

La Punitiva

Anonymous

On March 9, 1916, Francisco Villa led five hundred guerrilla troops across the U.S. border to attack the small border town of Columbus, New Mexico, killing seventeen Americans. The attack was in retaliation for U.S. diplomatic recognition of Villa's rival, Venustiano Carranza, as the legitimate government of Mexico. The attack caused considerable outrage in the United States, and since it was a presidential election year, it appeared some response was called for. On March 15, President Woodrow Wilson authorized the second major military intervention in the Mexican revolution (the first was the occupation of Veracruz in 1914): he sent a "punitive expedition" of six thousand (later increased to ten thousand) troops into Mexico with orders to capture Villa and disperse Villista bands operating near the border. The mission, led by General John J. ("Blackjack") Pershing, failed miserably and was withdrawn in February 1917. The details as given in the following corrido were largely erroneous, but the sense of outraged and bellicose nationalism caused by "la punitiva" was clearly genuine. Indeed, Villa remains a beloved nationalist icon and secular saint in his native Chihuahua and among mexicanos along the border.

In our Mexico, on the 23rd of February,
Carranza let the Americans cross over:
20,000 men, and 200 airplanes
were looking for Villa throughout the country.

Carranza tells them earnestly,
if they are men enough and know how to track him down:
"I give permission for you to find Villa
and you can also learn how it is to die."

When the Texas "blondies" arrived
exhausted from so much walking,
after seven hours on the road,
the poor souls wanted to go back home.



The American Punitive Expedition in Mexico. (Anita Brenner and George R. Leighton, *The Wind That Swept Mexico: The History of the Mexican Revolution of 1910-1942* [Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971], photo no. 12.)

The expeditionary searches began
and the airplanes started to fly,
they took several directions
looking for Villa in order to kill him.

When Francisco Villa saw the punitive forces
he immediately got ready, too,
he dressed as an American soldier,
and he also transformed his troops.

When the planes saw the flag
that Villa had painted with stars
they made a mistake and came down,
and Villa took them prisoners.

Francisco Villa no longer rides a horse
and his people need never ride again:

Francisco Villa is now the owner of airplanes
which he very easily acquires.

Because we are so few Mexicans
the "blondies" say they can finish us off,
it doesn't matter if they bring a thousand cannons
because they end up leaving them in the hills.

When they entered the State of Chihuahua
all of the people were just amazed
to see all those American soldiers
that Pancho Villa left hanging from the poles.

When the "blondies" entered the city of Parral
asking for flour, crackers, and ham,
men, women, and children would tell them,
"There's only gunpowder and cannon balls."

They say death stalks in Mexico,
and that people there kill each other every day;
as long as there is one Mexican alive
our flag will be waving in his hand.

Francisco Villa was a fighting man
and his artillery was always prepared,
they would have burned the last cartridge
in defense of our nation.

Just what were the Americans thinking,
that combat was like dancing a *carquis*?
With their faces covered with shame
they returned to their country once again.

It doesn't matter that the "blondies" have
battleships and vessels by the score,
and airplanes and armored cars
if they don't have what it really takes.

Pedro Martínez

Oscar Lewis

Between 1943 and 1963, anthropologist Oscar Lewis conducted extensive tape-recorded interviews with the members of a peasant family from the village of "Azteca" (actually, Tepoztlán, Morelos). The resulting volume, Pedro Martínez, is quite likely the most detailed autobiography ever produced by a Mexican peasant family. In the following excerpt, the family patriarch, Pedro Martínez, provides a rambling account of his revolutionary years as an active Zapatista combatant, while his wife Esperanza contributes an interesting counterpoint on the hardships suffered by the families the soldiers left behind.

Pedro

In 1910, the action was in the north. It was still possible to work, then. So, once again, there I go to the *haciendas* looking for work. But the foremen didn't do anything to us any more. They were afraid, now, and besides we didn't take it any more.

Well, there we were one day and it was time for lunch. We were all hunting for wood to make a fire. We had only cold *tortillas* to eat while those who belonged there, the permanent hands of the *hacienda*, had coffee and two pieces of bread. They would swallow it down as fast as they could and get back to work. When the call came to get to work, they were ready, but we were still gathering wood to make the fire to heat the *tortillas*. The foreman shouted, "Come on, up on your feet."

"But we haven't had lunch yet."

"What's that to me? Come on, on your feet. Time is up."

But nothing doing. Everybody said we wouldn't go back to work until we had eaten. There were about sixty of us in a big circle. So the foreman said, "Oh, so you won't, eh?" And he rode his horse into the circle and trampled the *tortillas* we were warming. The horse was about to step on one of the men but he grabbed it by the bridle. The foreman raised his whip to hit him. Then

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