

THE  
Mexican  
War  
Journal  
& Letters

OF RALPH W. KIRKHAM

*Edited by Robert Ryal Miller*



THE MEXICAN WAR  
*Journal and Letters*

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*Texas A&M University Press*  
*College Station*



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Second printing, 1993

*Frontispiece:*

Ralph W. Kirkham, oil portrait bust, c. 1857  
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Binding materials have been chosen for durability.



LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Kirkham, Ralph W. (Ralph Wilson), 1821-

The Mexican War Journal and letters of Ralph W.  
Kirkham / edited by Robert Ryal Miller.

p. cm. — (Essays on the American West ;  
no. 11)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-89096-463-7 (cloth); 0-89096-537-4 (paper)

1. Kirkham, Ralph W. (Ralph Wilson), 1821-  
— Diaries. 2. Kirkham, Ralph W. (Ralph Wilson),  
1821- — Correspondence. 3. United States —  
History—War with Mexico, 1845-1848—Personal nar-  
ratives. 4. United States—History—War with Mex-  
ico, 1845-1848—Campaigns. 5. Americans—Mexico  
—Diaries. 6. Americans—Mexico—Correspondence.  
I. Miller, Robert Ryal. II. Title. III. Series.

E.411.K57 1991

973.6'28—dc20

[B]

90-41183  
CIP

THE MEXICAN WAR  
*Journal and Letters*  
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*Number Eleven*  
ESSAYS ON THE AMERICAN WEST  
*sponsored by the*  
Elma Dill Russell Spencer Foundation



## *Editor's Introduction*



RECENTLY, there has been a renewed interest in the Mexican War of 1846-48.<sup>1</sup> That conflict had a tremendous impact on the two belligerent nations—besides the huge financial outlay, it strained their domestic political alliances and resulted in tens of thousands of casualties. One of the major effects of the war was the peace treaty's territorial adjustment that transferred to the United States more than half a million square miles, an area larger than Spain, France, and Italy combined. For the United States, the acquisition of vast new lands provided room for expansion and ports on the Pacific, but the newly acquired lands upset the balance of free and slave states, intensifying sectionalism, which helped to bring on the American Civil War. For Mexicans, the war was an economic and psychological disaster. The disgrace of losing virtually all of the battles, having their capital and other cities occupied by the enemy, and being forced to surrender half their national territory (counting Texas), shattered national honor and engendered a deep-seated Yankeeophobia. Mexicans continue to lament the consequences of that war.

Forty years ago, when I studied history at Mexico's Universidad Nacional Autónoma, Professor Pablo Martínez del Río organized field trips for his students to visit nearby battle sites of the U.S.-Mexican War. His lectures and those excursions kindled my interest in U.S.-Mexican relations and led to many subsequent visits to Mexico. But while climbing around the fortresses of Churubusco and Chapultepec, little did I realize then that I would have a career of teaching Mexican history at American universities, and that one day I would discover an original manuscript journal written by a Yankee officer who fought at those memorable battlegrounds.

A number of American officers and soldiers kept diaries or journals during the Mexican War. Of the surviving accounts, some are now located in archives and libraries; others have been published as books or articles in historical quarterlies; and perhaps a few are in

family trunks or attics. Most of the printed accounts described events during the campaigns of Generals Zachary Taylor and Stephen Kearny in Mexico's northern states and territories, but operations in the southern theater of war were not as well covered. Just a few eyewitnesses chronicled General Winfield Scott's amphibious landing near Veracruz and his subsequent battles leading to the takeover of Mexico City, and only three of the previously published accounts spanned the important nine months' military occupation of Mexico's capital.<sup>2</sup> Thus the recently discovered journal kept by Lieutenant Ralph Kirkham during the last fifteen months of the American military presence in the heartland of Mexico is a welcome and important addition to the Mexican War literature. Kirkham's lively and compelling account has descriptive and literary merits, but it is chiefly valuable as a first-person memoir and primary historical source. Furthermore, the lieutenant's observations are astute and accurate.

Ralph Wilson Kirkham was from New England, where his family roots extended back to 1640. His great-great-grandfather, Henry Kirkham, fought in the French and Indian War, and his grandfather, John Kirkham, served in the American Revolution, during which he was wounded at the Battle of Monmouth. Lieutenant Kirkham's father was assessor, collector, and a selectman of Springfield, Massachusetts, a textile center and site of an important armory one hundred miles west of Boston.<sup>3</sup> Springfield had a population of about 6,200 people in 1821, when Ralph, the second of five children born to John Butler Kirkham and Betsy Wilson Kirkham, was born there.<sup>4</sup> His early years were typical of a middle-class boy's life at that period—he went to public school, tramped in the woods, fished in the Connecticut River, and played games in the winter snow. When he was sixteen, he went to Geneva, New York, where he studied at the Lyceum (which later became Hobart College) for two years. Then he taught school for one year at Granville, New York, before beginning his true vocation.<sup>5</sup>

In February, 1838, Kirkham received a printed notice from the secretary of war appointing him a cadet at the U.S. Military Academy, effective June 30 of that year. He had been nominated by Congressman William B. Calhoun. For the next four years he studied, drilled, and lived at West Point, New York. He liked the beautiful setting on the Hudson River, the physical contact games, horseback riding, swimming, and escapades with fellow cadets at the nearby tavern operated by Benny Havens and his wife. His classes included mathematics, civil



U.S. Military Academy cadet uniforms, 1840 (U.S. Military Academy Library)

and military engineering, chemistry, geography, history, philosophy, French, and drawing.<sup>6</sup> During those cadet years, Kirkham kept a notebook in which he listed alphabetically the members of his class, their home states, and a brief note about their careers at the academy and later. Of the 114 young men who entered in 1838, plus three who

were turned back from earlier classes, only 56 successfully completed the four years. Two cadets died during those years, 21 resigned, 7 were dismissed, and 31, those who failed their examinations, were found to be "deficient."<sup>7</sup>

Upon graduation in 1842, Ralph Kirkham was commissioned as a second lieutenant in the infantry branch of the United States Army. Following a leave of absence, during which he visited his family in Springfield, Massachusetts, he reported for duty at Fort Niagara, New York. Like other graduates of the academy, Kirkham expected to stay in the army at least four years, because Congress had stipulated such a requirement in 1838.<sup>8</sup> A second lieutenant's pay was then twenty-five dollars a month plus rations. Prospects for promotion, which was by seniority within each regiment, were slim because the army was barely growing and because there was no retirement system, which induced many officers to remain on active duty until an advanced age.

After six months of duty at Fort Niagara, Lieutenant Kirkham was reassigned to the Indian Territory of Oklahoma, more than a thousand miles away. He traveled most of the way by riverboat — down the Ohio to its junction with the Mississippi, then south on that river to Fort Smith, Arkansas, where he took a steamboat up the Arkansas River to Fort Gibson. During the next four years he served with the Sixth Infantry Regiment at two frontier posts in the Cherokee Nation: Fort Gibson, near the junction of the Arkansas River and the Neosho (or Grand) River; and at Fort Towson, one hundred and twenty miles south, near the confluence of the Red and Kiamichi rivers. These western forts were established in the 1820s to protect the routes of travel, and to implement the government's Indian removal policy.<sup>9</sup>

Romance bloomed for Lieutenant Kirkham at Fort Gibson in 1846. On June 1 of that year he met Miss Catherine E. Mix, two years younger than himself, who had come to the post to visit her Aunt Julia, wife of the post commander, Colonel Gustavus Loomis.<sup>10</sup> For Ralph and Catherine, it was love at first sight; they were engaged in mid-July, and married in the post chapel on October 20. Born in Washington, D.C., Catherine Mix had been raised in New Orleans, Louisiana, where she had a father and six brothers.<sup>11</sup> After their marriage, Ralph and Kate Kirkham enjoyed five months of bliss, living in a small cottage at Fort Gibson. They had a servant named "Aunt Hetty," two dogs, some cats, chickens, and a garden.<sup>12</sup> But the war



Catherine Mix Kirkham, oil portrait bust, c. 1857 (Torres Collection)

with Mexico, which began in 1846, separated the Kirkhams when he was ordered to the battlefield.

Two decades of deteriorating relations between the two countries led to the Mexican War. Beginning in the 1820s, Mexican leaders were apprehensive about the expansionist tendencies of the United States, which had recently acquired the Louisiana Territory and Florida, and they worried about the growing number of American trappers, traders, explorers, and settlers who moved into their northern provinces.

Some of those Yankees were stimulated by a sentiment called Manifest Destiny—the belief that divine providence had given the United States a moral mission to occupy and develop western lands. Perhaps this same spirit, as well as their own imperial ambitions, motivated three American presidents to send agents to Mexico offering to purchase California, New Mexico, or Texas—proposals that were offensive to Mexican officials.<sup>13</sup>

Two of the American schemes to purchase Mexican territory were tied to the problem of Mexico's debts and its nearly bankrupt condition. In 1842 President John Tyler instructed the American minister to try to acquire California in exchange for the cancellation of Mexico's debts to the United States. Three years later President James Polk dispatched a special envoy to Mexico empowered to offer \$5 million for the western half of New Mexico and \$25 million for California, and to propose the assumption of a \$2-million unpaid debt to the United States in exchange for Mexican recognition of the Rio Grande as the boundary between the two nations. This delinquent debt involved claims for repudiated bonds, revoked concessions, and damages to American property that had occurred during civil wars in Mexico. Although Mexico had signed a convention in 1843 to pay the debt, it suspended payments the following year.<sup>14</sup>

Texas and its boundary were central issues in the controversy between the United States and Mexico. In 1836, after the Texans won their war of independence with Mexico, they established an independent republic, which Mexico refused to recognize. Furthermore, the new nation declared its southwestern boundary to be the Rio Grande (Río Bravo y Grande del Norte) from its mouth to its source, thereby shifting the line many miles southwest of the Nueces River, the traditional boundary. This exaggerated claim tripled the size of the old Spanish and Mexican Texas, and it put the eastern half of New Mexico, including Albuquerque and Santa Fe, into the Lone Star Republic. Several times during the nine years of Texas independence, emissaries from that republic asked for annexation to the United States, a request that provoked heated debate in Washington and elsewhere. Northern antislavery forces did not want to add another slave state to the Union, but southern planters favored the move, as did northern expansionists. Meanwhile, Mexican officials accused the United States of complicity with Texas in its independence war and declared that annexation “would mean war with Mexico.”<sup>15</sup>

American moves to acquire Texas culminated in 1845. At the end of February, just before the inauguration of President Polk, who had campaigned for the acquisition of Texas and Oregon, a joint congressional resolution invited Texas to join the Union, if Texans themselves ratified the agreement. A week later the Mexican minister in Washington, claiming that the resolution was "an act of aggression," broke off diplomatic relations and returned home. In July, a popular convention in Texas voted to join the Union, and five months later the American Congress declared Texas the twenty-eighth state. Meanwhile, as soon as Texas agreed to annexation, Polk sent a naval squadron to the Gulf Coast and an occupation army to Texas to protect the new American state against a threatened Mexican attack. A few of Polk's contemporaries and several historians have asserted that the president sent the large military force to the Texas frontier hoping to provoke an attack by Mexico, after which the United States would retaliate by seizing California and other Mexican territory. Certainly, Polk wanted California, by peaceful acquisition if possible.<sup>16</sup>

Brigadier General Zachary Taylor headed the American troops that established a camp, at the end of July, 1845, on the west bank of the Nueces River near its mouth at Corpus Christi, Texas. Additional soldiers arrived during the following months; by October the force numbered thirty-nine hundred men, which was almost half of the United States Army. Early in 1846, when Polk learned that Mexican officials had refused to receive John Slidell, his special emissary sent to settle the Texas annexation and boundary questions, he ordered Taylor to advance to the left bank of the Rio Grande, where he was to take up a defensive position.<sup>17</sup> The Rio Grande boundary claimed by Texas was also sustained by the United States, but Mexico claimed that the land between the Nueces and the Rio Grande was its territory.

At the end of March, 1846, Taylor established a forward base about twenty-five miles upriver from the mouth of the Rio Grande and opposite the Mexican town of Matamoros. There, American soldiers constructed a five-sided fortress with earthen walls nine feet high and fifteen feet thick. Facing them across the river was a Mexican army garrison that was reinforced in April by three thousand additional soldiers. The Mexican commander ordered the Americans to decamp and retreat to the other side of the Nueces River, but Taylor replied that his instructions did not permit a withdrawal. After a Mexican cavalry column of sixteen-hundred men crossed the river with orders to cut the

American supply line, there was an inevitable clash. Hostilities began on April 25, 1846, when an American scouting party was ambushed by a Mexican unit in the disputed territory on the left bank. In that engagement, eleven Yankees were killed, six wounded, and sixty-three taken prisoner.<sup>18</sup>

When President Polk was notified about the bloodshed on the Rio Grande, he incorporated this fateful news into a special message he had already prepared for Congress, asking for a declaration of war. Announcing news of the armed clash, he told the legislators, "Mexico has passed the boundary of the United States, has invaded our territory and shed American blood upon the American soil. . . . A war exists, and notwithstanding all our efforts to avoid it, exists by the act of Mexico herself. . . ." Influenced by these assertions, and other arguments such as that regarding the unpaid claims, the overwhelming majority of legislators voted, on May 13, to declare a war on Mexico. The vote was 174 to 14 in the House, and 40 to 2 in the Senate. Mexico's Congress delayed its declaration of war to July 2.<sup>19</sup>

Public opinion about the Mexican War was sharply divided in the United States. In Congress the great majority of legislators favored the war and voted for funds to pursue it, but a vociferous minority, including Daniel Webster, John Quincy Adams, and Abraham Lincoln opposed it. Enthusiastic public gatherings in major cities generated support for the war and stimulated enlistment of volunteers, especially in the Mississippi Valley, where thousands of men enlisted for service in Mexico. Yet there was enough dissent to classify this as an "unpopular war." In addition to the partisan opposition of the Whigs, who faulted the Democrats and their president, some Americans considered the war to be unjustified aggression against a weak neighbor; abolitionists thought that it was a conspiracy of slaveholders to extend their territory; and still others blamed New England merchants and shippers who coveted Pacific Coast ports.<sup>20</sup>

When the war began, U.S. strategy, outlined in cabinet meetings and at military headquarters in Washington, called for naval units to blockade Mexico's principal ports in the Gulf and on the Pacific, while land forces would seize territory west and south of Texas. Eventually, five separate American armies invaded Mexico, where they participated in more than fifty campaigns and engagements. General Zachary Taylor's Army of Occupation crossed the Rio Grande at Matamoros and eventually captured Monterrey and other northern cities.

General John Wool's Central Division moved southwest from San Antonio to Saltillo for a timely linkup with Taylor. General Stephen Kearny marched his men from Fort Leavenworth to Santa Fe, New Mexico, where they raised the American flag. Then Kearny took part of his forces to occupy California, which had been partially subdued by American naval and marine units, aided by mounted Yankee riflemen under Major John Frémont. One column of Kearny's army, under Colonel Alexander Doniphan, marched south from New Mexico to Chihuahua and Saltillo. Finally, a large amphibious force under General Winfield Scott landed on the Gulf Coast near Veracruz and followed in Hernán Cortés's footsteps to conquer Mexico City.<sup>21</sup>

Lieutenant Ralph Kirkham joined Scott's forces about a month after the Americans had landed near Veracruz. Ordered to join the Sixth Infantry headquarters, then based in Perote, Mexico, Kirkham left Fort Gibson at the end of March, 1847. His wife Kate accompanied him to New Orleans, where she would spend the first part of the war years, and where he would board a ship for Veracruz and duty in the combat zone. Kirkham, who played the flute, also escorted to Mexico the band of the Sixth Infantry. His journal entries began on March 27, 1847, when he boarded a steamboat at Fort Gibson bound for New Orleans.

In his journal and letters to his wife Kirkham gave vivid details of his wartime service in Mexico. His position as adjutant general of the Sixth Infantry Regiment and assistant adjutant general of the second brigade of Major General William Worth's First Division gave him an opportunity to observe different military outfits and operations. Because he was required to keep records of his regiment and to serve as liaison between his unit and others, he always had access to paper and ink, a scarce commodity on campaigns. Kirkham portrayed scenery and events while en route to Mexico's capital, especially in the city of Puebla, where Scott's army remained for three months. Later he graphically described six major battles on the outskirts of Mexico City. During these engagements he saw many of his classmates and comrades wounded or killed. As a result of his gallantry in Mexico, Kirkham received a brevet promotion (an honorary rank higher than his permanent pay grade) to first lieutenant and later to captain.

After the American takeover of Mexico City in mid-September, 1847, and during the subsequent nine months of peace negotiations, Kirk-

# Journal.

Left Fort Gibson C. N. Saturday, March  
27<sup>th</sup> 1847, on Steamboat "Cello," with men  
com: staff & Band. 6<sup>th</sup> Infantry for the  
Dancing in Mexico.

April 3<sup>rd</sup> Saturday - arrived in New-Orleans

" 11<sup>th</sup> Sunday, Left New-Orleans, on  
Ship "Sophia Walker," Capt Crofton.  
Passengers, Mr. Randall & family, St. Helena  
and 180 Passengers 6<sup>th</sup> Infantry.

April 19<sup>th</sup> Monday - arrived at Vera-Cruz  
Mexico - and encamped on the beach about  
two miles above the City.

April 23<sup>rd</sup> Friday - Left Vera-Cruz  
for Tehuacan, with a regiment train & escort,  
encamped first night at Santa Fe,  
distance ten miles -

First page of Kirkham's journal (Torres Collection)

ham continued to write about the U.S. military occupation of the heartland of Mexico and about his own activities there. His comments show that there was considerable collaboration between Mexican civilians and American military personnel. In the Mexican capital and in Toluca, where he was based for two months, he was treated kindly by Mexicans, who entertained him and other officers in their homes and haciendas.

Although Kirkham was a professional soldier, his observations were not limited to military matters. Among other highlights, he described a Mexican bullfight, the effects of an earthquake, the funeral of a young Mexican girl, a visit to a Mexican theater, and a Lenten carnival which featured a colorful public procession with musical groups and masked dancers. In one long letter he recalled his trek, along with five other officers, to the summit of the volcano Popocatepetl, which rises to 17,887 feet above sea level. This is the first known ascent by any American to the summit and crater of that perpetually snow-peaked mountain, which is visible from the Mexican capital.

Kirkham also commented about what he saw on visits to several institutions in Mexico City. He described some of the paintings and sculpture at the Academia Nacional de Bellas Artes, artifacts from Aztec and other Indian cultures on display at the Museo Nacional, and the artwork and architecture of the Hospital de Jesús, founded three centuries earlier by Hernán Cortés. He also noted the profusion of flowering plants such as dahlias and passion flowers, and of fruit trees, including pomegranates, quinces, figs, olives, and citrus. In the countryside he jotted down the names of crops he saw growing in the fields.

Of special interest are Kirkham's descriptions of Mexican residences. For two months he was billeted in a private home in Toluca, about forty-five miles southwest of Mexico City, where he ate with the family. Meals began in the morning with hot chocolate; the midday dinner consisted of eight to ten courses; chocolate or coffee and bread were available at five each afternoon; and a substantial supper was served at about seven in the evening. Among the regional foods mentioned, he liked green pea pie and pumpkin preserves. Later, when quartered in the Mexico City home of a Mexican colonel, Kirkham described the palatial residence, which featured a large central patio with a myriad of flowers and an aviary containing more than one hundred colorful songbirds. He also reflected on a Christmas Eve party

which he attended in a private home in the capital where the owners had an entire room fixed up as a Nativity scene.

Kirkham's religious spirit is evident in many of his journal entries. A devout Episcopalian, he often jotted down prayers—sometimes as thanks for having survived a battle, and sometimes asking divine protection for his wife. He also made negative comments about Roman Catholic priests and practices in Mexico. Several times Kirkham mentioned Protestant religious services conducted by the Rev. John McCarty, the only commissioned American army chaplain who served in Mexico. These devotional services always made the young lieutenant think of his wife and family in the United States, and he longed to return home. Finally, in midsummer of 1848, after witnessing the replacement of the American by the Mexican flag over the Palacio Nacional of Mexico, Kirkham and his unit headed back to Veracruz, where they boarded ship for home.

Over the years, the letters Lieutenant Kirkham sent to his wife from Mexico and his journal kept in that country have remained with his family, who considered them precious souvenirs. Heretofore, they have never been seen by outsiders. Two of Kirkham's great-granddaughters, Sarah J. Torres and Arian Gedman, have inherited and carefully preserved these items, along with his silver spurs, golden epaulettes, and other family mementos. I am indebted to them for making these written items and the portraits of Kirkham and his wife available for publication. They also were extremely helpful in identifying relatives mentioned in the journal and in providing genealogical data.

Information about American arms and military organization during the Mexican War came from several sources. Richard J. Sommers, archivist-historian at the U.S. Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania, answered specific questions and provided additional information that aided the editing process. Two friends, George Rascoe and Colonel James Harvey Short, both of whom attended the Military Academy at West Point, kindly made their extensive military libraries available to me. Finally, I must thank the staff of the Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, for providing study space and for locating pertinent books and relevant documents.

In editing Kirkham's journal and letters, very few changes were made. Dates of journal entries were standardized for uniformity, several Mexican placenames were given their modern spellings, punc-