

ROAD TO DISCOVERY

THE UNITED STATES WESTWARD EXPANSION

By Roger B. Blakeley

On May 13, 2005 it will be 159 years since America declared war on Mexico for control of the American Southwest. Although this war was of profound significance to our time, not much is really known about the events that transformed both nations.

The causes of the conflict are still under debate today. Many people claim that the war was invariable. The Mexican-American war was born from a nation's quest to stretch from coast-to-coast and a doctrine of Manifest Destiny by its citizens. With the unrest in Texas and the revolts in California in the 1840's, it was just a matter of time before the boiling pot overflowed.

Texas was annexed by the United States in 1845. This action angered the Mexican government because they never recognized Texas as independent. General Zachary Taylor was sent to Texas to provide protection in August of 1845. General Taylor's army landed in Corpus Christi on the Nueces River. Mexico claimed the Nueces River to be the southern boundary of Texas, while Texans claimed all of the land to the Rio Grande. When Taylor's army took up positions on the north bank of the Rio Grande in the spring of 1846, the Mexican army attacked, killing 11 and capturing or scattering the rest.

President James K. Polk went to Congress and said that American troops had been killed on American soil and asked for a Declaration of War. War was declared on May 13, 1846.

The war planners of this time wanted a fast, low-cost, low-casualty war to gain as much territory as possible. The war planners proposed a three-pronged approach to invade, hold the northern Mexican territories and to secure the southwest and California. The ultimate march would take them to Mexico City and capture the City and force a treaty.

General Zachary Taylor was to head-up the campaign on the northern Mexican territories. He had a string of victories with his greatest battle taking place at Buena Vista where outnumbered by the Mexican Army, he repelled two full attacks lead by Mexican General Santa Anna. Taylor held and secured the northern territories.

A second group would be lead by Colonel Stephen Kearny but men were needed to enlist in his army. President Polk sent Colonel Kearny (later to become General Kearny); to enlist the help of the Mormons who were heading west after the mobs of Illinois and Missouri had driven them from their homes and farms. The Mormon group was living in temporary shelters, wagons and tents in preparation to move to the Salt Lake valley. When Colonel Kearny arrived to ask for their help, he found a reluctant, destitute people. They were leaving the United States so they could believe in God and Christ without persecution. Their own country had almost destroyed them because of their beliefs and

now they were asked to enlist to fight for freedom for this same country. Brigham Young, the prophet leader, told the saints that if they would go and fight, they would never be forgotten and held in remembrance forever and ever. They would have to leave their families and risk death to fight a war for a country that had essentially abandoned them. All the wages they received would go to their families to buy supplies to take them to the Salt Lake Valley. After Brigham Young's speech, 500 men with a few wives and children joined Colonel Kearny on July 1846 and set out for his historic march across 2000 miles in securing the southwest territory.

The third part of the plan was to have General Scott launch an amphibian assault against Vera Cruz, Mexico. He was successful and in March of 1847 started his march to Mexico City. He invaded Mexico City on September 13, 1847.

The capture of Mexico City ended the war. The Treaty was signed and ratified on May 30, 1848 with the turning over of the southwest territory to America and settled the Texan land issues.

The Army of the West Mormon Battalion opened the trails, which became the roads that started the westward expansion. The Army marched through Yuma County January 1 through 9, 1847. They crossed the nearly mile wide Colorado River January 10 and 11 near Algodones. After crossing the Colorado River, they marched across the sand dunes and desert to San Diego. This is part of our nation's history and is being remembered by a group of individuals determined to make Yuma an historic destination point.

The Army of the West Foundation was developed to provide the historic context of the Army's march. The Army experienced tremendous hardships during the march. They built much of the infrastructure that led to the settling of the west and provided a path for the gold rush era. You may find out more about this organization and how you can help build a statue at the Yuma West Wetlands to honor these soldiers by visiting the website at www.usarmyofthewest.org