



The Prisoners of Perote (Barker Texas History Center)

William Preston Stapp

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In late 1842, Private William Preston Stapp and about three hundred other citizens of the Republic of Texas took it upon themselves to invade Mexico. They intended to retaliate for a recent Mexican attack on San Antonio and to humiliate President Sam Houston, who had been hesitant to seek revenge.

Stapp provides a closely observed, day-by-day narrative of the disastrous adventure later known as the Mier expedition. While his style might be described as "elegantly restrained" in comparison to the literary excesses of that early Victorian age, Stapp's flair for drama and description makes for colorful reading.

In response to the public outrage prompted by the San Antonio incident, Houston issued a presidential proclamation inviting volunteers for a retaliatory expedition across the Rio Grande. After the bloodless "capture" and pillage of two Mexican border towns, he called the volunteers back home. Most were relieved to comply, but some felt compelled to pursue the honor of the Republic further, and the Mier expedition was launched on December 20, 1842. On the day after Christmas, all save a forty-man camp guard were captured outside of Mier, a few miles across the Mexican border.

The prisoners faced a brutal forced march to Mexico City. Stapp was one of a large group that escaped along the way, became lost in the mountains, and suffered badly from hunger and thirst before recapture. He survived the notorious Black Bean Episode in which 17 of the 176 returned escapees were shot after drawing black beans in a lottery. The Texans were delivered to Perote Prison near Mexico City in September 1843, where a few of them tunneled to freedom and many more died in captivity. Mexico released the last of the prisoners in 1844, and Stapp was among them.

First published in 1845 and later issued in pamphlet form in 1933 by the La Grange Journal, *The Prisoners of Perote* is a fascinating view of a painful episode in Texas history.

The foreword by Joe B. Frantz provides a perspective on the Texas-Mexico relations during this period "when both countries were shaking down and had not yet found their way." He points out that *The Prisoners of Perote* provides some clues to the reasons behind the inherent tenseness that exists between Texas and Mexico today.

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