

JOURNAL *of the* WEST[®]

Vol. VIII, No. 1

JANUARY, 1969

A comprehensive, illustrated quarterly magazine devoted to
Western History and Geography

OAKAH L. JONES, JR., *Guest Editor-in-Chief*

THE SPANISH BORDERLANDS —

Introduction and A Selected Reading List

MARC SIMMONS

SETTLEMENT PATTERNS AND VILLAGE PLANS IN
COLONIAL NEW MEXICO

ODIE B. FAULK

THE PRESIDIO: *Fortress or Farce?*

PAIGE W. CHRISTIANSEN

THE PRESIDIO AND THE BORDERLANDS: *A Case Study*

MAX L. MOORHEAD

THE SOLDADO DE CUERA: *Stalwart of the Spanish Borderlands*

RICHARD E. GREENLEAF

THE NUEVA VIZCAYA FRONTIER, 1787-1789

FORREST D. MONAHAN, JR.

THE KIWAS AND NEW MEXICO, 1800-1845

RICHARD SCHMUTZ

JESUIT MISSIONARY METHODS IN NORTHWEST MEXICO

ALAN PROBERT

BARTOLOME DE MEDINA: *The Patio Process and the Sixteenth
Century Silver Crisis*

FRANCIS J. JOHNSTON

SAN GORGONIO PASS: *Forgotten Route of the Californios?*

D. E. LIVINGSTON-LITTLE, *Editor*

BOOKS FOR THE WESTERN LIBRARY — *Twenty-nine New
Books on Western History Receive Concise, Analytical Reviews*

PUBLISHED FOUR TIMES A YEAR IN THE MONTHS OF
JANUARY, APRIL, JULY and OCTOBER

\$6.00 per year

\$2.00 per copy

THE PRESIDIO: *Fortress or Farce?*

By Odie B. Faulk

Associate Professor of History
Oklahoma State University, Stillwater

THE PRESIDIO was but one of three separate yet related colonial institutions employed by Imperial Spain in its drive northward from Central Mexico into what is now the American Southwest. The other two were the mission and the civil settlement. On paper these institutions seemed excellent devices for conquering, civilizing, and Hispanicizing the natives of the region. Missionaries venturing into the wilderness would spread the gospel of Christianity; those Indians converted would be gathered into missions where Franciscan or Jesuit padres would instruct them. The missionaries would be protected by soldiers, who would be housed in presidios near the religious establishments. The troops would provide the physical strength needed to over-awe the natives, but force would be used only when necessary to coerce the heathens into a receptive attitude toward the teachings of the missionaries. And the families of the soldiers would go with them to the frontier, merchants would come to sell them goods, while farmers and ranchers would be given land in the vicinity. Thus civil settlements, recognized by law, would grow near the presidios and missions. This three-pronged attack on the wilderness, it was felt, would gradually bring the northern frontier under complete Spanish domination and rule.

For the most part, however, the mission system was a failure. In Arizona, the Western Apaches did not take to mission life, nor did their eastern kinsmen in New Mexico and Texas or the lordly Comanches of the latter province. The only successes enjoyed by the missionaries were among sedentary tribes such as those in California, the Pimas and Opatas of Sonora, the Papagos of Arizona, the Pueblo Indians of New Mexico, and the Hasinai Confederacy of East Texas. Yet even these normally peaceful tribes occasionally rebelled, martyred their missionaries, burned the religious establishments, and fled to wilderness hide-outs. In 1751, for example, the Pimas staged a bloody uprising in Sonora and Arizona, as had New Mexican natives in 1680 and the Tejas Indians in 1693. Even in California there were disturbances from time to time. In addition, the mission Indians used every possible pretext

Editor's Note: This paper was originally read to the Organization of American Historians, Dallas, Texas, April, 1968.

The Presidio: Fortress or Farce

to flee from the rigid confines of the padres' care; the missionaries were continually requesting governmental aid in securing the return of run-away neophytes. As a result of such vexations, the Spanish government, with very few exceptions, was unwilling to finance new efforts to convert the natives during the last years of the colonial era.

Nor did the civil settlements work as planned. At the end of the Spanish years of control, there were only a few scattered towns on the northern frontier. For the most part, these existed in the shadows of the presidios where the civilians could quickly gather whenever raids occurred. These civilians, in theory a source of strength as a standing militia, usually were timorous, impoverished peasants. They would not join in forays against the enemy, and yet they had to be protected.

Thus by the end of the Seven Years' War, Spanish officials knew that the system then being used was in need of overhaul. The Marqués de Rubí and José de Gálvez were sent to inspect and make suggestions, a task they accomplished by 1768. Their recommendations¹ led to the issuance of the Royal Regulation of 1772,² a compilation of laws intended to bring about a pacification of the Indians by force of arms. The mission and the civil settlement would continue to play a part in frontier colonization, but their roles henceforth would be secondary.

According to the Royal Regulations, the provinces of Nueva Vizcaya, Sonora, Sinaloa, California, New Mexico, Coahuila, Chihuahua, Texas, Nuevo León, and Nuevo Santander were placed under a commandant-inspector, who was to function under the supervision of the viceroy. The officer selected for this post was Colonel Hugo O'Connor, an Irish mercenary long in Spanish service and experienced on the frontier of New Spain. Manfully and energetically O'Connor worked to effect the changes ordered. Principal among these alterations was the relocation of presidios into a cordon of twenty—stretching from the Gulf of California to the Gulf of Mexico. In the process some presidios, such as those in East Texas, were abandoned; some, such as the one at Tubac (Arizona), were moved; and some new ones were constructed, such as the one at San Buenaventura (Chihuahua).³

These presidios varied but little in design and construction. Located most often near good farming land and built on high ground, they were constructed on a pattern learned from the Moors. Using local materials (principally adobe bricks), the presidios were built in a square or rectangular shape with walls at least ten feet high; the length of the sides ranged from two to eight hundred feet each. On two diagonal corners, round bastions (*toreones*) were constructed, rising above the wall and pierced with firing ports. This arrangement allowed the soldiers to fire down the length of all four walls at attackers. On the inside of the walls, buildings were constructed, the roofs of which were high enough to serve as parapets from which men could fire over the walls. Included

inside the presidio were storage facilities, a chapel, and rooms for the officers and men. The only outside opening was the main gate.

Variations in this basic design were used at such places as Los Adaes in the province of Texas, where wooden palisades and diamond-shaped bastions were constructed, and at Tubac, where there was one square tower instead of two round bastions. At Santa Cruz de Terrenate, there was only one diamond-shaped tower. The new systems of fortification being developed in Europe by such men as Preste de Vauban and Menno van Coehoorn had only slight influence on these Spanish frontier posts. Such changes were predicated on an enemy with artillery; as the Indians of the Interior Provinces had no such weapons, the presidial commanders could rely on inexpensive, traditional designs and materials. The adobe walls were built up to thicknesses of three feet — enough to stop any arrow or bullet. While the Indians were able to penetrate these stout walls by stealth on occasion,⁴ they never overcame one by direct attack. In fact, the design of these presidios was so practical that many American traders and military leaders at a later date chose to build their forts in the Southwest on the same pattern. Bent's Fort in Colorado is an excellent example.

Although O'Connor achieved some positive results in his campaigns against the natives committing raids, the Interior Provinces continued to decline.⁵ Therefore, in 1776, the king concluded that even more sweeping changes were necessary. That year he established the Interior Provinces separate from the viceroyalty of New Spain. The area was placed under a commandant-general, who combined in his office civil, judicial, and military powers. Yet his effectiveness was limited from the start by a royal decision that he would be dependent upon the viceroy for troops and supplies. As there were always more demands on the royal treasury than there were funds — and because the viceroy would not be sympathetic to the pleas of a commander not under his jurisdiction — the Interior Provinces never received sufficient funds to undertake an effective pacification of the Indians by military means.

First to occupy the position of comandante-general was Brigadier Teodoro de Croix, a native of France who had entered the Spanish army at the age of seventeen.⁶ As commanding-general it was Croix's formidable task to halt the shrinkage of the area under Spanish control on the northern frontier. Arriving in Mexico City in 1776, Croix spent several months studying reports, then set out to inspect personally the area under his control. What Croix discovered was that the presidio as a military structure was not at fault. The failure of the military to contain the enemy was two-fold: (1) the philosophy of building presidios was predicated on European concepts of warfare, and (2) the soldiers garrisoning the presidios were not adequately trained, supplied, or equipped for containing the type of enemy faced in the Interior Provinces.

The Presidio: Fortress or Farce

The Royal regulations stipulated that the cordon of presidios be built "approximately forty leagues apart one from another" so that they could "give mutual aid to one another and to reconnoiter the intervening terrain."⁷ Such a string of forts was in the best European tradition, yet was useless against Indians of the Interior Provinces, whose code of honor held it was stupid to stand and be killed in open battle when the odds were against them; they preferred hit-and-run and favorable odds, rarely choosing to fight in the accepted European mode. In addition, the presidios generally were understaffed, and their soldiers were spread thinly to cover a multitude of tasks. Nearby missions generally required a small force of soldiers for police duties; troops also served as escorts for the supply trains, as mail riders, and as guards for the presidial horse herds. Picketed away from the presidios because of space limitations and because of shortages of grain for feeding, these herds were favorite targets for Apache and Comanche raiders.

Basic flaws in the concept of the presidios — poor location, inadequate numbers of troops, and herding horses away from the forts — do not explain the numerous reverses suffered by Spanish forces on the frontier, however. Far more important during the battles fought than the precise location of presidios was the discipline, equipment, and morale of the soldiers involved. It was in this area that Spain made its greatest mistakes.

Actually the lower-class citizen of New Spain who enlisted in the army for service in the Interior Provinces came to his post with great potential. In most cases he had been born on the frontier and thus was accustomed to the harsh desert climate and was an expert horseman.⁸ He had been so subjected to governmental discipline that he could regard soldiering as the best life open to him. A soldier had retirement benefits, a pension for his widow in case of his death, and access to skilled medical attention. There also was the hope of promotion, for most junior officers in the Interior Provinces had risen through the ranks. Additionally, the soldier could easily obtain land near the presidio for himself and his family.⁹

For his services the newly enlisted soldier received 290 pesos annually. From this he received one-fourth peso daily for his and his family's subsistence. The remainder was kept by the paymaster to be used to purchase the horses, articles of uniform, armament, and equipment needed; and twenty pesos were withheld from his pay annually for five years as a contingency fund to be given him at discharge.¹⁰

Unlike the regular Spanish army, the troops of the Interior Provinces were enlisted into presidial garrisons and had no regimental or larger unit designations. The viceroy at Mexico City was not inclined to release soldiers of the regular army for frontier service, although infantrymen of the Catalonian Volunteers were sent to California in 1769

and some dragoons of Mexico served in Sonora in the 1780's. By royal decree the men of the frontier army were to be accorded the ranks and privileges of the regular Spanish army. This practice, as well as the benefits mentioned, should have produced a high *esprit de corps*, a pride in the local unit unattainable in any other way. Yet such was not always the case.

The training of new soldiers was rigidly prescribed in the Royal Regulations of 1772, but in actuality it varied from presidio to presidio. The captains were expected to drill their men in the handling of fire-arms, in target practice, in mounted tactics, and in military discipline and procedures. Weekly reviews were to be held to inspect equipment and to see that unserviceable items were replaced.¹¹ But in many cases these regulations were disregarded, and the new soldier learned his profession from his fellow enlisted men in barracks discussions or, even worse, on the actual field of battle.

Besides the poor training he received, the new soldier quickly discovered that the isolation of his post meant that he was subject in many ways to the whims of his officers. This practice of paying soldiers partly in cash and partly in goods accrued to the benefit of paymasters, presidial officers, and local merchants, many of whom connived together to set exorbitantly high prices for goods of inferior quality. The temptation for officers to engage in this practice was strong since inspections were rare, punishment for those caught was light, and the example of others getting rich was ever at hand. Paymasters on occasion even spent all the money entrusted to them for pay purposes, so that deficits were common and salaries often in arrears.¹² Because of these abuses, the soldiers received so little money that they and their families lived on the edge of starvation, their equipment deteriorated, and they developed morale, as one inspector declared, "shot through with insubordination."¹³

Corporal punishment was still observed in the garrisons, inflicted by the same officers against whom an offense was committed and who sat in judgment of the culprits.¹⁴ And there were vexing interferences in the private lives of the soldiers.¹⁵ Nor could a discontented soldier transfer to another presidio without the consent of his commanding officer, and approval was difficult to secure since most posts were short on personnel.¹⁶ The army was thus only as good as its officers, and Commandant-General Croix characterized his officers as poor: "Very few give any hope of improving their behavior and conduct. They openly embrace all the abominable excesses . . . , do not observe orders, [and] hide the truth . . . I have no others to whom to turn."¹⁷

Just as the concept of the presidio was European in origin — and ill-suited to conditions in the Interior Provinces — so were the weapons carried by the common soldiers. Each was armed with a lance, a wide sword (*espada ancha*), a short-barreled, miguelet-lock, smoothbore carbine (*escopeta*), and two large-caliber, heavy pistols.¹⁸ Both the sword

The Presidio: Fortress or Farce

and the lance were excellent against an army that stood and fought hand-to-hand, as was traditional in Europe, but useless against the Indians of the Interior Provinces. The firearms proved almost useless in the Interior Provinces because of inadequate training in their use and maintenance. Also, Spanish regulations provided that each soldier be issued only three pounds of gunpowder annually; as he was charged for all powder in excess of this amount, he had little interest in target practice.

For defensive purposes, the soldier carried a shield (*adarga*), wore a leather coat (*cuera*), and leather-leggings (*botas*). All were bulky, cumbersome, hot — and practically useless. General Croix urged that the shield, the leather jacket, and the lance be discarded; he urged the use of lightly-equipped, mounted troops employing the latest firearms and the best horses in order to pursue and defeat the Indians.¹⁹ Although the regular Spanish cavalry units in the New World had already adopted such tactics, Croix's suggestions were not implemented in the Interior Provinces to a large extent. Many officers on the frontier still believed in the lance and the leather armor, and few changes were made.

Unable to meet the Indian enemy on the open field with any great hope of victory, the troops preferred to stay behind the security of presidial walls. Finally in 1786 the new viceroy, Bernardo de Gálvez, who had seen service on the northern frontier and had later governed Louisiana, put a new plan into effect in the Interior Provinces. He decreed a vigorous war on those Indians not at peace with Spain. Once the savages asked for peace, he ordered that they be settled in villages in the shadow of a presidio where they would be given presents, inferior firearms, and alcoholic beverages. Gálvez reasoned that the presents should be of such value that the Indians would prize peace more than war, and that the arms supplied them would quickly become inoperative and could be repaired only by Spaniards.²⁰ The Gálvez policy worked sufficiently well to bring about a period of relative peace from 1787 to 1801 and the outbreak of the Mexican Revolution; when that conflict began, and the annual distribution of presents ceased, the Indians again took to the warpath.²¹

The presidio, therefore, was both fortress and farce. It could withstand siege, but it could not halt Indian incursions into the interior of New Spain. It served as a refuge during raids for both civilian and soldier, but it rarely was the staging area for a successful campaign against the marauding natives. As a weapon of defense, it was a fortress; as an offensive weapon, it all too often was a farce. Yet considering the shortage of supplies and funds, the paucity of support from higher echelons of government, the poor training of the soldiers, and the barbaric ferocity of the natives, the wonder is not that the presidio largely failed in its military objectives as a frontier institution but that it succeeded as well as it did.

JOURNAL of the WEST

NOTES

1. For the Rubí report, see "Digttamen, que de orden del Exmo señor Marqués de Croix, Virrey de este Reyno expone el Mariscal de Campo Marqués de Rubí, en orden a la mejor Situacion de los Presidios, para la defensa, y extension de su Frontera . . ." Tacubaya, April 10, 1768 (Archivo General de Indias, Audiencia de Guadalajara, 1768-1772, 104-6-13, Sevilla; Dunn transcripts, Archives, University of Texas Library, Austin); see also Lawrence Kinnaird, (trans. and ed.), *THE FRONTIERS OF NEW SPAIN: Nicolás de Lafora's Description, 1766-1768* (Berkeley, 1958). For Gálvez, see Herbert I. Priestley, *JOSE DE GALVEZ, Visitor-General of New Spain, 1765-1771* (Berkeley, 1916).
2. For a copy of the Royal Regulations of 1772 in both Spanish and English, see Sidney B. Brinckerhoff and Odie B. Faulk, *LANCERS FOR THE KING* (Phoenix: Arizona Historical Foundation, 1965).
3. For O'Connor's work during this period, see *Informe de Hugo de O'Connor Sobre el Estado de las Provincias Internas del Norte, 1771-76*, ed. by Enrique González Flores and Francisco R. Almada (Mexico City: Editorial Cultura, 1952); for biographical details on O'Connor, see David M. Vigness, "Don Hugo Oconor and New Spain's North-eastern Frontier, 1764-1766," *JOURNAL of the WEST*, Vol. VI (Spring, 1966), pp. 27-40.
4. For examples, see Sidney B. Brinckerhoff, "The Last Years of Spanish Arizona, 1786-1821," *Arizona and the West*, Vol. IX (Spring, 1967), pp. 5-20.
5. See Flores and Almada (eds.), *Informe de Hugo de O'Connor*, and Alfred B. Thomas, *TEODORO DE CROIX AND THE NORTHERN FRONTIER OF NEW SPAIN, 1776-1783* (Norman, 1941).
6. For details on Croix's career, see Thomas, *Teodoro de Croix*.
7. Royal Regulations, Brinckerhoff and Faulk, *Lancers for the King*, p. 49.
8. For example, at La Bahía del Espíritu Santo in 1780, only four of the presidial troops had been born outside the Interior Provinces; see Domingo Cabello y Robles, "Real Presidio de la Bahía de el Espíritu Santo. Extracto General de la Tropa . . ." January 12, 1780, San Antonio (Béxar Archives, University of Texas Archives, Austin). Other presidial returns show a similar condition prevailing.
9. Various land laws were in effect to grant land near the presidios to both soldiers and civilians. These laws were designed not only to encourage enlistments, but also to bring civilians to the area who, in theory, were automatically part of the militia. The presidio of Tubac, for example, grew to a population of five hundred in its first fifteen years of existence through a liberal land policy; see Ray H. Mattison, "Early Spanish and Mexican Settlements in Arizona," *New Mexico Historical Review*, Vol. XXI (October, 1946), pp. 281-282.
10. "Distribution of Funds and the Pay of Soldiers," in the Royal Regulations as quoted in Brinckerhoff and Faulk, *Lancers for the King*, pp. 23-25.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 41.
12. For an excellent study of presidial supply, see Max L. Moorhead, "The Private Contract System of Presidial Supply in Northern New Spain," *Hispanic American Historical Review*, Vol. XLI (February, 1961), pp. 31-54.
13. Quoted in Thomas, *Teodoro de Croix*, pp. 13-14.
14. For an example, see Francisco Amangual, "Diario de las Novedades y Operaciones ocurridas en la Expedición que se hace . . ." March 30-December 23, 1808, San Antonio (Béxar Archives, University of Texas Library, Austin). Officers who went astray, however received only token punishments; for example, see "Año de 1792. Numº 126. Expediente promovido por el Teniente Dⁿ Fern^{do} Fernz sobre queixa contra el Alférez Dⁿ Manuel de Urrutia," January 28, 1792, San Antonio (Béxar Archives, University of Texas Archives.)
15. For example, see Cortes to Manuel Muñz, September 9, 1795 (Béxar Archives, University of Texas Archives).
16. Thomas, *Teodoro de Croix*, p. 42; see also Kinnaird (ed.), *Frontiers of New Spain*, pp. 214-217.
17. "Armament and Mounts," in the Royal Regulations, quoted in Brinckerhoff and Faulk, *Lancers for the King*, pp. 21-22.
18. Thomas, *Teodoro de Croix*, pp. 57, 152; Kinnaird, *Frontiers of New Spain*, p. 216.
19. Bernardo de Gálvez, *INSTRUCTIONS FOR GOVERNING THE INTERIOR PROVINCES OF NEW SPAIN, 1786*, trans. and ed. by Donald E. Worcester, (Berkeley: The Quivira Society, 1951).
20. See Brinckerhoff, "Last Years of Spanish Arizona," Odie B. Faulk, *THE LAST YEARS OF SPANISH TEXAS, 1778-1821* (The Hague: Mouton and Company, 1964); and Joseph F. Park, "Spanish Indian Policy in Northern Mexico, 1765-1810," *Arizona and the West*, Vol. IV (Winter, 1962), pp. 325-344, for examples.