Pancho Villa and the Battle of Columbus: Frontiers in Digital Newspapers

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Introduction
Since early 2011, the University of New Mexico and the University of North Texas have been engaged in a historical newspaper digitization project. The endeavor is part of the National Digital Newspaper Program (NDNP): a long-term project coordinated by the Library of Congress with the goal of digitizing 100,000 pages of historical newspapers from each of the 50 states and publishing them to the Web at Chronicling America (chroniclingamerica.loc.gov).

NDNP New Mexico is funded by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

After digitizing and creating metadata for approximately one hundred reels of microfilm newspapers, New Mexico NDNP has completed its 100,000 page goal. Contemporary accounts of many noteworthy historical events in New Mexico history are now readily available online. One such event is General Francisco “Pancho” Villa’s cross-border attack on Columbus, New Mexico, an important episode in the Border War spurred by the Mexican Revolution.

The Border War
Although the heaviest fighting took place far from the U.S.-Mexico border, lives and livelihoods on the New Mexico border were often in grave danger during the decade beginning in 1910. The clipping below (Fig. 1) describes some dangers of life on the border in 1915.

The Battle of Columbus
In the early morning hours of March 9th, 1916, General Villa led his band of Mexican revolutionaries across the international border with the United States to raid the small town of Columbus, New Mexico. He intended to capture military supplies and abscond, but the attack quickly escalated into a prolonged battle with the 13th Cavalry and armed townspeople.

Despite advance notice of Villa’s movements the day before, the attack took the town’s defenders by surprise. In the clipping to the right (Figure 3), the local newspaper editor blamed squarely on the shoulders of the 13th Cavalry’s commanding officer.

The attackers looted or burned much of the town, and The Columbus Courier published a shortened edition of nothing but advertisements for two weeks following the attack. The Courier returned on March 24th with dramatic accounts of Villa’s raid and assurances that business would carry on as usual in downtown Columbus (Figure 5).

The Mexican Expedition
In the wake of the ill-fated raid on Columbus, the United States government acted quickly to punish Villa and to prevent any further attacks. President Wilson sent the Army into Mexico to attempt to capture or kill Villa.

The Mexican Expedition, or Punitive Expedition, ultimately failed to apprehend Villa, although it successfully engaged his fighters on a number of occasions. The expeditionary force returned to the United States in early 1917.

Conclusion
Through the lens of an important event in United States and Mexican history, this poster highlights a substantial corpus of historical newspapers that were recently made available on the World Wide Web for the first time. Previously these primary sources were only available on microfilm.

Students, educators and scholars alike can benefit from the easy access that the Chronicling America Web site provides, the portability of the downloadable digital files, and the full-text search capabilities made possible through Optical Character Recognition.

Chronicling America currently has almost five million news images from 25 states. New images and states are added on a regular basis.

General Villa’s Misfortunes
After escaping from prison in 1914, General Villa enjoyed military success for a time. However, Villa’s fortunes started to decline when he lost the support of the U.S. government. Then, in April 1915, he suffered a shattering defeat at Celaya that left his fighting force severely depleted. The clipping to the left (Figure 2) indicates Villa’s massive losses of men and material. Unwilling to give up the fight, Villa gathered what remained of his force and retreated to the hinterlands of the northern Mexican state of Chihuahua. From there he waged a guerilla campaign that led to The Battle of Columbus one year later.

Bibliography & Resources

Fig. 1: The Galloped Current describes some dangers of life on the border in 1915.

Fig. 2 (above): Headlines from Albuquerque’s The Evening Herald that describe Villa’s defeat at Celaya.

Fig. 3 (left): The Columbus Courier’s editor praises the troops and blames their commander.

The evening edition of The The Columbus Courier’s is part of the National Digital Newspaper Program.

Fig. 4 (left): Headlines from The Evening Herald the day after Villa’s raid.

Fig. 5: Civic leaders in Columbus, New Mexico respond to the U.S. military’s efforts to punish Villa.

Fig. 6 (above): Headlines from Albuquerque’s Pancho Villa’s Revolution By Headlines.

Fig. 7 (below): Early attacks of the Mexican Expedition from the Tucumcari News and Tucumcari Times.

Fig. 8: Headlines from The Columbus Courier.

Fig. 9: Civic leaders in the Columbus, New Mexico respond to the U.S. military’s efforts to punish Villa.

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