

Episode 2: The Civil War, History & Memory

Transcript

Word Count: 8,703 words

Steve Sisson: Hello everyone and welcome back to the History and Memory Podcast. I'm here with Dr. Alexander Mendoza. Hello Alex, how are you?

Alex Mendoza: Good, glad to be back.

Steve Sisson: Good. Well, we are going to be covering a really interesting period of US history, but especially history of *la frontera* and Texas history, the area that we're talking about in this, we've been talking about throughout this podcast series. And this area in this time frame is the time frame that's of most personal interest to me. I'm interested in all of the history of the West in this particular period from basically 1800 to the Civil War is really interesting of how America is becoming America and how all these parts of the world that had so many various competing interests are now solidifying into some kind of continuity or consistency of a place or a person or a nation, and so it's very, very interesting to me. But one thing I wanted to set up the stage before we get started on are specific characters that we're going to be talking through.

And we're going to be covering basically the period between the Texas independence and the Mexican American war, and then from Mexican American war into the Civil War, and that was that's where we'll end at the end of the Civil War in this episode. So just so people have a context. But one thing I wanted to set the stage for folks is the period of time prior to this and the period of time that we'll be having after this, while they're not peaceful periods, this whole area has always got a lot of contention going on, a lot of varying interests folks who usually fix those interests outside the law because the law is not in existence in this part of the world for extended periods of time, or the law is there's vying contrasting elements of whose law and what law. But in general, it's a relatively peaceful period. But from 1835 into 1865, this '30 window, we have many, many wars, nonstop guerrilla and actual military actions from Texas independence to the Mexican war to the Comanche and Indian depredations that are going on during this time frame.

There's a tiny little thing called the Cart War. There's another thing called the Cortina War. And then we go into the Civil War, and all this is happening South of San Antonio and north of Saltillo, but really right on the borderline, right at the border area. We'll be talking about Laredo early on in this episode, which is the epicenter of some challenging things that are going on that will be playing out throughout the entirety of this podcast. But I think this is something I just want to highlight.

This not only are all these things happening, but there's also constant guerrilla warfare going on all around the time. Can you kind of set the stage for us a little bit going into this into the Mexican American war, what this area looks like, and just how fraught the situation is for our main group that we're paying attention to, which are Tejanos, who are Mexican Americans living in this border region.

Alex Mendoza: I think it's a tumultuous time for anyone living in Texas during this time period. And if you think about it like in a broad concept, for example, sixteen years, I mean, you're not even entering into adulthood, but in the span of sixteen years, Texas went through four flags, four national flags. A fifth national flag, if you include just the border region, the Rio Grande Valley and the Republic Of The Rio Grande, but Texas shifted from the Mexican flag in 1835 to the Republic of Texas flag in 1836 to The US flag in 1845 and then the Confederate flag in 1861. And sixteen years is not a lot, not even a full generation, but the idea that there could be peace during this tumultuous time period with you are still having native threats coming in from the Western part of the state. You still have this nebulous area of the border, which is prone to outlaws, and you have incoming American migrants continuing to rally for land and additional political and economic clout, it's just a recipe for disaster.

And this is not even talking about two wars, the Mexican War from 1846 to 1848, which is been in part over Texas, and then obviously the Civil War after 1861. So, you have just a series of catastrophic events coupled then with population groups that are trying to just survive and it's a recipe for all these confrontations based on law and order, based on civilization, and based on how people are going to try to just coexist.

Steve Sisson: Yeah. It's super it's so very interesting to me. Now as we go into the Mexican American war, basically, the president of The United States at this time is Polk. He just basically decides to pull basically, just decides to invade and decides we want that land, and we're gonna go do what we need to do to take it, pretty much. Right?

I mean, you there's not a lot of diplomacy prior to this. There's mostly just military action by sending Taylor Zach Zachary Taylor down into the area. Set this up for us a little bit about how it might be feeling for someone who's living in Laredo at the time to be thinking about what the heck is happening as you see American troops sudden suddenly coming in in in that area, passing through that area to go further south into Mexico proper. What what do you think the mindset of a of a average Laredo in this is at that moment who's, let's say, at Tejano and thinking about these things?

Alex Mendoza: You know, from Laredo all the way down to the mouth of the Rio Grande, Brownsville, the Mexican Texans who lived there, the Tejanos community who existed there just simply wanted to survive, and they live in that great area. They're still considered Mexican, but they're not really believers in terms of the Texas Republic. When they see a foreign army, Zachary Taylor, go to the mouth of the Rio Grande and then move closer down to the Brownsville area, what becomes Brownsville, then ultimately they just simply want to be left alone. And the leaders from this area, they believe in something that we'll come back to, which is this notion of a frontier identity, a regional sense of independence away from federal authorities. So when we're talking about those flags flying over Texas in that span of sixteen years, technically you could actually add a fifth flag, the Republic Of The Rio Grande which in the border region between the Texas Revolution and the Civil War, they wanted to carve out another independent region, the Republic Of The Rio Grande like the river.

So yes, they are there, they are frustrated, they want to be left alone, they want to just coexist as best as they can. And to them, it is just another headache, something that will come back to once the war with Mexico is over.

Steve Sisson: But this is read by Texans and then by the Americans as what side are you on? Right? That's not read as a oh, we understand they're coming in as not necessarily understanding. Even Mirabeau Lamar, who is so important to this piece of the puzzle, he's just north in Austin, basically. Right?

And he's asking, what are you? Like, that's the name of this chapter is, like, are you a are you a are you a Mexican or are you a Texan? And their answer is, we're Mexicans who just want to be left alone, but then there's this other it's just it's just representative of the challenges that are going to be going on throughout this hundred and fifty year. I mean, even challenges that are going on today.

Alex Mendoza: You know, every major city in Texas, you have a sister city across the river people cross over, use the bridge, and in happier times, it was a source for tourists. But when Lamar makes his way down to Laredo, he is doing so on behalf of now the United States government. He already had his stint as the president of the Republic Of Texas, but he is just flummoxed by the idea that he receives a petition from Laredo Tejanos asking to remain part of Mexico as if they have any say in what these nation states are deciding upon themselves hundreds of miles away. But Lamar is taken aback by such an affront in his estimation that these Laredo Tejanos want to stay as part of Mexico. So, he scolds them officially, and he basically offers like this condemnation Laredo is gone forever from Mexico and gives them a choice.

You could stay here or you could cross the river and go back to Mexico. And many in Laredo do, they cross the river and go to Nuevo Laredo New Laredo, which is the city had been founded in the 1750s. So, it's not even a century old when this happens. But in the 1840s, many Laredo Tejanos did choose that very simple thing and just crossed the Rio Grande and chose to set up shop and reveal the way to Mexico.

Steve Sisson: Interesting. So, sketch for us how we get from what are the main things we need to be thinking about here as we move and transition from the Mexican American War into the Civil War, this period of time, this window. There are a lot of challenges going on in the area as you're talking about, so many things playing out, but what are the ways in which this area is dealing with this obvious, for those of us who are into history, we're very aware of the steps and things that happened in the eighteen thirties and forties and fifties as the Civil War set up, but we're mostly thinking about those things as they're relating to Richmond, Virginia, or relating to Washington DC. We're not thinking about how they're being dealt with on the border. And during this window of time, Texas is getting more and more slaves are coming into the area because it's obviously, it's financially lucrative.

There's a lot of areas in Texas that could really benefit from it. It also gives political clout and ability not just financial clout, but political clout. And at this time, we know all up in Washington DC, they're very, very, very concerned about who's who and what's what. Which parts of when you think about what's going on in Missouri, what was going on in all these other different areas during this window of time, every Texas has got to be important overall in the big picture. Obviously, it's so far south that it's probably going to end up going, but it's not that far I mean, you think about it, Missouri was in a lot of challenges.

Kansas was in a lot of challenges during this window of time. What were they going to end up being? And they're not that far away from where we are, but just set this up for us a little bit in terms of what's going on historically, especially for people in the valley and in San Antonio.

Alex Mendoza: Yeah. The challenges are the balance for free and slave. The nation had already split apart, and as the Compromise of 1820 as new additional territories are being acquired. The whole idea is simple. You can't have one state coming in as a free state without a slave state.

They needed that balance in the upper house, the senate. So by the time Texas comes in in the eighteen forties, it's going to come in as a slave state. And the balance at the time was Iowa coming in a year later as a free state. And what is shocking at the time is that Iowa had more towns than Texas than some people thought that Iowa was going to completely surpass in terms of economic growth, in terms of development, then what becomes a lone star state. But the notion of slavery throws in like an additional dynamic because of the bordering country of Mexico.

Now you mentioned obviously some of the territories, Missouri and Kansas, obviously in those territories, the idea that slaves could run away was something that was noticeable and part of the national fabric. And of course, slave patrols and controls to keep slaves at bay dominated. But in Texas, it's different because it's an international border and Mexico had already moved to outlaw slavery decades before. So in the period that Texas is incorporated—annexed into—the United States in the 1840s, the dynamic of adding slaves into the mix because normally when you think of the underground railroad, you think of South to North, but in Texas, you could have north to south or you could have slaves freeing from Texas into Mexico. So how Tejanos factor into all this is they're not largely slave owners.

There's just like less than a handful of Mexican Texans who actually owned any slaves and they're from the San Antonio area. But along the Rio Grande, along the border, Mexican Texans are always seen as suspicious. I mean, they're treated as disloyal because they are seen as suspicious to helping runaway slaves, providing information for potential runaway slaves, for helping and aiding runaway slaves make their way into Mexico. So, newspapers and official accounts always seem to treat Mexican Texans with this great sense of fear and trepidation. Ironically, those Tejanos who actually aid and help in the capture of runaway slaves are treated to notoriety.

The highest-ranking Confederate officer during the Civil War is a Laredo Tejanos who receives public acclaim and notoriety because he actually travels into Mexico because of his language and his ethnic background to help capture runaway slaves and return them to their owners for a reward. And the dichotomy is you move a little bit further south into the Brownsville area; you have other Tejanos who have been accused of aiding and abetting runaway slaves and therefore they are disloyal. So you have that additional dynamic kind of flavoring this tumultuous decade of the 1850s when the entire nation is being split apart in terms of half slave, half free. But in Texas, have that additional ingredient, which involves like how the janos factor into the mix because throughout the slave holding South, it was pretty easy to discern. Either you supported slavery, you owned slaves, but you never really had too much of a challenge from those that were non slave owners because they acquiesced and they towed the party line, but they can't figure out the role of Tejanos along the border.

And that's going to be one of the ingredients that kind of flavors the Civil War and how Tejanos are going to be treated.

Steve Sisson: So, let's move into the Civil War now and just be thinking a little bit about these conflicts. We think now we still are dealing with the shadow of the rebel flag in so many parts of our lives today. In 2026, we're still dealing with these. But at the time you I think sometimes people think that everyone in the South was pro Confederacy, but that's not true. There were many folks who were Texans of all stripes who were would have been union, but they're so far South in the Confederacy that they have to make a choice.

Some leave and go North and come to fight for that, but then they're worried about what will happen with their families that are still back there. How's that going to happen? How's that going to happen? Many of the ranch you hear about this with ranchers, some who felt strongly they needed to be a mayor, and they would go fight the war, but then they would have lots of horrible things happen to their families. But tell us what the Tejanos are feeling at this time.

What would make someone lean one direction or another? Would there be anything in particular? What are the things that are setting up this what are you? Johnny Reb or are you what do they call the unionists? I don't know.

Alex Mendoza: A Billy Yank.

Steve Sisson: A Billy Yank? Yes.

Alex Mendoza: Billy Yank and Johnny Reb.

Steve Sisson: Yeah. Yeah.

Alex Mendoza: You know, it's funny you mentioned Unionists because Texas has a lot of Unionists too. And what historians have kind of grappled with and I had a department chair who wrote a book on Texas unionists in the Gainesville area, just north of Denton, but it really comes

down to is whether you were a slave owner or not. In areas that had less propensity to own slaves for example, Eastern Tennessee with all its mountains, Western Virginia, which ends up seceding from Virginia during the Civil War with its mountain regions the West Virginia, the Mountaineers. And in Texas, it was the Central Texas region, which had a lot of German immigrants around the hill country. And because of that, they did not gravitate towards this blind subservience about slavery.

So, if you just scope things down a little bit further south, Tejanos were not enthusiastic about the institution of slavery because of their own ethnic heritage. Mexico's move against slavery a few decades earlier and touched into all this is the economic discrepancy of like they're never going to aspire to be slave owners for the most part.

Steve Sisson: So, There's also a piece here I just want to note that there's also a piece here of religion because Catholics generally were very not pro slavery in most cases, but yet Protestants have some, but yet the German Protestants most Germans were Protestant, the ones that came here because they had all kinds of challenges. They also I think the religious element is another piece of the puzzle here to think about what their ethics and their values are, their moral sense of what it is, also places it up. It's always intriguing to me how as someone who grew up in a Christian milieu, and yet I don't understand how anyone could think that slavery was good in that context, which is I think a little bit hard for many people who are studying the Civil War now to think how in the world could anyone make a religious justification for such. Yet, there were people that were definitely I've studied this. There's definitely a lot of religious argument people making religious arguments for why slavery is okay.

But I do think that's another piece of the puzzle that these that these are these are areas in which these two groups, Tejanos and German Americans at the time, are they're they're all they're very different in so many different levels than what we might call an not every Anglo American, but many of them. Right? Because most Anglo Americans at this point in time are not trying to build tight communities, they're trying to grow and expand and make things bigger and it's just frontier white mentality, which is, I'm going to just say it, it seems to be a part of this piece, John Wayne, shoot them up bang-bang, I take what I'm going to get, I got this. Right? Which also brings in something we haven't mentioned yet, which is the epitome of what I would call the Texas Rangers.

So the Texas Rangers start during this window of time. Correct? This is when they really become they not only are they are they founded and given more and mostly around the depredations that are happening from Apaches and Comanches and Mexican I mean, sorry, in Indian Indian depredations or indigenous and depredations. So talk a little bit about how we've got this mixing in this pot too, this Texas Ranger piece.

Alex Mendoza: As we continue to kind of move our way towards the role of the Texas Rangers, we also need to think about like how it keeps coming back to Major League Baseball, the new statue, and the Ranger group of the early twentieth century. But during this time period, again, they're modeled after the *compañías volantes* that we discussed during our last podcast. And

what's funny about that is that during this time period, these Texas Rangers have a very poor reputation because there is no real arm of supervision. You know, they're basically free to kind of do as they please. And the Tejanos call them *Los Diablos Tejanos* those devil Texans.

So they had a very negative interpretation of the Texas Rangers. And during this time period, as Anglo migrants are coming in from Tennessee and from Kentucky and from Alabama and elsewhere, they want land. And the only way they could get land after the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo is if they displace Mexican Texans from their land. And the Texas rangers become from the 1840s all the way to the early twentieth century, the instrument for how Anglo newcomers are able to obtain land. So when you thought you misspoke earlier, you actually did not because the Texas Rangers believe that Mexican outlaws are roaming and crisscrossing the Nueces Strip.

So, they're actually also attacking these purported Mexican outlaws, but they're not making any distinction if they're Texas residents or if they're actually coming in from across the Rio Grande. And that's the whole point, they make no distinction, but if they could eliminate some landowners and if they could intimidate others, then therefore the Anglo newcomers can acquire more and more pieces of land, which is something that's gonna build up to like that first Cortina War that you mentioned in 1859 when one prominent Tejan landowner finally has had enough of this extra-legal discourse that is displacing and discriminating against Tejanos.

Steve Sisson: Let's do it. So, let's unpack this because this is in your book, this is probably the most unexpected and yet juicy story. I think a novel needs to be written about this particular story from all the different places and points of view. It's so dramatic. It could be done really well.

Alex Mendoza: You mentioned a novel, but Cortina lives on to this day. I mean, he is like the equivalent of a Mexican Robin Hood, or he could be a potential bandit. So, he lived through songs throughout the late nineteenth century, and there's actually historians. I know my former thesis committee member, Dr. Jerry Thompson, who teaches at Texas A&M International University, he wrote a biography on both of these men.

And there's a current historian who's not looking so much at the actual facts but is looking at how they lived on in memory, in myth and in folklore.

Steve Sisson: Especially in the music, which is a huge part of the border region, who love their bandits. They love their bandits. Everyone's a bandit. If you're not a bandit, you're not actually a huge they that's the they're the highest level of personhood.

Alex Mendoza: Those late nineteenth and early twentieth century *corridos* really were something else.

Steve Sisson: And they're still being sung today. They're still singing the same ones. They're still so popular. Know? It's such a beautiful story.

It is very much Robin Hood. It's just the *La Frontera's* version of Robin Hood. It's pretty cool. So set the stage for us.

Alex Mendoza: So as we talk about both men, we have to kind of keep in mind that they are both born a couple of years apart in the mid-1820s, and during this time, they're technically both born in Mexico. I mean, Santos Benavides was born in Laredo. He is the descendant of the founder of Laredo, Tomas Sanchez, back in the 1750s. So he comes from a pretty prominent and wealthy family. He's always been well-to-do, economically viable, broad family, but they've made accommodations in Laredo.

And what I mean by accommodations as Anglo newcomers and European newcomers come in, they marry, there's *padrinos* and godparents. So Santos Benevides, even though he always has believed in this idea of regional autonomy and resistance to federal authority, at the same time, he is accommodating himself to the newcomers. Now in contrast, Juan Cortina, again, born in what is now Brownsville, only about 180 miles away from Laredo, approximately the same type of environment along the Rio Grande, also a native of Mexico in the 1820s, it's still not Texas Republic yet. He also grows up as a wealthy landowner, well-to-do, but in the 1850s, he doesn't want to accommodate to the Anglo newcomers, And the resistance that he has against the Anglo newcomers kind of eventually boils over in 1859 when a former ranch hand of his is being mistreated by the Brownsville sheriff. And the reason he has such a difficult time with this is because he's already been witnessing what I mentioned just a couple of seconds ago, which is displacement.

Displacement of Mexican Texans, displacement of Tejanos landowners, the political eclipse of their standing, even though they are the majority, they just seem to have no political clout, no political power in the 1850s. And eventually he has a confrontation with the sheriff, ends up shooting and wounding, and then having his former ranch hand and they flee to Mexico. This is going to be the beginning of the first Cortina War. There's going to be several Cortina Wars. And what it sort of reveals right on the eve of the American Civil War is just like this notion of identity and loyalty.

I mean, identity in terms of like how you see yourself. And Santos Benavide sees himself in the light that he is a Texan, that he kind of can accommodate himself to the newcomers and the decision makers in Austin. Whereas Cortina, who again, grew up only 180 miles away, sees himself differently. And this is going to be one of the frustrating elements of Confederate leaders from 1861 to 1865, they can't figure out the loyalty and the identity of these men because Cortina will agitate against Confederate authorities while Benavides will support Confederate authorities.

And even though his loyalty is kind of flavored by economic self-interest because he is a prominent landowner there and he wants to make things work, eventually he begins to resist Confederate authorities because their lack of loyalty towards him and not promoting him to become a general. And during this time, just to mention, there is a great deal of discrimination in

the US Army. For example, when African American troops are incorporated into the army after 1863, black troops cannot become officers and they have to be led by a white officer. And this is captured in the movie *Glory*. This is factual.

They're paid less. So for the Tejanos serving the Confederacy, there's the same idea that maybe they're not disciplined enough and maybe they're not loyal enough, and therefore Santos Benavides only reaches to the rank of colonel. He is the highest ranking Confederate officer, but yet never is able to cross that threshold and become a brigadier general or a major general, even though he's got men flocking to him, Tejanos, that want to leave their Anglo commanders to go serve on the Thirty Third Confederate Infantry Regiment down the Rio Grande.

Steve Sisson: And what is the battle scenes looking like here? What is the what is the Civil War construct? What are we seeing in battles in the in the border area? Where are some of these men going because they aren't going up to fight battles up in in the in what we would consider the standard Civil War places like Pittsburgh Landing. Right?

Alex Mendoza: Well, the Texas Brigade that actually does that. I mean, historians have kind of chronicled like why soldiers fought and those Texans that fought, they believed that they were defending their homes. So in their estimation, they leave all the way to Virginia, they fight in Robert E. Lee's army the Texas Brigade, other Texas units are fighting out in Tennessee, but what's unique is that most Tejanos don't want to leave. And there's reasons why they don't want to leave because in their estimation, they kind of view their local attachments just a little bit differently because they don't believe in concepts like the flag or these institutions like the Capitol in Austin.

They don't believe in abstract concepts like that. They believe their home is their home, what they physically see with their own eyes. And even though there's some Tejanos that fight in Tennessee and fight in Arkansas, the vast majority don't wanna leave. And the biggest problem that the Confederate States Army is gonna have with Tejanos soldiers is that they're not gonna be able to no. They're not gonna be able to make them leave because they just simply run away to Mexico.

And this is going to be like a perennial concern for not only Confederate authorities during Civil War, but US authorities all the way up to the World War I period. Like, how do you keep the Tejanos from not going back to Mexico when they don't want to be fighting for a unit, for a brigade, for a regiment? And this is always going to be

Steve Sisson: It also ends up being where really you start to see what is still considered or was considered when I was growing up prejudice against Tejanos and Mexican Americans. This idea, this is your quote, lazy, corrupt, and irresponsible. I didn't make those words up, you did. But that view was one that played through, a lot of that has to do with this misunderstanding of value. What one group values, another group recognizes as corrupt or irresponsible or lazy or afraid or chicken or whatever.

But whereas that is part of the cultural construct of family, regional connection, connection to land which is not land in terms of its property value but land because it's the place my father and mother, my grandfather, grandmother, all of my ancestors lived there, which is a very different view from the way that's viewed in Anglo American constructs. And so, to me it's really interesting to see, to read this and think about this because the prejudice I grew up with, right, that was in the space I lived in, a white part of a very Mexican American city, is these tropes which in my life, knowing all of the people I have ever known at every level who are Mexican American is not they've never been lazy, corrupt, or irresponsible. These are the actual opposite of what that is viewed and it's like, what is going what is this? And it's like, oh, it's just this old story that's been told for a very long time because of a misunderstanding between cultural values, I think. I think it's an important piece just to point out in generally.

Alex Mendoza: That's pretty precise and going back to our time at UT Austin. Ricardo Romo, who was then an associate professor, one of the books that he assigned for our Mexican American history class that he taught was a book by Arnoldo De Leon entitled, *They Called Them Greasers* which was like these attitudes and how they developed about the Mexican American community, the Tejano community in the Lone Star. And those ideas of corruption and laziness and slovenly behavior, I mean, they came from all over the place, but it basically came from trying to differentiate the Tejanos as another group, no, just others. That way they could continue to eclipse them politically and economically, and later on with segregation laws by the turn of the twentieth century in a different dynamic but it all revolves around that idea that they were other just different.

Steve Sisson: But they were other in the sense that an Anglo American who was scared shitless about going into battle and getting shot up and dying could say I'm going to stay and fight, which was a value of theirs because they have an attitude and an approach around conceptual constructs the way what is bravery, what is identity, and to someone who's from the border area, they're like, these are not values I value. I have a different set of values. To me, that othering is the recognition of difference. But these otherings are not non arbitrary. They are arbitrary.

They are based on a real thing, that they are other because they're different. And it's just who gets to play those cards, who gets to win at that game of cards. And in essence, in many cases, the Anglo Americans are playing with a set of cards that has more less number cards and more face cards because of just the way they can play it. Right? So it's not on an equal to equal basis.

But it's still interesting to me to pull this thread of saying, there are differences. Let's not deny that there's otherness here, it's just why are we playing that and where does it come from is really important for us to see that, yes, that's why we value diversity more these days, but diversity from the perspective of a person has a viable point of view which we want to honor and recognize as equal is a hard word, but just reasonable and we'll talk about it. Let's see what happens. Of course, talking is different than what happens in politics or what happens in terms of state law and whether or not you can speak Spanish when you're in a classroom has a lot

more to do with othering than it has to do with listening to someone's voice. I appreciate that completely, but I just think it's you were still dealing with the shadow of this time frame in strong way in in a lot of ways.

But what let's go let's go let's move into the Civil War proper, or maybe we can trace these Cortina Wars a little bit and see how that plays out, or what direction do you want to move this?

Alex Mendoza: Yeah. We need to think about Civil War because when I teach a Civil War class at a junior or senior level, here at a research one institution, everyone always wants to learn about Texas and the Civil War. What's the role of the Lone Star State? Because most of the students here are from Texas. It's a state school. But they're always shattered to learn that I suggest like, well, Texas didn't really have much impact in terms of battles or campaigns. The Battle of Galveston with a few dozen losses, you have a couple of massacres, you have the battle of Laredo, which only had like 400 people engaged, and then the ultimate Battle of Palmito Ranch which is technically after Robert E. Lee surrenders. So basically, all of those engagements, and I call them engagements, not really battles because they pale in comparison to the Battle of Gettysburg which had 100,000 men armies approximately.

They pale in comparison to the Battle of Atlanta with tens of thousands of casualties. They pale in comparison to the wars in Virginia. So in Texas, going back to this point of others, what Confederate authorities kind of figured out is that the naval blockade and the loss of the Mississippi River to the Confederacy made Texas important, but maybe not so in terms of like marauding armies marching back and forth, but for them to be able to sell cotton. And they couldn't sell it from the usual ports like Galveston and Corpus and the mouth of Rio Grande, but what they could do, they could the Rio Grande and then move it so it could be sold from Mexico. And this is where Tejanos and particularly Santos Benevides' regiment became so crucial because they were able to secure these Confederate cotton transports across the Rio Grande into Camargo, into Mexico so they could be sold without the scrutiny of US Naval authorities.

They found a role for them, even though they were continuously worried as manpower shortages trickled in after 1863, they couldn't get Tejanos to join the ranks of the Confederate army where they're needed the most, which is way off in Virginia or Tennessee or elsewhere. So the role they found for Mexican Texans in Santos Benevides was the main point person along the Rio Grande. Mean, he had a huge responsibility, basically patrolling over 100 miles worth of territory back and forth from Eagle Pass all the way down to like the middle part of the Rio Grande Valley. I mean, that was his domain and he knew that territory well and he secured all these Confederate transports of cotton. Ironically, money grew scarce in the Confederacy, I mean, the Tejanos started to disappear, and they started to desert and they started to go back to Mexico or just simply enlist in the Union army.

I mean, there's already other Mexican Texans trying to convince them to join or switch sides. They'll do so for the money; they'll do so for the pay. And many of them found this enticing, which only frustrates the Confederate authorities even more because they couldn't understand, like how can anyone switch loyalties? But for Tejanos who are used to working and living in this

nebulous area where flags don't matter much, just their regional identity matters more, their regional loyalty matters more, they're willing to switch sides. And as a consequence to that, you have Confederate authorities in Austin resisting the idea that Tejanos are to be trusted, that you need to promote Benavides.

And it's contentious all the way to the end of the Civil War. And to that end, even Benavides and his brothers, I mean, even after the surrender of Texas forces and Confederate forces, they flee into Mexico because they're not sure like what's going to happen to them. And what I think that indicates, what that suggests is that they are so afraid of the winds of war shifting in another direction and that they're going to be treated as traitors. They're not certain what their ramifications are going to be. So it takes them a while.

It takes them months, well over a year before they come back into Laredo and continue to coexist.

Steve Sisson: This just goes right back to where we started though. How would you think any different when you have all these various complications over a sixteen-year period, right? It is so many things happening, so many flags are changing, it is, now you can look and say, oh, you should have stayed loyal, but another vision is, hey, like, who knows who's going to come out on top? But there's a really interesting character we haven't discussed yet that I want to make sure we end on, and that's this character of Adrian Vidal who basically tell us a little bit about this character because it is a very interesting historical claim to fame that he has.

Alex Mendoza: Oh, he is a perfect epitome of someone who's just going to go where the money is, at least I think so. I mean, he joins the ranks of the Confederacy. He fights for the Confederacy, but then he's upset that he's not getting paid enough, that the accolades are not coming in, So he gets tired of the Confederacy. So, what's going on at the time, they have recruiters. The Union Army is making its way into Texas and they kind of have a base near the mouth of the Rio Grande where the US Navy can offer support.

And there's actually two Texas units, the first regiment of Confederate cavalry, and then there's a first regiment for a Union cavalry. So you have like coexisting units there operating the same general area, but Vidal is subject to what are known as *enganchaderos*, which are recruiters, essentially. Loosely translated *enganchaderos* are a recruiter who basically operates and translates, speaks Spanish, and is convincing Tejanos to join the ranks of the Union Army because they are there to liberate Texas from these authorities. So you have like this dilemma, I mean, because are you going to support the Confederacy who Basically, these are the state officials who oppressed you during the 1850s, during the 1840s. They're the ones who have taken away the land of your neighbors, your family members, or are you going to support Washington, D.C. authorities who maybe are responsible for the acquisition of Texas and the planting of The US flag, but they're far away and more abstract.

So you have, like, these internal dilemmas going on with Tejanos. So Vidal is subject to one of these *enganchaderos* who convinces him that it's time to switch the Union army, which he does.

And he fights for the Union army and ultimately just like he did with the Confederate army, he gets tired and frustrated. So he leaves the Union army and he goes and joins Mexican forces. So basically he's joining Cortina's rebels who are operating in the area.

Basically, he goes from Confederate to Union, to joining a band of Mexican rebels who are operating above and beyond law. And ultimately fate catches up to him. And at this time there are French imperialists operating in Mexico who happened to capture Vidal. Vidal's family is adamant that they need to do something to kind of rescue him, pay a ransom because that's how it's done in the nineteenth century, but to no avail. I mean, he's gone, he's executed.

And ultimately it's a fascinating story as to like how identity and loyalty just are a great matter to like many of these Texans. Obviously he is a notable figure, but I think that it's indicative of how these notions operated.

Steve Sisson: Yeah. Think he's a fantastic character to be thinking about what the challenges are particular in this window of time in this area. You just articulate, you just see it in his flipping, someone might call it, or optimizing, another person might call it. A lot of it has to do with your point of view and ultimately, he loses, which is very interesting who he loses too because now you've got imperial French forces in Mex in Mexico operating. I mean, we are we are now this is recognizing how important whatever's going on in the Civil War and on the borderline is to the rest of the world history, especially for the British, the French, the Germans.

They're this is they're paying attention to what's going on in America because of the vast amount of money and how much of the resources that they're using for the various things that you do in France. They come from cotton and as many of the other aspect, tobacco, other things that are being produced in the South primarily to export into those various European countries. And so it's just interesting. We think of, like, the twentieth century as a century in which there's spies and all these other things. There's a lot of this going on especially in the border area and in the nineteenth century as well so it's really interesting.

So as we wrap up here, this episode, let's pull on our thread of history and memory and you've got two things you bring up in the book around ways or things you brought up for this episode about what are two ways that we're remembering history. And so you've got one that's around elementary school in Laredo and another around a flag, so tell us a little bit about how these how we're going to see this memory piece linking up in a way that we're going to track throughout all of our episodes.

Alex Mendoza: Sure. Sure. Let's bring up like a contemporary account of what's going on in Texas like right now. Cesar Chavez, for example

Steve Sisson: Mhmm.

Alex Mendoza: Obviously he has been accused of some vile deeds in recent months.

Steve Sisson: Some very challenging things. Yes.

Alex Mendoza: Yes. Cities are renaming their street names. Statues have been taken down, like Denver took down a statue just a week ago of Cesar Chavez. I don't know what's going to happen to our alma mater. They have a statue of him in the West Mall area.

But the idea of, like, how Confederates were commemorated in Laredo that Santos Benavides, I mean, he did join the ranks of the Texas House of Representatives after the war. He was a local leading figure all the way up to the late nineteenth century, but by the twentieth century, Laredo decided to commemorate him. And one of the things that they did in the 1980s and the 1990s is that they named a school after him, Santos Benavides Elementary. And not only that, Laredo used to fly the Confederate battle flag, but it took it a step further. So Laredo adopted the identity of a city the city under seven flags, not six flags like the rest of Texas because they were at one point part of the Republic of the Rio Grande who tried to secede from Texas.

But what was unique is that their local airport, Laredo International Airport, they created like the mosaic on the floor. We are talking about all seven flags embedded into like a mosaic floor of the Laredo International Airport. So as you walk from one end of the airport to the other, you could see all of the flags of Texas. And one of those was the Confederate battle flag. And again, this was before the major controversies of the late 1990s and the early 2000s, as even the local paper decided to change its masthead from the battle flag best known for the Dukes of Hazzard, the Ku Klux Klan of the late twentieth century, but they began to kind of morph into a different direction.

So Laredo, in terms of honoring its Confederate past, has to reconcile and had to reckon with, like, how Santos Benavides, who captured slaves, how he fought for the Confederacy, and even though other state entities are moving against the direction of teaching that slavery was a cause of the Civil War, in Texas, we still recognize that slavery was a leading factor, if not the most important factor. But you have to reconcile, like, how you're going to commemorate and remember the past. And in terms of Santos Benevides and the Confederacy, Laredo is moving in that direction to sort of lend credence to the fact that maybe it was not proper discourse to embed a flag because of international visitors. You know, somebody flying in from New York City to Laredo on business, all of a sudden they are coming down the escalators and they see this giant rebel flag when other states have already moved in a different direction. So Laredo is kind of moving to replace and reimagine their memory of what things used to be.

But Santos Benavides was on the cover. Again, his image was on the cover of a phone book back in the 1980s. There are schools named after he became a local hero. But now the aftereffects of what the Civil War was about how he made people kind of rethink and in some cases reimagine.

Steve Sisson: It's just so interesting how many times this theme repeats and repeats and repeats. And as you mentioned, we're dealing with the shadow of these things today that, you and I, we opened this up with our personal experiences in the 90s around shifting view of what it

is to be a hero or how do we recognize the past? Do we make them heroes or do we see them as part of a larger picture, part of a regional picture or a timeframe picture but then spreads out or do we erase and move on completely from those? And we're still determining as a culture in various ways, which is so interesting, so many varying context, personal views, viewpoints, political viewpoints, religious viewpoints, economic viewpoints, and we've still got to come up with how we're going to operate. And to me, it's one of the great One of the things about politics that's so frustrating for many of us and almost all of us is that we have to do this but it's also one of the most beautiful things is because we do have to do this.

Right? So we must come to some kind of agreement or some kind of statement about how we're going to move and then we can then be we'll then be judged by some other hundred year fifty years from now, a hundred years from now, we'll be judged again by how we have focused on history and memory and what steps we've taken in those regards. But that to me is the beauty of humans. It's we are not infallible. We are there's the capital t truth is going to suddenly be viewed as a small t truth at some point in time.

And so it's just so cool to see these I mean, it's cool is the wrong word because it's both tragic and illuminating is maybe the better terms. It's tragic that we replay these same stories over and over again, but these are the ways that humans operate under duress and stress of war. And this window of time that we covered in this episode, this I called it thirty. You brought it back down to sixteen years, which is even crazier. So much that goes on that ends up playing out throughout the history, just of *La Frontera* and the border area, but all of Texas, all of The United States, all of Northern all what we may call the North America, and into Central And South America.

It's just it's just this little window of time has its waves like a drop in a lake and it just the waves reverberating out throughout history and time and something so small as these Cortina Wars are really highlighting something really endemic and important for us as a people to reconcile with, reconcile with, and move on from. So thank you so much for letting me be on this journey with you. It's a lot of fun to keep learning more and more about how this plays out. And you know, when we first started this project, Alex, I was like, wanted I was like, oh, I just love the history of Texas and I love this area and you and I can get along, but now I'm realizing just how much my framing of who I am or how I am in my place of Central Texas and how I grew up is so impacted by this idea of history and memory and impacted by this period of time. And so I think it's really cool.

And your book, you can't pull on these threads and make people aware. Look, you're still playing. You can try, but it's hard because it's in a book that's written about a pretty vast period of time, and then you can't hit all of the pieces, but we can do that a little more in this conversational context.

Alex Mendoza: Most definitely.

Steve Sisson: Cool. Well, thanks y'all for listening. We appreciate you. We'll be back in a little bit with another episode. Thanks for listening to History and Memory.