

GREGORIO CORTEZ

Mexican-born outlaw and folk hero

After killing a Texas sheriff in self-defense, Cortez became both a fugitive from justice and a symbol of resistance against the Anglo occupiers of land that had once belonged to Mexico. As a result, Cortez is a Latino folk hero whose exploits have been celebrated in legends, ballads, and film.

Latino heritage: Mexican

Born: June 22, 1875; near Matamoros, Tamaulipas, Mexico

Died: February 28, 1916; Anson, Texas

Also known as: Gregorio Cortez Lira

Area of achievement: Crime

EARLY LIFE

Gregorio Cortez Lira (greh-GOH-ree-oh coh-TEHZ LEE-rah) was born on a ranch in the state of Tamaulipas, Mexico, just south of the Rio Grande. He was the seventh of eight children born to Román Cortez Garza and Rosalía Lira Cortinas. When Cortez was twelve years old, he moved with his family to Manor, Texas, east of Austin. Two years later, in 1889, Cortez and his older brother Romaldo began working seasonal jobs on farms and ranches in Karnes and Gonzales counties, east of San Antonio. During this time, Cortez married Leonor Diaz, with whom he raised four children, the eldest born in 1891. Romaldo also married, and the brothers and their families settled in 1900 on rented farm land roughly ten miles west of Kenedy, in Karnes County.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Texas cattle barons and businessmen ruled the borderlands in which Cortez lived and worked. County sheriffs and deputies, as well as the vaunted Texas Rangers, enforced the law, frequently discriminating against Mexican Americans who worked on farms and ranches. Conversely, Mexican Americans often were suspicious of the Anglos who controlled the lands that had not long ago belonged to Mexico. Tensions between the two groups were ever-present, especially when members of one group did not speak the other's language.

LIFE'S WORK

On June 12, 1901, W. T. Morris, the Karnes County sheriff and a former Texas Ranger, came to the farm of Gregorio and Romaldo Cortez in search of a horse thief. Accompanying Morris was one of his deputies, Boone Choate, who spoke some Spanish but apparently did not understand the important difference between *caballo*

(horse) and *yegua* (mare). Cortez had recently traded a *yegua*, and thus answered truthfully in Spanish when he denied trading a *caballo*. Hearing only the word *no*, Morris believed Cortez was lying and started to arrest him. In the ensuing struggle, Morris shot Romaldo in the mouth, wounding him critically; Cortez shot and killed Morris in self-defense; and Choate escaped unharmed.

For the next ten days, Cortez crisscrossed roughly five hundred miles of southern Texas, on foot and by horse, skillfully avoiding capture, even though he was pursued by an estimated three hundred lawmen. When a posse of eight men attacked the house where he was hiding on June 14, Cortez shot and killed Gonzales County sheriff Robert M. Glover. Cortez finally was captured on June 22 in a sheep camp just north of the Rio Grande by one Texas Ranger and one former Texas Ranger, who had been informed of Cortez's whereabouts by a Mexican American hoping to receive the reward money.

From July, 1901, to April, 1904, Cortez was tried in court six times. The results were one acquittal, one hung jury, three convictions that were overturned by the Texas Court of Criminal Appeals, and one conviction for the murder of Glover, which the appeals court upheld. Cortez was sentenced to life imprisonment but received a pardon from the state governor on July 7, 1913, after serving just over eight years in the state penitentiary at Huntsville. Cortez then moved to Nuevo Laredo, Mexico, where he fought briefly on the losing side of the Mexican Revolution. Wounded in battle, he returned to Texas to convalesce at the home of one of his three sons. He died three years after his release from prison, probably of natural causes, although some family members contended that he was poisoned by enemies who did not want to see him free.

SIGNIFICANCE

Cortez sought neither fame nor infamy but found both because of misunderstandings and circumstances beyond his control. While many Anglos in southern Texas vilified Cortez as a fiendish desperado, the Mexican population on both sides of the border celebrated him as a folk hero who fought the Anglos skillfully and daringly. Almost immediately after Cortez was captured, various *corridos* (ballads) were composed and sung in his honor. That same tradition continued with the release of the television film *The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez* (1982), featuring Edward James Olmos in the title role.

James I. Deutsch

FURTHER READING

- Alonzo, Juan J. *Badmen, Bandits, and Folk Heroes: The Ambivalence of Mexican American Identity in Literature and Film*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2009. Examines several literary and cinematic expressions of Cortez's life, noting how each reflects a different ideological point of view.
- Noriega, Chon A. "No fue mi culpa, or, You Should be Dead." *Aztlán* 34, no. 2 (Fall, 2009): 1-7. Examines the influence and timeless appeal of the many versions of Cortez's life, including the film, the *corrido*, and even the academic study by Paredes.
- Paredes, Américo. "With His Pistol in His Hand": *A Border Ballad and Its Hero*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1958. This seminal study still is the most au-

thoritative source on Cortez's life and the *corrido* sung about him.

- Peña, Manuel H. "Folksong and Social Change: Two Corridos as Interpretive Sources." *Aztlán* 13, nos. 1-2 (Spring-Fall, 1982): 13-42. Places the *corrido* of Gregorio Cortez in the context of other ballads and folk songs that express the reactions of oppressed people to historical events.
- Sommer, Doris. *Proceed with Caution, When Engaged by Minority Writing in the Americas*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999. Uses the case of Cortez to explore issues of mistranslation and problems of intercultural communication.

See also: Juan Cortina; Joaquín Murieta; Tiburcio Vásquez.

JUAN CORTINA**Mexican-born criminal and activist**

Cortina was a Mexican Texan rancher from a wealthy family. He fought for the rights of poorer Mexicans living in Texas. Cortina also fought for the Mexican army and served as governor of Tamaulipas. He eventually was imprisoned in Mexico without a trial for almost fifteen years.

Latino heritage: Mexican

Born: May 16, 1824; Camargo, Tamaulipas, Mexico

Died: October 30, 1894; Atzacapozalco, Mexico

Also known as: Juan Nepomuceno Cortina; Cheno Cortinas; Red Robber of the Rio Grande

Areas of achievement: Crime; military; activism

EARLY LIFE

Juan Nepomuceno Cortina (NEH-poh-mew-SAY-noh coh-TEE-nah) was born May 16, 1824, in Camargo, Tamaulipas, Mexico. His parents, Estefana Goseacochea and Trinidad Cortina, both had been married before and each had two sons. In addition to Cortina, Estefana and Trinidad had two more children together, Jose Maria and Maria del Carmen. Cortina, nicknamed Cheno, was slender, with reddish-blond hair and gray eyes.

Cortina's family had been living in the Rio Grande Valley for generations. His great-grandfather was among the first settlers to arrive in the area. Estefana was from a wealthy, aristocratic family. She inherited a large ranch near Brownsville, Texas. The family moved

to Matamoros when Cortina was a child. They later moved to his mother's ranch in Santa Rita, Texas.

The Cortina family had several land disputes with Anglo Americans. Cortina also saw and experienced harassment and grew to hate Anglos for their mistreatment of poorer Mexican Texans. At the beginning of the Mexican-American War, Cortina was twenty-two years old. He joined the Mexican army and served under General Mariano Arista. Cortina recruited a group of irregular cavalry of local cowboys and ranch hands. The regiment, known as the Tamaulipas, was placed under Cortina's command. They fought in the battles of Resaca de la Palma and Palo Alto. The war ended February 2, 1848, with the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo.

LIFE'S WORK

Cortina's antipathy toward Anglo authority figures soon included local judges and lawyers, whom he saw as corrupt. He felt they were extorting land from the Mexicans who did not understand the American legal system. He gathered and trained a group of followers that functioned as a private army. An incident on July 13, 1859, started the first "Cortina War." Cortina saw a Brownsville marshal brutally arresting Tomas Cabrera, a ranch hand he knew. Cortina intervened and shot the marshal in the shoulder. On September 28, Cortina and his gang rode into Brownsville and seized control of the town, killing five people. On September 30, Cortina issued a proclamation asserting the rights of