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A Soldier in New Mexico, 1847–1848

JACQUELINE DORGAN MEKETA

It was May 11, 1847, when Albert L. Gay, a young civilian teamster working for the Army quartermaster, arrived in Santa Fe. Although the Mexican-American War was still in progress, New Mexico was relatively peaceful. The previous August the Army of the West had marched into Santa Fe and taken over the Territory for the United States. During the winter there had been a bloody but short-lived revolt against the American invaders which was smothered but since that time, although resentment still burned in some native breasts, no organized resistance of major consequence had occurred.

Gay, in his early twenties at the time, was an adventurous, intelligent, literate, and observant young man, qualities discernible in the letters he wrote to his parents, Mr. and Mrs. Lowman Gay of Rochester, New York.¹ These letters add details and personal insights to a rather scantily documented period in New Mexico history.

Jacqueline Meketa has done extensive research on the military in New Mexico. She is the author of numerous articles and books on military topics, the most recent being *Legacy of Honor: The Life of Rafael Chacon, a Nineteenth-Century New Mexican* (1986).

1. Albert L. Gay's exact birthdate is unknown but according to Captain Jesse B. Gay, Jr., United States Navy (Retired) of Falls Church, Virginia, a descendant, Gay's next older brother was born in 1818 in Fort Edward, New York. Photocopies of Gay's letters, as well as some he and his wife wrote later from California, are available at the Sandoval County Historical Society Archives, Martha Liebert, Archivist, P.O. Box 692, Bernalillo, New Mexico. Private Gay's letters are reproduced here as exactly as possible using his own spelling, grammar, and punctuation without the use of (sic) to identify errors.

" Santa Fe August 26th 1847

Dear Parents

A motion having entered my ^{concluded} mind to send you a few lines, by way of giving you what information I have at hand, and removing from your minds, any uneasiness that my sojourn here may have occasioned: There is nothing in the line of news, of any stirring importance here at present; Some dozen Companies of new Volunteers have arrived within the last few days; and others are on the way to the amt of 18 companies, and who will be here in a few days, thus making the force in New Mexico 3000 strong. what disposition will be

Copy of one of Albert L. Gay's letters. Originals remain in the possession of the Gay family; copies are available in the Sandoval County Historical Society Archives.

Gay's motives in traveling so far from his eastern beginnings are unknown but many confident and enterprising young men, curious about the whole new territory out west, recently "liberated" from Mexico, saw it as a great opportunity for personal advancement and land acquisition. Gay's later actions confirmed that he was such a man.

Gay's first three months in New Mexico were mostly spent guarding and caring for military livestock being pastured some distance from Santa Fe but all that changed in August, as he told his parents:

Santa Fe, New Mexico August 6. 47

Dear Parents, I have not written to you since the last of May at which time I despatched a letter to you by Bernard. I should have written long since, but deferred it in hopes of receiving one from you by the June orderly Express. I rc'd one from you and one from G. of last winter's date at the time I arrived at Santa Fe May 11th. During this interval or since May 29th I have been engaged with others in guarding mules and oxen some 25 miles from Santa Fe, and although others have been cut off by Indians and Mexicans we have been so fortunate as yet as not to lose a man, or suffer

any injury, save that of mules and cattle stolen. You undoubtedly have heard horrid accounts of Mexican character, Mexican barbarity and in this, and I must announce, after having some little opportunity of judging of their character and disposition that the Mexicans are not as bad as our countrymen there represent them in the States. In fact there is two sides to every question, and it is very true that some few parties of the volunteers have been inhumanely murdered by them, but in every case the Volts. were the aggressors—volunteers and teamsters are dispersed over various parts of the country herding and not infrequently turn their animals upon the Mexican's corn and wheat and when politely asked to remove them would tell the Mexicans to help themselves if they could, in vain they would tell the volunteers that if their corn and wheat was destroyed they must starve, for that was their only resource. This was precisely the case at Bagus (a town in the outer settlements) some 70 miles from Santa Fe.² The volunteers had turned their animals on their fields, and when requested to remove them would not, and consequently a fight ensued which resulted in the death of four Americans. On the receipt of this intelligence at Bagus, a party of Volts. under Major Edmondson pursued them to the mountains killing 10 & taking 15 prisoners. A short time since 40 Mexicans were marched into Santa Fe from Bagus as prisoners, some taken at the time above mentioned, and others subsequently at the murder of Lieutenant Brown and two privates 12 miles south of Begas, 6 of them were hung on the 3d of this month for their offences.³ I do not pretend to say that the Mexicans were not culpable: but I am confident, if their Beef Cattle, Sheep etc. were less molested, the Mexicans not so frequently whipped by the Volts., there would be less cause of complaint. I have frequently been at their houses, and have been treated with the utmost kindness, and it is remarked by every one that the best the house affords is at the service of a stranger. I would, had I

2. This reference is to Las Vegas, New Mexico, where the United States Army kept a garrison which was used against marauding bands of Mexicans and Indians who were making desultory attacks on supply trains and grazing parties in the area. Some of these attackers were probably motivated by Mexican patriotism, others by pique at the American's high-handed ways, and some others possibly by sheer greed.

3. Philip St. George Cooke in his *The Conquest of New Mexico and California, An Historical and Personal Narrative* (Albuquerque: Horn and Wallace, 1964), 123, stated that Lieutenant Brown was killed at a small settlement named Las Vallas, 15 miles south of Las Vegas. Lt. J. H. Bourmam of the Missouri Mounted Volunteers, in a report reproduced in *The Conquest of California and New Mexico by the Forces of the United States, in the Years 1846 & 1847* by James Madison Cutts (Albuquerque: Horn and Wallace, 1965), 238–40 called the town Los Pias. In the past some historians have mistakenly placed the incident in Las Vegas. Apparently there is no longer a town on the site.

limits, write a good deal more about these people. This country is by no means an agricultural one. The land is sterile except in a few valleys. There they have to irrigate. Timber & water are scarce but of the latter, there has been an abundance since the last of June, it raining almost every day, but much rain here is uncommon. A few days ago I was in Santa Fe and went to the Quartermaster and asked permission to join a volunteer company now raising. This he refused, two days after I went to the Capt. of the Company and told him I would join if he would get me off from the Quartermaster, this he said he would. In the meantime Col. Price saw the Capt. and told him to enlist every teamster that he could.⁴ In the course of two hours I was at the Capt. quarters and he told me that all was right, (I supposing that he had seen the Quartermaster) and I was mustered in, in a few minutes I was ordered by Corporal Hill, Q. M. assistant to go to the grasing, which I refused alleging as a reason that I had volunteered, he then told me to go to the Guard House, but he not being able to put me there, went for a file of men to carry his tyrannical threat into execution, but he and his guard did not succeed, I saw Col. Price that same evening and he told me that I could not volunteer unless by the Q. M. consent and consequently the next day found me at the grasing, but I shall volunteer yet if nothing happens. The work we have to do is nothing. I am in good health and speak the Spanish language pretty well, shall bring home with me a Spanish Boy.

Your affec. Son A. L. Gay

August 9. I am a Volunteer in Captain Groves Company Santa Fe Rifles, and shall probably go to Chihuahua.⁵ I will write you at every opportunity. New troops are near Santa Fe for the relief of those here.

Gay's letter was apparently re-copied and sent to other family members. This comment had been added by someone at the end: "This is the people he has volunteered to fight against[.] I fear before he is

4. By this time Colonel Sterling Price, General Stephen Watts Kearney's successor, had become acting governor of New Mexico with the imposition of martial law after the Taos Rebellion had been crushed.

5. Captain William H. Grove commanded Gay's company. The other two mounted companies were commanded by Captain John L. Hamilton and Captain William B. Armstrong. Gay had enlisted in Company B, New Mexican Mounted Volunteers, according to the Muster-in Rolls, but the unit was quickly designated as (Walker's) Santa Fe Battalion, Missouri Mounted Volunteers. The battalion consisted of three companies of horsemen and one of artillery, and was commanded by Major Robert Walker. Gay's horse was valued at \$30 and his saddle and equipment at \$8. See A. L. Gay service records, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

again at liberty he will find something harder to do than he ever did before[.] I hope he may live to return but it is very doubtful. N. G."

Gay's open-minded friendliness and desire to learn as much as possible about the new and different world in which he found himself was as refreshing as it was unusual. Many of the troops flooding into New Mexico were arrogant or antagonistic toward the local people. One soldier told how the troops destroyed a large Indian melon patch near San Felipe Pueblo while on a march down river and admitted that "our horses did considerable damage to the corn which was just getting hard." He also cited an incident in which a group of Missouri volunteers, in response to some slight dispute, rode into a village, ransacked the town, took several of the residents prisoner, stole livestock and belongings, and even pilfered a religious artifact as a trophy.⁶

A short time later, Private Gay penned another letter home:

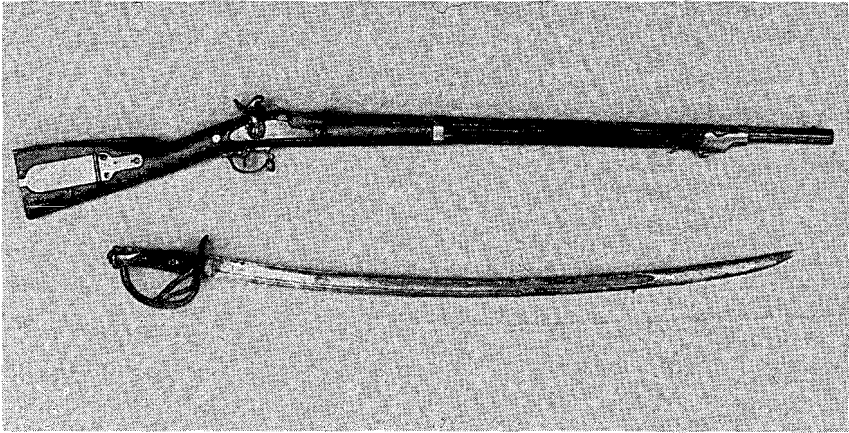
Santa Fe August 26th 1847

Dear Parents

A notion having entered my mind, I concluded to send you a few lines by way of giving you what information I have at hand and removing from your minds any uneasiness that my sojourn here may have occasioned. There is nothing in the line of news of any stirring importance here at present. Some seven companies of new Volunteers have arrived within the last few days, and others are on the way to the amt. of 18 companies and who will be here in a few days, thus making the force in New Mexico 3000 strong & what disposition will be made of these here I do not know but presume some will go to Oregon, others to Chihuha, and probably the Santa Fe Battallion, to which I belong will go there.⁷ this command consists of 4 companies under Major Walker, one of Artillery and 3 of mounted men. to the latter I belong—am in Capt. Groves Co B Prices Rangers for a compensation we receive \$8 per month per man and \$12 for horse, probably \$6 for forage & \$1 per month for use of my Rifle (all not having R) making \$27 per month. The Labor which we have to do is nominal, Drill at 8 o'clock AM & 5 PM and roll call at sunrise and stand guard once in ten days—for my

6. Abraham Robinson Johnston, Marcellus Ball Edwards, Phillip Gooch Ferguson, *Marching with the Army of the West, 1846-1848* (Glendale, California: Arthur Clark Co., 1936), 323-33.

7. Many of the Missouri Volunteers who had been left in Santa Fe after General Kearney's departure for California had been mustered into the service for one year in June 1846, and consequently their time was up. Attempts were made, in Santa Fe, to raise a new regiment. By early August three companies had already been mustered in and two others were reported ready for muster. They were composed principally of discharged volunteers and wagoners.



This Model 1841 rifle, also known as the Mississippi rifle, was used by the dragoons and mounted infantry in the Mexican-American War. The .54 caliber weapon was still in use by some volunteer troops during the Civil War. The heavy dragoon saber, Model 1840, was known as the "Old Wristbreaker." Courtesy of the author.

part I find it very agreeable, for I attend a Spanish School every day and am acquiring the language rapidly. There is only one school in New Mexico. Consequently the mass of the people are very illiterate. In this school there are some 20 boys, (no Girls) who are very good Schollars,—they being of the first Families in the country. Of those troops which have arrived from the states this season some few were so unfortunate as to be killed, of the Infantry 5 or 6 were killed and horribly mutilated by the Indians.⁸ One who is now here and doing well, was scalped and left for dead, and remained on the field among the Indians, during the night, and was able to make himself seen in the morning, and was taken to the camp. Of the Dragoons 5 were killed & 6 wounded out of 17 who were on a reconnoitering party. In fact, the Indians are playing perfect hell on the plains, and if we are not sent south we will be sent after them. This is just what I want, for I believe 100 Americans is good for 500 Indians. All of the old Volunteers have gone home, and we are left here for some time alone to keep

8. Not only infantrymen were falling prey to hostile Indians that summer. Travel to Santa Fe along the Trail was extremely hazardous. One dragoon officer wrote an interesting account of a Comanche attack at that time. See Cutts, *The Conquest of California and New Mexico*, 240–42.

the country.⁹ When this War will close I know not nor do I care for I am determined to make something out of it for the thought of dying or being killed never enters my mind.

2 o'clock P.M. Since writing the above I have learned that we are to leave town in a few days upon an Indian expedition, to what Indians I know [not?] but presume the Navahoes; as the[y] lately were engaged in killing Mexicans and stealing their stock.¹⁰ The Mexicans at present appear quite friendly and I think there will be no danger of another insurrection here. I wrote a letter last month and you may look regularly for one every month if I am situated so I can write, and I trust I shall have the satisfaction of receiving from you as often. I rec'd two of last Winters date on the 11th of May, since that; none. I trust you are all in good health and blessed with a fair share of worldly success.

Of all places, this is the beat for gambling and licentiousness, drinking not being excepted. In fact every House in Town is a Whore House or a Grog Shop I have nothing more to write at present so I must close. so give my respects to all enquiring Friends
I remain

Your affect. Son
A. L. Gay

In early September the reinforced Santa Fe Battalion started out on an expedition to the Navajo country. The three companies composing the battalion were made up principally of reenlisted volunteers and according to one private were "a very wild and reckless set. Nearly every man left drunk!"¹¹ Several months later, after the campaign, the unit returned to a spot near the Rio Grande to camp for the winter. From there Gay wrote to his parents telling them of his adventures:

Rio Grande 150 m's S. of Santa Fe New Mexico Nov 10th 1847
Dear Parents

I wrote you on the last of August at Santa Fe intimating to you that we should leave in a few days on a Navahoe Expedition. We accordingly left on the 1st of Sept. with 3 companies and 2 months Provisions & 1 piece of Artillery and proceeded down the Rio Grande about 75 miles and then left the River on the 10th and

9. The volunteers who opted to be mustered out returned, via the Santa Fe Trail, to St. Louis, arriving in the latter part of August where they were greeted with enthusiasm and distinction by the local populace.

10. Gay was correct. In an action that almost exactly paralleled that of Colonel Alexander W. Doniphan one year earlier, the new units would move southward and then west into Navajo country.

11. Johnston, Edwards, and Ferguson, *Marching with the Army of the West*, 314.



Zuni Pueblo, in western New Mexico, as it appeared in 1879, practically unchanged from when the inhabitants fed the hungry soldiers. Courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution.

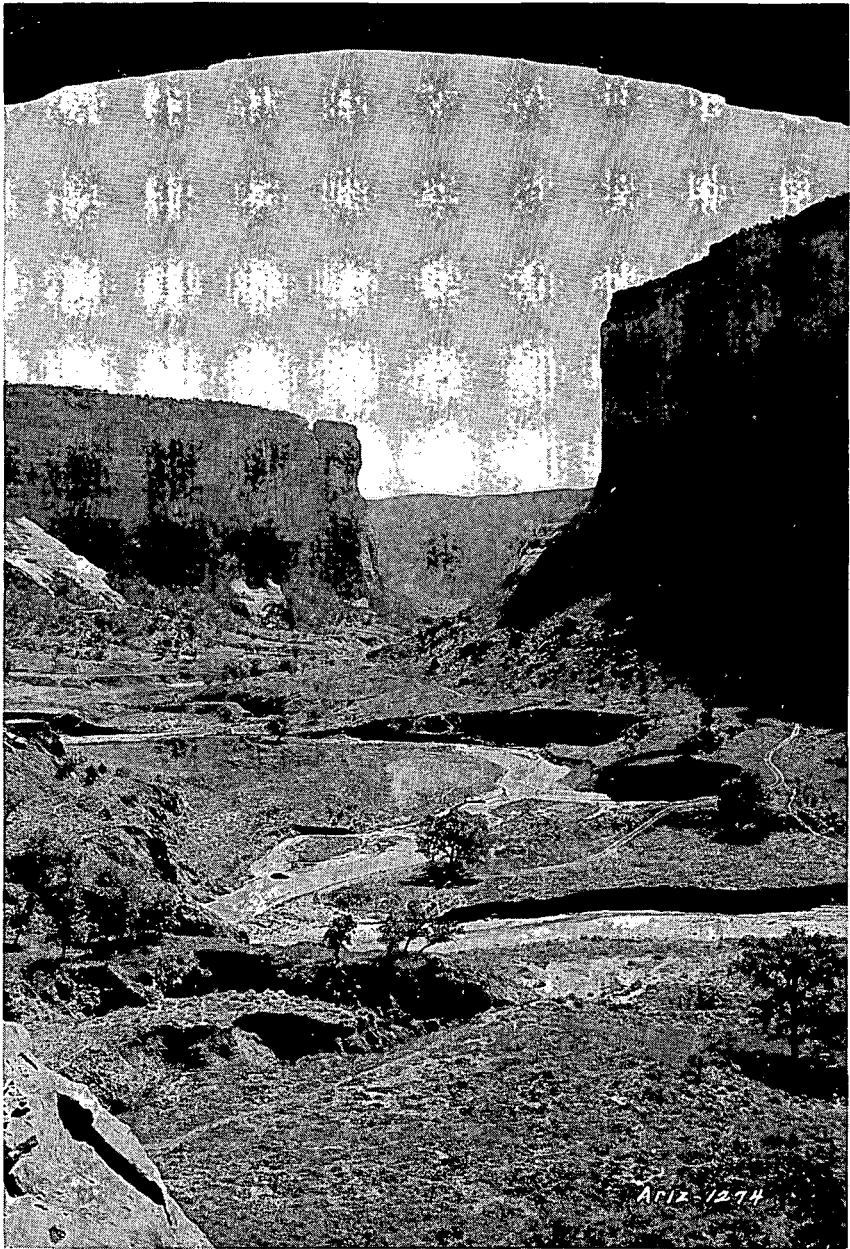
proceeded due west about 100 miles, as far as we could go with waggons, where they were left, and we on the 22nd with 10 days Provisions & 140 men made a forced march for the strong hold of the Navajoes, being 190 miles distant, on the 24 we reached Zouni an Indian Town of Friendly Indians containing some 1000 Warriors who are distinct and separate from any other inhabitants in the country. They are highly intelligent, more so than the civilized Indians in the states, and withal very industrious, raising plenty of corn & wheat, and making such domestick articles as they need. Their Town is compact, built in the middle of a plain, on a small eminence; their houses from 2 to 3 stories high, and for their better defence, no entrance in the first storie. Among them was a highly intelligent Boy, to whom I gave several presents, with which he was much pleased, and on our leaving he put a mark on my cap that he might know me on my return. I merely mention this to show their generosity. We left this town on Friday and made 30 miles late at night, and the next day met a party of Spaniards returning from the Navajoes having killed 5 and taken 31 Prisoners Women & children 1500 head of sheep & 75 Horses.¹² These pris-

12. It is interesting that Gay referred to the party of locals returning from an Indian scout as "Spaniards" when practically every other Easterner designated the local people as "Mexicans" in their correspondence.

oners excited a great deal of sympathy from us, and it was as much [as] the officers could do, to restrain us from flogging the Spaniards, and setting them at Liberty for if we were agoing against them; we have more love for them than the spainards. on Monday we arrived within 30 miles of the Canyon of Sha, their principal Town at a place called the Red Lake. Now we were 100 miles from Zouni, and our Provisions about out. we were all anxious to march immediately to Sha and know our doom at once, but imagine our surprise and mortification, to hear that insted of marching forward the command was to be split up into 3 parties and Captain Grove with 35 men myself among the number was to make a tramp in one direction to look for Indians, and Capt. Hamilton in another, the balance to remain at the Lake. We returned on Wednesday having seen no Indians, and half starved at that and, that too in the midst of their country, said to contain 5000 Fighting Men, on the same day 16 men on a scouting Party killed one Indian and wounded several. on Thursday, we started for Sha being entirely out of Provisions, went about 5 miles and met Capt. Hamilton returning, he having found nothing. Marched within 10 miles of Sha, and on Friday morning at 1 o'clock the 1st day of Oct. we were on our march and by sunrise we were at the mouth of the Canyon (we expected to get sheep today here, or some kind of stock) a halt was ordered and 60 of us mounted the right side of the Canyon on foot while the balance went into it.¹³ I was so hungry that I would have eaten a dedd Indian—we marched on probably a mile when we discovered Indians & their yell resounded through the mountains with deafening noise. We thought then we would make them sing a different tune but to our chagrin we came to an intersecting canyon, and could go no further, and to make the tale short we could not get at the Indians, and they could not come to us, and to stay there and starve was out of the question, and consequently we left; by the by this Canyon is 70 miles long from 100 to 600 yards wide and its walls 2 or 300 feet in height. we went 4 miles and encamped; on Sat 2nd went 35 miles after devouring a mule and a few Indian Dogs by way of Luxury, and a rich one it was, on Sunday Lieutenant Blakely and 24 of [us] started for Zouni 125 miles distant to hasten back Provisions.¹⁴ we reached

13. Frank McNitt says that the mounted troops penetrated the canyon six miles, finding neither Navajos nor livestock. Frank McNitt, *Navajo Wars: Military Campaigns, Slave Raids and Reprisals* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1972), 126. He also stated that Walker's decision to leave most of his supplies back with his wagons and try to live off the land at that time of year when crops were already harvested, was foolish.

14. Private Gay does not mention it in his letter but his service records show that on October 5, 1847, the day after he arrived back at Zuni Pueblo, his horse died from excessive riding.



The steep canyon walls and rugged terrain at Canyon de Chelly made chasing the Navajos difficult. Courtesy of the author.

there about noon on Monday so weak that we could scarcely stand, as soon as I came to the borders of the Town my little Boy recognised me by his mark, and took me to his home and treated me in a manner I shall never forget and in fact all of our men we[re] well fed. Provisions were obtained here and sent back to our half famished companions, several days after, we arrived at camp nothing having happened worthy of note.¹⁵ Here we remained until the 22nd when we rec'd orders for the south and here we are on the Rio Grande awaiting our Provision Train. There are 21 companies ordered south making about 2000 men our destination is probably Chihuahua. There if we go, we will have a hard fight as we have news that 5000 Mexican soldiers are there awaiting us with 3 pieces of Cannon. Whether we go or not is not known certainly at this time, but we know that Col Commanding is furthering operations for that object as fast as possible—General Price has not yet arrived, but probably is in Santa Fe by this, and he may order us, but I think not, unless peace is made.¹⁶ We have heard of the Fall of Mexico and we expect peace is made ere this.¹⁷ if it is I probably shall return in the spring. I have re'd no letters from you since May and have written several. The Troops here generally are in good health—the Spaniards are very much irritated here against the Americans the Soldiers steal from them and vice versa. If we go south there will be 11 companies left here, and you need not be surprised to hear of another rebellion this Winter. The weather here is moderate now, but in Santa Fe excessively cold. I am very anxious to hear from you and I trust I shall hereafter. I can think of plenty more to write but cannot for want of time, for the Express is on the eve of starting so I must bid you a Farewell.

Give my love to all enquiring Friends

Your affect. Son

A. L. Gay

During the winter of 1847–48, Gay and his comrades remained encamped in the Socorro area, a strategic point midway between the American troops at El Paso and General Sterling Price's headquarters

15. The reference here is to the return to Ojo de la Jara, where his command's wagons and most of their supplies had been left. McNitt, in *Navajo Wars*, 126, says that the troops struggling back toward Zuni from the canyon killed and ate their pack mules, dog meat, and wild parsley since nothing else was available.

16. On the very day Private Gay was writing his letter, Price, who had recently been promoted to brigadier general, was leaving Fort Leavenworth to return to Santa Fe. He would not arrive there for two months.

17. The reference, of course, is to the fall of Mexico City to the American army on September 14, 1847. Gay, however, was a little premature in his expectations of a peace treaty.

in Santa Fe. Price, who had long desired to lead an expedition to Chihuahua, earlier made application to Washington to do so and was asked to supply further details before a decision could be made. In November Price was ordered not to march south. However, a loophole existed in the directive when it stated that in the case that Price should learn of an enemy force being organized in Chihuahua with the aim of marching on New Mexico, he could use his own discretion as to when it should be encountered although it was not recommended that he proceed to Mexico to attack it.

Throughout the winter American merchants and the local newspapers in Santa Fe kept putting pressure on Price to mount an expedition against the Mexicans. Their interest was mostly mercenary, for Chihuahua was a trading center of importance, but their desires paralleled Price's own personal inclination.

The justification presented itself in early February 1848. Rumors began flying northward from the El Paso area that a Mexican general was advancing on the city with an army of thousands. The information arrived at Socorro on February 2, several days before it reached General Price at Santa Fe. Without waiting for orders from the military headquarters, the companies at Socorro took up the line of march for El Paso almost immediately to go to the aid of the approximately 500 American soldiers there. Private Gay managed to write a brief letter to his parents before departing:

Socorro New Mexico Feb 3d 10:00 P.M. 1848

Dear Parents

With a little time I hasten to send you notice of passing events. We are all in great excitement here. [We move?] from information received here last night from El Paso of the approach of some several thousands of Mexicans under the command of General Herrera, and on the last of the past month he was within a few days march of the pass, which is about 180 miles distant from here.¹⁸ Col Ralls is there with 6 Cos and all of his men including Teamsters does not exceed 500 men.¹⁹ a poor stand I think they

18. The Mexican general's name was Urrea, not Herrera and some of the wild rumors included one in which he was said to have an army of nearly eight thousand men. See Robert E. Shalhope, *Sterling Price, Portrait of a Southerner* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1971), 70-71. Gay may have been confused after hearing that, on January 8, 1848, a General Herrera had been elected Constitutional President of the Mexican Republic.

19. Colonel John Ralls commanded six companies of the Third Missouri Mounted Volunteers. Soon a rumor was circulating that Ralls had been defeated at El Paso by Urrea.

will make against such fearful odds, unless we get there in time to assist them. We received orders about 2 hours since to take up our line of march for there tomorrow morning and also 4 Cos. of Col. Eastons Battalion, and about the 8th of Feb you will probably hear that we are all whipped and killed, or that after hard fighting we have come off victorious. I know not what our fate may be, but I expect no evil, and if I am to be killed in Battle it is a consolation to know, that I have not to die, but once, and whatever may be my fate, I do not wish you to harbour any uneasiness about me, but I have no notion of dying. We have received civil express this evening cautioning us about approaching the Passo for fear the Enemy may throw a body of men this side of the Town to cut us off.

Our Town has been in great excitement for several days past, in consequence of a man by the name of John Woodard being brutally murdered by the Spaniards. He was as you may say a perfect imbecile. He was decoyed out of Town by a Spaniard dressed in Women's clothes, and taken some six miles away from here and beat to death, his head being bruised up in a most shocking manner. We arrested 6 Spanish cut throats and hung them up by the neck, until they revealed the participators. One of them we took today with a rope around his neck, and made him find the Body which was in the River, in the manner before described; When he was brought into Town, it was as much as the Officers could do to restrain the men from rushing to the Guard House and taking the 6 Devils and burning them on the square; they probably will be hung. We have lost a good many men here by sickness; one of my messmates died today.

The next news you hear from here I believe will be that the whole country is in a state of revolution, at least all appearance indicate it, and I think we will have a hard row to hoe. But rest assured, they have got to fight before they can subdue an American Army that goes 2000 miles to fight a savage foe. You shall hear from me again in less than a month from the time you receive this, dead or alive, I have had no letters from you since the July Letter. I'm trusting that you are in good health and feeling nought but hopes of success. I bid you Farewell, Farewell

Your Affect. Son

A. L. Gay

P.S. I could write more but have not time, give my Love to all enquiring Friends so adieu.

Private Gay had no way of knowing, when he wrote his letter from Socorro on February 3, 1848, that the prior day a peace treaty had been adopted and signed by representatives of Mexico and the

United States in the Mexico City suburb of Guadalupe Hildago and that four days later the governors of the Mexican states would all be notified that the fighting was over. Of even more grave consequence was the fact that his commanding officer, General Price, was also unaware of this turn of events.

On February 8, Price left Santa Fe with his staff. When he finally arrived at El Paso, on February 23, he learned that the reports of an advancing Mexican army had been nothing more than rumors. While there he also received a dispatch from Washington which, even though it had been written a month earlier, forbade him to proceed south into Mexico. Deliberately, Price decided to ignore and, thus, disobey it—an action which would have terrible consequences.

Price, determined to have his fight and possible moment of glory, wanted to advance on Chihuahua quickly but his supply train had been delayed. Anxious that the Mexicans might learn of his presence, he decided to begin operations immediately. To cut off enemy communications to and from Chihuahua City he dispatched some of his best mounted troops to Carrizal, ninety miles to the south, on April 24. The three companies he sent over the border first, who would remain there alone for almost a week, were those of Robert Walker's Santa Fe Battalion, Gay's unit.

On March 1, when his supply train still had not arrived, an impatient Price headed southward from El Paso with seven companies and only eight days' rations and joined Walker's group three days later.

The next day the combined force left at sunrise and rode forty miles through a cold rain. Pressing on, the following day they were up at daybreak again and made a wearying fifty-mile ride before they stopped to camp. On this day, while still fifty miles from the city of Chihuahua, Price's presence was discovered by Mexican spies. Fearing that their warning would give General (and also Chihuahua Governor) Angel Trias time to prepare his defenses, Price urged his troops forward. But, as they neared the city, the men were met by a delegation from Governor Trias which informed Price that a peace treaty was in effect and all hostilities had been suspended. Price, perhaps fearful that Trias was using a strategy to gain time in order to further fortify the city, ignored the information, speeded up his advance, and entered Chihuahua at 9:00 P.M. on March 7 without opposition, for Trias, upholding the treaty, had pulled out of the city with all his troops and the public property.

Not content with the capture of the city, Price was determined to do battle. By this time his men and mounts were exhausted. There were only enough fresh horses available to mount 250 men but this

did not deter Price. On the morning of the eighth he took this small contingent and pressed ahead. At daylight on the ninth, after a hard, sixty-mile ride southward, they arrived at Santa Cruz de Rosales where Trias' troops were entrenched in the fortified town.

While awaiting the arrival of the balance of his force, including his artillery and supply wagons, Price laid close seige on Santa Cruz. Trias stated that he and his troops were determined to defend the town if they had to but that he expected a proclamation decree of peace from his government at any moment. Price, still fearful that Trias might be awaiting reinforcements, rejected his plea for patience. Ironically, on March 10, 1848, while the single-minded Price was waiting to pounce on Santa Cruz de Rosales, the United States Senate, in Washington, ratified the Treaty of Guadalupe Hildago after intense debate. The Mexican-American War was over!

Early on the morning of March 16, General Price, now reinforced by the arrival of three companies of regulars and a battery of cannon, demanded the surrender of the town. General Trias again informed Price that he had received official word that a peace treaty had been concluded and that therefore they should not do battle. Price, however, had received no confirmation of Trias' statements from American authorities so he was unbelieving. Trias then stated that he would not surrender the town and would act in a defensive manner if required to.

At 10:30 A.M. the American battey opened fire on Santa Cruz, beginning a bloody battle. The Mexicans returned in kind and the cannonade went on for the best part of the day. Later, one American participant ruefully stated, "Our artillery laid to dust the work of years as it played upon their splendid churches and well-constructed houses."²⁰

About three o'clock in the afternoon Price ordered his artillery to cease fire and pulled his troops back. One soldier wrote that the Mexicans, "thinking that we were whipped, shouted victory."²¹ But the maneuver had been the result of an untrue report that a large Mexican force was approaching from the American's rear and Price soon re-deployed his men for an attack. All the volunteers were dismounted and various units were placed on the west, the south, and the northeast sides of the town while the dragoons and one other company remained mounted to cut off any of the enemy attempting to escape or any reinforcements that might appear. A cannon was fired as a signal to attack and the troops then stormed the town.

20. *Santa Fe Republican*, April 22, 1848.

21. *Ibid.*

Gay's unit, the Santa Fe Battalion, charged from the south. In short order it became obvious that fierce house-to-house fighting would be required. Each house was filled with defenders. Mexican sharpshooters were posted on the roofs behind parapets and hastily constructed barricades. The volunteers, quickly adapting to this type of fighting, advanced on the rooftops and through the streets, breaking into buildings with axes and crowbars, killing or driving the enemy out, and then using the homes as cover as they advanced. The Mexicans threw long-fused grenades at the Americans but often they had time to kick them back into enemy-held buildings before they exploded.

Gay's commanding officer, Major Walker, handed out shells from his small mountain howitzer to his men. They were able to light them and use them as hand grenades. The volunteers fought their way through the chaos of smoke, gunfire, and rubble, to the large church on the plaza in the center of town where the main Mexican resistance was concentrated. Walker's force battled so vigorously they were cited for having been "in the lead, entering the square fifteen minutes ahead of the other troops."²² It was sundown when they reached and prepared to storm the church. When Major Walker's howitzer opened fire on the building the Mexicans raised the white flag.

It was reported that many Mexicans were brutally killed while attempting to surrender. Some of the Missouri volunteers, still in a frenzy of fighting and killing, were so intent on taking the church the American officers had a difficult time restraining them when the Mexicans gave up.²³

Even though the American troops were outnumbered approximately two to one and the Mexican soldiers fought so bravely that the Americans were highly impressed, and even in spite of the fact that Trias' force had an impressive arsenal of heavy artillery, the American casualties were relatively light. It was reported that 1 officer and 3 men were killed and 19 wounded. The Mexicans, however, were not so fortunate. More than 250 died in defending their town.²⁴

After the battle Gay and other members of his company returned

22. *Ibid.*

23. Shalhope, *Sterling Price, Portrait of a Southerner*, 74.

24. Figures citing each side's troop strength, as well as the casualty figures and number and types of cannon the Mexicans had, vary from source to source. See, for example, Shalhope, *Sterling Price, Portrait of a Southerner*; the *Santa Fe Republican*, April 22, 1848; George Winston Smith and Charles Judah, eds., *Chronicles of the Gringos: The U.S. Army in the Mexican War, 1846-1848—Accounts of Eyewitnesses & Combatants* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1968), 143; and M. H. Thomlinson, "The Dragoons and El Paso, 1848," *New Mexico Historical Review*, 23 (July 1948), 220.

to Chihuahua City where they performed occupation duties until early July and then began the return trip up the Rio Grande to Santa Fe. During this period Gay lost two more horses; one was killed by a wild bull in Mexico and its replacement was stolen from guard camp in mid-August while he was in Polvadera, New Mexico, on his way northward. From Santa Fe he and the other volunteers due for discharge traveled east on the Trail to Missouri. On October 22, 1848, Gay wrote to his parents telling them that he had arrived in Independence "on the 7th . . . after a constant and severe journey of three months from Chihuahua." He explained that he had not written home immediately because he had been "engaged in adjusting the accounts of my company which duties kept me constantly engaged until now."

The men were mustered out on the nineteenth and paid two days later. Suddenly Gay found himself on his own once again. He wrote:

Now that I am once more free to think act and do for myself, I am completely lost—my associates in arms have gone to their homes to seek their Friends, who anxiously await their return, but I am left alone with nothing to console me but the consciousness of having faithfully done my duty to my Country, and to my fellow men—I know not where to go, nor whither to direct my steps—there is a void in my brain, an aching in my heart, that is difficult to be accounted for by those who have not been similarly situated—my first impulse was to go immediately home, but then, I desired first, to locate my Land this Winter, and in addition think I have a good and authenticated claim against the Government for One hundred and Twenty Five Dollars for horses lost, which I can better arrange here than there, and I think I shall remain in this neighborhood during the Winter, for their better adjustment—I should not be surprised that I make some progress towards farming by Spring, and thus have a home of my own. . . . I think sometimes that I will take my Gun on my shoulder and go into the woods and do nothing this Winter but kill Deer Turkeys etc and at other times that I will go to St. Louis, and go into some kind of Business until Spring, and then settle down for Life. But my mind is so fluctuating at present that I expect that it will require a month or so to bring it to a focus.

How Albert Gay spent the winter is unknown but by the next spring he had decided what he wanted to do as a civilian. He headed west. On July 31, 1849, he wrote a letter to a brother, heading it "Fort Laramie, 672 miles from Independence." He was on his way to Sacramento via the California Trail, traveling with a train consisting of

fifty-nine men, eight baggage wagons, eight carriages, and fifty spare mules under train proprietors Lowe and Allen.

By 1853 Albert Gay had established a farm on the Sacramento River, had a wife, Susan, and a one-year-old son, Horace. Earlier he had run a stable and hotel in the town of Sacramento. During the following fourteen years Gay farmed, did some road construction, dabbled a little in politics and continued to be a faithful correspondent to his parents. The couple had five more sons but only three survived past early childhood. In 1867, while in his early forties, Albert Gay died in California.