



Juan Cortina

Mexican Folk Hero



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Known as the Robin Hood of the Rio Grande, Juan Nepomuceno Cortina (1824–1894) stands as a champion of Mexican civil rights in Texas.

Juan Cortina was born in Camargo in Tamaulipas, Mexico, to an aristocratic family in 1824. His mother inherited a large cattle ranch in the Rio Grande Valley around Brownsville, where he moved as a young boy.

The War with Mexico In his early twenties, Cortina fought in the War with Mexico against the United States, serving as a cavalryman. After the war, he moved to the north side of the Rio Grande, where he was charged at least twice by Texas authorities as a cattle rustler. He was not arrested, though, and he remained popular with the Mexicans in the area.

Hero of the Poor After the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848), which established the Texas boundary at the Rio Grande, Cortina rose in prominence as a leader of poor Mexicans along the river whose lands were being taken by the U.S. government. He also acted as a political boss for the South Texas Democratic Party.

Making of an Outlaw Then, on July 13, 1859, Juan Cortina witnessed an act that would be the start of “Cortina’s War.” In Brownsville, he saw Anglo marshal Robert Shears pistol-whipping one of Cortina’s ex-employees. Cortina demanded that the marshal stop abusing the man. When Shears refused to stop, Cortina shot the officer in the shoulder and carried his friend to safety on horseback. In those moments, Cortina officially became a legend and an outlaw.

Two months later, Cortina returned to Brownsville with 40 to 80 armed men. He released several Mexicans from jail and killed four Anglos, each of whom he claimed had killed Mexicans and had not been punished. Cortina and his men seized control of the town and rode through the streets crying “Viva Mexico!” and “Death to the gringos!” Cortina raised the Mexican flag above Brownsville and proclaimed it the Republic of the Rio Grande.

A Call for Rights Two days later, a Mexican official convinced Cortina to take his troops to his family

ranch, where he issued a proclamation of rights for Mexican Texans.

The proclamation called on the “sacred right of self-preservation” and demanded justice for the oppressed and abused Mexican residents in the Rio Grande Valley.

Hot Pursuit In the following months, Cortina and his army were pursued by forces, including the Texas Rangers and a joint Mexican-Anglo force of militiamen. Cortina quickly defeated the latter group, though one of his closest lieutenants, Tomás Cabrera, was captured by a town posse.

When the Texas Rangers got involved, they quickly hanged Cabrera, fueling the fire that drove Cortina. On December 27, the U.S. Army dealt Cortina’s forces a harsh defeat in Rio Grande City. His army was eventually forced to dissolve.

The Fighting Spirit Endures Cortina didn’t stop fighting. He returned to Mexico, where he fought against the French in the 1860s. He also took part in the American Civil War, fighting for the Union in Texas. He was later promoted to general in the Mexican Army and proclaimed himself the governor of Tamaulipas, the state in which he was born.

In 1876, largely because of American diplomatic pressure, Mexican dictator Porfirio Díaz put Cortina in prison in Mexico City, where he was held until 1890. He returned to Tamaulipas and died in 1892.

Review Questions

1. Why do you think Cortina is called the Robin Hood of the Rio Grande?
2. What event sparked “Cortina’s War”?

Critical Thinking

3. **Summarizing** What was Cortina’s major contribution to Mexican Texans in the mid-nineteenth century?