Juan Cortina
Mexican Folk Hero

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

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.

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?