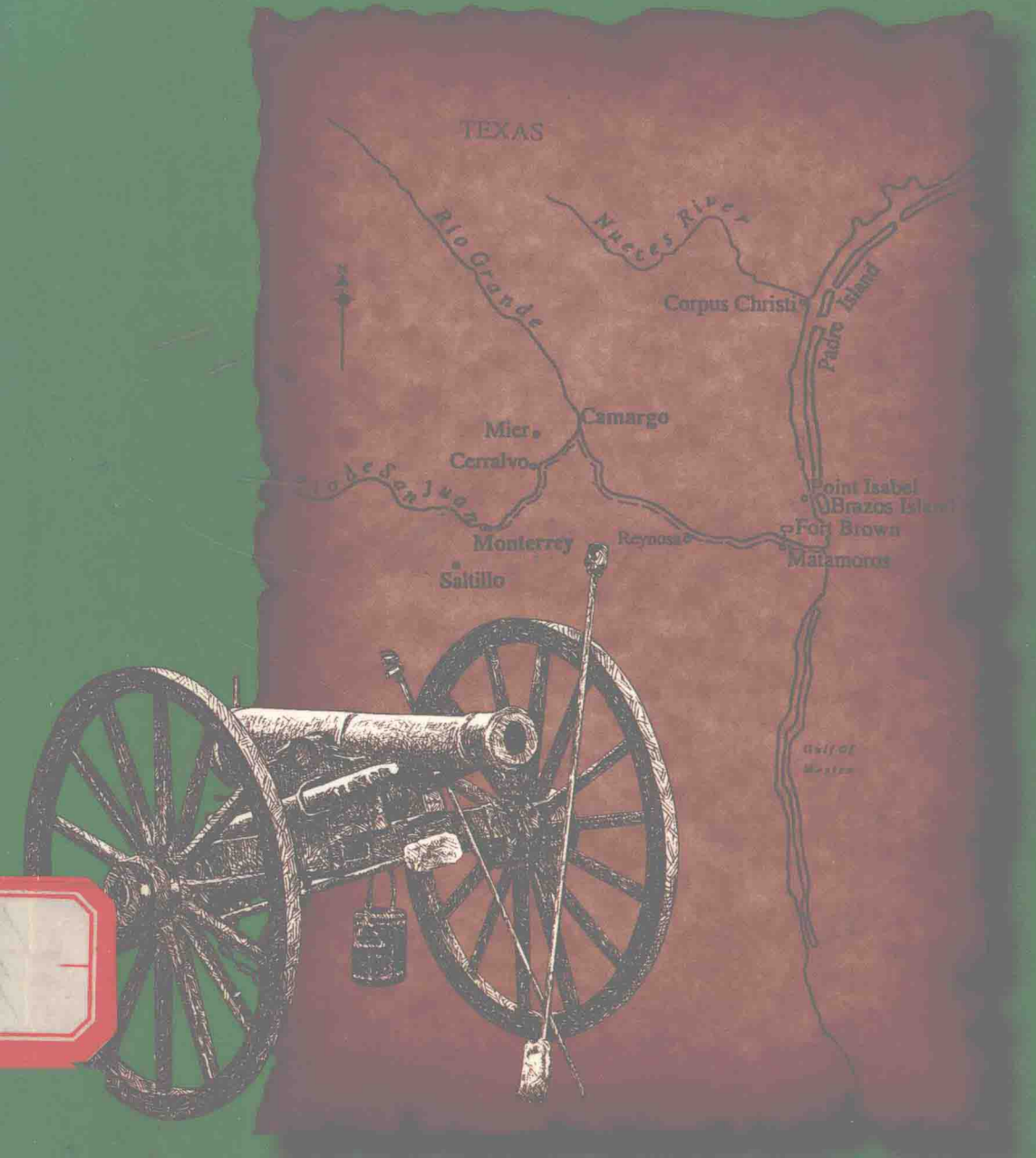


THE MARCH TO MONTERREY

The Diary of Lt. Rankin Dilworth

Edited by Lawrence R. Clayton and Joseph E. Chance



Illustrations by Wil Martin

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The Diary of
Lieutenant Rankin Dilworth,
U.S. Army

A Narrative of Troop Movements and Observations
on Daily Life with
General Zachary Taylor's Army
During the Invasion of Mexico

Edited by
Lawrence R. Clayton and Joseph E. Chance

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Wil Martin is an Associate Professor of Art at The University of Texas-Pan American in Edinburg. His drawings have been exhibited in numerous one-person shows throughout the United States and in Mexico. He has received major awards in national and international juried exhibitions.

*This book is dedicated to the memory of
Calvin L. Chance, Jr.,
who was my dear brother.*

Joseph E. Chance

*This book is also dedicated to my wife,
Sonja Irwin Clayton,
my constant helper in these and other matters.*

Lawrence Clayton

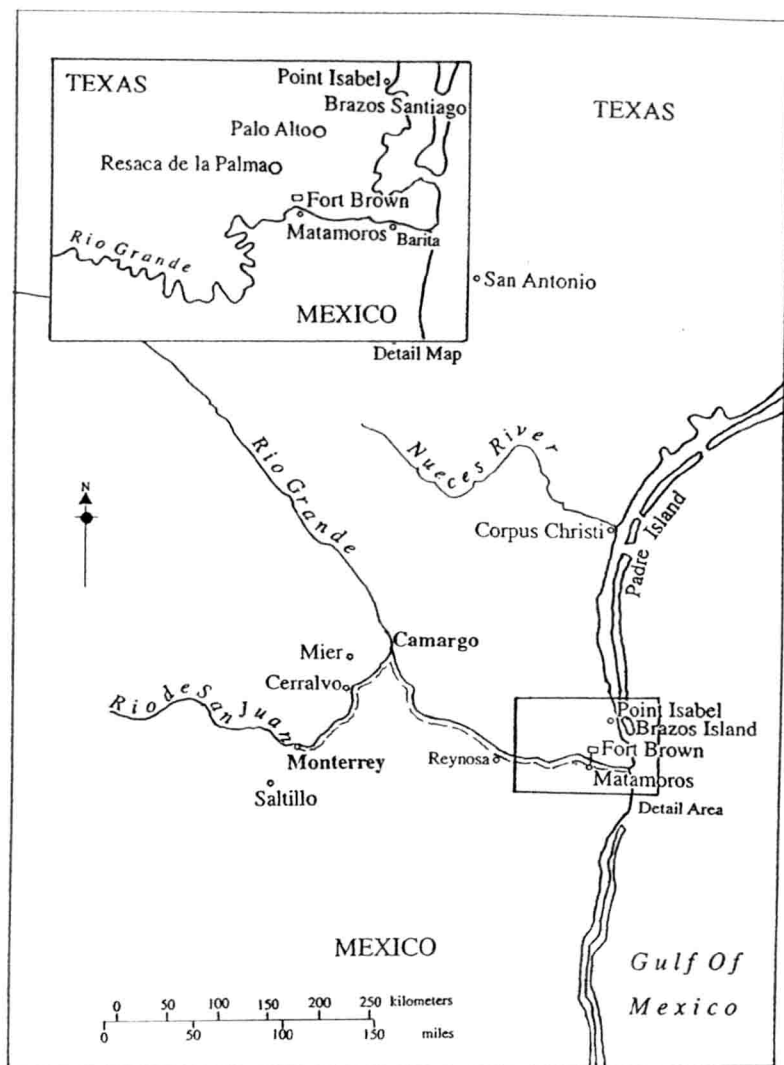
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A great many people have been helpful in bringing this long lost piece of work to its present state. Principal, of course, are Charles Passel and his wife, Alda. Mrs. Passel insisted that Charles bring the diary to Dr. Clayton to see if it were worthy of attention.

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INTRODUCTION

Family records reveal that Rankin Dilworth was born on February 19, 1822, in Mills Grove, Ohio, to Abram and Martha Judkins Dilworth. Nothing is known of his early life, but correspondence from young Dilworth, only seventeen years of age, to officials of the United States Military Academy forcefully expressed a desire to enter that institution. His mother, who by this time signed her name as Martha J. D. Evans, had apparently been widowed, remarried, and was a single parent. The family must have been of modest means, as Dilworth described his own situation in a letter to the secretary of war written in 1840 saying that he must “depend upon [his] own resources.” Dilworth was accepted as a cadet, and his mother certified her consent in a letter dated April 28, 1840. He proudly entered the academy at West Point, New York, from Floydsville, Belmont County, Ohio, on July 1, 1840, four months past his eighteenth birthday.

The Plebe or Fourth Class of 1841, of which Rankin Dilworth was a member, contained thirty cadets. From these ranks came men who would later serve with him in northern Mexico and some who would later lead Union and Confederate troops in the American Civil War. The conduct roll for 1841 lists Rankin Dilworth with forty-one demerits; the same page lists Cadet Ulysses S. Grant of the Third Class with sixty-seven, both cadets falling far short of the two hundred demerits required for a dismissal recommendation by the Academic Board. Demerits were awarded for offenses that were graded into seven categories; the most serious were the offenses of introducing spirituous liquors into the barracks and disobedience of the orders of a military superior (both eight demerits). However, for the same offense, an upperclassman would receive more demerits than a plebe. Dilworth received a maximum of ninety-six demerits his third year, and was ranked moderately high in conduct over his four-year stay at West Point.¹ His grades placed him as thirteenth of twenty-five in his graduating class of 1844.

Six years after admission to the United States Military Academy, Rankin Dilworth chose to record the first entry in the diary while stationed with the 1st Infantry at Jefferson Barracks, outside St. Louis, Missouri. His last and final entry, dated September 19, 1846, found him with Gen. Zachary Taylor's army poised for an attack on the heavily fortified eastern side of Monterrey. In this attack, on September 21, 1846, young Lieutenant Dilworth was struck down and mortally wounded by a Mexican cannonball.

The editors of this diary hope that their efforts are a fitting memorial for Rankin Dilworth and all his comrades that were slain before the walls of Monterrey, and serve as a reminder to

our readers, who we hope might pause for a moment to think of the sacrifices made by many of our fine young men and women who so proudly serve their country.

The life of Rankin Dilworth is remembered today only in the cold statistics of the official records (Register of Graduates and Former Cadets at West Point) which tersely note:

1218 Rankin Dilworth

B-OH: Inf: Mortally wded Monterrey: D-27 Sept 46 2LT a-24.

These records would remain as his only earthly testament, had it not been for Charles Passel, a descendant of Rankin Dilworth. Mr. Passel had found Dilworth's diary in materials belonging to his mother, Mrs. Cornelia Beakley Passel. Her mother, Abigail P. Dilworth Jones, was Rankin Dilworth's sister, and had received his personal effects after his death. Her name plate is affixed inside the cover of the diary.

The small diary in which Dilworth composed his record measures six by eight inches, a handy size to carry on a military campaign. It is of sturdy construction, coming from a time in our history when quality writing materials and binding were more important than today. The paper is approximately twenty pound weight by modern standards, and shows no water marks. The spine, once covered with leather, is now protected with blue adhesive tape, as the threads used to sew the gatherings are weak with age. The stiff boards are marbled and in remarkably good condition considering age. The corners of the volume are dog-eared and rubbed, and some pages are mottled by occasional discoloration, mute evidence of its daily exposure to the weather and the rough treatment expected in the military camps of southern Texas and northern Mexico.

The little diary also served as a composition book for Lieutenant Dilworth. Although the threads have parted on the first gathering of the book, an essay written in the same careful hand and entitled "On the Rise and Fall of Nations" is found in the front portion, and on the last page of that gathering and the first of the other is a lyric-like passage praising the beauty and trials of life. These two pages are not included in this book.

Some of the pages in the first gathering have been torn out, perhaps for use as writing materials by the author, or by some unknown censor who read the material after Dilworth's death. No diary text materials are missing; the diary begins on the third leaf of the second gathering and proceeds through two additional gatherings and part of a third for a total of ninety-four consecutive pages.

The text is mostly written in a very graceful hand, evidently composed on a table or a desk. However, some entries show a somewhat cramped style indicative of field entries transcribed in poor light or with the book braced on the author's leg in some unstable resting position. The characters in the earlier portions of the diary are in a very fine line in black ink. Later a blunter pen is used, but the ink color remains the same. The fine script returns from time to time, indicating the possibility of Dilworth's using an amanuensis. Little emendation was made by the author, but a few sentences are left unfinished.

Rankin Dilworth's diary documents the life and times of a young American officer summoned to south Texas to implement the war policy of the James K. Polk administration. The dispute between the United States and Mexico, although of a more general nature, focused on the admission of Texas to the Union, and specifically to possession of the so-called Nueces

Strip. The Republic of Mexico claimed the Nueces River as the southern boundary of Texas, while the United States asserted the Rio Grande as Texas's southern boundary. Possession of the Nueces Strip became the tangible issue used to initiate the war.

In June 1845 Brevet Brig. Gen. Zachary Taylor was ordered to move his "army of observation" into the disputed area in order to protect American claims to ownership. Taylor's initial buildup took place north of the present Corpus Christi, near the Nueces River at a camp-site well chosen to assert American interests in the Nueces Strip without unduly exciting Mexican authorities.

The winter of 1845 passed without diplomatic resolution of the boundary dispute between the United States and Mexico, despite several American efforts. President Polk, whose patience was exhausted by the Mexican government's cold shoulder, ordered the movement of Taylor's army into the disputed Nueces Strip in March 1846. President Polk hoped that this aggressive action would pressure Mexico to the bargaining table. But he had critically misjudged the Mexican Government's resolve to retain possession of its northern borders. Mexican national honor, gravely insulted by the loss of Texas, was now aroused to the brink of war. At a time in their history in which government overthrow occurred almost as frequently as the change of season, no Mexican president who wished to retain his office could now dare to hint of any negotiations with the Americans.

After a march overland from his winter camp near Corpus Christi, General Taylor settled his army on the Rio Grande opposite Matamoros without Mexican armed opposition. The American camp had to be supplied by provisions from ships off-

loaded at Point Isabel, about twenty-five miles northeast of Matamoros on the Texas coast. Supplies were then hauled by wagons over land in their final leg of the journey to the camp on the Rio Grande.

The Mexican Army which garrisoned Matamoros almost immediately began to erect earthen works across the river designed to place the American camp in a crossfire. In response to this threat, General Taylor ordered the construction of a single large earthen fortification. Originally named Fort Texas, it was to become known as Fort Brown, in honor of its first commander Maj. Jacob Brown, who was later killed while defending this fortress from Mexican attack. Fort Brown was the nucleus around which the city of Brownsville would later be built.

A short period of uneasy peace descended on both sides of the river as both armies awaited further orders from their political leaders. American soldiers daily lined the banks of the river to view their Mexican counterparts across the river. Tops on every young soldier's list of favorite customs was the practice of daily nude bathing by women in the afternoon. In the balmy evenings, the pleasing sounds of music filtered across the river from Mexican regimental bands playing romantic arias from operas.

The first armed clash of the war occurred on April 25, 1846, near Rancho de Carricitos on the north bank of the Rio Grande. Mexican cavalry forces of Anastasio Torrejón ambushed a patrol of United States Dragoons led by Seth Thornton, capturing Thornton and most of his troopers. In his official report to Washington on this clash, Taylor wrote that "hostilities may now be considered as commenced...." Gen. Mariano Arista, under orders from the Mexican government, had begun offen-

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sive actions to remove Taylor's army from the Rio Grande. Torrejón's cavalry was the vanguard of a Mexican force of infantry, cavalry, and artillery that was to cross the Rio Grande from both above and below Taylor's camp. General Arista planned to place Taylor's outnumbered forces in the jaws of a trap by cutting off all supplies from Point Isabel. Arista began crossing his infantry below Matamoros at Longoreno by April 30, but was delayed in this movement, giving the American army precious time to escape. Taylor's forces with a train of supply wagons left the Rio Grande camp on May 1, and by a forced march toward Point Isabel managed to outdistance the pursuing Mexican infantry. Maj. Jacob Brown and about five hundred defenders were left behind to garrison Fort Texas. By May 3 the booming of cannons at Fort Texas, as reported by Dilworth, commenced to be heard by the American soldiers as far away as Point Isabel. The Mexican army had commenced an attack on that garrison.

Three days were spent by Taylor's men strengthening the defenses of Point Isabel against possible Mexican attack, but finally on May 7 the American army turned its face toward the Rio Grande again and marched to relieve the siege on Fort Texas.

On the road between Point Isabel and Fort Texas, Taylor's army delivered two stinging defeats to the Mexican forces that blocked their way—at Palo Alto on May 8, and at Resaca de la Palma on May 9. The battle at Palo Alto clearly demonstrated the superiority of the new highly mobile American artillery, while the battle at Resaca de la Palma was highlighted by hand-to-hand combat with saber and bayonet. The defeat of the Mexicans on May 9 was complete, and a disorganized and

routed Mexican force was driven back across the Rio Grande to Matamoros. Lieutenant Dilworth saw his first action a few days later in the capture of the Mexican village of Barita.

From Barita, Taylor had hoped to launch a flanking operation to capture Matamoros, but this effort was to prove unnecessary. American forces crossed the Rio Grande on May 18, and General Taylor accepted the surrender of Matamoros without opposition. The remnants of the once proud Mexican army retreated from Matamoros on a disastrous march to the west through an arid land marked with dry water holes. Their final destination was Monterrey.

President Polk, who had signed a declaration of war against Mexico on May 13, felt that the best American strategy for rapid victory over Mexico was to "conquer a peace." Polk ordered General Taylor to commence offensive operations that would lead to the capture of northeastern Mexico. For the first time in our history, American soldiers would be engaged in a foreign country on a war of conquest.

The military strategy for this region was dictated by geography. The Sierra Madre Oriental, a rugged range of mountains extending into Mexico from the west at the Big Bend and curving east to Tampico, effectively walled off the northeastern section from the remainder of the Republic. In 1846, only one major connection existed; the ancient trade route that passed through the mountains between Saltillo and Monterrey. The capture of Monterrey by American arms would effectively seal the fate of northeastern Mexico. However, between Matamoros and Monterrey, a distance of almost two hundred miles, the country was a semi-arid desert that had neither the water nor the food to support a large body of men and horses. General

Island, and along the north bank of the Rio Grande from its mouth up to Matamoros. In fact, many more volunteer soldiers were recruited for service than could possibly be used in the campaign against Monterrey. Many of these volunteers spent their year of federal enlistment in Rio Grande camps and not a few sickened and died from unsanitary conditions there. The poet's admonition that "the paths of glory lead but to the grave" was tragically fulfilled as many a young man was destined to fill an unmarked soldier's grave far away from home on the banks of the Rio Grande.

The American expeditionary force, numbering but six thousand volunteer troops and regular soldiers, was assembled at Camargo and ready to advance on Monterrey by August 19, 1846. The army marched southwest toward Monterrey by divisions, with that of Gen. William Worth as the vanguard. Dilworth's diary graphically reports on the assembly of Taylor's army at Camargo and the resulting overland march. After a period of rest and consolidation at Cerralvo, the army completed the march and was camped on the outskirts of Monterrey by September 19. American engineering and topographical officers sent to examine the newly constructed defenses of Monterrey returned that evening with very sobering reports.

The city had recently been well fortified by Mexican military engineers to withstand attack. Military structures lined both sides of the roads leading into Monterrey from the north and the west. These defenses were specifically designed to place the roads into Monterrey under an intense crossfire of artillery shot and shell. Looming to the north of the city stood La Citadela, a bastioned fortress of thirty guns that dominated the principal roads leading into Monterrey from the north. To the east of this

Arista's disastrous overland march with his army from Matamoros to Monterrey had convinced General Taylor that Monterrey must be approached from some other route.

The route of advance to Monterrey was finally dictated by the availability of supplies and water. It was decided that troops and supplies were to be moved up the Rio Grande by steamboats to the village of Camargo, about a hundred miles from Matamoros overland. Camargo is situated on the right bank of the Rio San Juan, about four miles from its confluence with the Rio Grande. From this site, using wagons and burros to transport supplies, the American army was to march over land southwest to Monterrey, following well-watered routes near the Rio San Juan and the Rio Alamo. The little village of Cargo became a major depot for American supplies shipped from the mouth of the Rio Grande on that marvel of mid-nineteenth century American technology, the high-pressure, sidewheel, shallow draft steamboat. The Quartermaster Department, as early as June 1846, had agents traveling the Mississippi River to purchase or charter for federal service the needed steamboats. Thus began an extensive riverboat traffic on the Rio Grande.

General Taylor's immediate problems were then to find more soldiers to fill the thin ranks of a peace-time American army that had been decimated for the past generation by Congressional cost-cutting. President Polk solved this problem by an act that requisitioned from the several states a quota of volunteer soldiers for federal service of one year or until the end of the war. State enlistment stations were swamped with glory-seeking recruits, and thousands of disappointed men had to be turned away as quotas were rapidly filled. By July 1846, white tents marking the camps of volunteer regiments were seen at Brazos