

THE GLEN SPRINGS RAID

By CAPTAIN C. D. WOOD

Editor's Note: After serving as a volunteer officer in the mounted infantry in Cuba and in the Philippines, Captain C. D. Wood settled in the Big Bend country of Texas. His *candelilla* wax factory established the booming community of Glen Springs until the raid of May 5, 1916. Here is an account of the much disputed attack, by a man who was there. Captain Wood wrote this article when he was ninety years old.

Armed with guns, ammunition and weapons of plunder, sixty or more Mexican raiders waded their horses silently across the Rio Grande onto Texas soil that hot summer night of May 5, 1916.

They broke into two parties: one group under a colonel's leadership would raid the small station of Boquillas, only twelve miles away; and the larger party turned their mounts toward Glen Springs, Texas!

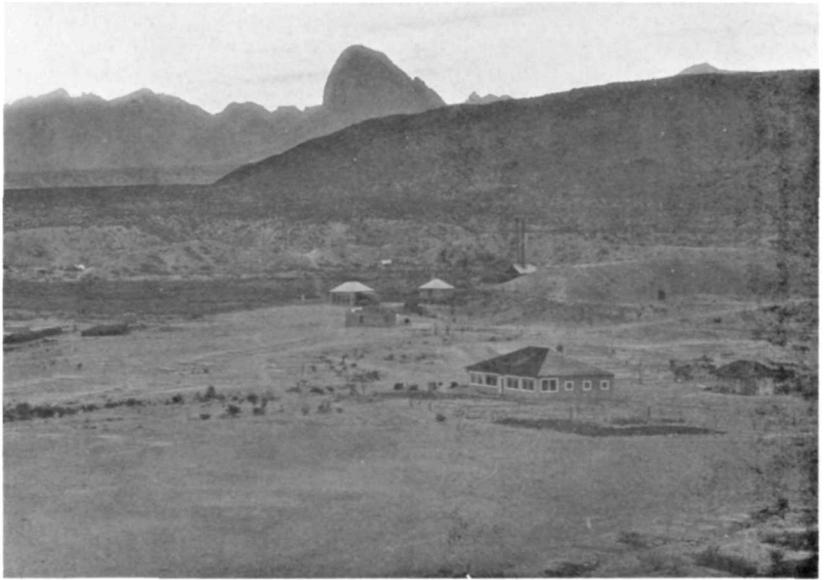
There had been no rest in the area for many years. All along the border, ranchers and townspeople felt the tension as Mexican bandit raids came closer and grew deadlier. Many had forgotten the peaceful day seven years before, in 1909, when President Porfirio Diaz and President Taft met and held a conference on the center of the International Bridge between El Paso and Juarez—signifying friendship and understanding between two neighbors. The upheaval in Mexico came when Francisco L. Madero overthrew Diaz in 1911. Nine years of discontent, violence and revolution followed.

When President Wilson aided General Carranza in his fight with Villa, the infamous Mexican bandit became the most notorious leader of border raids ever to cross the Rio Grande from Mexico. There were hordes of bandits. Some even included soldiers of the Carranza government.

Glen Springs became a settlement in 1914 when W. K. Ellis and I established the third *candelilla* wax factory in the Big Bend area. It produced a daily average of 1,000 pounds of crude wax, and employed about fifty Mexican-American workers. A settlement grew up around the workers and their families, and a general store was established by Ellis and myself. Glen Springs is located 130 miles down the Rio Grande from Presidio, Texas.

Prejudice ran high along the nearly two thousand miles of border, necessitating the placement of over 100,000 soldiers in this area to protect towns and citizens. The Fourteenth Cavalry sent a detachment of nine troops under the command of Sergeant Smythe to Glen Springs. Despite the apparent safety of the town, I decided (after the Columbus, New Mexico, and other raids by Villa) to take my wife and son to Alpine, Texas, 100 miles away. Later on, I returned to our home about two and one-half miles from Glen Springs and fell into a tired sleep on the porch bed.

I was awakened shortly after eleven o'clock by the sound of heavy gunfire from the settlement. Grabbing a rifle, I hurried over to the house of a neighbor, Oscar de Montel. Together, we set out on foot to investigate.



Glenn Springs, Texas, 1916, after the raid of May 5, 1916.



Wood's and Ellis wax plant at Glenn Springs—1916

High flames broke into the dark night, and the fighting was heavy as Oscar, a veteran of the Philippine Campaign like me, and I made our way to Glen Springs. We stumbled through whipping bushes and annoying cactus until, half an hour later, the firing ceased and the blaze died down. We pushed on in the darkness.

About two hours later, we reached the Mexican quarter of the settlement on the southwest side of town. We passed unnoticed through the commotion and loud talking. When we were within 100 feet of the Ellis store, a heavy silence filled the air and only a lone lantern moving about the field near the burned adobe shack could be seen.

"Quien vivi?" called a Mexican sentinel suddenly.

The startled Montel asked in return, "Quien es?"

He had not given the correct answer to the revolutionary's question, "Who lives?" (Raiding bandits had two passwords, depending on the crowd. They would either answer, "Viva Villa!" or "Viva Carranza!") The sentinel immediately began emptying his gun at us as we ran through the darkness, barely dodging the whizzing bullets.

"Arriba, muchachos!" he called to his companions.

Our retreat to the safety of my house was blocked, so we veered in the opposite direction, coming to a mesa about five hundred yards away. Our pursuers did not venture after us—their main interest was the soldiers. We stayed there until daybreak.

At dawn, about twenty-five raiders saddled and packed their horses and those of the American soldiers. As the sun began to rise higher, they moved out toward the Rio Grande. These were the men we had encountered only a few hours before. The other raiders, maybe forty, had left during the night for Boquillas.

Presently, we left our mesa hideout to examine the damage. Two soldiers, haggard and tired from the long night, had remained in their tents when the battle began around the adobe shack. They had managed only to wound a Mexican raider near the corral and even then they were not sure what toll their bullet took when all they found near the spot was a pool of blood.

Of the seven soldiers who remained in the burned adobe shack, three had been killed. Their bodies were found near the building. Pvt. Cohen had jumped from the building, only to have his face blown off. Pvt. Coloe lay about ten feet from the door, and Pvt. Rogers, with his clothes afire, had made an easy target for the Mexicans when they dropped him only 100 yards from the shack.

The four remaining soldiers, Sergeant Smythe among them, were in horrible condition with gaping wounds and blisters as large as hen eggs on their bodies. When the Mexicans set fire to the thatched roof, the adobe shack became a man-sized inferno. They were caught undressed and when they made their escape over the burning coals, their bare feet suffered greatly.

The only other person around was Mr. Ellis. He stood alone in the



This was the building where the seven soldiers fought off more than 100 Mexican raiders for several hours, until the building was set on fire by the Mexicans. This shows the building after the raid.



fighting area when we returned from gathering the wounded. Someone asked anxiously, "Where's Mrs. Ellis?"

"She is safe," he answered. Ellis, who had a wooden leg, had slipped away during the night with his wife. He had returned only for his car so that he could take his wife to the railroad. Their large home was offered as a resting place for the wounded soldiers until help could arrive.

At Compton's house, we found the body of his small seven-year-old son, Tommy Compton, lying a few feet from the front door. Later, the bandit responsible for his death confessed that he had called into the darkness of the house. When no one answered, he had fired into the open doorway, causing the bullet to ricochet and kill the boy.

When the fighting began, Compton had carried his daughter to the house of a Mexican but did not make it back in time for his sons. His other boy, nine-year-old Robert Compton, wandered about the settlement. He was a deaf-mute and had been spared by the superstitious Mexicans who believed it was bad luck to harm a *loco*.

The general store had been thoroughly looted and stripped of post office and other funds, plus clothing and canned goods. Heavy merchandise, such as flour and corn, was left. Perhaps they would return for it. Contents of sauer-kraut cans were discarded, considered "muy mal"—very bad.

The toll had been heavy for such a small community. Three soldiers and one boy were dead. Forty years after the raid, bleached bones of a human were found on a Rio Grande bluff. Possibly, they might have been those of a fifth victim, an old fur buyer named Bosworth who had not been seen after the raid. Two days later, only one body was found of those who had so casually uprooted Glen Springs. Their leader, Rodriguez Ramirez, with a Carranza captain's commission, was hastily given a burial under a pile of *candelilla* shrub. Seven pools of blood were found scattered near the adobe shack but the toll among the Mexican bandits will never be known.

Saturday morning the army replacements came in from Marfa. Instead of coming on Friday as their orders stated, they had camped on the road overnight. Their truck was hastily loaded with the bodies of the dead soldiers as well as the wounded. They were taken to the Marathon and Marfa railroad stations.

Mr. and Mrs. Ellis, accompanied by a guard, left Glen Springs before another night. Montel and I and the nine new soldiers were quartered in their house that night, keeping guards alerted in case the bandits returned for the remaining supplies.

By Sunday morning, news of the raid had spread to ranchmen, officers and civilians who came long distances in their cars to be of assistance. Brewster County's Judge wired the U. S. Senators from Texas, and the Marfa military command notified the proper authorities. The troop cavalry captain from Marfa and some of his men rode into the small settlement early Sunday.

Reports began to come in from Boquillas, target for the smaller party



It was across many miles of such country that the troopers pursued the bandits who raided Glenn Springs and Boquillas in May, 1916.



Troop A, 6th Cavalry, stationed at Glenn Springs after 1916 bandit raid.

of raiders. As I recall, Boquillas had one doctor and four other men. The nine well-armed Mexicans quickly subdued the Boquillas community and loaded the residents into a truck. Doctor Powers quickly gained their confidence by administering to their ailments and seeming to be worried about their welfare. Several miles south, the driver intentionally stalled the truck in a small gorge. The truck needed water, he told the colonel. Two of the Mexican captors were sent for water and two more were sent ahead to scout for mules. Now, they were almost even. There were five armed Mexicans and five unarmed Americans.

When the messengers were out of sight, the doctor suggested that they all push the truck from the gorge. A successful ruse followed. On a given signal, the Americans quickly wrenched the rifles from the Mexicans.

These men, brought to trial at the Alpine district court, were given life sentences in a Texas penitentiary.

The Glen Springs raiders had crossed the border soon after the attack, making capture or punishment almost impossible. However, Colonel Langhorne was ordered to cross into Mexico and give pursuit. The Colonel, riding across roadless lands, plunged forty miles into Mexican territory, but returned from his brief sojourn when Carranza made stern protests.

After the raid, Glen Springs became part of a military district until the Big Bend National Park gobbled up small settlements like Boquillas and Glen Springs.

The assassination of Carranza in April, 1920, brought great improvement to border life. With Obregon as the new president and the Cordell Hull Good Neighbor Policy, American troops soon disappeared from the small towns.

Now, as tourists stumble upon the Glen Springs ruins, they may find some trace in the rubble of that memorable night—May 5, 1916.



Boquillas, Mexico (across the Rio Grande from Boquillas, Texas) now in Big Bend National Park.



Mariscal Canyon from the air. (This Rio Grande canyon is located between Santa Elena Canyon and Boquillas Canyon, in Big Bend Park.)