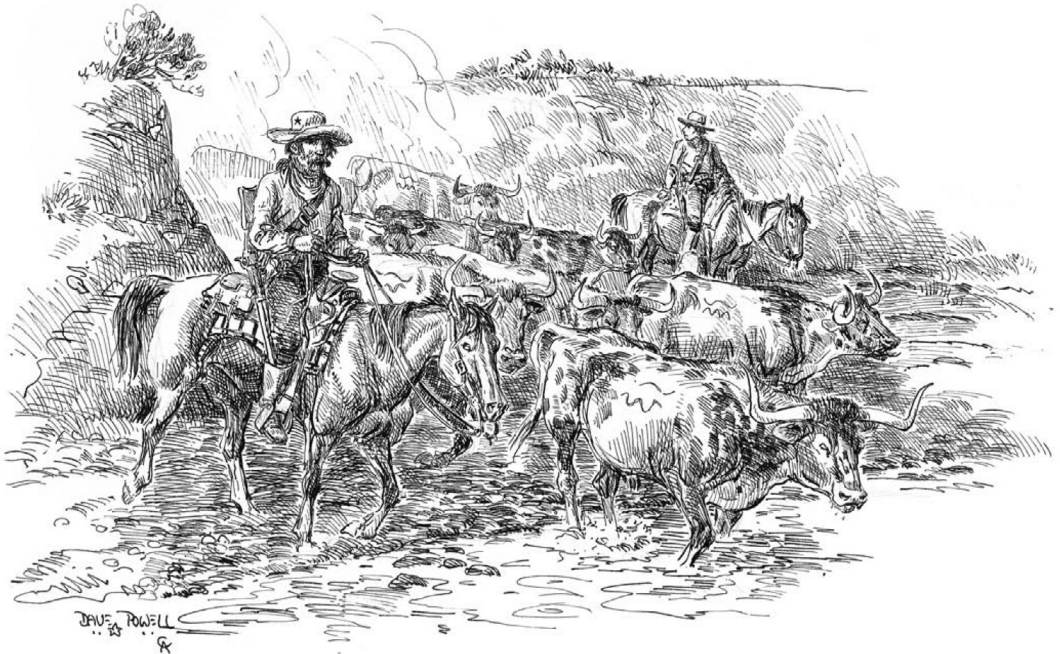
Consequently, over the next year he also

enlisted almost a dozen local Tejanos as Rangers, scouts and even spies. His best-known scout, Jesus Sandoval, had his own very personal reasons for serving with McNelly. Several years before, some of Cortina's rustlers had raped both his wife and teenage daughter. From that day forward, Sandoval lived only to kill Cortinistas.

His favorite method involved a captured bandit, a paint horse and a hangman's noose made from his rawhide reata applied with a firm hand until valuable intelligence was extracted from the prisoner. Sandoval called this his "paint gallows." McNelly didn't exactly approve of Sandoval's methods but didn't discourage them either. (We would call that "water boarding" today.) These were brutal times against a brutal enemy, and meeting fire with fire was often the only difference between victory and death and

promising to deliver large numbers of stolen Texas cattle every month to feed their troops in Cuba. Sandoval then captured an American outlaw who rode for Cortina and administered his special brand of justice. The information learned from this prisoner proved to be quite accurate and on June 12, McNelly and 30 Rangers ambushed 18 Cortinistas including another American renegade on the border plains at Palo Alto. In a hard-fought fight, the Rangers killed 17 of the raiders, losing only one man themselves; unfortunately, it was their youngest member, 16-year-old "Berry" Smith.

Ranger George Durham, only himself 17 at the time, vividly recalled his impressions of his first gun battle. "I saw a raider in a big beaver hat with a white scar running down his cheek. I got that scar in my sight and dropped the hammer. I had made my first



much valuable intelligence was gathered in such a fashion.

McNelly himself applied the old Spanish axiom of "*La ley de fuga*," meaning that any attempted rescue of a bandit prisoner would be met with the immediate execution of said prisoner. After the Nuecestown raid, McNelly also gave orders to his Rangers to drop any man seen riding one of the distinctive concho-trimmed Dick Heye saddles stolen from Noakes Mercantile. "Leave the body and bring back the saddle," he instructed his Rangers, and several Heye saddles were reported recovered in such a fashion.

In June of 1875, one of McNelly's most reliable spies reported that Cortina himself had met with Spanish military officials

shot in combat and hit my target. Hat and scar seemed to explode. That fellow was the prize, the scar-faced dude who had quirted down Mrs. Noakes at Nuecestown. Right there I quit being a scared country boy. I was a man. A Ranger."

One hundred and fifty stolen cattle were recovered and McNelly had the bandits' bodies stacked up like cordwood in the square at Brownsville as a macabre warning. Cortina was livid, claiming to the Mexican newspapers that his men were assassinated in their bedrolls and vowed revenge. The Ranger captain had a good laugh at that and told a Texas newspaper, "If they were asleep, I don't want to find any of them when they're awake."

For the next four months, McNelly was

laid up by his tuberculosis, while his Rangers patrolled the border and arrested a number of rustlers; only to see the authorities release the criminals on technicalities or out of fear of retribution. By mid-November, McNelly was well enough to swing back into command, readying a bold move to bring the hostilities against Cortina's raiders to a successful conclusion. Headquarters for Cortina's men north of Matamoros was a fortified hacienda called Las Cuevas. After trailing 250 stolen cattle to a Rio Grande crossing near Las Cuevas, McNelly formulated a silent but explosive plan to cross the border violating international law and hit the raiders at this supposedly safe haven. A troop of the 8th Cavalry soon showed up with two Gatling guns as support, but their officers would not agree to cross the border.

On the evening of November 18, the Ranger captain lined up his men and gave them a short but inspired speech that evoked Travis at the Alamo. "No man need to separate himself from his conscience if he does not want to cross into a foreign country where we have no right. There is no quarter in this and we ask none." At one the next morning, McNelly led all 26 Rangers, including Sandoval and five horses, stealthily across the river and onto sovereign Mexican soil. As dawn rose three miles deep into Mexico that foggy morning, the Rangers opened fire on a village called Las Anchevas thinking it was Las Cuevas and killing a half a dozen armed men. Some modern historians have criticized this

attack as the killing of innocents. Yet, that couldn't be farther from the truth for the individuals there had been just as involved in the rustling and raiding in Texas as any others encountered. Peasants and farmers were seldom armed with up-to-date Winchester and Spencer carbines.

The Rangers quickly regrouped and marched onward towards Las Cuevas, which was now swarming with activity reacting to the gunfire at the first rancho. Hundreds of Cortinistas and several troops of Mexican Cavalry, 300 fighting men overall, soon rushed out to engage the 27 invaders. McNelly never blinked, realizing the overwhelming odds against him, he led his men in a well-organized fighting retreat back towards the Rio Grande. Then he dug in and turned to receive a mounted cavalry charge on his front. The Ranger's Sharps carbines barked loudly as McNelly rode up and down the now fortified embankment encouraging his men and snapping off shots.

Militia General and local *alcalde* (mayor) Juan Flores Salinas, a leading Cortina underling, led one charge and was promptly shot out of the saddle dead with his pistol still in his hand. Finally, the U.S. troops on the American side of the river aimed their two Gatling guns high in the air and arched a series of deadly volleys over the heads of the Rangers causing havoc and death amongst the attacking raiders and Mexican troops. When all was said and done, according to Mexican accounts, over 80 of Cortina's men

and Mexican soldiers were killed, the Rangers only suffered a few minor wounds.

Within hours, the telegraph wires to Washington were singing with reports and an 8th Cavalry trooper crossed the river with a message; Secretary of War William Belknap demanded McNelly cross back over the Rio Grande to Texas immediately. McNelly's reported response was all Texas, all Ranger and all McNelly. "I intend to stay in Mexico with my men until the stolen cattle are returned. My compliments to the Secretary of War, tell him he can take his Yankee War Department and go to Hell. Respectfully, Lee McNelly, Captain Commanding Rangers."

Three days later, at the international bridge at Rio Grande City, using the influence of what one of his men called "the power of a Sharps' cartridge on International law," McNelly did something no one had ever done before; he took possession of almost 70 head of stolen cattle to be returned to their owners back in Texas. While cattle raids did continue on the border for a time, Cortina, now considered a major liability by the Mexican Government, was arrested and imprisoned. Though technically detained at Mexico City, he lived in relative opulence for the rest of his life, dying of natural causes in 1894.

Half of the recovered Texas cattle bore the Running "W" brand of King's ranch and were soon returned there by the Rangers. Richard King declared that of the tens of thousand of his cattle that had been stolen and driven to Mexico, "these 35 head are all I have ever got back. These cattle will neither be killed for beef or sold and shall be permitted to live out the balance of their days in peace."

Captain McNelly was never censured publicly or privately for his actions; instead, Texas cheered him. He died of tuberculosis in September of 1877. Four months later, an impressive obelisk of a monument marked his gravesite. The cost was reported to be over \$3,000, paid for with sincere gratitude by Richard King. George Durham gave up rangering, married a niece of Richard King's wife and worked as straw boss and eventually a foreman on King's immense ranch for the rest of his life. To his dying day in 1940, he considered himself a "McNelly Man." ■

Dan Gagliasso is a documentary filmmaker, and historian who has written or directed films and programs for The History Channel, The Discovery Channel and Fox News. His script "Boone & Crockett; the Hunter Heroes" won the Western Writers of America award for Best Documentary in 2002. While at college, he was an amateur "bumps and bruises" bull rider.

Dave Powell . Historical Western Artist *By Dan Gagliasso*



Dave Powell was born to be a western historical artist, comfortable authentically portraying 1820s Californio vaqueros, 1840s Texas Rangers, 1880s cowhands, Lewis and Clark, and 19th century Crow and Cheyenne warriors. The youngest son of Montana artists Ace Powell and Nancy McGlaughlin Powell, Dave's grandfather was a cowhand who packed in

supplies to Charlie and Nancy Russell's Bull Head Lodge.

As a youngster Dave's dad Ace would try his preteen best to emulate Charlie Russell's paintings with a paint set that Nancy Russell gave him. Which gives grandson Dave a direct Old West connection to Charlie Russell and Russell's protégé Joe De Yong, who was a frequent visitor to the Powells' home.

At 18, Dave's artistic talents were guided by his close association with modern western artists like Joe Beeler, Tom Lovell, Ned Jacob and Robert Loughheed. Dave's historical art was eventually discovered by western film producers and directors and he has shared his extensive historical knowledge in many major classic westerns and TV movies, including "Lonesome Dove," "Silverado," "Far and Away" and "The Good Old Boys." And he made accurate period clothing, weapons and props for a series of mountain-man movies including "Winterhawk" and "Grayeagle." ■