

The Rampage of the Espinosas, part 1

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Terrorists inspired by religious fanaticism launch a murderous attack on a culture they regard as godless, greed-based, racist and colonialist.

Fear-stricken, yet determined to protect themselves and discover and exterminate the terrorists, that culture retaliates with urgent violence, overriding civil liberties and resorting to extralegal actions, including torture.

Sound familiar? Maybe. But this happened in the mid-nineteenth century, not in the early years of the twenty-first, and these terrorists were Roman Catholic Hispanics, not Muslim jihadists.

The place they attacked was Colorado Territory.

Between January and October 1863 a pair of New Mexican-born brothers, Felipe and Vivian Espinosa, and later, their nephew José, verifiably slew ten Anglos, six around the gold camps of South Park, two in the Pike's Peak region, and two on the Conejos River. They also tried to take the lives of two other men, one near Fairplay and another by Fort Garland in the San Luis Valley. One woman was raped. They may have committed an eleventh murder near Huerfano Butte.

But rumor credited them with more than twice as many victims. Felipe himself, in writings found on his person after his death, claimed he and Vivian had slain thirty-two. "Ask in New Mexico," he wrote, "if any other two men have ever been known to have killed as many men as the Espinosas."

Anglos have called them the "Bloody Espinosas," America's first serial killers. Some Hispanics see them as patriots who dealt out payback for the Mexican War and America's conquest of the New Mexico homeland; others as religious zealots who punished Protestant oppressors and died martyrs to the Catholic faith. Many consider their exploits a shameful blemish on an honorable Hispanic-American heritage.

Sensitivities can still be bruised. As recently as the 1970s, the then-director of the Fort Garland museum staged re-enactments of the dramatic moment when famed plainsman Tom Tobin dumped the severed heads of Felipe and José out of a gunnysack in front of the commandant's office — heads fashioned of papier-mache — much to the disgust of Hispanics. The museum's current director, Rick Manzanares, says people still stop by asking to see the real heads, which they imagine have been preserved. (They haven't.)

What caused the Espinosas' outbreak? If theirs was truly a vendetta against Anglos, was it because, as one tale asserts, they were lordly New Mexican hacendados until their patriarch Don Juan Espinosa was dispossessed of his vast herds and lands and outlawed by the new Anglo rulers after the American takeover in 1846? Or was it because Anglos crushed the 1847 Pueblo- New Mexican revolt and hanged its suspected leaders, outraging the Espinosas' Hispanic patriotism? Did perceived Anglo disrespect for the Catholic faith kindle righteous wrath in the hearts of these devout Penitentes?

AT ONE TIME or another these theories and more were advanced and believed. But Felipe himself described a motive far less sweeping: "They (the Anglos) ruined our family — they took everything in our house; first our beds and blankets, then our provisions. Seeing this we said, 'We would rather be dead than see such infamies committed on our families!'"

The evidence supports Felipe's claim, discrediting some of the more patriotic sentiments cited for the brothers' rampage, at least regarding their initial clash with the law, if not their later exploits.

[Espinosa raid map.]

Their first documented crime, in mid-December 1862, was a robbery and assault near Galisteo, NM. Their victims were not Anglos but fellow Hispanics, a freighter (who recognized them as neighbors from Colorado's Conejos Grant) and a Catholic priest whose shipment they hijacked.

To reclaim this property and arrest the robbers, a ten-man dismounted detail of Company D, First New Mexico Cavalry, out of Garland, raided the Espinosa home in San Rafael (now Paisaje) on January 16, 1863, provoking a firefight; one trooper died. Ironically, this first man to perish at the hands of the Espinosas was a paisano, a corporal named Lòpez. The officer in charge, an Anglo, Lt. Nicholas Hodt, was wounded. George Austin, another Anglo, suffered a broken leg.

Later, the Garland commandant, Capt. E. Wayne Eaton, listed the items confiscated after the shootout: "4 beds and bedding, 1 Beaver trap, 2 water buckets," as well as eight cows and oxen, other livestock and "1 trunk." The confiscations, Eaton wrote, would pay the costs incurred in burying the soldier and in "hunting for the ... murderers." Perhaps the very beds Eaton mentioned were property belonging to the priest and stolen from the teamster, which Felipe disingenuously complained had been taken from his family.

The day of the shoot-out, Colorado United States Marshal A.C. Hunt dashed off a note to the Rocky Mountain News Weekly: "We have just had a skirmish with a party of Mexican bandits ... in which the few troopers who were here came off second best." Soon after, Hunt offered a \$50 reward in the same paper for the "apprehension and delivery to me, dead or alive, of three Mexicans...JESUS M. SANCHEZ..., and BROBAN and PHILLIP OSPENACIA ..." Despite the phonetic spelling, it is clear that

Viviàn and Felipe were the wanted men, together with Sàncchez, who may have been an uncle.

Hereafter Sàncchez drops from sight; Felipe and Viviàn slipped into hiding, probably in the snowbound fastnesses of the San Juans. Here they waited two months, nursing their rage. Viviàn, in a diary he later kept, wrote that the “alive or dead” reward, together with the attack on their home, prompted them to swear an oath to “exterminate the Americans.”

WHEN THE WEATHER BROKE, they set out to make good their vow. On March 16 they claimed their first victim, Franklin William Bruce, on Hardscrabble Creek at the eastern edge of the Wet Mountains. Bruce, who had been building a sawmill, was shot through the heart and his body mutilated, a large cross cut into his chest.

Two days later, on March 18, it happened again, to Henry Harkins, also a sawmill worker, in a canyon ten miles south of old Colorado City. Harkins’s head had been split open with an axe, his brains strewn about, and his upper body severely gashed. In both cases, the victims’ possessions were ransacked and plundered, perhaps in reprisal for what had happened at the Espinosas’ home, perhaps simply in a mad outburst of hate.

Two such atrocities so closely linked in space and time sparked a flare-up of concern in the Pike’s Peak area. Hostile Indians were suspected; so were roving bands of Confederate guerrillas. The sheriff of Fremont County picked up the trail of the murderers but lost it at Ute Pass; we know nothing else of his pursuit. A sheriff’s posse from Colorado City briefly poked around Wilkerson Pass. Then the killings stopped and fears ebbed. The Espinosas went to ground in a hideout they had discovered after turning south from Ute Pass. This was at Grape Spring in the broken country along Fourmile Creek north of Cañon City.

The lull lasted 21 days— incidentally, a period encompassing Holy Week, a time of intense spirituality for Penitentes. Then, on April 8, two miners, Jacob Binkley and Abram Shoup, were murdered and mutilated at their campsite near the Kenosha House on the northeastern rim of South Park. On April 10 the shot and mangled body of a mail-station operator named J.D. Addleman was found near his cabin at the edge of the Park southeast of Wilkerson Pass. His house was also ransacked.

Afterward the Espinosas returned to Grape Spring where they remained idle for another two weeks. But they had unleashed forces that would soon spin out of control. Abram Shoup was a brother of Lt. George L. Shoup, a staff officer for the First Colorado Cavalry and one of the heroes of the 1862 New Mexico campaign against Texan invaders. The assumption at headquarters, Military District of Colorado, was that the troubles in South Park were the work of Rebel partisans, or “jayhawkers.” A decision was made to dispatch troops. Twenty men of Companies E and F of the First Colorado left Denver on April 15, commanded by Lts. Luther Wilson and John Oster.

Soon troops were escorting stagecoaches, patrolling, and keeping watch at outlying ranches. But for the most part they seem to have spent their time loafing, hunting the abundant game in the Park, and drinking in the saloons of Fairplay. Finally on April 22, near Weston's ranch in the lower Park, some troopers of Co. F arrested "two men...who are suspected," according to the diary of Pvt. Romine H. Ostrander.

THE FIRST COLORADO was a tough outfit, disinclined to observe niceties but even more volatile now that they had Lt. Shoup's brother to avenge. Ostrander's diary for the following day says "the

Which raises a question. Civilian lawmen are conspicuously absent in this period. After the killings of Bruce and Harkins, the Fremont and El Paso County sheriffs had quit the trail. But Park County had a sheriff, Cullen Farnham, and the Territory had Marshal Hunt. Where were they? The probable explanation is that federal court was in session at Central City. Hunt would have been there, and possibly Farnham too; one case on the docket required the testimony of witnesses from Frying Pan Gulch, which may have lain in his jurisdiction.

Colorado had only been a territory for two years and its local government structure was far from fully fledged. Militia often stepped in to help civilian officials maintain order. But the First Colorado, composed largely of busted-out miners, prospectors and gamblers, was ill-suited for peace-keeping. Lt. Shoup was a popular officer; the turbulent Firsters ached to requite his loss. This strong feeling, combined with the terror that was sweeping South Park, made a combustible mix.

Then the Espinosas shed more blood. On April 25, for the first time in a populated area and before eyewitnesses, they shot and hacked to death a miner, Bill Carter, near the Cottage House on the road from Montgomery to Fairplay, just as Edward Metcalf drove up in his ox-wagon. Vivian Espinosa shot Metcalf, striking him in the chest, but the ball was stopped by a copy of President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation which Metcalf had stowed in a breast pocket. A man named Allen, living at the Cottage House, spied the killers and fired at them, but without effect. The Espinosas bolted. Metcalf and Allen quickly reported that the "jayhawkers" weren't Confederates after all, but Mexicans. From then on, no dark-complexioned man in South Park was safe.

For some reason the Espinosas now took refuge not in their Grape Spring hideout but in the heart of the Park, amid the gloomy pine forests of the Red Hills two miles east of Fairplay. On the evening of April 27, where the Denver road passed through a defile in the Red Hills, they shot and viciously tomahawked Fred Lehman and Sol Seyga, miners living at California Gulch who were returning home from district court where Lehman had testified. Then they returned to Grape Spring.

The bodies were discovered shortly afterward by traveling companions who had lagged behind. One, Nathan Hurd, found Lehman's paper collar pinned to a tree; on it was written, in Spanish, a statement that "vengeance was to be wreaked on the Americans as a sacrifice to the Virgin," the first evidence of a religious motivation for the murder spree.

A man rode into Fairplay to report the incident and returned with Lt. Wilson and some troopers.

Presently a man named John Foster came strolling up the road from Fairplay. Foster was a parishioner of Pastor J.L. Dyer, the famed “snowshoe itinerant” who traveled between mining camps on either side of the Mosquito range using a pair of handmade skis. But Foster was unknown to Wilson, the troopers, or the friends of Lehman and Seyga.

Though no reports say so, Foster may have been of dusky coloring. At any rate, he looked suspicious to the militia and they to him, armed men standing over two corpses in the twilight-darkened road. Someone in Wilson’s party fired at Foster, who took to his heels in terror, convinced Wilson’s men were the murdering Mexicans. The militiamen, equally certain Foster was one of the killers, charged after him.

FOSTER RAN AN INCREDIBLE MARATHON the two miles back toward Fairplay. Somehow — maybe owing to drunkenness — the mounted militiamen never managed to overtake him. But word spread like a lightning fire in dry grass that one of the fiends preying on Anglos had been flushed out. An angry crowd gathered and joined the chase. Poor Foster kept up his desperate flight, even losing his coat and boots as he tore through the brush. Inevitably, though, he began to tire as revenge-crazed troopers and a growing lynch-mob closed in on him.

He collapsed exhausted at the door of a house on the edge of Fairplay where, providentially, Father Dyer was in residence. The respected minister spoke up for him and dispersed the clamoring throng with a stern lecture. Foster improbably survived. Others would not be so lucky.

This is the first of two parts.

Charles Price, a native of the Southern Appalachians, wised up later in life and married into a Colorado pioneer family, in which he strives to win the good regard of his father-in-law, Salida’s resident curmudgeon Ray Perschbacher. Price has written five novels and currently aims to write one about the Espinosas. He and his wife Ruth live in Burnsville, North Carolina.