Wild to Fight: The New Mexico Rough Riders in the Spanish-American War

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THE UNITED STATES DECLARED WAR on Spain on 25 April 1898. Realizing that his regular army of 28,183 men was hardly large enough to fight an international war, President William McKinley called for 200,000 American volunteers to face the hated Spanish “dons.” The patriotic response from every state and territory of the Union was overwhelming, especially in the territory of New Mexico where hundreds of men responded to McKinley’s call to arms.

New Mexicans were particularly eager to serve because President McKinley had authorized the formation of a special cavalry unit to consist of volunteers from the western territories. These volunteers were to be chosen carefully, according to the *Santa Fe New Mexican*, for each “must be a good shot, be able to ride anything in the line of horseflesh, [be] a rough and ready fighter, and above all must absolutely have no understanding of the word fear.” Inspired by this challenge and anxious to be included in such a group of virile young men, the *New Mexican*’s entire composing room staff dashed off to volunteer for the Army on the day these words appeared in print.

Others rushed off to enlist as if they were volunteering for a new crusade against infidels. Telegrams and letters from many towns, including Roswell, Clayton, Albuquerque, Wagon Mound, San Marcial, Hillsboro, and Lake Valley, poured into Governor Miguel Otero’s office as men attempted to reserve a place for themselves before every spot in the new regiment was taken. George Hamner of Wagon Mound thus sent a telegram to Santa Fe and asked: “Any chance to get in [the] cavalry now?” Responding immediately, an officer wired back: “If you are [a] first class horseman and are ready..."
to face anything . . . train for Santa Fe. . . . Otherwise do not come.” Hamner was on the train to the capital in a matter of hours. In all, 351 New Mexicans arrived in time to be mustered in and embark on what was to be the greatest adventure of their lives. Destined to capture the country’s imagination within weeks of their enlistment, these 351 men represented more than a third of the famous volunteer regiment known in history as the Rough Riders.

Who were these eager young men and what motivated them to volunteer so readily? Once in the U.S. Army, what did they experience in the training camps, transit ships, and battlefields of the Spanish-American War? How did they compare what they saw and heard in the war to what they had seen and heard in New Mexico? What impact did their military experience have on their lives and on the history of New Mexico? Finally, how was this regiment able to capture the country’s imagination in 1898 and maintain its reputation as national heroes for decades to come?

The volunteers who gathered in Santa Fe were a “motley assemblage,” but they shared several important characteristics. For example, they varied in age from sixteen to forty-four, but the vast majority were in their twenties, and their average age was twenty-seven. The New Mexicans also varied in height from 5'3” to 6'2”, but the average volunteer from the territory stood just about five and a half feet tall. Although the group included married men as well as bachelors, nearly 88 percent were single when the war began. In addition, these men represented as many as seventy professions, ranging from blacksmiths to actors, from teachers to plumbers, from shoemakers to cigar makers. However, 41 percent were either cowboys or miners, and most considered themselves to be outdoorsmen by experience, if not by profession. Scorned as “tenderfoot cowboys” in some quarters, the volunteers were, as most observers noted, “fine specimens of physical manhood” and “great, big strapping young men.”

These “fine specimens of physical manhood” had volunteered to fight in the Spanish-American War for four main reasons. First, they volunteered to fight in order to avenge the sinking of the U.S.S. Maine in Havana Harbor on 15 February 1898. Although no one was able to prove that the Spanish were responsible for the
blast that killed 266 American sailors on the Maine, few New Mexicans doubted who was to blame for the disaster. In the inflammatory words of the Santa Fe New Mexican, "Ever since the destruction of the Maine every move on the part of the Spaniards and [the] Americans has been in one direction—to fight." Curiously, the Cuban struggle for independence from Spain, which received so much attention and sympathy in other parts of the United States, was seldom mentioned in New Mexico. As Colonel Ralph Emerson Twitchell put it, "There was not a single member of [the] regiment from New Mexico who . . . went to . . . war with any ideas of 'freeing Cuba' from Spanish domination. The [overriding] idea was [to] 'Remember the Maine.'" New Mexico's territorial honor was also at stake in this conflict. Within ten days after the destruction of the Maine, the New York World had wired a telegram to Governor Otero asking how many men New Mexico could "furnish" the U.S. in the event of war. The governor took this rather innocuous inquiry as an affront to New Mexico loyalty and responded indignantly that New Mexico would not only send its share of volunteers, but would "furnish . . . more men in proportion to her population, than any state or territory in the Union." Furious that anyone would question their patriotism, New Mexicans were now prepared to believe the worst rumors regarding the eastern press. According to these rumors, eastern newspapers suspected New Mexico of siding with Madrid against Washington. Spanish flags were reportedly seen flying in Taos and Santa Fe and the Spanish-speaking population of the territory was reportedly set to revolt against the United States at any time. New Mexico newspapers acknowledged that some Hispanics did indeed "have treason on their tongues and . . . in their hearts," but added that the vast majority of Hispanics in the territory were extremely loyal. As the territory's first Hispanic governor under American rule, Otero told a packed courthouse in Santa Fe that "I am getting tired of hearing that the New Mexican people are not loyal to the stars and stripes. . . . I am a New Mexican, and in saying that I am saying that I am an American." Addressing the same audience in Spanish, Amado Chaves declared that "Our citizens must advance to the front and prove to the world that the people of New Mexico are
loyal to the United States." The band played, the crowd cheered, and vivas for the United States were proclaimed "in pretty good English and in very good Spanish," according to an eyewitness at the scene. Similar patriotic rallies were held in other parts of the territory, including Las Vegas where twenty-one young men volunteered on the spot in order to prove their absolute loyalty to the United States. Referring to these patriotic volunteers, New Mexico's territorial delegate in Congress, Harvey Fergusson, declared on the floor of the House that these "cowboys . . . will be as . . . loyal to this Government as any troops that will be sent" to fight overseas.

New Mexicans volunteered en masse for political as well as patriotic reasons. Eager to demonstrate their territory's fitness for statehood, political leaders recognized the war as a possible stepping stone to admission to the Union. As Judge A. L. Morrison explained, "The conduct of our troops will dispel all doubts of our loyalty before the people of the east and later, when the smoke of war has cleared . . ., we will demand and get statehood." Other New Mexicans, recalling the political value of veteran status in the decades following the Civil War, thought of this new conflict as a means to win not only fame and glory, but also future political office. Ambitious men like George Curry, Frederick Muller, Maximiliano Luna, and William Llewellyn could be included in this group.

Finally, many New Mexicans volunteered to serve with the Rough Riders simply because they longed for adventure. The cost of fencing the open range had been very expensive in New Mexico, but the job was done, and the old frontier had vanished from the territory by 1898. Young men like Royal Prentice, Alvin Ash, and Jack Stockbridge were therefore searching for new worlds to conquer and new adventures to experience by the late nineteenth century. Unfortunately, as has so often happened in American history, this combination of restless energy and physical restraint produced a growing belligerence among the young. According to the Santa Fe New Mexican of mid-April, "There is no question but the war spirit is abroad in the land and nothing save [some] bloodletting can bring permanent peace." Literally wild to fight, soldiers of this generation sang:
We sigh for the field of carnage,
the blood-red stream of war;
We long for the noise of conflict
that is borne on . . . winds afar;
We are tired of this inaction,
while the wild and restless sea,
Seems [determined] to implore . . .
that we make a people free. 21

Apparently, enough time had passed since the Civil War that the horrors and misery of battle were overshadowed by the more appealing and glorious warrior mystique. New Mexicans nearly stumbled over one another in their efforts to reach Santa Fe, "see fighting," and play a major role in the coming adventure.

Santa Fe was hardly prepared for this influx of spirited young men. The barracks at old Fort Marcy lacked even the most basic comforts, such as cots or bunkbeds. Old militia uniforms were distributed, although parts of the uniforms dated back to the Civil War. Most of the volunteers were forced to wear their high-heeled cowboy boots for marching in military drills. Food supplies were also scarce. Without even tin cups to drink from, the men went hungry until a disgruntled volunteer led several of them off to a local restaurant and demanded food. Learning of the plight of the Rough Riders, Thomas Benton Catron saved the day by contributing one hundred dollars to each of New Mexico’s four troops, promising additional funds in case they were needed. 22

New Mexico’s 351 volunteers were mustered into the U.S. Army on 6 May in a formal ceremony outside the Palace of the Governors. Every business in Santa Fe was closed, and nearly every citizen in the capital was present to witness the soldiers’ departure by train that day. 23 The crowd was ecstatic. As one young soldier wrote to his family in Albuquerque, "several Fourth of Julys combined . . . could not have stirred up the enthusiasm which was turned loose when we left [town]." 24 The volunteers were received with similar enthusiasm in Las Vegas, in Raton, and in every other town they passed through on their special five-car train. 25

The volunteers were quick to notice the surrounding countryside as their train sped through parts of Kansas and Texas. For many,
Oath of allegiance in front of Palace of the Governors, Santa Fe. Courtesy of Museum of New Mexico.
this was their first trip outside of New Mexico, and they were impressed by the rich farmland and large cotton fields they encountered. “Everything seemed so prosperous,” wrote one Rough Rider, although he admitted that his eyes were still “used to New Mexico’s barren wastes.” This observant young trooper also noticed that in the midst of the cheering crowds some stared “as though we were a lot of steers being shipped east to be butchered.” The soldier could not help thinking that “Perhaps that notion isn’t far from right.”

On 9 May the New Mexico volunteers arrived in San Antonio, Texas, to join the rest of their thousand-man regiment. The Rough Riders used the large fairgrounds in San Antonio for their military training headquarters. They were, after all, still raw recruits who knew little about military drills and nothing about military discipline. As one New Mexican wrote later, “One of the hardest lessons we had to learn was that of unquestioned obedience to an order; it was so easy to . . . enter into a discussion as to the necessity of carrying out [an] order or to point out the benefits [of] putting [it] off until tomorrow . . . . We had [, of course,] been raised in the ‘Land of Manana,’ but we soon overcame this handicap.”

The Rough Riders in fact adjusted to military life rather well, considering their diverse backgrounds and the short period of time they had had to train. Up at 5:30 each morning, the men drilled on horseback and on foot through most of the day. Determined to do well, the New Mexico volunteers worked hard and eventually won their commander’s praise in a letter from Col. Leonard Wood to Governor Otero dated 18 May 1898. Gradually, the Rough Riders began to look less like a frontier posse and more like a well-disciplined cavalry unit.

The New Mexicans were especially known for their ability to break and ride range horses. Purchased from nearby ranchers at highly inflated prices, most of the regiment’s ponies had had to be broken before even the simplest of drills could be attempted. Many Rough Riders were inexperienced in the art of breaking broncos and willingly paid the New Mexicans up to ten dollars per horse to perform these services. The New Mexicans gladly accepted this fee for an activity they considered to be more fun than labor. More than a thousand animals were thus broken in less than three
weeks. With each troop assigned a different colored horse, Captain Curry’s New Mexico Troop H, with its gray mounts, became known for having the best riders in the entire camp. 

Despite this success, the New Mexico volunteers experienced numerous hardships in San Antonio. Food was now plentiful, but, as in Santa Fe, no cots or bunks were initially available for the troops. The men were often forced to sleep on the ground or “on the soft side of a board” in the grandstands at the fairgrounds. The official uniforms of the Rough Riders arrived late, fit poorly, looked ugly, and seemed more appropriate for the cold of Alaska than for the heat of the Caribbean. In addition, the mosquitoes in San Antonio were extremely bothersome; Pvt. Arthur Spencer wrote home to Albuquerque that he knew of a soldier whose feet were so swollen from insect bites one night that he was unable to put his shoes on in the morning. The heat and humidity were similarly difficult for men accustomed to the dry climate of New Mexico.

Finally, and probably worst of all, the volunteers had to wait for weeks without any official word of where they were headed and when they would begin the next leg of their journey. Some thought that they would soon go to Galveston, Texas, and then on to Puerto Rico; others were convinced that they would ship out to Cuba from New Orleans. Suffering from an “attitude of expectation,” a New Mexico private wrote of longing “to go somewhere, anywhere, just so we moved towards Cuba.” “If a man’s wishes were law,” wrote another, “we would start before I could finish this letter.”

Restless and still wild to fight, the Rough Riders got into considerable mischief as they awaited their orders in San Antonio. Pvt. Jack Stockbridge told of a local merchant’s attempt to purchase the civilian clothing of the Rough Riders once their official uniforms had arrived. Paying $2.50 for each set of clothes, the merchant hoped to turn a profit by reselling the clothing as used garments or as souvenirs in town. The enterprising businessman had not gotten to the camp’s gate, however, before he was “captured” by some Rough Riders, thrown up into the air on a blanket, and chased out of camp empty-handed. Stockbridge explained how two other merchants suffered a similar fate, leaving the Rough Riders, rather than the businessmen, with a neat profit. As a result of this and similar episodes, Colonel Wood confided to his wife that “These
men are wild. If we don’t get them to Cuba quickly to fight the Spaniards there is a great danger they will be fighting themselves.”

The restless volunteers trained nineteen days in Texas before they finally received orders to ship out by rail. As at every stage in their adventure, the desire of the Rough Riders to fight the enemy far outpaced the ability of the U. S. Army to train them, move them, or supply them with adequate speed. The regiment was actually better off, however, than most volunteer units. Theodore Roosevelt had, in fact, been late in arriving in San Antonio and assuming his post as Wood’s second in command because he had remained behind in Washington to cut through rolls of bureaucratic red tape in order to secure needed supplies. According to one historian, Roosevelt practically charged “from one War Department bureau to the next, smiling broadly but tersely insistent that the chiefs immediately authorize his requisitions.” Successful in these efforts, Roosevelt was able to obtain scarce and valuable equipment for his volunteers, including hundreds of new Krag-Jorgenson rifles usually reserved for regular army personnel. Thus trained and equipped as well as possible, the Rough Riders set out for Tampa, Florida, on 29 May. Roosevelt’s only instructions to his departing troops were for them to “Stand firm, [conduct] yourselves like men. The eyes of the world are upon you.”

The eyes of the world were indeed upon the Rough Riders as they journeyed through the South aboard seven trains consisting of sixty cattle cars, eight box cars, one Pullman sleeper, one baggage car and thirty-five “magnificent” day coaches. The volunteer regiment had captured the country’s imagination, much as the Minute Men, the defenders of the Alamo, the legendary western posse, Mosby’s Raiders, and other small groups of volunteers had captured the country’s imagination in the past. Historically opposed to large standing armies, Americans favored the notion that small bands of rugged individuals, led by charismatic leaders, could challenge and often defeat their enemies, despite impossible military odds. Especially eager to discover a new band of such heroes in an age when American individualism and traditional values were under constant attack, southern crowds nearly rushed the Rough Riders’ trains when they stopped for fuel and supplies. According to Pvt.
Amaziah B. Morrison of Las Vegas, "immense throngs of people" met the volunteers and literally showered them with flowers, fruits, and free cigars. Rather than subside, "the excitement seemed to increase... as we pushed on" toward Tampa.\(^{46}\)

But, as always, the Rough Riders encountered problems as well as glory. Poor railroad management, coupled with the need to frequently stop to care for their 1200 horses, delayed the regiment's arrival in Tampa by two days.\(^{47}\) Lacking rations for such an extended trip, the men grew hungry as well as tired and dirty.\(^{48}\) The journey was nothing less than a "nightmare," in Pvt. Frank Brito's words.\(^{49}\)

To make matters worse, the regiment's livestock cars were delayed an additional eighteen hours just outside of Tampa. Concerned about his unfed livestock and frustrated by the railroad's refusal to act, Capt. George Curry of Tularosa went so far as to commandeer the train, drive it to a stockyard to feed his horses, and finally order that the animals be ridden into the camp of the Rough Riders in Tampa. Expecting to be severely reprimanded for his unorthodox behavior, Curry was taken aback when Colonel Roosevelt simply asked him "why the hell" he had waited so long to act in this emergency. This sort of response and fairness soon made Roosevelt "the idol of his men." As Curry later described Roosevelt in his autobiography, the colonel "always stood by [his men] when he thought them right [but] he could be equally stern when he thought them to be wrong."\(^{50}\)

In great awe of Roosevelt and his leadership ability, the New Mexicans went so far as to name their prized mascot, a golden eagle, "Teddy."

The Rough Riders joined approximately 30,000 other American soldiers in Tampa to prepare for a major invasion of Spanish Cuba. Fortunately, the Rough Riders spent only four days in the coastal city, for they found conditions there even worse than what they had encountered in Santa Fe or San Antonio. Unprepared for the arrival of so many men and so much equipment, Tampa experienced "unparalleled chaos," according to Pvt. George Hamner.\(^{51}\) The weather was warmer, the mosquitoes were thicker, and the Rough Riders' food was often rotten by the time it arrived by train.\(^{52}\) To make matters worse, the men were never paid in Tampa because the local citizenry dreaded the thought of 31,000 young troopers roaming the streets with cash in their pockets and mischief on their
minds. Most tragically, a race riot involving black soldiers and local residents broke out on 5 June, leaving thirty wounded and several dead.

But, as usual, the Rough Riders were less concerned about the adverse conditions they encountered than about the exciting prospect of overseas combat. More restless than ever, Prentice wrote what every man felt: that sitting around and waiting was undoubtedly the "hardest strain that can be placed upon a soldier." The New Mexicans were so eager to fight that they even looked forward to breaking up camp brawls "with high expectations of a good scrap." By late May, the Rough Riders had adopted a most appropriate fight song: "Rough, tough, we're the stuff. We want to fight and we can't get enough."

The Rough Riders finally received their orders to sail for Cuba on 7 June. Unfortunately, these orders also included the news that at least one New Mexico troop would have to be left behind because not enough room for all the men and their supplies was available on the transport ships. Leonard Wood therefore called Captains Curry and Luna into his tent and suggested that they toss a coin to decide whose troop would go to the front. In one of the most dramatic moments of the war, Wood tossed a coin, fully aware of Luna's great desire to fight the Spanish and thereby demonstrate Hispanic New Mexico's absolute loyalty to the United States. The coin fell to the ground. The decision was made. Luna would go to Cuba.

Maximiliano Luna and his troop proceeded to join their fellow Rough Riders as they charged onto their assigned transport ship to make sure that no other regiment claimed their space. A total of 16,085 American soldiers were now set to sail for Cuba aboard thirty-two coastal vessels. Thrilled by the prospect of finally reaching their destination, the New Mexicans were in no mood to hear that their ship's departure would be delayed until the coast was clear of Spanish raiders. The Rough Riders were forced to wait at anchor for nearly a week under almost intolerable conditions.

To begin with, their steamship, the Yucatan, was far too small. In the words of a New Mexico private, the men were crowded on board "like cattle" with barely enough room to stand in the day,
no less sleep at night. With space at a premium, even the cavalry's horses had had to be left behind in Tampa.

Worse yet, not enough food or water was available for so many men confined for so long a period. Finally paid their $13 in back wages, the volunteers were forced to purchase extra food rations on board at highly inflated prices. Sgt. William Mattocks of Santa Fe reported that the ship's stewards charged from 75¢ to $1.00 for pies, while Sergeant Prentice wrote of men having to pay up to $5.00 a meal for scraps from the officers' mess. Private Stockbridge later recalled that an enterprising Florida businessman had rowed out to the Yucatan with a small cargo of pies that he offered to the men for as little as a nickel each. The soldiers eagerly bought the pies up until someone discovered that they were sour, whereupon the salesman and his wares were thrown overboard to serve as dinner for the less discriminating tastes of sharks in Tampa Bay.

When not looking for food, the New Mexicans occupied themselves by gambling away their wages, fighting with argumentative sailors, recovering from bouts of seasickness, and swimming alongside the Yucatan with an armed guard on duty to discourage approaching sharks. Some even indulged in the Bible, as Arthur Spencer of Albuquerque reported in a letter written on Sunday, 12 June. Spencer happily described how his copy of the Scriptures was "going the rounds of the boys as though it was a fresh morning [news-]paper." However, by the time Spencer had finished writing his letter, he was obliged to announce the sad news that rather than reading his Bible "the boys [had] made cigarettes [from the pages] of Revelations and St. Paul's Epistles" so that Troop F was "now as nearly out of Bible as it is out of grub." In a more serious vein, the volunteers also occupied their time by circulating rumors about the enemy and about the mysterious dangers they could expect to find in the jungles of Cuba. Having read real and imagined reports of Spanish treachery in the American yellow press, New Mexicans were ready to believe almost anything about the enemy and his style of warfare. Noticing the effect of these rumors on his fellow volunteers, a New Mexico sergeant declared that "it began to appear that if the Spaniards could keep us in the jungle for a few days we would be so decimated as to become easy victims in battle." These fears notwithstanding, an
Albuquerque soldier could still write from the Yucatan that “we are as full of fight as ever and only ask for action before we give in to sickness” on board ship.69

The Rough Riders finally landed in Cuba on 22 June after a total of two weeks at sea. Weakened by their long ordeal, the volunteers were in no condition for the forced marches and heavy fighting they faced over the next five weeks. But it was fighting they came for, and it was fighting they got as they courageously charged into battle behind their trusted commanders. The Rough Riders were, in fact, to distinguish themselves in two of the most important confrontations of the entire war: at Las Guasimas, just two days after their arrival in Cuba, and, of course, at Kettle Hill, just eight days after their first baptism by fire. Since much has been written about these heroic charges, they need little discussion.70 Much less, however, has been written about other aspects of the Rough Riders’ experience abroad, even though these other aspects were of crucial importance during the volunteers’ short tour of duty overseas.

First, while the Rough Riders as a whole suffered heavy casualties at Las Guasimas and Kettle Hill, the volunteers from New Mexico suffered relatively few losses in the course of these battles. Of the approximately 270 New Mexicans who saw combat, only thirty-one were wounded, and only ten died during the Spanish-American War.71 Yet the New Mexicans were always in the thick of things and were never too far behind Roosevelt in his fearless (some would say insane) charges into enemy lines. Captain Muller could, in fact, boast that his troop of New Mexicans was the first up Kettle Hill.72 They were heroes at last; as one Rough Rider wrote, “the boys wanted action,” and with “only a few . . . killed or hurt” the rest got exactly what they had come for: a “thrilling lark.”73 As young Prentice wrote four days after joining in the charge up Kettle Hill, “Our regiment are [sic] quite the heroes . . . on account of the little scrap we had the other day. . . . I don’t believe I ever felt better in my life.”74

The experiences of the Rough Riders may have been a “thrilling lark” during their first few weeks in Cuba, but conditions on the island eventually made their remaining stay a nightmare. Although they had encountered rough conditions before, nothing in Santa Fe, San Antonio, Tampa, or even on the Yucatan could compare
Rough Rider campsite in Cuba. Courtesy of Museum of New Mexico.
to the situation in the jungles of Cuba. The heat was terrible, but the humidity was even worse for the battleworn southwestern volunteers. Daily rains were cold and hard, and poor drainage and small tents often forced men to sleep with their blankets submerged in water and their legs exposed to the rain. Their heavy woolen uniforms were, moreover, inappropriate for the tropics, but even these uniforms were little more than rags by the time the Spanish surrendered Santiago de Cuba on Sunday, 17 July.75

Essential supplies were held up for weeks because of poor management, according to quartermaster William Griffin of Santa Fe.76 As a result, food rations were short, and the meat that arrived in camp was usually rotten. Referring to this “embalmed” beef, one soldier wrote home that the “stuff’s been dead so long [it] needed an undertaker, not a butcher!”77 The Rough Riders were expected to survive on a diet of two pieces of bacon, two tablespoons of coffee, and fifteen hard tacks per day, although a New Mexican protested that a man could “easily eat it all at one meal and still be hungry.”78

Medical conditions were nothing short of abominable. Pvt. Edward Todhunter of Las Vegas reported that only one doctor was available for the thousand-man regiment, and he was far in the rear with only quinine water as a remedy for any ailment or wound. The wounded were taken to field hospitals over muddy roads that were so poor that ambulances often overturned as many as three times in a single trip from the front lines. The ill who survived this rough handling were often shot at by Spanish snipers hiding in the jungle. Once at the over-crowded field hospitals, patients, like Sgt. Ray Clark of Santa Fe, were usually left to lie in the grass without shelter or proper medical care for hours at a time. Learning of these conditions, the sick and wounded often insisted upon staying at the front where they could at least count on their fellow New Mexicans to look after them.79

Usually wet, poorly clothed, always tired, and seldom well fed, the Rough Riders became prime candidates for tropical diseases ranging from malaria to dysentery, from yellow fever to typhoid fever. According to Captain Muller, nearly every New Mexican was ill from one terrible disease or another by 25 July.80 Seven of the ten New Mexico losses were, in fact, caused by disease. In all, at
least fifteen times as many soldiers died of diseases as died of battle wounds suffered in combat during the Spanish-American War. 81

Emaciated by illness, the New Mexicans were “anxious to see the hills of God’s country again.” 82 After what seemed like an intolerably long wait, the Rough Riders were finally transported back to the United States on various hospital ships, including the Conchos, the Iroquois, and the San Marcos. 83 Incredibly, conditions on these vessels were not not much better than those the Rough Riders had left behind in Cuba. Suffering from yellow fever, Captain Llewellyn, for example, was shipped home aboard the San Marcos, although the ship had no doctors, no ice, no decent food, and no sanitary water. Noting that “the suffering of the men was simply terrible,” Llewellyn recalled that so many died on board that the San Marcos was forced to stop en route in order to bury its numerous dead at sea. 84

Conditions at last improved for the surviving Rough Riders when they returned to the United States in mid-August. Most of the regiment rendezvoused at Montauk Point, Long Island, where they were treated royally and given considerable attention by the national press. With proper medical care, excellent food, new uniforms, and abundant supplies at last, the men wrote home to New Mexico that they were “living in clover” in “a regular summer resort.” Those who were well enough to venture into New York City on furlough were greeted as heroes and given so much for nothing that local impostors soon donned Rough Riders uniforms in hopes that they too could share in all the glory. 85 There was even some talk of a parade for the Rough Riders in New York City, but with so many men still recuperating and with their horses not accustomed to large crowds, the idea was soon abandoned. 86 Instead, the regiment’s 1070 horses were auctioned off for about $19 each, although they had been purchased for much more in Texas, and only the officers’ mounts had seen action in battle. 87

The New Mexicans eventually grew tired of all the attention and confusion of New York. In the words of one observer, the men had “Tried their feet walking on the pavement . . . [of] the biggest town . . . on the country’s map” but still “retained all their old love for [the] rough and free . . . life” of the West. 88 They were, therefore, eager to return to civilian life when they were mustered out of the
Army on 15 September following a highly emotional farewell speech by Colonel Roosevelt. 

Sixteen of New Mexico’s Rough Riders nevertheless made one last stop before proceeding home. Led by Captain Muller, these men visited President William McKinley in the East Room of the White House. Clad in their now-famous khaki campaign uniforms, this “crowd of cowboys” greeted the chief executive with a round of “blood-curdling” Rough Rider yells that were reportedly heard as far away as the Navy Department. When McKinley asked if the New Mexicans would “be willing to go back to the front and fight for your country again,” the men responded that they would go back the very next morning if the president commanded. Pleased with this opportunity to demonstrate their patriotism, the New Mexicans retreated from the East Room with “another series of thrilling yells . . . for the President, the army, the country, [the] flag, and the Rough Riders.”

The New Mexico volunteers were sadly disappointed if they had entertained any thought that their trip home was to be a quiet, uneventful one. Train passengers badgered them with questions and tugged at their uniforms in rude attempts to secure souvenirs. Railroad engineers went so far as to wire ahead that Rough Riders were aboard their trains so that crowds could gather to greet them at every station along the way. Tired of all the attention and eager for rest, Lt. Sherrard Coleman changed into civilian clothes and traveled incognito. Pvt. Grant Hill of Santa Fe pinned a sign to his shirt that read: “This man was talked to death,” although his sign only caused fellow passengers to stare as if he were “a dime store freak.” The New Mexicans soon realized that the best they could do was to grin and bear the fuss goodnaturedly.

The Rough Riders were, nevertheless, happy to receive a heroes welcome when they arrived home in late September. Roswell, Santa Fe, and Albuquerque, among other towns, turned out en masse to greet the volunteers with great fanfare. Observers found most of the boys to be in good spirits, although some were described as “shattered, physical wrecks” having lost from thirty to sixty pounds as a result of bad food, serious illness, and generally poor living conditions. The latter slowly recovered their strength and gladly recounted their wartime experiences on the street corners and in
the meeting places of their hometowns.97 The men were especially
glad to return to the dry climate, good water, and familiar landscape
of New Mexico.98 Their long journey and great adventure had finally
come to an end.

The New Mexico volunteers had completed their journey, but
had they achieved their original goals in going off to war? They
had certainly avenged the sinking of the Maine and defended their
nation’s honor in helping to defeat the Spanish “dons.” In the
process, however, they lost whatever respect they had ever had
for the Cuban people and their fight for independence. The Cubans
were characterized as filthy, greedy, merciless cowards who bore
no resemblance to the romantic freedom fighters previously de­
scribed in the American press.99 Dismissed as racially inferior “hu­
man buzzards,” the Cubans were not even allowed in or around
the camp of the Rough Riders after the early battle of Las Guasi­
mas.100 Indeed, most of the Rough Riders thought of their former
allies as ignorant children who were hardly prepared to rule them­
selves with a democratic government, much less develop an island
that was acknowledged to be “one of the richest spots on earth.”
Generally, the New Mexicans thought that Cuba would require a
large dose of American political and economic intervention if it
were to succeed and prosper as a newly independent nation.101

The New Mexico Rough Riders may have criticized the Cubans
for being uncooperative in the war and poorly prepared for the
responsibilities of independence, but these words were destined
to haunt the territory when the volunteers returned home in 1898.
As early as July, New Mexico newspapers had given up all hope of
statehood in the near future because the local Hispanic population
had hardly proven to be cooperative and loyal in the war effort.
According to the Albuquerque Citizen, the “marked sympathy for
Spain” by a “large portion of [the Hispanic] inhabitants has given
convincing proof that the Territory is not worthy of self-govern­
ment.”102 Despite Maximiliano Luna’s eagerness to serve on the
front in Cuba, few other Hispanics had volunteered to serve in the
Army or otherwise lend a hand in the struggle. “The sad truth,”
wrote the Las Vegas Optic, “is not so much that the native New
Mexicans are loyal to Spain as that their loyalty to this country is
negative.”103 The eastern press and much of the nation agreed.104
Given this situation, not even Teddy Roosevelt’s vocal support for New Mexico statehood could make a difference at the turn of the century. Roosevelt declared that he would “be glad to do all within my power to aid [New Mexico] when she knocks on the door of congress [sic],” but he did little to help the cause either in 1899, after he attended the first reunion of Rough Riders in Las Vegas, or in 1903 and 1905, when he visited the territory during his two terms in office as president of the United States.

Teddy Roosevelt was, nevertheless, far more willing and able to help his former Rough Riders reap other kinds of political rewards after the Spanish-American War. In exchange for their continued support and personal loyalty, he gladly appointed several former volunteers to high political posts in the New Mexico territory. Capt. George Curry, for example, was one of seven Rough Riders who worked in Roosevelt’s Republican campaign for the governorship of New York in 1898, although Curry had previously been a staunch Lincoln County Democrat. Recalling this New Mexican’s great loyalty in the ranks and in the political arena, Roosevelt eventually appointed Curry to the highest political office in the territory after Roosevelt reached the highest political office in the land. George Curry thus served as New Mexico’s territorial governor from 1907 to 1910.

Other Rough Riders also received choice political plums, even if securing them meant radically bending civil service examination rules. Indeed, the political generosity of Teddy Roosevelt occasionally went to embarrassing extremes. In one instance, Charles Ballard visited Roosevelt in the White House to seek the president’s help in the rebuilding of the washed out Pecos River dam. Before the former Rough Rider could explain his mission, however, Roosevelt “insisted” that Ballard become the new U.S. marshal in New Mexico. Ballard was forced to refuse the offer because, as he informed his surprised commander, he was and always had been a dyed-in-the-wool Democrat. Undaunted, Roosevelt proceeded to offer the same job to another former Rough Rider, although the president’s second choice was no better able to serve as a U.S. marshal from the confines of his prison cell, having been convicted of nothing less than murder.

Many Rough Riders exploited their fame as wartime heroes to
win elections with or without Teddy Roosevelt’s great influence and support. Charles Ballard was elected sheriff of Chaves County, Frederick Muller was elected treasurer of Santa Fe County, David Leahy was elected district attorney of Colfax County, and William Llewellyn and Maximiliano Luna served as speaker of the New Mexico House of Representatives. Having won their offices shortly after their return from Cuba, these men can be said to have joined Teddy Roosevelt in charging up Kettle Hill and never stopping until they had won their share of military fame and political fortune.

The New Mexico Rough Riders also achieved their fourth and final goal: to experience adventure and “see fighting” overseas. Unfortunately, most of their adventure involved battles with the U.S. Army, while most of their fighting involved struggles with the elements of nature. It was, in fact, as if the elements had conspired to test just how rough these Rough Riders could be. Most of the volunteers proved equal to the task and deserved to be called “rough riders,” a western term used to describe those best able to ride (or fight) the worst outlaw horses (or enemies) of the roundup (or war). As part of the small handful of American volunteers who saw fighting in the Spanish-American War, the New Mexicans considered themselves fortunate to have been given the opportunity to prove their bravery in fierce combat. Justly proud of their exploits, the Rough Riders continued to celebrate their good fortune and fame in annual reunions for the next seventy-odd years.

Significantly, sixteen former Rough Riders, including several New Mexicans, also participated in Buffalo Bill’s Wild West show. William Cody’s extravaganza, which colorfully portrayed frontier life in the West, included a reenactment of the Rough Riders’ famous charge up Kettle Hill. The 500-man reenactment was, in fact, so popular that it replaced Custer’s Last Stand as the Wild West show’s grand finale in 1899 and 1900.

It was no coincidence that Americans celebrated Kettle Hill as a frontier battle and honored the Rough Riders as frontier heroes. Lacking new worlds to conquer at home in 1898, the New Mexico volunteers had taken their fighting skills east to be led into battle on their country’s newest frontier. As such, the Rough Riders served their country not only as the last great heroes of the old frontier,
but also as the eager—albeit unwitting—advance troops of the new American empire.

Clearly, the Rough Riders captured the country's imagination and became national heroes because they represented so much to so many. For some, the Rough Riders represented a group of individualists capable of overcoming terrible conditions and impossible odds; for others, they represented an elite military force fighting to create a prestigious international empire; for still others, they represented a band of adventurers on a new frontier just when it seemed that all other frontiers had been conquered; but, for most, they represented the courageous leaders of a restless American generation that was nothing less than wild to fight.

NOTES


2. *Santa Fe New Mexican*, 28 April 1898.


4. See the letters and telegrams in Communications Received by the Adjunct General, 14 April–7 July, 1898, State Records Center and Archives (SRCA), Santa Fe; Miguel Antonio Otero, *My Nine Years as Governor of the Territory of New Mexico, 1897–1906* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico [UNM] Press, 1940), p. 45. New Mexico filled its quota of volunteers within eight days (Lynn I. Perrigo, *Las Vegas and the Rough Riders* [Las Vegas, N. Mex.: Museum Board of the City of Las Vegas, 1961], p. 13).


7. Statistics calculated from the Muster-In Rolls of Troops E, F, G, and H, First Volunteer Cavalry, Adjunct General Files, SRCA.

9. Santa Fe New Mexican, 2 May 1898, Las Vegas Optic, 4, 6 May 1898.
12. New York World telegram to Miguel Otero, New York, 25 February 1898, Personal Notebooks, 1897–1901, box 5, vol. 1, p. 73, Miguel Otero Papers, Special Collections, University of New Mexico (SC-UNM), Albuquerque; Otero, Nine Years, p. 35.
18. Quoted in the Santa Fe New Mexican, 27 April 1898.
24. “G” to the editor, San Antonio, 12 May 1898, Albuquerque Morning Democrat, 17 May 1898. Also see Otero, Nine Years, p. 43.
25. Amaziah B. Morrison to the editor, San Antonio, 21 May 1898, Las Vegas


31. Santa Fe New Mexican, 12 October 1898; Hening, Curry, p. 122.

32. A. P. Spencer to his parents, San Antonio, 13 May 1898, Albuquerque Weekly News, 21 May 1898; "Prentice Memoirs," Prentice Papers, box 359, p. 16, MC-UNM. One New Mexican complained of certain Rough Riders "who are more used to riding a dry goods box than a bronco" ("G" to the editor, San Antonio, 12 May 1898, Albuquerque Morning Democrat, 17 May 1898).


36. Las Vegas Optic, 25 May 1898.


38. "Private" to the editor, On Board the Yucatan, 12 May 1898, Albuquerque Morning Democrat, 17 June 1898.


40. Stockbridge interview, p. 23.
43. Hening, Curry, p. 122.
44. Hamner interview in Walker, "Last of the Rough Riders," p. 43. Also, see Herman H. Wynkoop to the editor, Tampa, 5 June 1898, Santa Fe New Mexican, 13 June 1898.
45. Morrison to the editor, Tampa, 4 June 1898, Las Vegas Optic, 14 June 1898.
46. Morrison to the editor, Tampa, 4 June 1898, Las Vegas Optic, 14 July 1898; "Como" to the editor, Tampa, n.d., Santa Fe New Mexican, 3 June 1898; "Prentice Memoirs," Prentice Papers, box 359, p. 21, MC-MNM.
47. "Como" to the editor, Tampa, n.d., Santa Fe New Mexican, 3 June 1898.
48. Morrison to the editor, Tampa, 4 June 1898, Las Vegas Optic, 14 June 1898.
49. Quoted in Walker, "New Mexico's Last Rough Riders," p. 34.
50. Hening, Curry, p. 123. For other examples of New Mexican praise of Roosevelt, see Thompson, "I Helped Raise," pp. 297–98; "Como" to the editor, Tampa, n.d., Santa Fe New Mexican, 22 June 1898; Ash interview.
60. J. Rankin to the editor, On Board the Yucatan, 9 June 1898, Las Vegas Optic, 16 June 1898.
62. Edward S. Lewis to the editor, Tampa, n.d., Las Vegas Optic, 15 June 1898; Paul Warren to Judge H. L. Warren, Tampa, 3 June 1898, Albuquerque Morning Democrat, 13 June 1898.
64. Stockbridge interview, p. 28.
67. See Linderman, Mirror of War, pp. 121–27.
69. “Private” to the editor, On Board the Yucatan, 12 June 1898, Albuquerque Morning Democrat, 17 June 1898.
72. Muller interview, Santa Fe New Mexican, 10 October 1898.
74. R. Prentice to the editor, Camp Outside Santiago, 28 June 1898, Las Vegas Optic, 22 July 1898. Roosevelt felt the same way. As one friend wrote to the future president’s wife: “No hunting trip so far has equalled it in Theodore’s eyes. . . . When I caught him up the day of the charge . . . [he] was revelling in


80. Frederick Muller to General E. L. Bartlett, Santiago, 25 July 1898, E. L. Bartlett Papers, SRCA.

81. Three hundred forty-five American troops were killed in battle, while 5,462 died of illness in the war (Linderman, *Mirror of War*, p. 110).


83. Americans dreaded the soldiers’ return because they feared the spread of yellow fever in the states. Only the warning that all the men might die from illness if they were left in Cuba forced the issue and precipitated their trip home (Glen O. Ream, *Out of New Mexico’s Past* [Santa Fe: Sundial Books, 1980], p. 119).

85. Spencer to his parents, Camp Wikoff, New York, 30 August 1898, Albuquerque Weekly News, 10 September 1898; Rough Rider interviews, Santa Fe New Mexican, 20, 21, 25, 27, 28, 30 September, 11, 14 October 1898; Hening, Curry, p. 126.

86. Santa Fe New Mexican, 8 September 1898; Spencer to his parents, Camp Wikoff, New York, 30 August 1898, Albuquerque Weekly News, 10 September 1898.

87. Las Vegas Optic, 20 September 1898.


89. Roosevelt's farewell speech to his troops appeared in the Santa Fe New Mexican, 24 September 1898. The Rough Riders' farewell ceremony was described in "Prentice Memoirs," Prentice Papers, box 359, p. 62; Morris, Rise, pp. 673–74.


92. Harmon Wynkoop interview, Santa Fe New Mexican, 21 September 1898.

93. Coleman interview, Santa Fe New Mexican, 26 October 1898.

94. Hill interview, Santa Fe New Mexican, 14 October 1898.

95. Hening, Curry, p. 127; Santa Fe New Mexican, 21, 26 September, 19 October 1898; Albuquerque Weekly News, 13 August 1898; La Farge, Santa Fe, pp. 171–72.

96. Santa Fe New Mexican, 30 August, 26 September 1898; Rough Rider interviews, Santa Fe New Mexican, 1, 5 October 1898.

97. See, for example, the Rough Rider interviews in the Santa Fe New Mexican, of September, October 1898.

98. A. J. Griffin interview, Santa Fe New Mexican, 5 October 1898.

99. George W. Vinnedge to "Jess," Camp Outside Santiago, 27 June 1898, Las Vegas Optic, 23 July 1898; Rough Rider interviews, Santa Fe New Mexican, 1, 14 October 1898; Albuquerque Morning Democrat, 28 June, 8 July 1898. Photographs of the idealized image of the revolutionaries, as compared to a more realistic portrayal of the Cubans, are shown in Frank Friedel, The Splendid Little War (Boston: Little, Brown, 1958), p. 93, and Linderman, Mirror of War, opposite p. 84.


101. Frank Booth to his brother, Army Hospital, Key West, Florida, 8 July 1898, Albuquerque Weekly News, 15 July 1898.

102. Quoted in the Las Vegas Optic, 2 July 1898.

103. Las Vegas Optic, 2 July 1898. Mount lists three main reasons for Hispanic "indifference" during the war: the language barrier, a "legacy of resentment" against the United States after the Mexican War, and, given the general poverty
of Hispanics, an overriding interest in their daily survival that left little time or
energy for "larger" national and international issues of the day (Mount, "Nuevo
Mexicanos," pp. 389, 392–93). On New Mexico black support in the war, see
Otero, Nine Years, p. 45; Albuquerque Morning Democrat, 15 May 1898; Santa
Fe New Mexican, 19 August 1898.

104. See, for example, the editorial in the New York Times, 24 August 1898.
105. Quoted in the Chicago Times Herald, 26 June 1899.
106. Robert W. Larson, New Mexico's Quest for Statehood, 1846–1912 (Al­
108. Ash to the authors, Edinburgh, Scotland, 4 April, 22 May 1982; Twitchell,
Leading Facts, 5: 540n, 542n; Hening, Curry, pp. 127–28; Santa Fe New Mexican,
25 January 1933; Otero, Nine Years, p. 326.
of the Rough Riders in San Antonio could easily distinguish between the "pro­
fessional" Rough Riders and the "plain" ones. The "professionals" were those who
had "profited by their connection with the President's regiment," held lucrative
official jobs, and wore khaki suits "that cost about $40 apiece and denote pros­
perity." The "plain" ones, on the other hand, "were found to content themselves
with a yellow badge or with a common khaki [outfit]. They are chaps who have
not yet been forehanded enough to require a job, but most of them [still] have
hopes" (New York Times, 8 April 1905).
111. Rickards, Ballard, pp. 23–24; Hening, Curry, pp. 127–28; Santa Fe New
Mexican, 25, 31 October 1898.
112. Only 2.5 percent of the 223,235 American volunteers saw fighting in the
Spanish-American War. The disappointed 97.5 percent included Capt. Albert B.
Fall and four companies of infantry volunteers from New Mexico. These 432
volunteers spent the war training and waiting for action at camps in Arizona,
Kentucky, and Georgia (Complete Roster of Officers and Men of the First Ter­
ritorial Regiment, Adjunct General Files, SRCA).
113. Two New Mexicans, George Hamner and Frank Brito, were among the
three surviving Rough Riders who attended the last Rough Rider reunion in 1972.
Hamner and Brito died in 1973. The last Rough Rider, Jesse Langdon of New
114. Ream, Past, p. 119.