



Their Stories: Women in the U.S.-Mexican War

In 1846, warfare was very much a male activity. Elder statesmen in Congress made the decision to declare war. Military men devised the strategies for waging war. And thousands of young men, some barely older than boys, took up arms and served on fields of battle. Women had very little say in the whole affair.

Nevertheless, females did leave their mark on the War between the United States and Mexico. On the home front and the battlefield, north and south of the Rio Grande, women served their nation in a variety of ways.



Camp followers served as cooks, laundresses, nurses, or maids.

CAMP FOLLOWERS

Women from both countries accompanied soldiers to war, sometimes in official capacity but often by their own choice. Whether serving as cooks, laundresses, nurses, or maids, these females were usually referred to simply as “camp followers”. U.S. wives of enlisted men were allowed to travel with their husbands as cooks or laundresses. The U.S. army also hired four laundresses for each company of troops (approx. 65 men). Laundresses received one food ration a day and were paid based on the amount of clothing they washed. These women kept the soldiers clean, fed, and healthy. More importantly, camp followers raised troop morale and brought a bit of home and relief to the drudgery of daily camp life.

Mexican women frequently accompanied husbands and brothers serving in the army. A U.S. soldier noted seeing “a woman of 60 or more, a mother with an infant

in her *rebozo* (shawl), a youthful Señorita frisking along with her lover’s sombrero on her head, and a prattling girl who had followed father and mother to the war.”

IN THE LINE OF FIRE

Most camp followers did not serve on the field of battle. Some women, however, took great risks to help soldiers during combat.

During the Battle of Monterrey, María Josefa Zozaya worked tirelessly to bring food and water to all, regardless of nationality. While gently lifting a soldier’s head into her lap and binding his wounds with her own handkerchief, she was struck and killed by gunfire. U.S. soldiers buried her body “amid showers of grape and round [cannon] shot.” Deeply moved, U.S. soldiers praised her humanity in the midst of war. Songs and poems were written to commemorate the compassion of the “Maid of Monterrey”.

U.S. women also put themselves in harm’s way to support the troops. During the siege of Fort Brown, U.S. camp followers were ordered to stay in underground magazines for protection. These women worked diligently sewing sand bags to strengthen the fort.

One woman, Sarah Bowman, refused to take shelter and served food and water in the middle of the fort. Even though a bullet went through her sunbonnet, she served “her boys” as they defended the besieged fort. Her determination during the siege earned her the nickname “the Heroine of Fort Brown” and the honorary title of Colonel Bowman. When she died, this courageous laundress was buried with full military honors.



Maid of Monterrey

WARRIORS

Women like Zozaya and Bowman ended up on battlefields by chance. Others specifically sought to place themselves in the fight. Some determined women managed to join the ranks and a few even experienced combat.



When invaded, women rose up to defend their homes.

Discovery was usually inevitable. A doctor's examination of the Alabama soldier, for example, quickly revealed the private was female, and she was forced to leave.

Some women never left home but nonetheless found themselves engaged in combat. The battles of Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma were fought in unoccupied terrain. As combat continued south to Mexico City and west to California, however, the War moved into heavily populated areas. Some women overcame feelings of vulnerability to rise up to protect their homes.

When her home city of Monterrey was invaded, Maria de Jesus Dosamantes donned a full Captain's uniform to "enter the ranks of the brave." Despite warnings from General Ampudia, the General in charge, of the dangers she would face as a woman she fought valiantly, earning the nickname the "Heroine of Monterrey."

Before U.S. troops occupied the city of Los Angeles, Igania Reyes – a local elderly woman - hid the city's main cannon in the reeds behind her house. Later, the cannon was uncovered and used to repel an attack of U.S. marines. The Battle of Dominguez Ranch is better known as "The Battle of the Old Woman's Gun" in her honor.



Some remained behind to run the household.

SHARED SACRIFICE

Women did not need to experience combat to contribute to the war cause. Many made their mark through their instincts as wives and mothers.

One notable example was the wife of Captain John Page. When she learned of her husband's mortal wound at Palo Alto, Mrs. Page sprang into action. Determined to see her dying husband one last time, she immediately boarded a ship from Baltimore to New Orleans. There she hoped to catch a steamboat sailing for the Rio Grande.

Her plans went astray as the ship made several unscheduled stops. Upon reaching Point Isabel, she discovered her husband was en route to New Orleans. She waited almost a week for the next boat back to that city.

By the time Mrs. Page finally caught up to her husband, she had become a national icon. Citizens followed the saga daily in the newspapers. The Philadelphia Public Ledger praised her devotion, stating that her action raised her "from the condition of wife of officer to that of a 'daughter of the Republic'." Others agreed that she was an example for all wives and mothers of soldiers.

Other women showed similar determination and devotion by keeping businesses running and households functioning until their soldiers came home. When the soldier did not return, or came back maimed, wives and mothers frequently guided their families through the crisis.

As war tore through their country, Mexican women were left to tend to the wounded and support their families as well. U.S. Captain William Henry saw several examples in Mexican hospitals after the Battle of Resaca de la Palma. "Beside one poor fellow," he wrote, "a beautiful girl of seventeen was seated, keeping off the flies. In another corner, a family group, the mother and her children, were seated by the wounded father.

Quietly and patiently, these women also served as daughters of their Republic.