



In Search of El dorado

A daily journal of my travels and adventures in my.....Search for Eldorado

Hello to Family & Friends

Friday, February 5th 2021 Day 20



No overnight issues in the strip mall parking lot, it was actually quieter than I expected. Let's start with a cemetery today, San Benito Memorial Park, and within, the Freddy Fender Memorial Park. It is certainly true that the Hispanic culture pays much more tribute to their dearly departed. Almost every grave has plants or flowers of some kind.



LEGACY

FENDER IS CREDITED WITH BEING THE FIRST AMERICAN HISPANIC ROCK & ROLL RECORDING ARTIST IN ANGLO LATINO MUSIC HISTORY. HE WAS ALSO THE FIRST MEXICAN-AMERICAN ARTIST TO CROSS OVER INTO MAINSTREAM POP AND COUNTRY MUSIC, AND WITH INTRODUCING TEX-MEX MUSIC INTO THE AMERICAN AND WORLD MUSIC SCENE.

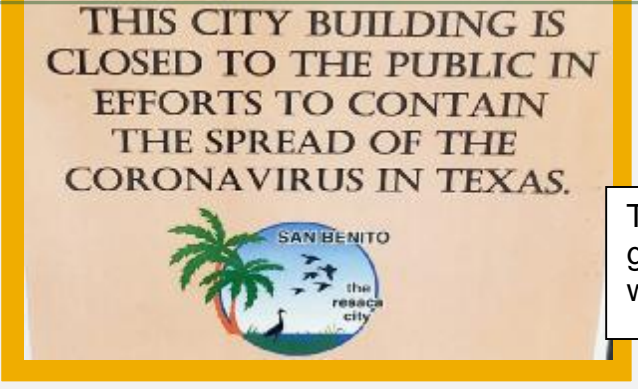
HIS MOUNTING SUCCESS TOOK HIM AROUND THE WORLD ENTERTAINING MILLIONS OF FANS AND ALWAYS PROCLAIMING PROUDLY THAT HE WAS FROM SAN BENITO, TEXAS.



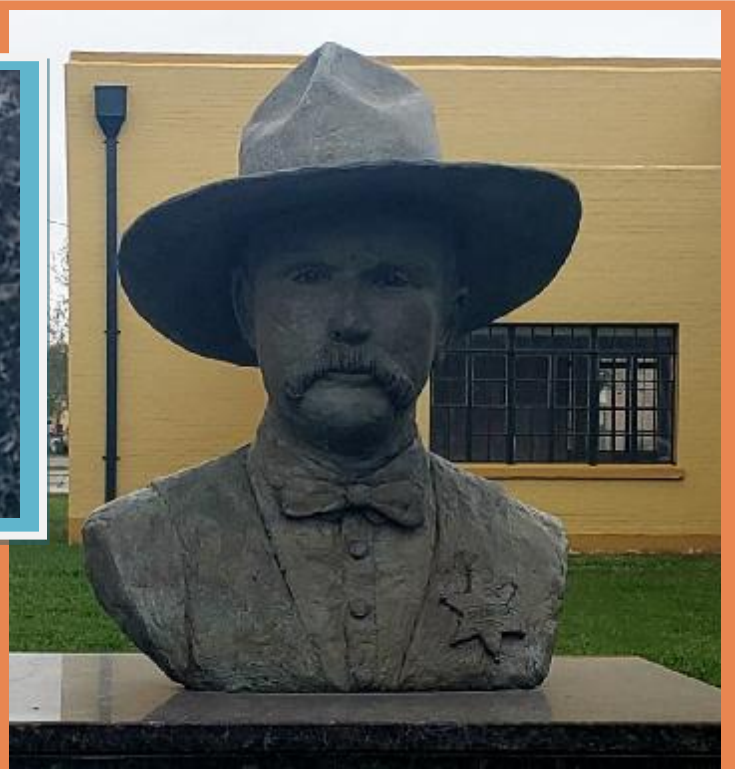
Front and back of the headstone.



Ok, off to the museums. There are three of them here in San Benito, plus a visitor center.



They are also all closed due to Covid. I did get the photo of the gentleman below. He was on the outside of the buildings.



I guess my next stop is the Palo Alto Battlefield, the first battle of the War with Mexico.



Another one for the collection



One Land, Two Nations U.S.-Mexican War, 1846-1848



In 1846, the United States and Mexico fought a war that transformed the map and the history of North America.

I don't know about you guys, but I don't recall learning very much about the War with Mexico when I was in school. Revolutionary War yes, but I think all I remember is memorizing dates for The War of 1812 (that's an easy one), War with Mexico, Civil War, WWI, WWII, Korea (Vietnam was in progress). Maybe that's it. We were in the midst of a war and schools did not want to dwell on wars for fear all of us elementary school kids would rebel and not want to fight. Hmm...seems like that's what the sixties were about.

Two young nations both claimed this sunburned, empty land. In 1845, the United States annexed Texas, declaring vast new territories now fell inside its boundaries. Mexico refused to go along, insisting that the lands to the north remained within its domain. Diplomacy failed. Both presidents refused to back down. One ordered an army southward; the other sent troops north. By May 1846, the time for talk was over. Here, on the prairie of Palo Alto, the shooting and the dying would begin.

If you recall prior newsletters, General Zachary Taylor landed near Corpus Christi with 4000 troops. 2300 of them are engaged in this battle.

Explore


The trail before you leads to the heart of the Palo Alto battlefield, the scene of the first major clash of the U.S.-Mexican War. Allow at least an hour to explore. Take it easy in hot weather.

Honor Those Who Fought

Soldiers of Mexico and the United States died here in defense of their countries. Some are still buried on this battlefield. Please respect their memory and help protect the place of their sacrifice.

Border War

It was a beautiful morning, the birds were singing, the sun was shining brightly...yet surrounded by all this loveliness were two Christian armies about to meet and kill each other.


 Barna Upton, private

The battlefield – An expanse of chaparral grass through which runs the only road from Port Isabel to Matamoros and the American fort on the north side of the Rio Grande (present day Brownsville).



Chosen Ground

At 2 p.m. U.S. troops arrived at the waterhole of Palo Alto, as Mexican troops spread out on the prairie, cutting the road... Our goal... was to prevent the Americans from lifting the siege we had imposed on their fort across the river from Matamoros which barely had three days' provisions left.

 José Luis Berlandier, captain

Long Live the Republic!

The 3,500 men of Mexico's *Army of the North* were primed and ready for a fight. Their battle line stretched about a mile, from here to the low tree-covered rise that you see in the distance.

The stage was set. General Arista had chosen both the place and the time for the first major battle of the U.S.-Mexican War.



An Awful Sense of Peril


U.S. soldiers approaching this point could clearly see thousands of Mexican troops blocking their road south. Some eyed the mile-long battle line nervously, some with excitement. All knew that gun fire would soon erupt.




Ulysses S. Grant

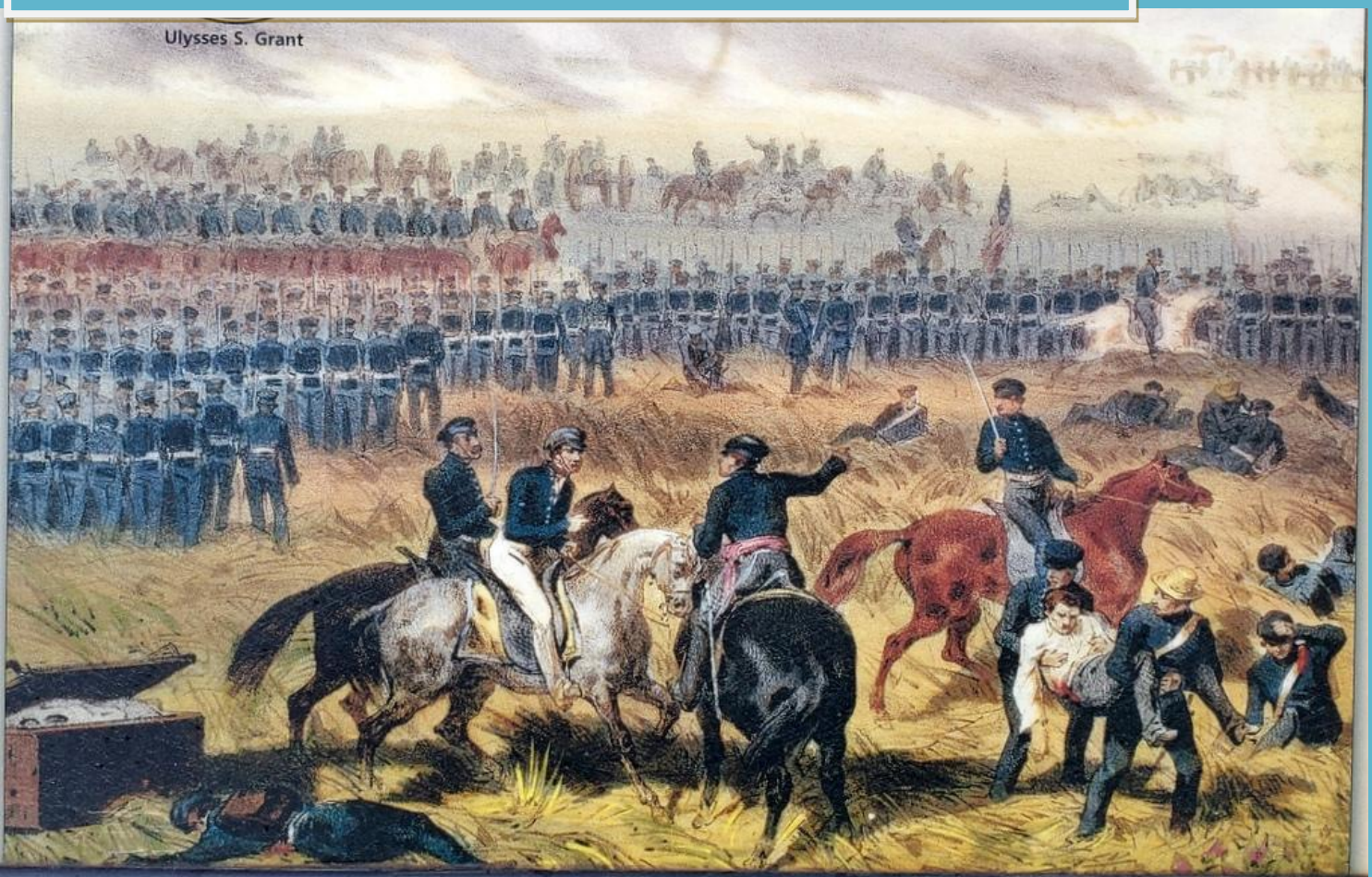
Young officers, like 24-year-old Ulysses S. Grant, would long remember the moments before this—their first battle. Fifteen years later, Grant, James Longstreet, and dozens of other Palo Alto veterans would also feel the weight of the “*fearful responsibility*” of a general, as they ordered large armies of Union and Confederate troops into bloody conflict.

As I looked down that long line of about 3,000 armed men, advancing toward a larger force also armed, I thought what a fearful responsibility General Taylor must feel, commanding such a host and so far away from friends.

 Ulysses S. Grant, 2nd lieutenant, 4th Infantry Regiment


What were the feelings of those thousands? How many thoughts and fears were crowded into those few moments! . . . a clammy sweat is settled all over faces slightly pale, not from cowardly fear, but from an awful sense of peril combined with a determination not to flinch from duty.

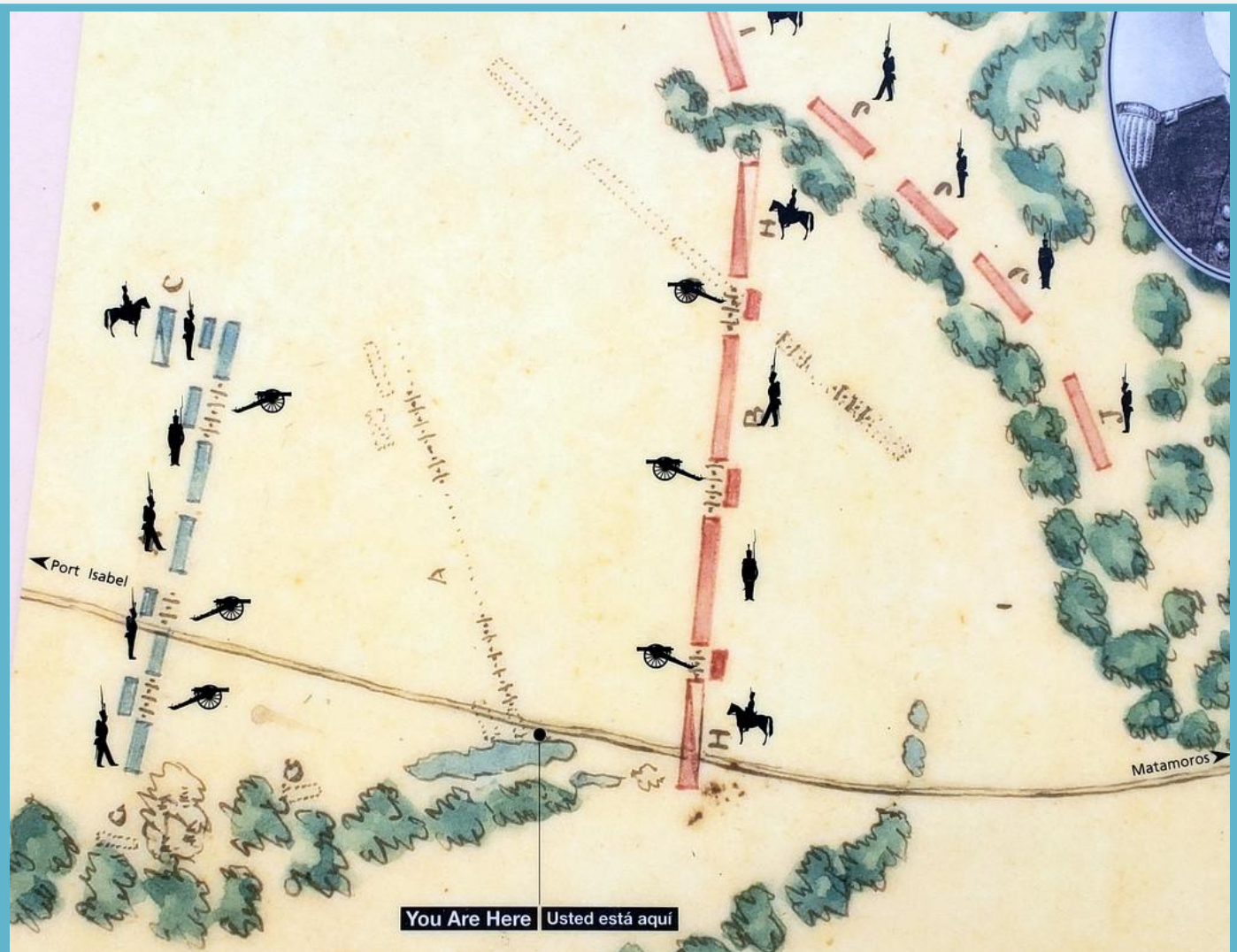
 Charles M. Reeves, corporal, 4th Infantry Regiment



Just in front of this overlook lies part of the old Port Isabel-Matamoros road. About 300 yards to your right, Mexican troops blocked the way to the Rio Grande. Cannon and 3,200 men formed a line across the prairie.

...an army, certainly outnumbering our little force, was seen drawn up in line of battle just in front of the timber. Their bayonets and spearheads glistened in the sunlight formidably. Where we were the grass was tall, reaching...the shoulders of the men, very stiff, and each stock was pointed at the top, and hard and almost as sharp as a darning needle.


 Ulysses Grant, 2nd lieutenant



Form Battalions!

General Taylor's 2,300 soldiers entered the prairie you see from the northeast and formed a battleline about 350 yards to your left. The U.S. army was prepared to charge straight ahead at the line of Mexican regiments.

We had a fair view of the enemy who were drawn up in line of battle about a mile and a half from us, their left resting upon the road we were compelled to take in our route. A thick chaparral was a short distance in their rear and served to conceal their reserve. After getting water we were formed in line of battle and moved forward. . . . When we had approached to within 600 yards, their cannon opened upon us. We halted and returned their fire.

 John Porter Hatch, 2nd lieutenant

Mexican Battle
Line Trail

The line of flags
indicates the
Mexican battle line





U.S. Battle
Line Trail

This line of flags indicates the American battle line

The lines really are a distance apart. If you blow up the photos significantly you can tell that the Mexican flags are red, white and green and the American flags, of course, red, white and blue.

Artillery at Work


From the first shot fired, the battle of Palo Alto was a contest between cannoners. The U.S. army lashed the Mexican lines with heavy artillery. Exploding shells from the big 18-pounders rained down a half-mile away, wounding 129 Mexicans and killing at least 102. American light artillery moved briskly around the battlefield to block cavalry attacks.



Dodging Cannonballs

When the shooting started, U.S. infantrymen here were just in range of the nearest enemy cannon. Mexican artillery, smaller in caliber and limited by poor gunpowder, lacked the range of the U.S. guns. But these American troops were not out of danger. Even the Mexican shots that landed in front of them could rebound and slam through their ranks with lethal force.

One cannon ball passed through our ranks, not far from me. It took the head off an enlisted man, and the underjaw of Captain Page. . .while the splinters from the musket of the killed soldier, and his brains and bones, knocked down two or three others.

 Ulysses Grant, 2nd lieutenant, 4th Infantry Regiment



Making the Earth Tremble

Here on the road to Matamoros stood the two most powerful cannon used at Palo Alto by either army. These siege cannon, intended for eventual installation inside the new U.S. fort near Matamoros, fired cannon balls that weighed 18 pounds. Their weight was so great—each iron barrel alone weighed more than 4,700 pounds—that these guns could not be safely taken off the road onto the grassy prairie during the battle.



U.S. Army 18-pounder
siege cannon

Cañones estadounidenses
de asedio de á 18 libras

Mexican cannoneers labored over their smaller caliber field guns, weapons with a shorter range. Using solid cannonballs, theirs was the more difficult and frustrating task—to pin down the enemy with direct hits.



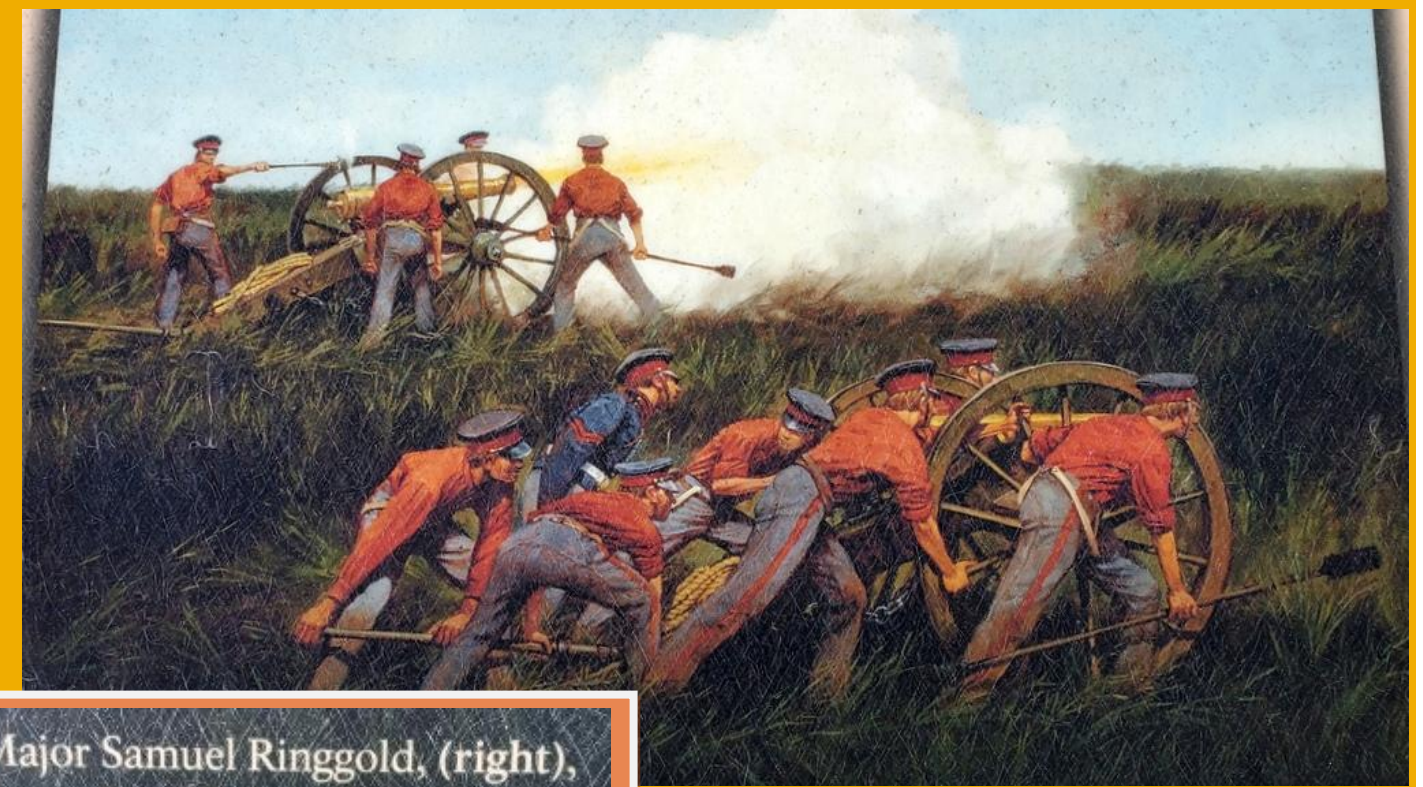
Flying Artillery

At Palo Alto, soldiers of both armies saw for the first time the value of fast-moving light artillery. Years of drill gave U.S. cannoneers the skills to fire and reload quickly. These gun crews shot faster and more accurately than their Mexican counterparts. The lighter American horse-drawn cannon could be rushed across the field to meet oncoming cavalry charges.

The gunners went into it more like butchers than military men; each man stripped off his coat, rolled up his sleeves, and tied his suspenders around his waist; they all wore red flannel shirts and therefore were in uniform. To see them limbering and unlimbering, firing a few shots, then dashing through the smoke, and then to fire again with lightning-like rapidity, partly hid from view by dense clouds of smoke, with their dark-red shirts and naked arms, yelling at every shot they made, reminded me of a band of demons rather than of men.



C.M. Reeves, corporal




Major Samuel Ringgold, (right), created and led the U.S. "flying artillery," watching his crews in action for the first time at Palo Alto. But Ringgold had little time to enjoy success. Struck by a Mexican cannonball, he died shortly after the battle.


Let Us Attack!

Mexican troops had expected a charge, but received instead a battering from distant U.S. cannon. Too far away to fire on the enemy ranks across the field, Mexican foot soldiers lined up near here had every reason to want to flee. Instead, they bravely held their ground and demanded a chance to defend themselves.


Our valient soldiers were blown through the air without even being able to fire their weapons, but they stayed in formation, like a fortress wall, unmoving, answering back the cannonballs and bombs that were clearing out our ranks with shouts of "Long Live Mexico! Long Live Independence! All along our line you could barely hear the bugle calls over the cannon fire. . . [our] regimental bands fell silent as if by magic because all at once they were destroyed by enemy cannon fire.

 Infantry officer, Campaign Against the Americans, 1846

Fury now appeared on the faces of our soldiers. Filled of burning rage, they shouted [for their leaders to] grant them permission to either throw themselves on the Americans or to let them move back out of the reach of the gun fire.

 Pedro de Ampudia, major general commanding the left wing

Converging gun fire and the ricocheting cannon balls from the enemy batteries wrecked horrible havoc. . . on our unmoving infantrymen. . . His Excellency said in a loud voice: "Enough of this dying from cannonshots, let's move out to attack!"

 José María Carrasco, colonel, 2nd Regiment of Light Infantry




Three Hundred Supply Wagons

Imagine the open prairie before you filled as far as the eye can see with 300 army supply wagons. Under the canvas tops were tons of food, weapons, and ammunition—enough to keep 2,800 soldiers going for about four months.


These vital—and vulnerable—supplies caught the eyes of both commanders. General Taylor placed his wagons behind the battle line. He kept his foot soldiers close to his supplies, and relied on his artillery. Hammered by the American cannon, Mexican General Arista ordered cavalry charge after cavalry charge, trying to destroy his enemies' train.

Cavalry Charge

I was anxious to charge because the cannon fire was tearing at our ranks. I ordered General Anastacio Torrejón to attack from the left with the greater part of our cavalry, expecting to open the way for a second strike from the right—using infantry and the rest of the cavalry. I waited for Torrejón to complete his charge, but he was stopped by an opposing force that defended a marshy ravine and turned back the attack.

 Mariano Arista, general

Eight hundred lancers formed to charge.... On they came—but when they had got within about 40 yards, the front of the square attacked, poured in its volley of buckshot and balls, and horses, officers, and...lancers were brought to the ground.

 Napoleon Dana, lieutenant

General Arista ordered his cavalry, the strongest part of his forces, to charge the U.S. line.


But marshy uneven ground and this twisting resaca—the ancient river-bed of the Rio Grande—slowed the attack.

The U.S. 5th Infantry had enough time to form a defensive square and turn back Torrejón's lancers.

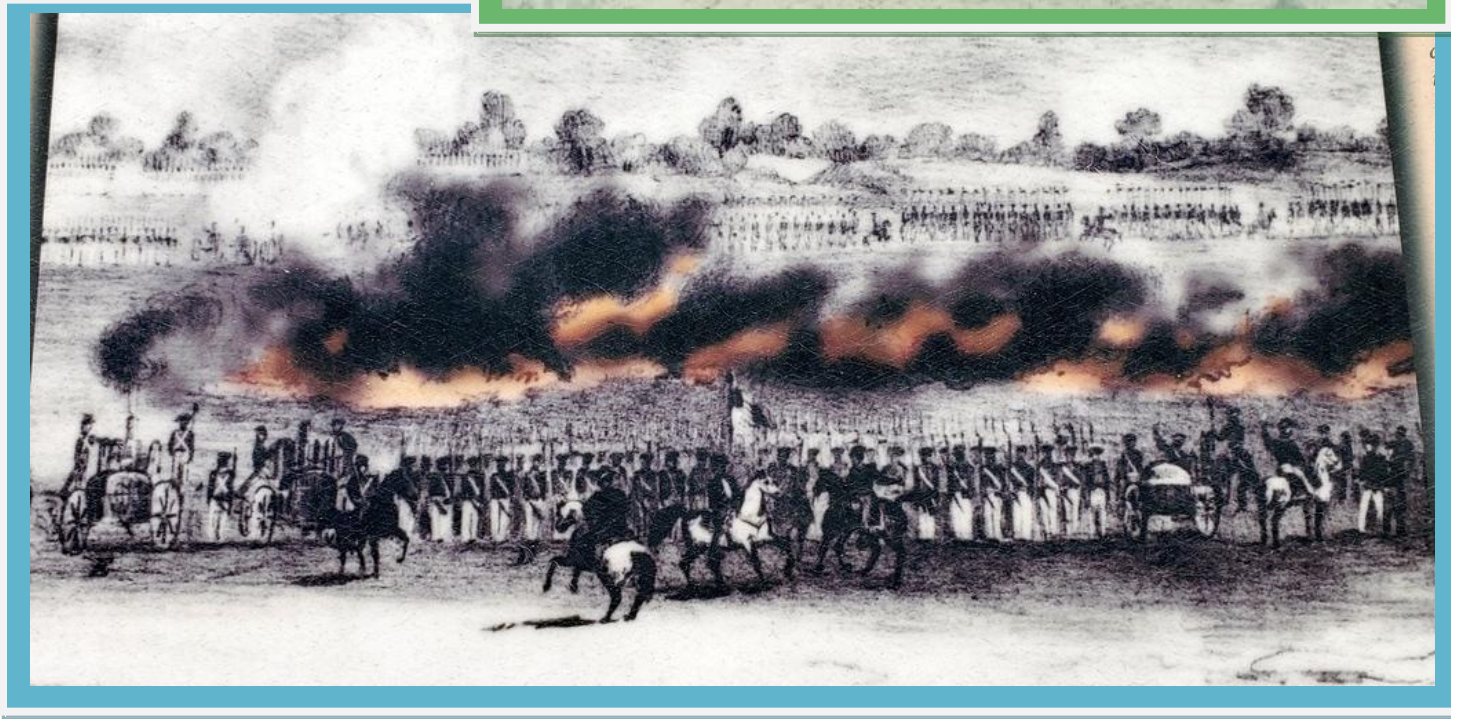


Wall of Flames

A wad from one of Duncan's guns falling into a bunch of dry grass fired the prairie on our left. An attempt was made to extinguish it, but a fair breeze was blowing at the time and the red flower began to dance and pitch into the air high above our heads. . . .the two armies were completely shut out from each other's sight and fairly separated by a barrier alike impassable to either. The firing on both sides ceased entirely. . . . We remained inactive another hour and a half, during which General Taylor rode along the line chatting with the officers and those of adjoining Regiments visited each other.

 George McCall, captain


Mexican soldiers thought the great fire that erupted on the rain-soaked prairie was intended to hide enemy troop movements. But U.S. soldiers were also surprised by this peculiar intermission in the midst of deadly combat.




Fiery Finale

As darkness fell, Captain James Duncan—who was positioned about 200 yards to your left—demonstrated the full potential of the new U.S. “flying artillery.” As Mexican horsemen and infantry charged the left end of the United States line, Duncan’s men rushed their cannon forward to meet the attack. Their swift, skillful movements turned back the charge, and brought the battle to a dramatic end.

Captain Duncan moved rapidly...unperceived under cover of a dense...smoke...and opened so unexpected and destructive a fire upon it that their ranks were broken and hundreds of them mowed down and the whole right wing of their army thrown into the utmost confusion. This closed the day...

 Phillip Norbourne Barbour, captain, 3rd Infantry Regiment


[The] enemy infantry, supported by two squadrons of cavalry...moved steadily forward to the attack...[my] battery opened upon them, with round shot, shells, and spherical case, so well directed that the whole advance...fell backward in disorder...until [the Mexican forces] disappeared in the chaparral.

 James Duncan, captain, 2nd Artillery Regiment

Silence Rested Over the Field

At sundown, the shooting stopped. Both armies camped in place on the battlefield. Men worked through the night to aid the wounded and bury the dead.


... as it began to grow dark the two armies presented a beautiful appearance, separated by a line of fire. Men could be seen moving about...looking for their wounded. We laid down on our arms in the prairie with nothing but our blankets to cover us.

 Madison Mills, assistant surgeon, 4th Infantry Regiment


By nightfall, U.S. troops had suffered nine killed and 45 wounded in the day-long cannon duel.

After night fell, U.S. soldiers fitfully slept here on the ground where they had fought throughout the day.

Men, wearied, slept by their guns, and soon a silence, that contrasted strangely with the din of battle, rested over the field.

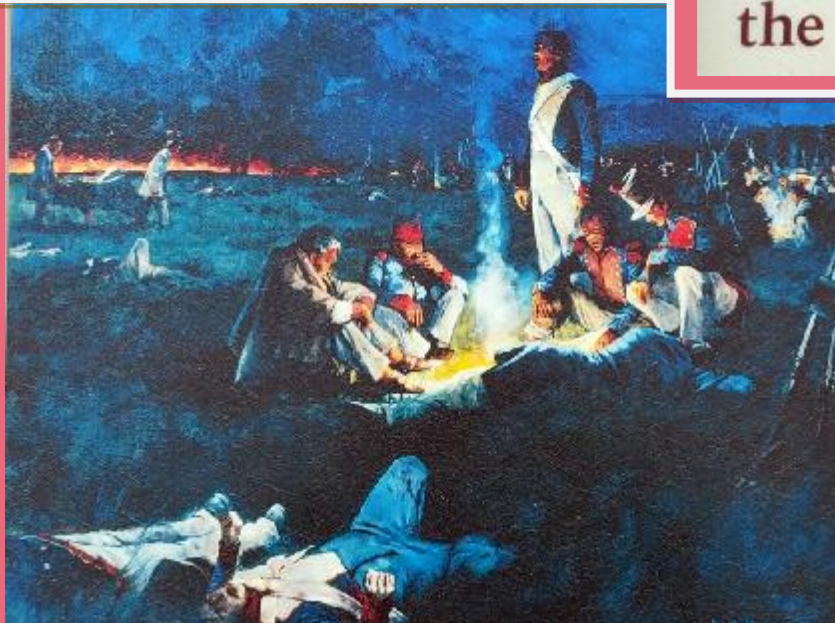
 Samuel French, 2nd lieutenant, 3rd Artillery Regiment

[The Mexican army] left their dead and many of their wounded on the field. We slept on the field that night and heard their cries and moans distinctly.

 George Wainwright, 2nd lieutenant, 8th Infantry Regiment

Hearing the moans of Mexican wounded, the Americans were aware that their cannon had inflicted heavy casualties. But on a battlefield lit only by glowing embers, they could not see the full effects of the clash. Resting with their guns within reach, the men waited for the fighting to resume at daybreak.

**Night Among
the Wounded**



With the Dawn

As the sun rose on the second day, May 9th, Mexican soldiers were still in battle formation and prepared to fight—but they would not fight here.


A Ravaged Army Regroups

General Arista ordered his *Army of the North* to form up, corps by corps, here on the Matamoros road so that they could withdraw in good order. Five miles to the south, these regiments would take up stronger defensive positions in the tangled thickets next to Resaca de la Palma. There, in the early afternoon, still unfed and shell-shocked, they would try again to repel the American invasion.


At dawn, General Arista ordered his army to withdraw south five miles to a densely wooded ravine called Resaca de la Palma. When General Taylor's men crossed this scorched prairie at mid-morning, many were shocked to see close at hand the destruction their artillery had wrought.



I saw two large graves newly covered with brush and dirt. . . .What havoc and what horrid wounds our artillery made! I saw heads and limbs severed from their bodies and trunks strewed about in awful confusion. . . .such ghastly spectacles I hope never to behold again.

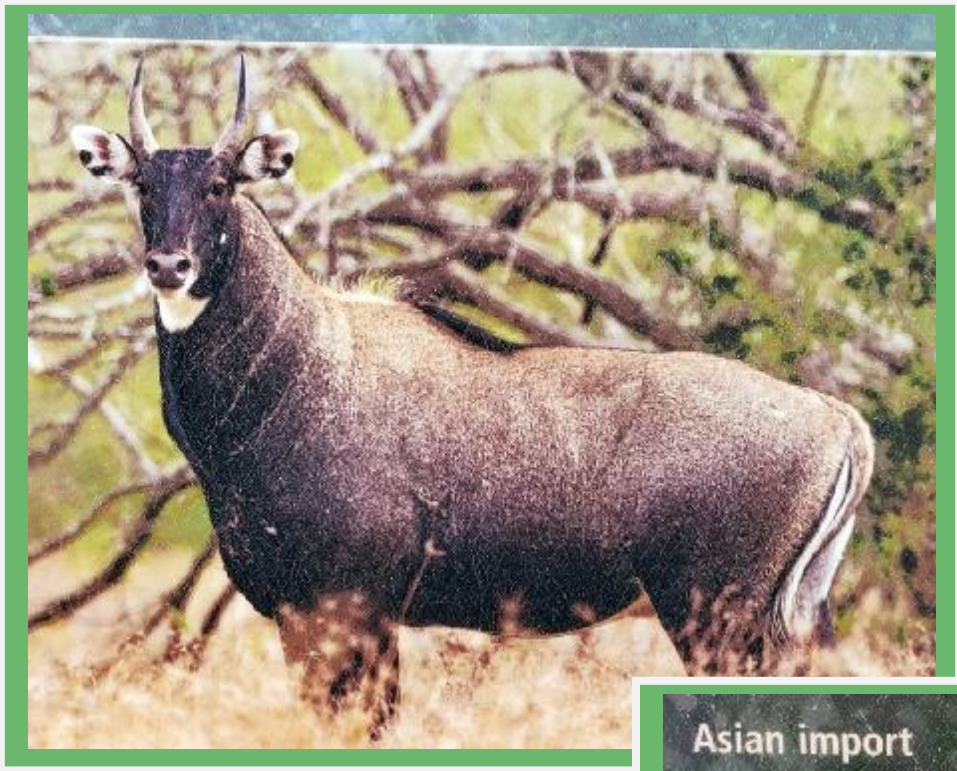
 Madison Mills, assistant surgeon

Our troops have to lament the loss of 352 men dispersed, wounded, and killed, the last worthy of national recollection and gratitude for the bravery with which they died fighting for the most sacred of causes.

 Mariano Arista, general

Taylor's troops then marched south following Arista. The two armies would clash again in the afternoon.

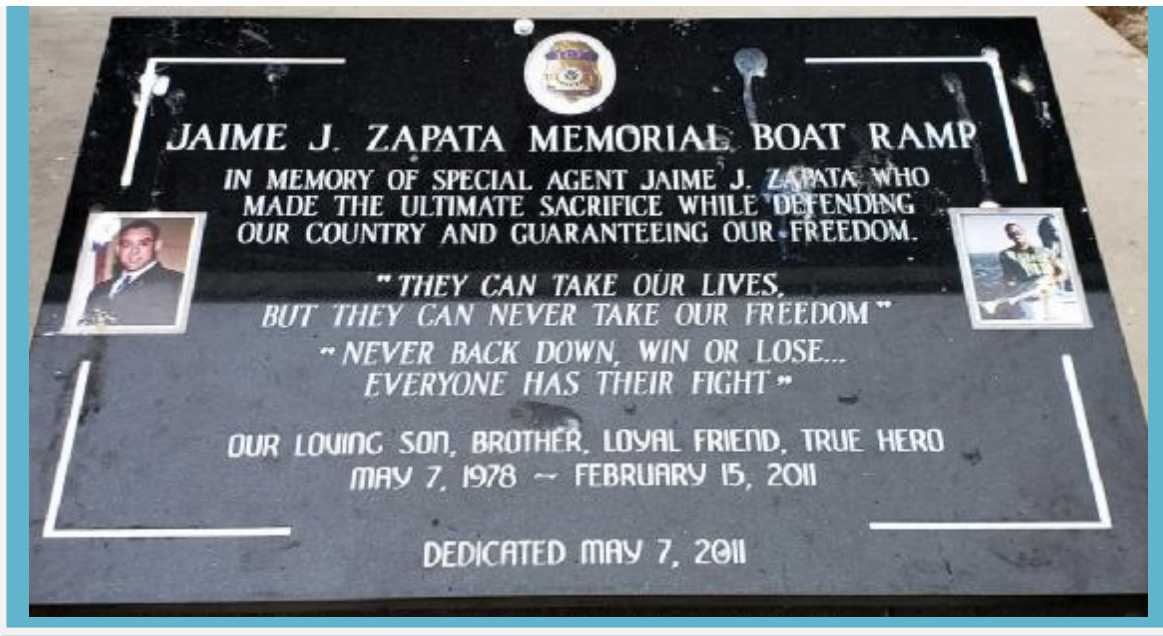
And with that, The Battle of Palo Alto, the first battle of the War with Mexico, comes to an end. I'm sure in the coming days we will revisit this war at the remaining three battlefields. As Ranger Karen was describing the conflict to me in the VC (visitors are only allowed into the vestibule where Karen has a large book showing the waging of the war) I asked how many battles were fought nearby. "Only four" she said, and handed me a brochure. Very quickly I asked myself "self, if there were only four battles, why did the war last two years?" As if she was inside my head, Karen stated "of course the war didn't end until they took Mexico City." I have to ask, did anyone out there know that, at one time in history, the United States military marched through Mexico and captured Mexico City? I have questions for my Social Studies and American History teachers if they're still around.



It would be really great to see one of these proud fellows now, wouldn't it. I did see a large pile, large pile (yes I did that on purpose) of droppings which looked like they had come from a deer. I am guessing they might be from one of these. I didn't see a Javelina either.

Asian import

The nilgai is one of Palo Alto's most surprising residents. Ranchers imported this species of Asian antelope to South Texas to challenge the skills of hunters. Escaped members of these herds have found their way to Palo Alto.



I drove the back roads to Port Isabel, stopped for fuel, and then headed out to my parking spot for the night. The Jaime Zapata Memorial Boat Ramp. In memory of special agent Jaime Zapata. There must be a story here somewhere.

Two U.S. Homeland Security Investigations special agents, Jaime Zapata and Víctor Ávila, were traveling from Laredo, Texas to Mexico City on an assignment for U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement. As they drove through the northern state of San Luis Potosí, the agents noticed two SUVs following them down Highway 57, a four-lane, federal highway from Mexico City to Monterrey. The two vehicles that came up behind them were at a high rate of speed, and were described as driving "aggressively," according to agent Ávila. One vehicle passed the agents' Suburban, while other gunmen started to fire at their vehicle, and eventually rammed them off the road. As one of the agents rolled down the window to inform them that they were U.S. diplomats, the agent recalls how one of the gunmen got off his vehicle, with a rifle in his hand, forced the door of the agents' car open and shot point blank at them. When Zapata shifted the vehicle into park, its doors automatically unlocked. The Zeta gunmen pulled open the driver's side door and tried to drag Zapata out, but he fought them off, managing to re-lock the doors. The agents, however, managed to crack the windows to talk with the assailants and identify themselves. The agents hoped to reason with the gunmen—as many as 15 of them—who surrounded the vehicle. According to congressman McCaul, the agents said "We're Americans, we're diplomats", and the response from the drug cartels was bullets.

The gunmen then fled, and Ávila was able to use his cellphone to call for help. Dying, Zapata managed to put the car in gear and drive away before collapsing at the wheel. Soon afterwards, a Mexican federal police helicopter arrived where the two agents were. Ávila was shot twice in the leg, and was later sent to a hospital in Houston, Texas. Jaime Zapata, however, gravely injured from three bullet wounds, died before the authorities could aid him with medical treatment. According to federal sources, the ambush took place at a fake military checkpoint established by the gunmen, who were dressed in camouflage uniforms and armed with machine guns. Thank you Wikipedia

Tomorrow we get to see if any of the museums of Port Isabel are open.

Until next time.....