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# Shootout in La Mesilla

By The FAT Boys

(Eric Fuller, Daniel D. Aranda, Emilio Tapia, Joe Lopez, Mary Kay Shannon)

The 1881 gunfight at the OK Corral in Tombstone, Arizona, is a well-known incident in Southwestern literature. Few are familiar with a more significant and deadly occurrence that happened in La Mesilla, New Mexico a decade earlier, although many more people participated and were killed and wounded as a result. Perhaps this account will give the shootout in La Mesilla the recognition it deserves.

She may have been right since a group of what has been referred to as the Santa Fe Ring was well imbedded in this part of the country.

The “Ring,” also known as the Indian Ring, was comprised primarily of Republican lawyers, judges, businessmen and politicians. Two prominent members were, Thomas Benton Catron, referred to as “The Boss” or “Tomcat” and Steven Benton Elkins known as “Smooth Steve.” Both men came to the Mesilla Valley in the 1860s and soon joined Samuel Jones’ law practice. They also engaged in banking and mining. More importantly, they established a lucrative practice in land speculation, specializing in the disposition of early land grants. Perhaps the often questionable usurpation of land from individuals in communal grants is what Carlos’ grandmother had been alluding to. Catron’s cronies were not above chicanery to meet their ends. Personal vendettas also played a part in the bloodletting.



Mesilla Riot of 1871, Gun Battle on Plaza – 1979 illustration by Joeseeph E. Lopez. Florencio Campos Lopez would have probably been killed had the bullet hit him an inch in any direction – Courtesy of Joseph E. Lopez

An election appears to be the catalyst for what became known as the Mesilla Riot. Contrary to what we may think today, most people of 1870s took their politics seriously and the coming election was no exception. Politics were not the only reason for the fracas. When young Carlos Melendrez, a grandson of one of the politicians, said to his grandmother that he had heard the riot had been caused by a bunch of drunkards, he was assured that he knew nothing about it. The disappointed woman looked straight into his eyes punctuating by pointing her finger in his face emphasizing that the disturbance was not fueled by alcohol but by long festering concerns over land issues.

Most of the towns and villages along the Rio Grande held meetings to discuss land reform. Squatters had moved in on sparsely settled land grants claiming the properties as their own. Some of the rightful owners soon recognized that titles to their lands were indeed in jeopardy for a variety of reasons so they organized to address the problem.

Meetings were held on November 16 and 17, 1870 at La Union and officers in that district were elected. Another similar meeting was held in Mesilla in April of 1871. The Honorable Pablo Melendrez, Jr., Probate Judge<sup>1</sup> was elected President and John Lemon and Daniel Frietze were elected Vice-Presidents. Cristobal Ascarate, J.D. Bail, Nehemiah V. Bennett, Thomas J. Bull and Ignacio Orrantia were appointed to a commission to study the matter. Unfortunately, the land issues were not resolved easily since most of the grants were issued

during the Spanish and later, Mexican eras. If the owners still had them, the deeds' vague descriptions further complicated true ownership. Another snag stemmed from the fact that some of the landowners were ignorant of the law and afraid because they did not understand the issues or the English language. Property owners had been tossed into a world of mistrust and confusion. Mary Taylor, a highly respected author wrote: "The long fingers of politicians in Santa Fe were not idle in the fight over lands and they were familiar with the Mesilla Valley." Undoubtedly, she was referring to "Smooth Steve" Elkins and "The Boss' Catron, who resided in the Mesilla Valley until moving to Santa Fe.<sup>2</sup>

Catholic Priest Father Jose de Jesus Baca exacerbated the problem and further fueled the issues by telling his devout followers that if the Republicans lost the election, it would create a vacuum for the Texans<sup>3</sup> to come in and usurp the lands and their religion. Since a man of God made the pronouncement, the faithful did not question him and did the priest's bidding. When election time approached, land issues remained, but were relegated to the background for other immediate pressing political matters. This bewilderment certainly altered the loyalty of many voters and resulted in some switching of allegiance in the two main political parties.

The Democratic Club of Dona Ana County was formed on April 19, 1871. A meeting to elect officers was held at the courthouse in Mesilla on May 3<sup>rd</sup>. Over six hundred enthusiastic supporters forced the meeting to take place outdoors. Tables, benches and chairs were moved outside underneath the shade of the large trees in the plaza. Thomas J. Bull, Esquire, presided over the meeting and explained the intent in both Spanish and English. The new club elected newspaper man Nehemiah V. Bennett president along with two vice-presidents each from Las Cruces, Mesilla, Picacho, La Mesa, Tularosa, Amoles, Doña Ana and Chamberino. Beer flowed afterward and a band, made up of supporters, mainly from the Gamboa and Bull brass bands, performed for pride and enjoyment. Republican bystanders demonstrated no overt hard feelings and all had a good time.

In June 1871, many Republicans from southern New Mexico gathered in Mesilla to organize. They elected Cesario Duran as president. Jacinto Armijo, Fabian Gonzales, Rafael Bermudes, Jose Miguel Trujillo, Atilano Baca, and Marcelino Gallegos were elected



### Gamboa Brothers' Band

Courtesy New Mexico State University Archives: RGHC

to lesser offices. In addition, nominations for county officers were made as follows: John Lemon for probate judge; Atilano Baca (who ironically was Father Baca's nephew) for probate clerk; Perfecto Armijo for sheriff; and Marcelino Gallegos for treasurer.

At a Republican meeting held in Las Cruces, speakers and supporters hurled insults at the Democrats by referring to them as *Secesh*, Copperheads<sup>4</sup> and traitors. Tempers began to flare fueled by distorted, erroneous, and magnified accusations by both sides. The local candidates were not alone in this abuse. Democrat Jose Gallegos and Republican J. Francisco Chavez, candidates for territorial delegate to the U.S. Congress, had their share of derogatory material published in the newspapers about them.

Mesilla was one of the largest towns between San Antonio, Texas and San Diego, California, so naturally those running for a congressional seat gave much attention to this area. Jose Manuel Gallegos, often referred to as "Padre Gallegos," was a veteran campaigner and an ex-priest defrocked by Bishop Lamy in 1853. J. Francisco Chavez was the incumbent.

Local contested offices took center stage. In the race for Probate Judge, the incumbent Pablo Melendrez, Jr. (D) was opposed by John Lemon (R). Mariano Barela (D) and Perfecto Armijo (R) were vying the Sherriff's office.

In early July, the Democrats held a rally in Picacho. After they adjourned, many went to Henry Lesinsky's Store on Main Street in Las Cruces. There was a band with them and where there is music, crowds gather. At first it was a friendly affair, but whiskey and the summer heat turned the crowd into a politically divided mob.

There was much cheering and “*Vivas!*” were shouted from the Mexican sector. Things began to deteriorate when epithets and uncalled for remarks flew from both sides. After an offensive slur, a Democrat clubbed a Republican over the head with a pistol. Those living nearby rushed to their homes for weapons while those just passing through went to their wagons for the same. It became ominously quiet and it looked like things might get out of control. After a woman cried out, the more levelheaded individuals stepped to the fore to calm the apprehensive crowd.

Shortly after the Las Cruces disturbance, Republican Rafael Bermudes of Mesilla threatened that if any more disturbances occurred, he and his fellow Republicans would go to Las Cruces and burn down Lesinsky’s place, the Democratic headquarters. Rallies continued on almost every Sunday in one of the many communities in the Mesilla Valley.

The following month, the Democrats announced that candidate Gallegos would be making a tour of the lower Rio Grande and that he would make an address in the Mesilla Plaza on Sunday, August 27, 1871. The Republicans also decided to meet in Mesilla on the same day. Since the Democrats announced their intention to appear in the Plaza first, the Republicans had to settle for meeting at the home of their candidate, John Lemon, which was adjacent to the plaza. Many recognized this as an ominous sign because of the earlier clash in Las Cruces. Hoping to avert violence, members of both parties met and agreed to confine the Democratic rally to the plaza, as arranged earlier while the Republicans were to remain at the Lemon’s home. In addition troops from Fort Selden were to be present as a stabilizing factor.

This was a big event and people came from Las Cruces, Doña Ana, and neighboring villages along the Rio Grande as well as other communities across southern New Mexico. All wanted to hear what their candidates had to say. Democrat, Horace Stephenson, rode in from the La Mesa area south of town with a hundred armed men. Whether they were armed anticipating trouble or just being prudent because of Indian activity has not been recorded.

To the relief of many, the campaigning proceeded without incident and around three o’clock in the afternoon the soldiers from Fort Selden departed as did Stephenson and his men. They were out of pistol range when things heated up. Both parties had bands

composed of local musicians. Although it may have been used as a barb it still seemed innocuous enough for the Democratic band to march around the plaza to close out their rally. Not to be outdone, the Republicans answered this with their band leading a march around the same plaza. Unfortunately, the bands marched in opposing directions, the Democrats marched counter clockwise and the Republicans clockwise. When they met on the west side of the plaza, both refused to budge. As a defiant gesture to let the Republicans know that they weren’t going to move out of their way, the Democratic band struck up the Civil War tune, “*Marching through Georgia.*”<sup>5</sup> Neither side was willing to yield, both bands were blaring and tempers rose to a high pitch.

Apolonio Barela, an excited Deputy U.S. Marshal, accidentally or deliberately fired his pistol into the air. Simultaneously Republican John Lemon confronted Democrat I.N. Kelley and in a heated exchange, remarked that he would just as well kill him as anyone else. Kelley took the threat seriously and clubbed Lemon over the head with a wagon spoke (some accounts say it

was an ax or pick handle), mortally wounding him. Then, all hell broke loose. Felicito Arroyo y Luera was nearby and shot Kelley five or six times and then was killed in turn by an unknown assailant.

Shooting and fistfights broke out immediately and

Women and children’s terrified cries mixed with those of the cursing, wounded, angry men. Hundreds of stray bullets flew throughout the plaza and an unidentified mentally retarded boy, referred to as the “idiot boy,” became a fatality. Some said that the bullet that killed him



John Lemon, first casualty of the riot. New Mexico State University Library: RGHC 02330037

cover or better vantage points.

was meant for Sheriff candidate Mariano Barela. Pedro Garcia, who either had a pistol pointed at Barela or who was holding a door open for the man's entry, was shot. It is unclear if Garcia's wound was fatal or not. Republican band member Antonio Garcia was one of the casualties when a bullet struck his flugelhorn.<sup>6</sup> Fortunately, he was only stunned and he shortly, gathered in his horn and ran home for cover.



Florencio Campos Lopez

This day was not only a politically charged day for the Lopez and Torres families, as they also used the occasion to further marriage plans for Florencio Lopez and fiancée, Isabella Garcia Torrez. The Lopez and Torrez women were headed to the home of Andres and Magdalena Lopez, a short walking distance from the southeast side of the plaza, when the shooting began. Andres Lopez pulled his eleven

year-old son Tiburcio out of a tree and sent him scurrying home. Another son, eighteen year-old Florencio, was shot in the lower rib cage with a thirty-six-caliber bullet. Fortunately, the young man was only stunned and bruised.

By chance, the bullet had only penetrated his vest and coin purse and had torn a small hole in a copper one-cent piece minted in 1851. (The coin was about the size of today's quarter.)



Top - Coin purse with bullet hole. Below in a copper one-cent piece minted in 1851. To the right of the hole in the 1851 one cent piece are the bullets that eleven year-old Tiburcio Lopez picked up after the fight. Photo courtesy of Katrina L. Lopez

Believing that his younger brother had been

killed or at least severely wounded, Felipe called out, "That son-of-bitch is not going to kill my family!" By chance or design, the shooter of - Florencio



44 caliber Remington revolver that Felipe C. Lopez used to kill an opponent - Photo courtesy of Katrina L. Lopez

was an old enemy of the Lopez family and Felipe didn't hesitate to shoot and kill him. The adversary's name was known, but decreasingly mentioned as the generations passed and is now lost in oblivion. A descendent remembers that when his relatives talked of the event, the dead man was suspected of having recently rustled some Lopez cattle.

A courier with a message, calling for help was soon dispatched to Fort Selden. According to James E. Griggs, he lent his fine horse to a young employee of his, Rafael Camunez, with orders to proceed as fast as he could to retrieve Lieutenant Colonel Thomas C. Devin. The post commander immediately sent Captain William Kelly and Lieutenant Millard F. Goodwin with sixty-five men of the 8<sup>th</sup> Cavalry to quell the riot. The unit returned to Mesilla in record-breaking time. When the unit arrived in Las Cruces, Capt. Kelly detached a large party under Lt. Millard to ensure peace there while he and twenty men rode on to La Mesilla where they arrived at 10:00 that night.

The troops in Mesilla restored order and then pitched camp on the plaza. By the next day, things appeared to be under control and the military units returned to their post.

Both political parties observed a tenuous truce and recognized that it was in everyone's best interests. Due to a vacancy, there was no sitting judge in the Mesilla district court, so Judge Hezekiah S. Johnson was called in from the Socorro District to investigate. He soon grasped that meddling would only agitate the still volatile situation so he prudently dropped the matter after a few days and returned home. No one was ever brought to trial for this violent affair.

The bells of San Albino rang at the funerals that

shortly took place for those killed. Thirty-nine year-old John Lemon, who died at around ten o'clock on the night of the onslaught, left behind his wife Luciana and four children. He was buried in the walls of the old church. There is a tombstone on the church grounds to this day.

The election on September 4<sup>th</sup> was anti-climactic and proved victorious for the Democratic Party. Mariano Barela was elected Sheriff by a three-hundred vote margin. Jose M. Gallegos won his race against his rival, J. Francisco Chavez. Chavez' defeat was in part due to Jose D. Sena who left the Republican Party to become an Independent candidate thus splitting the votes. Col. William Logan Rynerson stepped in for the murdered John Lemon, and was defeated by Pablo Melendrez.

The result of the election was more than many Republicans could bear and some left to settle in Grant County and others moved to spots along the Mimbres River. Another forty families decided to go to Mexico. They petitioned the Mexican government and were granted a parcel in Northern Chihuahua that became the village of La Ascención. The exodus to Mexico began in December of the same year. It has been said that they were taunted as they left with the following ditty:

*Los Republicanos se van  
Se van a La Ascención  
Porque los Demócratas  
Ganaron la elección*

*The Republicans are going  
They're going to Ascención  
Because the Democrats  
Won the election"*

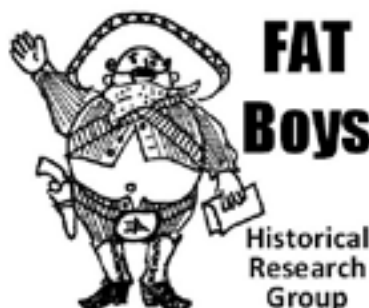
On January 1, 1872, these forty families became the nucleus of the new village. They built homes, businesses, and a new life, but conditions were not as hospitable as they had hoped. Indians, political discord, and other hardships forced many to eventually return to the U.S.

The authors wrote this article in hopes that it will encourage descendants and others with knowledge of the event to offer their thoughts before it is too late. Much has been written on the subject, but unfortunately, some only serves to muddy the waters. There are several good existing accounts and we would like to especially credit Lionel Cajen Freitze for his *History of La Mesilla and Her Mesilleros* and Mary Daniels Taylor for her book, *A Place As Wild as the West Ever Was: Mesilla, New Mexico 1848-1872*. These two sources helped fill many gaps in understanding the time and events.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> This Pablo Melendrez was the son of Pablo Melendrez Sr., one of the most important figures in Dona Ana County history. Pablo Sr. was among the first settlers of Dona Ana and holder of several important offices. He was also largely responsible for the settlement of Las Cruces. Melendrez is often spelled with an *s* instead of a *z*, both spellings are used by descendants.
- <sup>2</sup> Thomas Catron was appointed as U.S. district attorney of all of New Mexico in 1869 and Steve Elkins was the attorney general for the territory.
- <sup>3</sup> Texan was generic term referring to any unwanted Anglo foreigner.

- <sup>4</sup> Secesh is a derogatory term for Confederate secessionists during the Civil War. A copperhead is a person in the northern states who sympathized with the Southern states.
- <sup>5</sup> Period accounts state that the tune, Marching Through Georgia, was played by the Democrat's band, but more likely the Republicans would have played it in defiance to the mostly Democratic southern sympathizers. Also, the ditty taunting those leaving for Ascención was supposedly sung to the same tune, but we have tried to work those words in both Spanish and English and question this claim.
- <sup>6</sup> This horn is now on display at the Gadsden Museum in Mesilla.



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**FAT Boys** are a group of individuals in and around Las Cruces involved in various research projects. The “founders” are Eric Fuller, Daniel D. Aranda, and Emilio Tapia.

They are joined in this project by Joe Lopez and Mary Kay Shannon.

## Appendix

The following lists have been included as they should be part of the record and to inspire descendants to further probe into their past.

Those known to have died in the shootout:

“Chihuahua Bully,” Fabian Cortez, I.N. Kelley, John Lemon, Felicito Arroyas y Luera, Sotelo Lopez, Francisco Rodriguez and an unknown boy referred to as “Idiot Boy.”

Those wounded that have been accounted for were:

Juan Arroyo, Isadoro Apodaca, Juan or Jesus Barela, Dr. William W. Black (shot in the hand when looking after a wounded man), Jesus Calles, Pilar Candelario, Jesus Cubero, Cesario Flores, Pedro Garcia (shot in the back and may have died), Simon Gallegos, Francisco Lopez, Jesus Lopez, Oraquia Luna, Mateo Madrid, Leandro Miranda, Hilario Moreno, Manuel Nevarez (shot twice in the foot), Jose Maria Padilla, Jose Quesada, Juan de Dios Sanz. Forty to fifty were reported wounded.

Families that went to La Asención are compiled

from several sources and listed, for the most part, by the heads of family:

Refugio Alba, Andres Alvarez, Martin Alavarez, Domingo Alvillar, Estanislado Alvillar, Rafael Ancheta, Concepción Andrada, Juan Apodaca, Marcos Arroyos, Atilano Baca, Father Jesus Baca, Deputy Marshal Apolonio Barela, Benito Barela, Etimio Barrio, Guadalupe Barron, Miguel Bastides, Postmaster Fred Buckner, Ana Maria Chavez, Blas Duran, Defitero Duran, Tranquilino Duran, Fernandez family, Galindo family, Galvan family, Marcelino Gallegos, Antonio Garcia, Lorenzo Garcia, Fabian Gonzales, Feliciano Gonzales, Refugio Gonzales, Jose Maria Holguin, Juan Holguin, Miguel Holguin, Pedro Lara, Felipe Lechuga, Maximiliano Lucero, Nabor Lucero, Sabastian Lucero, Silvestre Maese, Vicente Mestas, Juan Mirabal, Leandro Miranda, Severo Ortega, Ignacio Orrantia, Luz Padilla, Pinon family, Refugio Ramirez, Monico Rocha, Remigio Saenz, Victoriano Sotelo, Jose Tapia, and Epifanio Tellez.