

Fort Davis

National Historic Site
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



IN THE WAKE OF COLUMBUS Hispanics in the Indian Wars

The Frontier Indian Wars not only touched the lives of most Americans, but it had a profound effect on thousands of immigrants and first generation citizens. It was not uncommon for Europeans and peoples of other continents to join the army upon their arrival in the United States. The army provided a home, an income, and an opportunity to learn English.

People of Spanish heritage had lived in the United States for centuries. Following the Mexican War, thousands more, who resided in the vast region comprising the present states of California, Nevada, Utah, most of Arizona and New Mexico, and parts of Colorado and Wyoming, were able to claim the United States as home.

Hispanics in this newly acquired territory usually joined the army as volunteers or worked as guides and scouts for the Quartermaster Department. For the most part, the Hispanics who enlisted in the Regular Army were recently arrived immigrants.

Volunteers on the Frontier

Rafael Chacon, a graduate of the Mexican Military Academy of Chihuahua, enlisted as a First Sergeant in Company B, St. Vrain's Battalion of Volunteers in 1855. This group of New Mexico Territorial Volunteers was organized to assist regular troops pursue raiding Utes and Apaches. Under the command of Colonel Thomas Fauntleroy the troops brought about the collapse of Indian resistance.

Fauntleroy's campaign was successful in many ways. Not only had the adversaries been defeated, but the Volunteers and Regulars had cooperated and worked together well. The Volunteers of Mexican descent had refuted the common Anglo belief that they would not bear arms.

During the Civil War, Chacon distinguished himself as commander of the 1st New Mexico Volunteers. A traveler being escorted by Chacon and his troops in 1863 recalled: "These Mexican soldiers ...are most thoroughly disciplined and seem possessed of all the requisites of fine soldiers.

In June 1858, Colonel Dixon Miles left Fort Defiance (Arizona) with a column of Infantry and Mounted Rifles troops along with a company of "Mexican guides and spies" under Captain Blas Lucero. The troops spent most of the summer and fall in the field in pursuit of Navajo warriors. Engagements with the Indians were few, but the presence of the military greatly reduced raiding activities in the area.

Guides and Scouts

Jose Policarpo Rodriguez, born in Zaragoza, Mexico in 1829, worked intermittently as a guide and scout for the military in Texas from 1849 until the outbreak of the Civil War. In 1849, he accompanied the famous Whiting-Smith Expedition to Presidio del Norte and El Paso to confirm if the route was practicable for wagons. The route the group surveyed became known as the "lower" San Antonio- El Paso Road. In the fall of 1854, "Polly" had the distinction of being the guide for Bvt. Maj. Gen. Persifor F. Smith when he traveled through West Texas looking for a site for a new military post. The site Smith selected was called Fort Davis.

Four years later, Polly led a successful detail to find a number of camels that had escaped from their keepers at Camp Verde, Texas. The camels were being tested to see if they could be used to haul supplies on the western deserts. Polly not only recovered all the camels, but came back to the post laden with bear, deer and turkey killed along the way.

Federal Troops occupied Fort Davis from 1854 to 1862 and again from 1867 to 1891. During these years, Hispanics like Polly Rodriguez served as scouts, guides, contractors, laborers, and enlisted men. One of the most skillful guides was Jose Maria Bill. Bill was employed by the post quartermaster from 1868 to 1872. He went on numerous campaigns and scouted thousands of miles from the Pecos to the Rio Grande.



Jose Policarpo Rodriguez

Enlisted Men at Fort Davis

Rafael Orteza and Abel Uranga were both twenty-one years old when they enlisted in the U. S. Army. Both were born in Monterrey, Mexico, but there is no evidence that they knew one another.

Orteza enlisted in San Antonio in July of 1880. An accomplished musician, he was assigned to the First U. S. Infantry Band stationed at Fort McKavett. In March of 1881, the headquarters for the regiment was transferred to Fort Davis. Orteza was at Fort Davis less than a month when he died of pneumonia. He was buried in the Post Cemetery on April 9, 1881.

Abel Uranga listed his occupation as a schoolteacher when he joined the army at Fort McIntosh, Texas on December 14, 1888. He was assigned to Company F of the Fifth U. S. Infantry and transferred with his unit to Fort Davis in August of 1890. The men of Company F were the last to occupy Fort Davis. The company was ordered to take station at Fort Sam Houston, Texas on the abandonment of the Post, ordered June 30, 1891.

Many Hispanic Americans, like Privates Orteza and Uranga, enlisted in the United States Regular Army during the last half of the nineteenth century. They served proudly, often unnoticed, and helped to open the American West to settlement and development.