

TIME

'I Cry All the Time.' A Century After 15 Mexican Men and Boys Were Massacred in Texas, Their Descendants Want Recognition



Descendants of Juan Flores, who survived the Porvenir massacre, gather to commemorate the event. Courtesy of Latino Public Broadcasting

BY JASMINE AGUILERA SEPTEMBER 27, 2019

In the dead of night on Jan. 28, 1918, a group of white Texas Rangers, U.S. military men and local ranchers burst into the homes of **Mexican and Mexican American** families in **Porvenir, Texas**, a small border town west of Marfa. They rounded up 15 men and boys — the youngest just 16 — and shot them to death. Juan Flores, then about 12 years old, watched his father, Longino Flores, be led away by the armed men. He later found his father's body shot dead in the

desert, barely recognizable.

The trauma haunted Flores for the rest of his life, until he finally spoke up at the age of 95 about what he witnessed as a child — but only after his daughter uncovered the family history while looking through county records.

After Flores finally spoke out, his family and the rest of the world had the chance to learn the details of the massacre from the only known living witness. Combining that knowledge with documents and excavation, academics were able to tell the story of the Porvenir Massacre, which was just one act in a decade of violence against Mexican Americans at a time tensions between Mexican “bandits” and white Texans was on the rise. The massacre, and its fallout for the affected families, is now the subject of a PBS documentary, *Porvenir, Texas*, which is streaming on PBS.org until Oct. 18.

“My father, after he started talking about this, he wanted the whole world to know,” **Benita Flores Albarado**, Juan Flores’ daughter, tells TIME. “[My father] described cowards killing men with their hands tied up. It was so sad. He would tell us after they killed his father he would wake up every morning knowing that his father was not there, knowing he was not going to be there anymore.”

“I cry all the time,” she added.

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Porvenir, Texas

In the early 20th century, the tiny town of Porvenir on the banks of the **Rio Grande** River was a quiet place, where a few families of Mexican descent lived and farmed. But this was also an era of mass violence against Mexican Americans and Mexican nationals.

The Mexican Revolution that began in 1910 came so close to the border that people who lived in El Paso, Texas, could take their lunch breaks on the roof of the **Camino Real hotel** (then known as the Paso Del Norte hotel) and watch the war across the border. One result of the unrest was an increase in immigration from Mexico into the U.S., and some who made the journey were revolutionaries. Though the revolution was largely **backed by the U.S.**, fights between revolutionaries and Texans were commonplace. The U.S. government began to heavily militarize the border, and tensions between ethnic Mexicans and white Texans increased, especially as white Americans kept claiming, **often illegally**, the territory owned and farmed by Mexicans, displacing the original landowners.

Historians estimate that hundreds of Mexican people were killed during this time, including 232 ethnic Mexicans who were lynched in Texas between 1848 and 1928 — on territory that **until 1848 had been part of Mexico**.

“There were a series of efforts to actually portray this violence as progress,” says **Monica Muñoz Martinez**, a historian at Brown University who specializes in the history of violence and policing on the U.S.-Mexico border. Her book, *The Injustice Never Leaves You: Anti-Mexican Violence in Texas*, examines a decade of mass violence on the border inflicted on Mexicans between 1910 and 1920, including the Porvenir Massacre. Not only did politicians call for violence, portraying people of Mexican descent as violent outlaws, but the media also tended to portray the victims as criminals and the killers as heroes.

On Christmas Day in 1917, the ranch of Lucas Charles Brite, located miles from Porvenir in western Presidio County, **was raided** by four or five people believed

to be supporters of Mexican revolutionary Pancho Villa. They killed the area postman during the raid. None of the Mexican men involved in that raid had anything to do with Porvenir, historians say, but residents wanted revenge.

On Jan. 28, 1918, while the town was sleeping, a group of Texas Rangers and local ranchers, with help from soldiers of the Eighth U.S. Cavalry Regiment, went from home to home waking the residents of Porvenir and ordering them outside. They selected 15 men and boys — as young as 16 and as old as 64 — to take into the desert, where they shot them. The victims were Antonio Castañeda, Pedro Herrera, Vivian Herrera, Severiano Herrera, Manuel Moralez, Eutimio Gonzalez, Ambrosio Hernandez, Alberto Garcia, Tiburcio Jáques, Roman Nieves, Serapio Jimenez, Pedro Jimenez, Juan Jimenez, Macedonio Huertas and Longino Flores, Juan Flores' father.

Young Juan Flores sought out local schoolteacher teacher Harry Warren — a white lawyer who had married into a Mexican family — for solace that morning. When Warren followed Flores out to the scene, Warren learned his own father-in-law, Tiburcio Jáques, was among the dead. Flores was left with the task of identifying the bodies, while Warren took notes.

“When they found them dead, they thought that [the vigilantes] had got them with a machete and chopped them up,” Benita Flores says. “But it wasn’t a machete, it was guns.”

Warren’s notes detailing the massacre would later serve as evidence of the events. Many of the massacre’s survivors fled to Mexico, where they sought help from the Mexican government. The Mexican government took down depositions, testimony and the names of the perpetrators, which led to an international investigation of the massacre. Meanwhile, Porvenir became a ghost town.

Investigating a massacre

What followed was an attempt by the Texas Rangers to “cover up” the events, Martinez says.

“On the one hand, we don’t know about this history because it is a shameful part of our history — but a lot of work was put into actually trying to cover up the tragedy,” Martinez says. “It’s an especially hard history to find because people weren’t prosecuted.”

In 1918, the Texas Rangers of Company B, then led by Captain James Monroe Fox, submitted reports saying they were forced to kill the men and boys as a result of a shootout. They said the Mexican victims were involved in the raid at Brite ranch and that they were thieves and murderers. Those reports were proved false through investigations by Mexican councils, the U.S. Army and the only Mexican-American state elected official at the time, Rep. José Tomás Canales, who called for an investigation into overall racial violence committed by the Rangers. Leading that push for investigations were the families of the victims, including Juana Flores, who was Longino Flores’ wife and Juan Flores’ mother.

“The massacre itself was so damning that it made it nearly impossible for the state not to have some kind of investigation,” Martinez says. The 1919 investigation “didn’t deliver justice,” Martinez added, but it “created a record of the ways that the state, that the Texas Rangers, that elected officials actually tried to justify the violence.”

Over 80 witnesses were interviewed and dozens of documents were submitted into evidence during the Canales investigation. Fox later admitted that he had ordered the Mexican men and boys executed. Company B was disbanded, five Texas Rangers were fired and Captain Fox was forced to resign, but no one was charged with a crime. The rangers who were fired were able to find new jobs, and Fox later rejoined the Rangers in Company A.

Juana Flores killed herself in 1935, and Harry Warren went on to work picking cotton in Arizona until he died.

And Juan Flores, the boy witness, didn't speak openly about the massacre again until he was 95 years old — but when he did, he reignited a search for the true events that occurred in 1918.

“If my father-in-law had died at 70 or 80 years old, we wouldn't be having this conversation,” says Evaristo “Buddy” Albarado, Benita's husband and Juan Flores' son-in-law. “He didn't know how to read or write, but he had the names engraved in his brain.”

Flores died at the age of 101 in 2007. Flores, who for decades had suffered quietly with the aftermath of his trauma, might have taken the events of that day to his grave had Benita not discovered Harry Warren's notes while doing research on her family history in 1998.

“My father never wanted to talk about his family when I was growing up,” Benita says. But while looking through records of the history of Presidio County in west Texas, she found Warren's list of massacre victims: a man named Longino, who had a wife named Juana and three kids named Benita, Juan and Narciso. “I went and I asked my father, ‘Are you this 12-year-old boy?’ And he said yes. It was very hard for him to tell us what happened that day, but slowly he started telling us.”

Juan Flores' family took him to visit Porvenir for the first time since the massacre when he was 96, as Benita and her family continued their search for answers.

The 100-year fight for accountability

Visiting universities and searching through archives, the Flores family found

hundreds of pages detailing what had happened — and also found other descendants of the victims, many of whom told Benita they had never heard of the massacre until she approached them.

As descendants learned more about the massacre at Porvenir, they reignited calls for justice.

In 2015, descendants and historians applied for a historical marker with the Texas Historical Commission (THC) to recognize the victims. Martinez, one of the sponsors of the historical marker, says the first time a state institution acknowledged the Porvenir massacre as a tragedy was the Texas State History Museum in 2016, and then the marker was unveiled in 2018, despite initial pushback by officials at the Presidio County Historical Commission, according to an investigation by the [Texas Observer](#).

“The militant Hispanics have turned this marker request into a political rally and want reparations from the federal government for a 100-year-old-plus tragic event,” wrote Mona Blocker Garcia, chair of the commission, according to the *Observer*, in an email to THC that also brought into question the innocence of the Mexican victims, despite significant evidence that they had not committed any crimes. (Garcia later told the *Observer* that she had heard from a descendant of someone at the Brite Ranch Christmas Day raid that a witness had told authorities about the perpetrators and then disappeared into a witness-protection program. Garcia acknowledged the story as “folklore” to the *Observer*, but added, “the story has lasted 100 years. Why would anybody make something like that up?”)

Benita Flores says she doesn’t care if some today don’t believe in the details of the massacre, because she has evidence on her side. “We have all the papers from Washington, D.C.,” she says. “They were killed in cold blood.”

The Texas Rangers, now a division of the Texas Department of Public Safety,

have never issued a formal apology. TexasDPS did not respond to TIME's request for comment by the time of publication. In 2018, a spokesperson for the Texas DPS told [the El Paso Times](#) that the massacre “has no relevance to the modern day/current Texas Rangers or to DPS.”

Martinez, however, feels differently.

“We should be able to say, 100 years later, very plainly and simply, when police come and arrest people and massacre them in police custody, that’s a tragedy and that’s a crime,” she says. “We can look at the historical evidence and say ‘Wow, this is unbelievable,’ but it’s taken this long for people to recognize this tragedy. That says a lot about where we are and the public understanding of Texas and border history.”

If you or someone you know may be contemplating suicide, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255 or text HOME to 741741 to reach the Crisis Text Line. In emergencies, call 911, or seek care from a local hospital or mental health provider.

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