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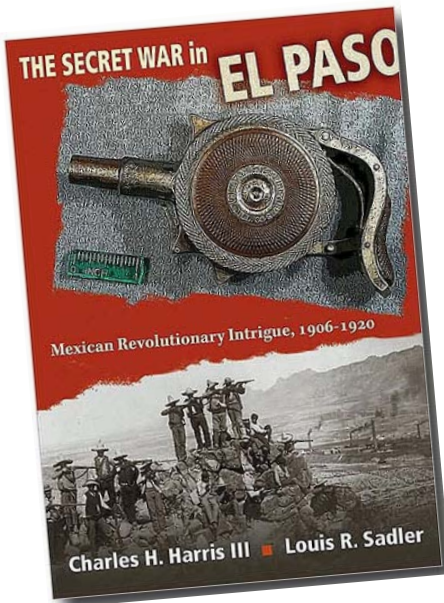
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The Secret War in El Paso *Mexican Revolutionary Intrigue, 1906-1920*

Charles H. Harris III and Louis R. Sadler

Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, June 2009.
Extensive notes, 30 illustrations bibliography, index, xiv + 488
pages. Cloth \$37.50. ISBN 978-0-8263-4652-0.

Review by Chuck Parsons

Texas historians, be they amateur or professional, are fully aware of the continued conflict between the two countries sharing the Rio Grande: the United States and Mexico. The river played an important role in the decades prior to the American Civil War as it did during the decades leading to the twentieth century.

Nothing really changed when the 1890s turned into the 1900s. “The more things change, the more they are the same” is true along the Rio Grande. The saying is clearly exemplified in Harris and Sadler’s latest study, *The Secret War in El Paso*.

The revolutions in Mexico’s history could not be contained within Mexico’s borders. The revolutionists had to have a neutral ground or safe haven in which to plot their overthrow, to plan strategy to conquer, and to purchase guns and bullets to use against whichever political figure was then president. Of course, the gun battles in and around Juarez had an effect on El Paso. Too many times bullets found their way into bodies in that town, either killing or wounding the targets.

The revolution was a secret war in El Paso as merchants in El Paso supplied huge amounts of ammunition, money, and man power to the rebelling forces. Some were patriots willing to die; others were mere soldiers of fortune. Besides providing the means to wage a revolution, El Paso also provided a safe haven for ousted rebels as well as banks to safeguard dollars and pesos. El Paso was the most important city on the huge border between the two countries. It offered everything



Book Reviews

a revolutionist would need or want and a base for the United States to develop investigative methodology—legal or illegal—to use against whomever it chose.

There have been numerous studies on the Mexican revolutions, but the uniqueness of Harris and Sadler's latest effort is their use of the massive archives of what was then known as the Bureau of Investigation, which became the FBI in 1935. The Bureau of Investigation was created in 1908 to monitor revolutionary activity, and fortunately, an incomparable paper trail survives. Seemingly every note, memo, directive, and shred of paper was preserved. The organization had spies and informants in Juarez as well as El Paso, and their documents were not swallowed or shredded, but preserved.

Although our own American Revolution brings to mind such heroic figures as George Washington or Patrick Henry, the sheer number of revolutionists in Mexico's recent history has lessened the possibility of a rebel becoming an iconic figure. Two exceptions that come to mind include Pancho Villa and Emilio Zapata.

There are a number of fascinating characters who appear in *The Secret War in El Paso* besides Pancho Villa. Not surprisingly, Texas Rangers were used to enforce the neutrality laws, and John R. Hughes contributed his part, thus adding more accomplishments to his long career with the Ranger Force. Gus Jones is also mentioned. His name has not become nationally recognized, but his work deserves study. Following his Ranger career, Jones became a special agent of the Bureau of Investigation based in El Paso.

Today, the revolution must be considered an action that deals with law and order. A century ago, liquor and Chinese aliens were the smugglers' items of choice. Today, drugs and humans are the smugglers' choice in contraband. The Rio Grande continues to be a magnet for illegal activity.

There have been numerous revolutions and revolts in Mexico's history, but that of 1906-1920 remains the best known. Harris and Sadler provide an important continuation to our understanding of why it lasted so long and what results were accomplished. The authors' earlier works dealing with this broad subject include *The Texas Rangers and the Mexican Revolution: The Bloodiest Decade, 1910-1920* and *The Archeologist Was a Spy: Sylvanus G. Morley and the Office of Naval Intelligence*. Their next work, due out in November 2009, continues with *Texas Ranger Biographies: Those Who Served, 1910-1921*.