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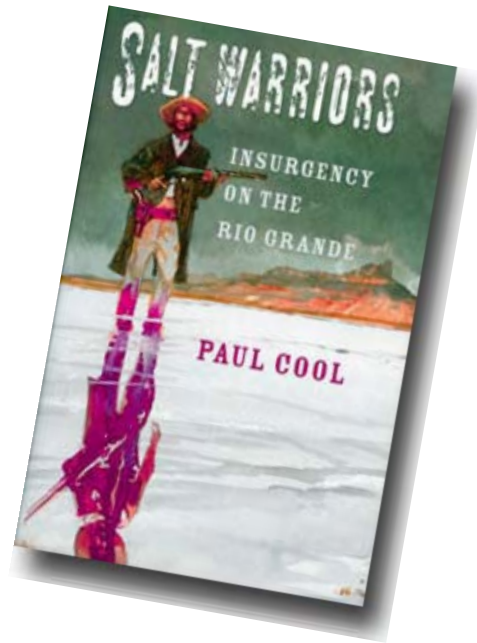
Salt Warriors

Insurgency on the Rio Grande

by Paul Cool

Texas A&M University Press, College Station.
www.tamu.edu/press
Extensive endnotes. Bibliography. Index. 2 maps.
21 illustrations. \$24.95. Hard cover only.
xviii + 360 pages. ISBN 978-1-60344-016-5.

Review by Chuck Parsons



Should Captain Tays's Texas Rangers have surrendered to a mob? Did highly respected Major John B. Jones simply make a poor choice in selecting Tays to represent the state in that crisis? Paul Cool answers these questions and many others in this highly researched history of the war over salt in 1877.

Few historians have given any real attention to this event, a border-war situation that could have led to another declared conflict with Mexico. C. L. Douglas devoted a chapter to it in his *Famous Texas Feuds* (1936). Two decades later, C. L. Sonnichsen gave his interpretation of the event in *Ten Texas Feuds*, but since his 1957 chapter, the only attention from historians appears in articles of little depth or circulation. From this, one might believe that the conflict over the mineral salt was of relatively short duration and that its only significance was that a group of Texas Rangers actually surrendered to a mob of Mexicans—the only time a Ranger force actually conceded to anyone.

Thanks to the solid research of Paul Cool, we now have a much broader understanding of the questions surrounding the Salt War:

1. Why there was an insurgency on the Rio Grande, similar in many respects over the colonists' revolt over the tea tax.
2. Why the war erupted.
3. How the lynch mob manipulated certain individuals to obtain their victims.
4. Why desperadoes from New Mexico Territory became important figures in the conflict.
5. Why the Ranger group surrendered.
6. The aftermath of the conflict.



Book Reviews

Through Cool's writing, the development of the Salt War's history is expertly expressed in easily read prose. The book contains all the elements that would attract a Hollywood producer: plenty of action, violent sexual encounters, and internal conflicts to match the man vs. man external conflicts. In addition, there are a sheriff with very loose ethics, a mob executing prisoners, and plenty of gun-wielding outlaws.

Cool details the controversy from the early 1800s, when explorers first began recording their observations of the area. Included in their writings are accounts of the *salineros*, or "salt gatherers," who traveled to and from the salt and loaded it in their squeaky *carrettas*. The heat, thirst, and Apaches were their only potential enemies.

Charles H. Howard, the son-in-law of Travis County Sheriff George B. Zimpelman, eventually decided that the salt would be better used if it had to be bought rather than merely gathered by *salineros*. For centuries, it had been taken for free, this salt from the Guadalupe Mountains, but now he would hold the purse strings. This single act was the spark that caused understandable resentment, much violence, Howard's own death, and the demise of many others.

Frontier Battalion Major John B. Jones sent in a force to quell the violence, but he had to admit failure in this instance. His choice was disastrous, but due to Cool's in-depth research, we must accept that no other reasonable solution to the problem would have worked. From hindsight, one cannot help but believe that if Jones had been there himself, along with perhaps several other Ranger captains and at least one full company, the conflict would have been less violent. After all, four captains, the adjutant general, and nearly the entire Frontier Battalion were sent to El Paso four decades later merely to prevent a prizefight! Possibly, the Salt War was a lesson learned through experience.

One cannot help but wonder if a similar conflict is occurring now. In the past, men were fighting and dying over salt, which seems like such a simple matter today. Now, men are fighting and dying over a vast array of illegal drugs. The differences between the two conflicts are in the numbers involved and the facts that salt was legal then and drugs are not today. Also, the Salt War of 1877 was relatively brief, but the 21st century drug war has been on going for years, and there is no end in sight.

In some aspects, little seems to have changed. Racial and ethnic tensions along the border occur now as then. There were no heroic icons among the "salt warriors," and there will probably be no heroes emerging from the battles of the drug war of today.