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Franklin Combs

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COMBS' NARRATIVE OF THE SANTA FE EXPEDITION IN 1841

There has recently been published¹ a body of data in regard to the part played by Thomas Falconer, the Englishman who accompanied the Texan Santa Fe Expedition as a guest by invitation of President Mirabeau B. Lamar. As is well known, the ill-fated expedition set out from Austin in June, 1841, but did not reach its destination, its starved and broken ranks being intercepted and disarmed by General Armijo's militia not long after the Texans had crossed the border into New Mexico, and soon started from San Miguel on the long march to the City of Mexico as prisoners.

The principal account of the history of the affair is that by George Wilkins Kendall, whose *Narrative of the Texan Santa Fé Expedition* first appeared in two volumes in 1844, and in several subsequent editions until the seventh was issued in 1856; and indeed there was a partial reprint as late as 1929. In the seventh edition appeared an extract from the diary of Falconer, covering the period from August 31 to October 9, 1841, during which time he was with the main body under Gen. Hugh McLeod which had remained in camp on the Quintufue, (called by Combs the Palo Duro) a branch of Pease river in northwestern Texas, while the others, in several parties, were sent ahead. Because they fill this hiatus in the history of the expedition as recorded by Kendall, the Falconer accounts are of considerable value.

Otherwise supplementing Kendall's account is a narrative by Franklin Combs, a son of Gen. Leslie Combs of Kentucky and also a guest of the expedition, written in the City of Mexico soon after his release as a prisoner, and printed in *Niles' National Register* of March 5, 1842. The first part

1. Letters and Notes on the Texan Santa Fe Expedition, by Thomas Falconer, with Introduction and Notes by F. W. Hodge. New York, Dauber & Pine, 1930.

of young Combs' account bears on the journeying of one of the advance parties, under Commissioner William G. Cooke and Captain Sutton, of which Kendall was likewise a member, but not Falconer. This was the force which, in its efforts to avoid the escarpments of the Llano Estacado, traveled too far northward to reach San Miguel directly. The narrative, which follows, gives considerable information not found in Kendall, especially as Combs was with those prisoners who started on the long and dreary march nearly a month before the others.

F. W. H.

SANTA FE PRISONERS

NARRATIVE OF FRANKLIN COMBS

The expedition after about ten weeks march, through a country infested by Indians, arrived at the Palo Duro, where being straightened for food, and having previously sent their guides in advance, it was determined to despatch about a third of the armed force, and two of the commissioners to procure provisions and prepare the way for the entrance of the expedition into the province of Santa Fe. The impression at the time was that the expedition had reached within 90 miles of Santa Fe, in consequence of which belief the advanced division took with them only three days rations. Col. Cooke and Dr. Brenham were the commissioners accompanying the advance and Capt. Sutton commanded the armed escort. The remainder of the forces were left at the Palo Duro under the command of Gen. McLeod, surrounded by a vast number of Indians, who were continually harrassing them and who had actually killed five of them the day upon which the division set out upon its march.

The advanced force soon learned that the expedition had made a fearful mistake in supposing the Palo Duro to be within 90 miles of Santa Fe. The distance was nearly 300 miles, and as a consequence the rations provided for the

troops were exhausted before they accomplished a third of the road to Santa Fe. The division then resorted to every expedient to escape starvation. They first subsisted upon such of the horses as had broken down, and wild berries which were occasionally met within the prairies. When these resources failed, they were compelled to live upon snakes, horned frogs and other reptiles which abound in the prairies and which constituted their principal and for a time, their only food. After marching in this way for two weeks or thereabouts, the division arrived at Gallinas. From this place, Van Ness, Lewis, Howard and Fitzgerald, accompanied by Mr. Kendall, were sent on to Santa Fe, to hold an interview with the governor, explain the pacific objects of the expedition, obtain stores for the troops and permit to bring the merchandise taken out by the traders within the province.

Two or three hours after these gentlemen left the camp at Gallinas, a note was received from Captain Lewis to the effect that the country was in arms, but that they would proceed on their journey to Santa Fe. They were, however, seized shortly afterwards, (as Capt. Lewis stated) bound and taken out to be shot but that their lives were spared through the intercession of a Mexican officer, who took them to meet governor Armijo. In the mean while the governor had despatched a force of several hundred men to intercept the Texians. The commander of these troops held several interviews with the commissioners, and endeavored to get the Texians to lay down their arms by assuring them of the friendly disposition of the governor and the inhabitants. This the Texians would not do. The Mexican officers undertook to take care of the few remaining horses of the Texians, and supply the men with food in order to allay all apprehensions of any hostile purpose. His next step was to cross the Gallinas with his men, with the avowed object of camping the two forces together as further proof of friendship. This he did, but as he drew near the Texian

camp, the disposition of his lines left little doubt of his belligerent intentions. The Texians were immediately got under arms. About this time also another party crossed the river, and forming a junction with the first, banished every lingering doubt of the objects of the Mexicans, and an engagement was on the eve of taking place when Capt. Lewis and the nephew and confidential secretary of the governor made their appearance.

When Lewis and the governor's nephew came up, a parley was had between them and the Texians, the troops upon both sides maintaining their battle array. Capt. Lewis represented the governor as willing to receive the Texians on condition that they would lay down their arms in conformity with a law of Mexico, which made it necessary for an armed force entering the province to give up their weapons before reaching San Miguel. He represented himself, and the nephew and secretary of the governor as empowered to stipulate for the surrender of the implements of war, and to negotiate for the safe conduct of the troops to the frontier after they had complied with this stipulation. The governor had empowered them to bind² the authorities to label the property of each individual, supply food for the march home, and return to every man his property. The representations were confirmed by the nephew and secretary of governor Armijo, as well as by the Mexican officers, a number of whom had joined in the parley.

The commissioners hesitating to confide in these representations, Capt. Lewis informed him that the governor with a well appointed troop of 3,000 men, was within twelve hours march, and if the Texians gained the battle, they would soon be engaged with a more formidable foe. The commissioners, yet not satisfied, Captain Lewis pledged his honor to the truth of all these statements, swearing upon his Masonic faith (both being Masons) to every word of it.

2. Should read "bind"?

Such being the circumstances of the division, without food, jaded and worn out by fatiguing marches, in front of a force of some six hundred men and expecting the arrival of 3,000 more, and being especially ordered by the Texian government to avoid hostilities if the people were opposed to them, and not apprised of the capture of the gentlemen despatched to Santa Fe, and not suspecting Lewis to be a traitor, the Texians laid down their arms upon the terms of surrender proposed. Food was then furnished the troops, and they were treated with some leniency until the next day, when the governor arrived with about 1,500 men, a force sufficient to make him secure in his barbarity; we were seized and bound six and eight together, with hair ropes and thong of raw hide, and put in a filthy sheep-fold, surrounded by a large armed guard. The Mexican officers then excited the Peons to the highest degree of phrenzy, by the accounts they gave of the Texians, and we were prevented from being slaughtered by being huddled together in a small yard enclosed by a mud wall, and defended by the regular troops. In this place we were kept all night, lying in heaps, one upon another, and suffering the most intense agony from the closeness of the confinement and the pressure of the ropes with which we were bound, and in full hearing of the disputes in the council called by the governor to deliberate upon our destiny, which decided about daybreak, by a *single vote*, that we should not be shot but marched off for Mexico.

At sun rise we had to take up our march for the city of Mexico, about 2,000 miles distant—the soldiers telling us that we were going to the mines.—Bound six and eight together, we were forced to travel, the three first days about thirty miles each, without food and even denied the privilege of drinking when we were wading the small streams, through which we were marched. We were stripped of hat, shoes, blankets and coats. The governor himself took from me my blanket and buffalo robe, cursing and striking the

prisoners and raving like a madman; because (as we heard) his wish to have us shot had been overruled in council. I was obliged to give my shirt, in the extremity of my distress, for a loaf of bread, and swapped a tolerably good pair of pantaloons for a ragged pair upon receiving a mouthful or two to eat in the exchange. When we arrived at the Rio del Norte I had parted with every thing but my tattered trowsers, vest and suspenders, every thing else having been disposed of for bread or robbed from me by the soldiers. Nor were the other prisoners in a better condition. The weather was then cold and we were nigh perishing in our nakedness.

After a few days march, it was found, impracticable for us to get on with any speed bound together in such numbers. We were then tied two together, and to each pair there was a rope tied about the waist, neck or arms, and fastened to the pommel of the saddle of the horses on which the guard was mounted. The soldiers would occasionally put their horses in a gallop to torture those fastened to them, and whenever any of us fell down or lagged behind, we were dragged upon the ground and beaten with thongs, sticks or whatever else was at hand.

The principal, indeed almost all the food we received during the route was furnished by the women, who would follow us in large numbers for miles, weeping at the cruelties to which we were subjected. They would not be allowed sometimes the discharge of their offices of charity—the soldiers beating them off and reviling them with obscene and abusive language. We were marched, at times, all night and all day, blinded by sand and parched with thirst, until our tongues were so swollen as almost to be incapable of speaking.

In this manner we were hurried on to the city of Mexico, which we reached towards the close of December. But I must here pause, to do justice to one of the captains of the Mexican army, who had charge of us for about five days of

the journey, who treated us with kindness, and furnished us with money out of his own pocket. He respected us as prisoners of war, and I lament that I cannot recall his name. He was the only officer who seemed to regard us as human beings during the whole of our long march. The foreigners also in Chihuahua and Zacatacas, raised a contribution for us, which gave us a temporary relief.

After we were taken prisoners, we learned that Howland, Rosenbery and Baker, the guides we took with us from Texas, and who had been sent on before the division left the Palo Duro, had been taken and shot—as well as an American merchant, named Rowland, who had gone their security when they were taken up, upon the information of one Brignole, a deserter from the expedition. Of these transactions however, I can only speak from heresay. A number of other outrages were reported to have been perpetrated upon American citizens—no doubt correctly reported.

When we arrived at Mexico, we were covered with filth and vermin. We there met an order from Santa Ana, to be chained with heavy iron. We were lodged in the Convent Santiago, about two miles from the palace; confined in a room over the cemetery, and the effluvia from the dead bodies beneath was offensive in the extreme.

Upon our arrival, I wrote to our minister Mr. Ellis, informing him of my situation, and of being a citizen of the United States, and stated the fact of my having gone with the expedition only as a guest of the commissioners, which circumstance was corroborated in writing, by Messrs. Cooke and Brenham, two of the commissioners then prisoners with us.

The prisoners were, upon the order of Santa Ana, waked up and chained two and two together, and marched to the palace, at midnight. When they arrived there, the doctor³ was asleep; the prisoners were kept in the public

3. Misprint for "dictator"?

square for some time, for the gratification of the rabble, and then marched back, no one daring to disturb the slumbers of the tyrant. I was not then put in chains, in consequence of my illness. Those prisoners who were able to do so, were subsequently made to work upon the streets of the capital.

About three weeks after we reached Mexico, two of the prisoners made their escape. This incensed Santa Ana to such a degree, that he ordered the whole of us, the lame and sick included, to be chained, and made to work with the rest. I was myself taken out of bed and chained with a heavy log chain about my ancles, and made to work in the streets. This, too, after I had been demanded as a citizen of the United States by our minister, Mr. Ellis; *I was kept in chains about two weeks*, and ill as I was, compelled to sleep and work in them, having thereby nearly lost my hearing, when I was sent for by Santa Ana..

The dictator asked me a variety of questions about myself, my parents, the objects of the expedition, and other matters. After I was in his presence about 15 minutes, the chains were taken off me by a blacksmith; Santa Ana then said, that in consequence of my youth, the capacity in which I accompanied the expedition, and my being the son of a general, I was at liberty, and might go home. During the interview, Santa Ana did not once mention the name of our minister, Mr. Ellis, as having demanded me; and I gathered from what I heard and saw, that my liberation could not be traced to the energy of our representative in Mexico, or the dread of the dictator of the resentment of my government.

Before my release I ascertained from our secretary of legation that Mr. Ellis had called several times upon Santa Ana, but was refused an audience. To my enquiry if this was the manner in which the representative of the United States allowed himself to be treated, he answered there was no help for it.—Mr. Ellis subsequently addressed a note to

Santa Ana, but what effect it had I know not; it can be imagined from the refusal of an audience upon three several occasions. Whilst I was in prison I neither saw Mr. Ellis nor received any word of reply to my letters to him. The secretary gave for an excuse for this negligence as I deemed it, that it was not becoming the dignity of a minister to correspond with a prisoner.

After my release, Mr. Ellis treated me with attention and politeness, and I have to thank him for the loan of money to bring me home. Whilst sick in prison Mr. Black sent me bedding, the foreigners sent me some necessaries, and Mr. Lumsden loaned me some money.

Amongst the persons who accompanied the expedition was one Mr. Faulkner, a British subject, who joined it with Mr. Kendall and myself under the same circumstances, except that he did not have a passport, which Mr. Kendall had procured before he left New Orleans from the Mexican consulate here. Mr. Pakenham, the British minister, informed me that Mr. Faulkner would be demanded the moment he reached the city at whatever hour in the night or day that event would take place. I delivered a package to the British consul of this city, Mr. Crawford, in which there was a note from Mr. Pakenham, stating that orders had been obtained for Mr. Faulkner's immediate release, although he had not reached the city of Mexico at the date of the note.

The remainder of the expedition, under General McLeod was expected to arrive in Mexico two days after I left the city. I heard they had suffered very much from bad weather, ill-treatment, &c. &c.; and that to sum up their troubles, the small pox had made its appearance amongst them, and they reported that about fifty had already perished, or had been left on the road, through its ravages and the cruelty of their captors.

I have omitted to state in its proper place, that on my release the dictator ordered his state coach to convey me in

my rags to look at the city, and thence in company with General Barragan to the office of Mr. Ellis. Several of the higher Mexican officers in the city—especially Barragan—expressed sympathy for me, and treated me kindly.

My warmest gratitude is due to the American consul at Mexico, (Mr. Black), for his constant kindness and attention to me while sick and in chains, as well as after my release.

FRANKLIN COMBS.