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If there is an inscription over the portal leading into Perote prison, it should have been copied directly from the pedestal on which the Goddess of Liberty stands in New York harbor:

Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.

For Emma Lazarus' lines fit the several batches of prisoners who walked from Texas to Perote. Whatever they were back home, they wound up in Mexico, wretched, huddled, and yearning to be free. Perote was no "golden door" beside which a Goddess of Liberty could lift her lamp. But it was a refuge of sorts into which Texans from the Republic of Texas were herded almost with regularity. Here came prisoners from the abortive Texan Santa Fe Expedition, from the Nicholas Dawson Expedition, and from the Mier Expedition. I doubt that anyone ever took a careful census of the number of Texans in Perote at the same time, but between the winter of 1841–1842 and sometime in 1843, altogether about 550 Texans were gathered within the confines of this forbidding prison. With today's population explosion in Mexico the town of Perote still checks out at less than 10,000 *ciudadanos*, and in the 1840's it must have been correspondingly smaller. If the Texans had been permitted to bloc vote, which of course they weren't, they could undoubtedly have held the balance of power in the town's municipal elections.

Nowadays Perote does not look particularly forbidding. On a secondary highway from Veracruz to Puebla, it lies just 30 kilometers upland from the provincial capital of Jalapa, a most civilized city. Its altitude would probably measure at about 7,000 feet, its climate is invariably temperate if a bit windy, and the nearby flora is a bit on the orchidaceous side. It barely misses being a gardenia spot that sits on the dry side of the dividing line between the damp coastland and the vast central valley of Mexico.

But Texans of the 1840's had no appreciation for the pleasures of Perote, any more than prisoners a half-century later enjoyed terri-

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torial prison at Yuma because of its parallel opportunities for sunbathing. Men yearning to be free don't care for incarceration, and complaints emanating from within Perote's thick, damp walls were bitter and unceasing.

Perote Castle had been built by the Spanish authorities between 1769 and 1775—about the time that the American independence movement was preparing to burst loose. It had two aims: to guard a principal trade route from the coast to Mexico City and to serve as a depository for treasure awaiting shipment to Spain. The fortress itself was rather routine, as Spanish fortresses go. It covered approximately 26 acres and had a moat around its inner walls. When the Mexicans replaced the Spanish, they transformed Perote into a prison. By the time the Texans arrived, the building was more than 70 years old, an antique by upstart Texas standards. And given the probable repair climate in Mexico, which for a third of a century had been more concerned with politics and fighting than with upkeep, Perote was undoubtedly in miserable shape.

In some ways conditions in Perote seemed to have paralleled conditions in Texas when that entity flew the Mexican flag. The Mexican captors were extraordinarily generous, permitting prisoners to write and receive letters from home, evidently without censorship; to receive visitors, money, and gifts; and to wander into town to purchase supplies. The opportunity for shopping was undoubtedly limited; in Perote today, opportunity for purchasing remains limited, despite the omnipresent Coca-Cola and Sears Roebuck products. Although international law was not as advanced then as now, Texans had an elevated idea of what it meant to be prisoners of war, and consequently chafed because the Mexicans forced them to perform common labor. Possibly the activity involved saved them from that most besetting of all woes in a prison environment, boredom, but the Texans detested any evidence of overlordship.

On the other hand, the Mexicans resented the fact that the Texans had insulted the integrity of Mexican institutions by coming on their soil to fight and to dissect the territory. Since no declared war existed, they hardly viewed the Texans as prisoners of war. The fair-skinned men from the north and east were just plain invaders, *banditos*. The observance of international law then becomes a matter of perspective.

When you spend 24 hours a day waiting, 144 hours a week, and nearly 9,000 hours a year, with each hour at least 60 minutes long,

time drags. In our mechanistic society all hours are presumably the same length. But the humanist knows that some hours are short and that other hours stretch out interminably. Not all hours are the same. And so the men in Perote waited long hours for their release, waited and waited some more. Up in Texas the Republic's Congress appropriated release money for the prisoners, news which likely reached to Perote, but the money never arrived. News of their plight reached Washington, which tends to be more sympathetic than Austin to problems of the tempest-tossed. President John Tyler instructed Waddy Thompson, United States Minister to Mexico, to negotiate for release of the Texas prisoners, even though they were not his fellow citizens and he was not their representative. He was also to demand, not negotiate, release of any imprisoned citizens of the United States. As for home and Texas, the prisoners felt that President Sam Houston had abandoned them and was taking no steps toward their release. After all, the Texan Santa Fe Expedition and the Mier Expedition had not been Sam Houston's idea, and he did not approve of unofficial filibusters. Houston was not a Texan romantic.

From time to time the men plotted escape, one way of relieving tedium. The remarkable thing is that in their letters home they showed no reluctance to mention plans to break out. This provides the clearest indication that they did not expect the Mexicans to read their letters. The fact that a large proportion of Mexico's soldiery was illiterate would also bring a certain confidence that letters would not be read, particularly when they were written in a language not the Mexicans' own. Further, and this the men would not have considered, censorship would have been difficult even for bilingual Mexicans because the execrable spelling practiced by most Texans, who themselves would probably be called functional illiterates today, is difficult for educated Texans to decipher in the 1970's.

On July 2, 1843, sixteen Texans escaped through a hole bored in the wall; eight were recaptured. Eight months later another sixteen men escaped through a tunnel; seven were recaptured. This escape came two days after the Mexicans released a huge cache of Texas prisoners from Bexar, and could be ascribed to disappointment on the part of those remaining, except that you don't dig a tunnel in two days. In mid-September, 1844, the remaining Texas prisoners, about 105, started home with Mexico's blessing.

We lack good records that would enable us to state with precision how many died in prison—from disease, malnutrition, or exposure;

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how many escaped; how many were released; and how many were killed by Mexican guards for any number of reasons. Naturally we do not know how many of those who did escape got lost or met the sharp blade of a machete or otherwise failed to reach home. In short, the list of MIA's from the Perote experience remains unreconciled.

Anyone seeking a sophisticated approach to racial antipathies should read neither the letters of the prisoners nor this book. These men had grievances, and they spilled over into racial charges. Since the Anglo-Texans suffered at the hands of Mexicans, they naturally didn't care for Mexicans. Few prisoners love their jailer. Besides that, regardless of the merits of either cause, you have a situation such as Richard A. Barkley's. His father and a brother were killed at the Alamo, and another brother fell with J. W. Fannin at Goliad. These misfortunes had happened only six years earlier, and again were due to Mexican action. Add to this past distress the fact that on March 22, 1843, Barkley writes home that he expects to be "liberated in about eleven days," and that on the following June 18, considerably more than eleven days later, he is still writing from the castle of Perote that "our treatment grows worse the longer [we] stay [...] the hours we have to work is increast to near double and iff one of us should be a little complaining he is forced of to work at the point of the bayonet and iff he proves to be two sick to work he is sent to the Hospitall where one of us that is well is not permitted to go even should he be like to dy. . . . On last Thursday we war locked up all day it being a day of feast—to-day we are locked up [...] this is the day they proclame the new constatution."

And then Barkley adds the eternal sentence, "Iff I am not mistaken this is the last leter I shall write at least I hope so." Only this time an ominous note follows: "None of the boys of our Prairie will go with me it being a haserdeous undertaking." Earlier Barkley had complained that he was made to "work nerlly every day and made to *pack* as mutch as we posabllly can—to add to our mizery a large body of cavelry has binn stationed [...] We have there filth to carey out every morning."

Once earlier when Barkley had tried to escape, his fellow prisoners had "stopt" him. The result was, said Barkley, that the "Mexicans point me out and say I am the worst one in the Castle—I have worn hobels two weaks binn [beat] with there spades and muskets Calaboosed and ev[ery means to] cow me that they can think of—some of them—you need not to write to me any more for I think that I shall

make my escape. There is no hopes of release." Small wonder then that he writes in another place, "I will have revenge or I will dy in the attempt."

Barkley sums up his feelings in a letter of April 10: "if you receive this letter remember it is from a friend in fine health and good spir-its yet he is in Prison and in chanes and subject to insults of a people he hates worse than he possebly could [describe] a people that has murdered his only brother in cole blood [and] butchered his Father himself driven before the bayonets [many hundred] miles and that two without a blanket or a coat to sheald him from the weather fedd on the refused Flower that was full of Bugs and worms with a small quantity of beef."

As Barkley says, his captors order him about "with more authority than an over seer driving his negrowes." To the Mexicans he is an invader to be treated like a "conveck," but to himself, with that self-deception that we all practice, he "is as inicant as a child unborned."

So don't read the book which follows with any idea that it is going to be fair and dispassionate. Maybe these men imprisoned at the old fortress should not have been in Mexico, but nonetheless there they were for reasons that seemed sufficient for them. They had marched in chains, and had wound up in a region which one described as colder than Texas in the winter, a windswept area only 160 miles east-by-south from Mexico City, to be sealed off from their world by walls that were 12 feet high and 6 feet thick, with 96 cannon mounted on the periphery. The moat, approximately 100 feet wide and 20 feet deep, could be crossed only by a drawbridge leading in to the one large gate. At the entrance two huge statues had been carved, effigies in stone of two colonial soldiers who had been executed for sleeping while on guard. The Texans probably found little reassurance in that. Rumor holds that the Aztecs called the place *pinahui-zapan*, or "something-to-be-buried-in."

As two Anglo observers wrote after a visit more than thirty years ago, "Today old Perote Prison is ignominious—its pits deserted— . . . The very atmosphere around it is unfit for human life; . . . and no living thing remains within its once-impregnable walls. Its moat is a dusty, rock-strewn ditch where a few mangy goats sometimes wander. The two huge sentinels in stone at the gate have become caricatures in rock."

But Perote would have one more flirtation with life. When Mexico declared war against the Axis powers, Perote prison was refurbished

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quickly but not too comfortably to house any Germans or Japanese soldiers who might fall into Mexican hands. Not many did.

To exist in Perote men had marched from the rather comfortable area of central Texas across the plains and mountains to Santa Fe and down through the desert of northern Mexico, at least 2,000 miles. You walk 2,000 miles under less than ideal conditions, and you wind up at Perote. This is not what most of them had in mind.

Or if they had joined the Mier Expedition, they had walked again from central Texas to the Rio Grande border, possibly 300 miles, to get captured in a fight in which they were outnumbered almost ten to one. They had watched their supplies run out and their discipline fall apart, and had surrendered to the forces of General Pedro Ampudia. Although they would later claim that they had surrendered as prisoners of war, they signed no terms of capitulation until after their arms had been grounded, when the Mexicans told them that they would be treated with "consideration." Back in Austin President Houston would take the position that the men had acted without authority, which really freed Mexico from obligation to treat them as prisoners of war.

General Ampudia sentenced all of the Mier prisoners to death, but as a sort of delayed Christmas present on December 27, 1842, reversed the execution decree. And then they marched. On the way a whole host of them escaped, but in trying to circle through the mountains during the dry season they became separated, lost their way, and suffered badly. In the end only three members made good their escape back to Texas. Altogether 176 Texans were recaptured, a rather discouraging figure.

Again they were sentenced to death, but then the execution order was modified to kill every tenth man, as chosen by lottery. One hundred seventy-six beans were placed in an earthen jar, seventeen of them black. A black bean meant death. Commissioned officers were ordered to draw first. As others drew, Big-Foot Wallace, astute as always, noticed that black beans were larger than white beans. Accordingly he fingered several beans before deciding successfully on the one to take out. Seventeen men were neither as shrewd nor as fortunate.

The Mexicans gave some of them time to write their families, and nearly all commissioned some companion to take a message back home if he ever returned there. The Mexicans then unshackled the doomed men from their companions, placed them in another court-

yard, and at dusk on March 25, 1843, shot them. Five years later Mexico returned the bodies to Texas, and they are buried at Monument Hill near LaGrange, otherwise known as the home of the historic Chicken Ranch. Obviously not everyone loses at LaGrange.

But again, after this not altogether happy interlude, the Mier filibusters were marched on to the vicinity of Mexico City, where they did road work throughout the summer months before winding up at Perote in September 1843. To them Perote was not so much a shelter as an end of a long road.

The Dawson party has a somewhat different history. After General Adrian Woll invaded Texas in September 1842, capturing San Antonio, news reached LaGrange, where Nicholas Mosby Dawson gathered fifty-three men to head west to confront the enemy. A detachment of Mexican cavalry discovered his group when it was about a mile and a half from the fighting. Although the Texans took cover in a mesquite grove, the Mexicans withdrew from rifle range and with two pieces of artillery killed about half of the Texans. Dawson tried to surrender, but his men wouldn't cease firing. Naturally the Mexicans began firing again, continuing even after some of the Texans had dropped their arms. Thirty-five of the fifty-three were killed, and fifteen more were captured, five of them wounded. With this miserable beginning the prisoners were marched to Mexico to be held in Perote. Only nine ever made it home. From this standpoint, they too had marched a thousand miles to nowhere.

Among the prisoners who returned home from the Mier expedition was William Preston Stapp. In October 1844 he wrote his story. The next year his little book was published in type that would destroy the eyes of an ordinary person. The publisher was G. B. Zieber and Company in Philadelphia, and the printer was C. Sherman, 19 St. James Street, presumably in Philadelphia. Probably this book did not have wide circulation, for few copies have survived. In 1887–1888 the *LaGrange Journal* reprinted Stapp's story in its columns. In 1933 the *Journal* republished the book in a facsimile edition taken from its files. The price was \$1.03 per copy, prepaid, and 75 cents per copy in orders of ten or more, postage prepaid.

The book paces well. It even has its poetic moments, and reads almost rhapsodically about the beauties of Mexico nights and Mexico City. But it is also relentless in its denunciation of Santa Anna and not much more charitable toward the expedition's captors. It presents a lively portrait of an unfortunate period in Texas-Mexican

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relations when both countries were shaking down and had not yet found their way. To understand some of the inherent tenseness that exists between Texas and Mexico, this book provides clues. While it won't please the Mexican nationalists on either side of the Rio Grande, perhaps it will make them slightly more tolerant of some of the extreme attitudes perpetuated even today by Texans who lack the courage to forget. And who knows, maybe the Mexican-baiters among today's Texans will perceive that historically those Mexicans stand on sound principle when they insist that Texans are arrogant and deceitful.

But see for yourself.

JOE B. FRANTZ

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