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James Mills

The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, james.mills@utrgv.edu

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The United States Military Occupation of Matamoros, Mexico, 1846 – 1848

James W. Mills

The two year American occupation of Matamoros (May 1846 to August 1848) during the Mexican American War led to the encampment of several thousand U.S. troops outside the city and the imposition of American civil authority inside the city. Although the population of Matamoros resented the occupation, the even-handed administration of William Chapman led to several municipal improvements. That no serious infractions occurred during the occupation helps explain the evolution of close social and commercial ties between Matamoros and Brownsville.

Today, the border cities of Brownsville, Texas and Matamoros, Tamaulipas are known as “sister cities” and “border *cuates*” (twins). Cultural and economic ties are strong, but a century and a half ago the lower Rio Grande Valley region told a different story. During the mid-nineteenth century, American desires to become a transcontinental nation, fueled in part by the concept of “Manifest Destiny,” brought the westward movement of the United States to the edge of the newly independent nation of Mexico.

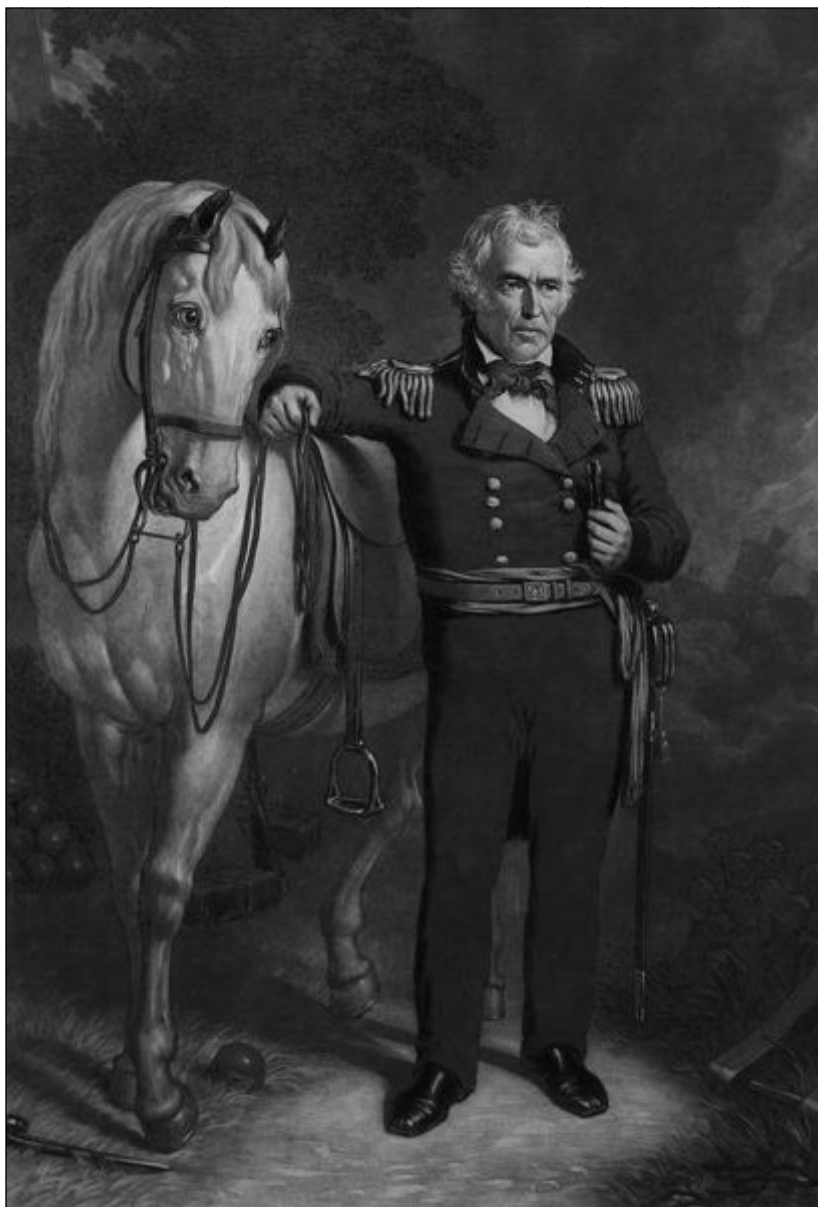
On March 1, 1845, President John Tyler signed a joint resolution of the United States Congress to annex Texas.¹ The move was provocative to say the least, since Mexico had never accepted Texas independence and was bound to interpret the annexation as a blow to its prestige and a threat to its national security. Shortly after the annexation, therefore, the Mexican minister in Washington, D.C., Juan Nepomuceno Almonte, asked for his passport, thereby severing diplomatic relations between the two countries.² Later that year, U.S. Secretary of War William L. Marcy ordered troops under the command of General Zachary Taylor to move from their base in Louisiana to Kinney’s Ranch at the mouth of

the Nueces River, the historic southern boundary of the Mexican province of Tejas. There he established “Camp Marcy” and began preparing his troops for possible action against Mexico. Early in 1846, Taylor received new orders “to advance and occupy...positions on or near the east bank of the Rio del Norte,” the southern boundary of Texas by U.S. understanding.³

Across the Rio Grande lay the city of Matamoros. In April 1846, General Pedro Ampudia arrived in the city with orders that all Americans vacate the area. A report from the U.S. Consulate’s office in Matamoros detailed the evacuation and escalating tensions:

I have further to inform you that on the 12th of April last, all the resident citizens of the United States, as well as myself, were forcibly expelled from this city and directed to proceed to Victoria, by order of Gen. Ampudia a copy of which is here with transmitted[.] The order allowed only 24 hours for our departure, and was vigorously executed with open threats of violence, that our citizens were compelled to abandon their property and effects and leave the city on foot. Having received information on the route to the interior of the reappointment of General Arista to the command of the Mexican Army, those who accompanied and opened a correspondence with him on the subject of our expulsion, a copy of which are also herewith enclosed, which resulted in a modification of the order giving us permission to embark to Tampico. Two or three Americans were permitted to remain at stock farms, [and] ranches, in the vicinity of this place, and several others at San Fernando and Santander. Four other Americans and myself proceeded to Tampico where we embarked, and returned to this port at great personal risk and fatigue[.] On the journey to Tampico, the roads [were] generally infested by robbers and at the time we passed through the country the inhabitants were extremely exasperated at our countrymen on account of the approach of the American army to the left bank of the Rio Grande.”⁴

As the Americans departed Matamoros, Mexican military units converged on the city and awaited orders. On April 12, 1846, General Ampudia warned Zachary Taylor to break camp and retreat beyond the Nueces River, or the Mexican army would have no choice but to force a U.S. withdrawal. When Taylor’s force failed to heed the warning, Mexican president Mariano Parades declared war against the U.S. on April 23 in response to Taylor’s “invasion” of Mexican soil. Two days later, Mexican troops attacked a detachment of American dragoons on the Texas side of the Rio Grande, and the war was on. In May, the two armies clashed at Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma, both resulting in American



General Zachary “Old Rough and Ready” Taylor

ants made preparations to occupy the city.

At around 12:00 p.m. on 17 May 1846, a Mexican bugler could be heard as General Thomas Requeña offered Zachary Taylor an armistice and the surrender of all public property in Matamoros. While this was going on, General Mariano

Arista worked feverishly to withdraw his troops from the city.⁵ Following the recent Mexican defeats at Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma, Arista had retreated with his army to Matamoros to regroup and await reinforcements.⁶ Fearing an imminent American assault and with no reinforcements in sight, Arista withdrew to the south, leaving more than three hundred of his sick and wounded soldiers behind. Dr. Nathan S. Jarvis, one of Taylor's surgeons, reported that most of the Mexican wounded "lay on the bald dirt floor in such a state of filth and wretchedness as cannot be described." According to some accounts, Taylor was so moved by their pitiful condition that he contributed "several hundred dollars" for their care.⁷ Meanwhile, Arista and the Mexican army made their way south to Linares in Nuevo Leon. Many of his men suffered from hunger and fatigue...a few even committed suicide. Two hundred and fifty dragoons and Texas Rangers under Lieutenant Colonel John Garland gave pursuit to Arista's army and managed to confiscate some supplies before turning back north.⁸

On May 18, 1846, Taylor and a portion of his men crossed the Rio Grande on makeshift boats constructed from lumber that they had brought in from Point Isabel. Once on the south bank, the Americans secured the ferry for the rest of their countrymen to cross. Matamoros civil authorities, "dressed in white and astride white horses," rode out to surrender the city to Taylor and the Americans. Accustomed to their own generals wearing elegant and glittering uniforms, they were shocked to see how this important American general was dressed. Taylor, dubbed "Old Rough and Ready" by his troops, commonly wore "brown linen dusters and floppy blue coats."⁹ One of his men described Taylor as a "Vermont farmer . . . dressed in a big straw sombrero, a pair of enlisted men's trousers which were too short for him, a loose line coat, and a pair of soldier shoes."¹⁰ Taylor assured the Mexican delegation that the Americans would respect their civil laws and not molest their women and property. Later that day, Taylor had the American flag raised over Casa Mata and other prominent fortifications in the Matamoros area.¹¹ Three days later, government leaders of Tamaulipas, with Mexico City's approval, ordered Matamoros cut off from all traffic and communications with the rest of Mexico.

Taylor set up headquarters under a tree just outside of town, thereby keeping the bulk of his troops out of the city. The general had orders to treat the citizens of Matamoros in a friendly manner. President James K. Polk went so far as to assign two Jesuit priests to accompany the army and serve as liaisons with the local Catholic Church to ensure the religious liberties and other fundamental rights of Mexican citizens would be protected.¹² The two clergymen selected for this assignment were 69-year-old Father John McElroy of Washington, D.C., and 39-year-old Father Anthony Rey from Georgetown.¹³

Taylor dispatched only two companies to patrol the city of four thousand inhabitants, and instructed the officers to do as little as possible to disrupt civil life. He seemed more concerned with the discipline of his own men than with

the citizens of Matamoros.¹⁴ He also instructed that local citizens be fairly compensated for any supplies confiscated by his soldiers. Although Matamoros merchants tended to overcharge for their goods, Taylor instructed his men, often against their will, to pay the asking price. Taylor also had a bilingual newspaper established called the *Republic of Rio Grande and Friend of the People*, edited by West Point graduate Hugh McLeod. Later, a second paper—the *American Flag*—became popular, although many readers complained that it contained no real news but mainly gossip, military reports, and advertisements.¹⁵

Taylor's concerns about the behavior and morale of his men were well founded. Eight thousand volunteers from Louisiana had begun to arrive at Brazos Santiago (a barrier island on the southern Gulf Coast of Texas) on 11 May, followed by additional volunteers from Texas, Ohio, Illinois, Georgia, and Maryland, swelling the number of American soldiers to over nine thousand by July. Taylor lacked adequate facilities to shelter the newcomers, and cramped conditions, boredom, and mosquitos caused many of these troops to fight amongst themselves as in the case of the "Catfish War" that broke out at Camp Belknap. During this unpleasant episode, a Maryland volunteer was reportedly caught stealing a fish that belonged to an Ohio soldier, causing troops from both states to square off against each other with pointed guns. The tension was eventually squelched by the intervention of higher ranking personnel. Due to the miserable conditions at Camp Belknap, many rambunctious and rowdy soldiers, not surprisingly, began drifting into Matamoros.¹⁶ Some of Taylor's officers also had problems with their black servants deserting and disappearing into Mexico to gain their freedom.¹⁷

Another of Taylor's duties in Matamoros was to have Samuel Clay, shipmaster of the U.S. merchant vessel *Susannah*, released from jail. Clay had arrived on the Texas Gulf Coast on December 14, 1845 and Mexican officials had his boat brought to Matamoros and stripped it of its rigging. According to Clay, he had been "repeatedly beaten" and "abused" while imprisoned in Matamoros.¹⁸ Taylor had previously been apprised of Clay's situation by way of a letter from the United States Consul to Secretary of State James Buchanan. In the letter (dated April 1846—about a month before hostilities between the United States and Mexico began) the American diplomat stated that he had "no doubt you will take such steps in his behalf as the peculiar circumstances of the case require."¹⁹

Taylor and his men camped outside Matamoros in rather primitive and squalid conditions. As summer set in, so did the heat, humidity, mosquitos, and yellow fever.²⁰ The volunteers also suffered at Brazos Island and Camp Belknap, and several continued to wander (contrary to orders) into Matamoros. Some occupied their time at bordellos, drinking establishments, gambling dens, and dance halls (such as Wheeler's Public House, where for two dollars soldiers watched *fandango*). Soldiers caught fighting or harassing the Mexican population were arrested and put to work cleaning the city's streets under the supervision

of military guards.

Overall, the U.S. soldiers were highly impressed with the local girls of Mexico. One young volunteer wrote that “two women he saw in Matamoros [had] large, dark, eloquent eyes, small beautiful feet, [and] beautiful delicate hands.” Another account described the women of Matamoros as wearing loose fitting white muslin shirts which scantily covered their breasts and exposed the holy cross which was worn around their necks. Many were amazed at the “elegance and ease with which a pretty señorita will handle and puff the delicate cigaritto.”²¹ Other American soldiers enjoyed the local culture by visiting churches and local Mexican families. Some were offered fresh milk, tortillas, and *pan dulce* by sympathetic local households, as well as getting their first taste of tequila—items that the American army, unlike the Mexican military, tended to paid for. At one home, a volunteer was invited inside and a few moments later, a beautiful young girl brought out a light-skinned baby whose father had been an American prisoner, but had since died. The baby’s mother, the soldier recalled, “spoke in the highest terms of her deceased lord, and seemed to worship his image in the child.”

While Taylor and his men lingered on the outskirts of town, American merchants and sutlers poured into the occupied city and established a variety of stores, coffeehouses, restaurants, ten pin alleys, and hotels. The Tremont House and Washington House became popular eateries where soldiers could enjoy such entrees as rabbit, kidneys, and eggs.²² A daguerreotypist from New Orleans opened a studio, and nearby a watchmaker provided new time pieces. Pies and cakes were sold at the Resaca House, although one customer complained it was hard to tell the food from the flies. Other soldiers passed the time by attending bullfights or by placing a wager at a local cock-fighting pit.

Droves of reporters from the U.S. also descended on Matamoros including George W. Kendall, a writer from the New Orleans *Picayune*, who wrote that Matamoros resembled a robust American city. He commented that the American presence in Matamoros had a civilizing effect as confirmed by the fact that mint julep had been introduced into the city! A theater group known as the “corps dramatique” came to town and featured entertainers such as Joseph Jefferson III, who performed at the Olympic Arena for a mixed audience of local Mexicans and newly arrived Americans—both soldiers and merchants.²³ Jefferson described the audiences as being wild and rowdy and “the most motley group that ever filled a theatre.”

Passengers and a great variety of merchandise flowed into Matamoros by way of New Orleans. The ocean-going voyage by American steamships took seven days on average and arrived at Brazos Santiago and the mouth of the Rio Grande on a daily basis. The vessels then completed the journey by traveling up river to Matamoros. Messieurs Ogden and Mosby operated a business at La Boca del Rio where they sold groceries, wines, liquors, boots, shoes, clothing, cigars, sardines, and other “frontier necessities.” A post office was also located

on the Brazos to dispatch mail. Businessman Charles Stillman was the recipient of much of the merchandise that arrived in Matamoros, as was entrepreneur Don Juan Jose Lopez. To trade in Matamoros, a license had to first be procured from local government officials with the consent of U.S. authorities.²⁴

In the meantime, General Taylor awaited supplies and further orders from Marcy and Army General-in-Chief, Winfield Scott. His next objective would be to invade northern Mexico and capture Monterey, but first he needed to establish a base further inland along the Rio Grande at Camargo. In June 1846, Taylor gave orders for his troops to begin making preparations to move upstream. Steamboats began to arrive by early July, and before long began shuttling troops slowly up the Rio Grande, as heavy artillery and other supply trains moved parallel by land. Death from various camp fevers, which included cholera and dysentery, awaited 12.5% (one out of every eight) of Taylor's army at what became known as the "cesspool of Camargo."²⁵ Taylor himself left Matamoros on 4 August and arrived on the 8th aboard the *Corvette*.²⁶

Old Rough and Ready and the American army then pushed deeper into northern Mexico and eventually won the hard fought battles of Monterrey and Buena Vista. In November 1847, Taylor returned to Matamoros. He brought with him a young West Point graduate by the name of William Chapman to serve as interim mayor as well as military quartermaster. Shortly after arriving, Chapman sent for his wife Helen, who left New York aboard the U.S.S. *Massachusetts* and arrived at Brazos Santiago in early January 1848. The presence of officers' wives reportedly had a positive effect on their husbands, providing emotional and material comforts and "checking their [husbands'] excesses." William Chapman rode out to meet his wife and the reunited couple then traveled the seventy-five miles by river to Matamoros aboard the steamboat *Whiteville*.²⁷ They secured a three-room apartment in a large home owned by a wealthy Mexican woman named Doña Warneta (Juanita) Perella, directly in the center of Matamoros on the plaza where William worked. Because Mexico was forced to bear the expenses of the war, their rent of \$60.00 per month was covered through local taxes. Chapman's duties included oversight of the city's municipal services as well as the U.S. army depot there. In this capacity, Chapman appointed a civil police force, installed street lamps, improved the overall appearance of the town plaza by planting trees, and repaired city streets. For the most part, these reforms met with the approval of the local community.²⁸ At the request of American soldiers who suspected some of the local townspeople might be hiding firearms, Chapman gave his approval to a plan to have homes searched.²⁹ While many Matamoros families probably resented this intrusion on their privacy, there were no major problems in the twenty-seven month U.S. military occupation of Matamoros. The peace was also upheld due to a ban on the consumption of hard liquor, which shut down grogshops and made such popular drinks as the "Old Rough and Ready" illegal.

Even before the arrival of Taylor and the American army, the mayor of Matamoros, Francisco Logiro, along with his secretary Mariano Aguado, had sent letters of complaint to Tamaulipas officials expressing their unhappiness with their state government. First, they scolded the leaders of Tamaulipas for not trying harder to prevent the U.S. from annexing Texas.³⁰ They also expressed concerns that government leaders had not adequately funded education for their children, or enough teachers, and were equally concerned with government corruption. One Matamoros citizen, Francisco Gojon, requested a night school for adults. When government action was not forthcoming, he took it upon himself to open a private school for children where instructors taught both English and French.³¹

When the Americans began arriving in mid-May 1846, Matamoros schools were ordered closed. However, in part due to pressure from local citizens, William Chapman oversaw the re-opening of educational facilities in the city. He converted some large apartments into schoolrooms, had the walls painted, and installed desks. He also advertised in the local papers for a male teacher to teach about twenty-five boys-- children of the occupying U.S. military and local wealthy Mexicans. A separate school for girls was re-opened and students there were taught by a "Miss Bacon" from Canada, who one disappointed soldier described as being a "poor, worn out, old maid."³² Save one literary work, entitled *Dancing Feather*, there were few books for the schools until an appeal went out to the local community. Shortly thereafter, some of the influential families did provide more reading material.

The cathedral in Matamoros, which had received extensive damage as a result of a hurricane in 1844, was repaired much to the approval of the local citizenry. The majority of American military personnel and merchants who occupied Matamoros at this time were Protestant and they marveled at some of the Roman Catholic traditions that had blended with indigenous religious elements. The firing of skyrocketes at funerals, for example, represented the ascent of the deceased's spirit into heaven. Over one hundred graves of U.S. soldiers lay outside the Catholic burial grounds, all of whom bore the remains of men under the age of twenty-one who had died from "exposure, climate, and their own passions."³³

There had been two U.S. army surgeons assigned to the local hospital during Chapman's tenure, a Dr. Leonard McPhail and Dr. John C. Glen, but McPhail found himself working solo after Dr. Glen was mortally wounded in a local gambling house. The doctor had accused a Texan, Colonel Harrison W. Goyne, of cheating, and after striking Goyne with his cane, was shot and died the following day. A military commission investigated and found Goyne not guilty on the grounds of "excusable homicide." Dueling was apparently a fairly common occurrence among the men. A similar episode involved Captain S. B. Duffield who would later become one of the first elected Cameron County Commission-

ers after the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo.³⁴

U.S. and Mexican diplomats signed the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo on a Wednesday morning, 2 February, 1848, just outside of Mexico City. The U.S. Senate, however, did not formally ratify the treaty until 10 March, and the Mexican Congress did so two weeks later. Word of the Mexican ratification finally reached Washington, D.C. on June 9, 1848. William Chapman received word of the peace treaty in May, but official news did not reach Brazos and Matamoros for another three weeks. Although Americans and Mexicans greeted the news with enthusiasm, a number of Matamoros citizens wanted to remain under the American flag. Others expressed a desire to create an independent northern republic out of the states of Tamaulipas, Nuevo Leon, and Coahuila, a movement that later became known as the Plan de la Loba.³⁵

Throughout the summer of 1848, large numbers of U.S. troops began to make their way down river to Brazos Island where steamships awaited to carry them home. General John E. Wool, his staff, and the 10th Infantry reached Matamoros from interior Mexico in late June and helped with a grand Fourth of July celebration that included an inspection of the troops and music provided by a military band. It was during this July 4th ceremony that the Mexican flag was once again raised over the city. Across the river, Fort Brown fired a thirty-gun salute, one shot for each state in the Union. Wool and his entourage then moved on to Brazos Island to await their departure home.

William Chapman oversaw the removal of all army personnel, equipment, and supplies to the north side of the Rio Grande, the new boundary that had been officially established between the United States and Mexico. Land speculation along the lower Rio Grande Valley became popular, particularly among merchants in Matamoros who sought to move their operations onto the other side of the river." Northern investors also purchased land in the area. The *American Flag* predicted in June 1848 that the area across from Matamoros would become a thriving community and that "Athens" would be a suitable name for the new settlement. By mid-August, Chapman had completed the move from Matamoros, but before he departed, the *ayuntamiento* (city council) passed a resolution thanking him for his contributions and authorized him to cross back to their city whenever he so desired.³⁶ The U.S. occupation of Matamoros, Mexico had ended.

One and a half centuries later, the *American Flag's* prediction came to pass. The area across from Matamoros did prosper. However, the community was not named Athens, but rather Brownsville in honor of Major Jacob Brown, one of the first casualties of the U.S.-Mexican War. Today Brownsville and Matamoros remain "sister cities" and enjoy cordial cultural, political, economic, and social relationships—thanks in part to the legacy of the U.S. occupation of Matamoros from 1846-1848.

Notes

1 Josefina Zoraida Vazquez and Lorenzo Meyer, *The United States and Mexico* (The University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1985), 40.

2 Vasquez and Meyer, *The United States and Mexico*, 40.

3 Jack Bauer, *Zachary Taylor: Soldier, Planter, Statesman of the Old Southwest* (Louisiana State University Press: Baton Rouge, 1985), 114-128.

4 National Archives and Records, Vol. 4, Roll 2, Jan. 1 1840 – Dec. 12, 1857. *Dispatches from United States Consuls in Matamoros 1826-1906*.

5 Bauer, *Zachary Taylor*, 164.

6 Frank Daniel Yturria, *Life and Times of Colonel Manuel Maria Yturria* (The printers Border Press: Brownsville, 1999), 53.

7 Bauer, 165; John D.S. Eisenhower, *So Far from God: The U.S. War with Mexico, 1846-1848* (University of Oklahoma Press: Norman, 1989), 100; Caleb Coker, ed., *The News from Brownsville: Helen Chapman's Letters from the Texas Military Frontier, 1848-1852* (Texas State Historic Association: Austin, 1992), 55.

8 John Frost, *The Mexican War and it's Warriors* (H. Mansfield Press: New Haven, 1849) 62-63. Yturria, 54.

9 Philip Katcher and G.A. Emblazon, *The Mexican-American War 1846-1848* (Osprey Publishing: Oxford, 1976), 40.

10 Bauer, *Zachary Taylor*, 165.

11 Rosaura Alicia Davila y Oscar Rivera Saldana, *Matamoros En La Guerra Con Los Estados Unidos* (Instituto Tamaulipeco de Cultura: H. Matamoros, 1996), 30.

12 Bauer, *Zachary Taylor*, 170-171.

13 Peter F Stevens, *The Rogue's March: John Riley and the St. Patrick's Battalion, 1846-1848* (Potomac Books, Inc.: Washington, D.C., 1999), 133-134. While riding alone from Monterrey to Matamoros in late 1846, Father

Rey was murdered by rancheros. His body was never found.

14 Eisenhower, *So Far from God*, 100. The estimate of the Matamoros population being four thousand represents Matamoros proper. Small surrounding communities, including Santa Cruz and other areas on the outskirts of Matamoros brings the area population to perhaps 10,000-15,000. See Antonio N. Zavaleta, "The Twin Cities: A Historical Synthesis of the Socio-economic Interdependence of the Brownsville-Matamoros Border Community," in *Studies in Brownsville History*, ed. Milo Kearney (Brownsville: Pan American University at Brownsville, 1986), 162. The War Department had ordered companies to be expanded from 64 to 100 soldiers during the summer of 1845 in anticipation of hostilities with Mexico.

15 Eisenhower, 100; Brian Robertson, *Wild Horse Desert: The Heritage of South Texas* (New Santander Press: Edinburg, 1985), 63; Richard Bruce Winders, *Mr. Polk's Army: The American Military Experience in the Mexican War* (Texas A & M Press: College Station, 1997), 132. Hugh McLeod had been in favor of the creation of an independent republic of the northern Mexican states of Tamaulipas, Nuevo Leon, and Coahuila.

16 Eisenhower, *So Far from God*, 108.

17 Winders, *Mr. Polk's Army*, 180.

18 National Archives and Records, Vol. 4, Roll 2; Charles M. Robinson III, *Texas and the Mexican War* (Texas State Historical Association: Austin, 2004), 19, 47.

19 National Archives and Records, Vol. 4, Roll 2.

20 Robertson, *Wild Horse Desert*, 60.

21 Robert Selph Henry, *The Story of the Mexican War* (The Bobbs-Merrill Company: New York, 1950), 91. Frost, *The Mexican War and its Warriors*, 59. Winders, *Mr. Polk's Army*, 138, 175.

22 *Ibid.*

23 Bauer, *Zachary Taylor*, 170; Robertson, *Wild Horse Desert*, 60. Joe Jefferson was only seventeen years old when he performed in Matamoros. He went on to fame and fortune with his 1870 Broadway production of *Rip Van Winkle*.

24 Chapman, *The News from Brownsville*, 23-24, 45; Davila, *Matamoros En La Guerra Con Los Estados Unidos*, 24-25. Henry, *The Story of the Mexican War*, 89.

25 Eisenhower, *So Far from God*, 107-112. Reportedly, the death march was heard at Camargo on such a regular bases, that mockingbirds repeated the sounds.

26 Bauer, *So Far from God*, 174; Robertson, *Wild Horse Desert*, 63.

27 Chapman, *The News from Brownsville*, 3-9, 36.

28 *Ibid.*, xix, 356-357; Davila and Saldana , *Matamoros En La Guerra Con Los Estados Unidos*, 35, 50.

29 Davila and Saldana, *Matamoros En La Guerra Con Los Estados Unidos*, 35.

30 *Ibid.*, 9-12. Henry, *The Story of the Mexican War*, 90.

31 Davila and Saldana, *Matamoros En La Guerra Con Los Estados Unidos*, 12.

32 Chapman, *The News from Brownsville*, 16, 33, 38, 355; Davila and Saldana, *Matamoros En La Guerra Con Los Estados Unidos*, 15.

33 Chapman, *The News from Brownsville*, 19.

34 *Ibid.*, 21-22.

35 Eisenhower, *So Far from God*, 363; Chapman, *The News from Brownsville*, 31, 42, 50.

36 Chapman, *The News from Brownsville*, 49, 56-57, 65.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Doug Braudaway is the Government Department Chair at Southwest Texas Junior College in Del Rio, Texas. He also serves on the Val Verde County Historical Commission and as a City of Del Rio Election Judge from 2000 through 2005. Braudaway lectures to community groups and researches and produces applications for historical markers. This is his sixth article published in the Journal of South Texas.

David Louzon is a graduate student in History at Texas A&M Corpus Christi and plans to graduate in December 2007. David wishes to acknowledge the comments and assistance of Dr. David Blanke, Professor of History, and Dr. Thomas Kreneck, Director of Special Collections and his staff at the Bell Library, Texas A&M Corpus Christi.

Sara Massey recently retired from the University of Texas Institute of Texan Cultures at San Antonio. She now lives on the Gulf Coast in Austwell, Texas, and continues to work as a freelance travel writer, independent historian and artist.

James W. Mills is an instructor of history at the University of Texas at Brownsville and a long time resident of the Rio Grande Valley. He is currently a member of the Board of Directors with the Brownsville Historical Association and has published several articles on various historical topics relating to South Texas and Northern Mexico.

Dr. Robin Robinson is a graduate of Arizona State University and a specialist in Borderlands and Latin American history. He is currently an Assistant Professor of History at the University of Texas at Brownsville.

Dr. Stephen Townsend (Ph.D. University of North Texas, 2001) works as a professor of history and government at New Mexico Junior College in Hobbs. His specialization in American history is the Civil War. His book *The Yankee Invasion of Texas* (Texas A&M University Press, 2006) received two awards, the Katherine Bates Award and the Summerfield Roberts Award. He and his wife Jill and have two beautiful daughters.

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