

CHAPTER 1

Manifest Destiny's Children

The Rincón de Santa Gertrudis, an old Spanish land grant, lies at the heart of King Ranch, for it was here, on these untenanted lands, that Capt. Richard King, in 1853, first laid claim to a dream of ownership that would make his nascent rancho the envy of the world. The site on the Santa Gertrudis Creek, which ran prettily in seasons of rain and dried to caked mud in the frequent droughts of that land, was 125 miles north of Brownsville on the border and 45 miles southwest of the little gulf seaside town of Corpus Christi. What was true of an adjacent, larger tract (the Santa Gertrudis de la Garza land grant), which King would buy the next year, was true of all this land—in the grandiloquent language of Spanish deeds, it was “unappropriated, waste and unpopulated.”

Originally the land had belonged to no one, lying on the floor of the Late Cretaceous seas a mere sixty-five million years ago; in the fullness of time the waters receded, leaving behind deposits of oil and salt domes and subhumid plains of varying soils and grasses and plants, and an ecology that would support human beings. Small Indian groups, designated later by ethnologists as Coahuiltecan, hunted or gathered such food—various roots and tubers, deer, shellfish, pecans along the Nueces (Nut) River—as they could find in the sparse, unfor-giving country that the Spanish, when they arrived in the sixteenth century, called *El Desierto de los Muertos*, the Desert of the Dead.

Cabeza de Vaca, the first European to spend any length of time in Texas, passed this way during his seven-year sojourn of surviving half-naked among the peoples there to greet him. De Vaca recognized an agrarian future awaiting this country: “All over the land,” he

wrote, “are vast and handsome pastures, with good grass for cattle; and it strikes me the soil would be very fertile were the country inhabited and improved by reasonable people.” Eventually Spain flung its northernmost settlements across the Rio Grande and Spanish land-grant holders reached as far inland as the Santa Gertrudis Creek, but Indians in the area resisted the Spanish as they later resisted Anglo incursions, and the Spanish abandoned these holdings and were content to stay along the border in the towns built in the eighteenth century.

When Anglos began to stream into Texas from the 1820s on, and after the Texas revolution in 1836, settlements remained east and south of the Nueces country. Stephen F. Austin, the father of Texas settlement, looked with disfavor upon the region because it did not fit the prototype for cotton plantations. After a trip to Matamoros in the 1820s, he wrote of the land that English speakers were now calling the Wild Horse Desert: “the poorest I ever saw in my life. It is generally nothing but sand, entirely void of lumber, covered with scrubby thorn bushes and prickly pear.” As late as 1839, the following notation appeared on maps depicting South Texas: “Of this section of country little is known.”

But it was here in this inhospitable wasteland of grass and sweltering heat that Richard King assembled his empire piece by piece. To do so he hired the best legal talent available. The successive transfer of ownership from Spanish to Mexican to Anglo meant a very tangled history of land titles and taxes paid and unpaid and dispossession and new ownership, a lengthy and knotty process with new laws cantilevered over older ones. One Spanish deed holder on the Rio Grande spoke to the problem of title: “I have traced the [land] title back to the King of Spain, who got it by right of discovery and conquest, and since he ruled by Divine Right, that takes it back to God Almighty himself, and that is as far as I can go.”

King did not have to go that far and did not. In all, King made over sixty purchases of land in his lifetime, so that by the time of his death in 1885 he owned over a half-million acres and was the richest man in Texas, the archetypal cattle baron whose fame would increase with the passage of time. What in the beginning had seemed a fool’s errand into a wilderness acquired instead the patina of myth, the aura of legend. “Buy land; and never sell” were words of wisdom uttered,

the family maintained, by the sainted Robert E. Lee himself. They became King's motto and stood him well from first to last.

Fifty years ago I could have traveled, as the great chronicler of the King Ranch, Tom Lea, once did, upstream from the mouth of the Rio Grande all the way to Roma, 150 miles to the west, to get the feel of the Rio Grande and the region as it might have been experienced by Captain King. *No más.*

Today the closest I can get to the river's mouth is a few miles away, on the windblown beach at Boca Chica (Little Mouth). The road from Brownsville to Boca Chica, State Highway 4, gives a glimpse of just how desolate the country still is. Northeast of Brownsville there is almost no development at all, and four or five miles from the coast, there is nothing but salt flats to the east and flat, empty scrub country to the west. The last historical marker signifies the site where Camp Belknap once stood, about a mile west of S. H. 4, on a stretch of "high ground," a long narrow belt of land only slightly elevated above the low-lying plain. General Zachary Taylor established a camp at this spot to receive volunteers who in the summer of 1846 poured into Brazos Santiago a few miles away, on the coast. Many men never left Camp Belknap, dying instead in that pestilential, mosquito-plagued hellhole, the camp averaging two to three burials per day.

S. H. 4 ends a hundred yards from the water. To either side stretch dirty, taupe-colored beaches where the families of the poor gather beside their pickups and four-wheel-drive vehicles to grill chicken and steaks while the kids play in the sand and water, the radios and CD players pumping out the sounds of conjunto music. A few miles to the northeast rise the condos and hotels of South Padre Island, but along the Boca Chica beach there is nothing at all except dirty sand, dead seaweed, the strange purple and green cellophanelike remains of jellyfish, and the quiet slap of waves.

South of where I am standing, a few miles away, is the mouth of the river, only in 2002 there is no river. Where once the Rio Grande entered the Gulf of Mexico, today it does not. A newly created sandbar caused by wave action from the Atlantic Ocean plus the sluggish flow and pooling upstream marks the river's end. Although it is possible to walk across the mouth of the river, it is probably not such a good idea, for this is drug smuggler country and anybody poking

around in this isolated place, a true borderland, vague and undefined, is asking for trouble. It is also no longer possible to take a boat from Boca Chica to Brownsville. Today the only boats on the river belong to the Border Patrol.

At the edge of the gulf at Boca Chica, waves lapping at one's feet, looking west away from the gulf, toward Brownsville, thirty miles distant by land, all one can see is the overarching blue sky, the shimmer cast by blazing sunlight, an irregular line of low sand hummocks tufted with sea-blown grass, and beyond, a blurry haze created by the sun's glare and mist from the gulf. From here, one sees Texas as it appeared to those who first came to these shores, from the Spaniard de la Pineda in 1519 to the youthful future founder of King Ranch three centuries later. From this perspective Texas is all possibility, formless and blank. Those with a taste for the picturesque, as many cultivated nineteenth-century newcomers were, would have had to travel far up that river to find anything that would appeal to their sensibilities. Extreme South Texas was extreme in its lack of picturesqueness. There was an end-of-the-world feeling here—there still is—as though America seems to drain away and something else begins. South Texas in the mid-nineteenth century was a place where, from the American point of view, there was nothing else to do except try to find a way to get rich.

In May 1847, when Richard King stepped ashore at Brazos Santiago, the place hummed with activity generated by commerce and its handmaiden, war. But apart from its vital economic function, nobody ever had anything good to say about Brazos Santiago. Major Luther Giddings, who hated the “suffocating atmosphere of that sandy waste at the Brazos,” enumerated the panoply of pests like some Darwinian Dante: “snakes, tarantulas, ants, centipedes, lizards, horned toads, scorpions, fleas, spiders,—*et id genus omne*” [and it is all types]. Lieutenant William S. Henry told a tall tale to capture the deplorable conditions that he observed during the summer of 1846, telling about a man who swallowed a sandbar and saying to his doctor, “Well, then, I am a *gone sucker*. I've got a sand-bar in my innards, upon which every thing grounds, and I can't get any thing up nor down.” A Pennsylvania volunteer named Jacob Oswandel described his impression

from aboard ship on January 28, 1847, just four months before Richard King arrived in Texas: “A miserable looking place it is; two or three shanties and a few tents along the beach, and the harbor full of vessels of all descriptions anchored around the beach.”

Whatever its shortcomings as a site of pleasurable human habitation, Brazos Santiago was a crucial port of entry where ships unloaded passengers and goods by means of lighters (smaller boats) that trundled cargo, human or otherwise, from ships anchored offshore to Brazos Santiago or Brazos Island. So important economically was Brazos Santiago—the only northern seaport for trade with Mexico—that controlling it was a vital factor in the war that brought men like Richard King to Texas in the first place.

Who *was* Richard King? He was a pure product of America, an orphaned youth without family, money, or pedigree, with only his wits and determination and pluck to carry him through the world. His childhood had been brief. He was born on July 10, 1824, in New York, of Irish parentage, which meant, unspoken, a great deal. It meant a history, back in Ireland, of hunger, need, oppression, and flight to America. The year he fetched up at the mouth of the river in



Richard King. The once beardless young steamboat captain as Victorian patriarch.

South Texas, Ireland was being emptied of its hungry, suffering masses. That historical process, the slow leaking of Ireland's people, was now a cascading, frantic, giant exodus forced by the failure of the potato crop—and a dozen other ills. It had been going on since the turn of the century. Nothing is known of Richard King's parents except that like other Irish immigrants, they must have come to New York for a fresh start. But there they perished instead, and their son Richard King, at age five, found himself placed in the care of an aunt and then, at age nine, apprenticed to a jeweler. The young King did not like being an apprentice, sweeping, running errands, taking orders, and in 1835, when he was eleven, like that archetypal American, Benjamin Franklin ("I dislik'd the Trade and had a strong Inclination for the Sea"), the boy bolted from his apprenticeship and took to sea, hiding away on the *Desdemona*, a ship bound for the Gulf Coast.

At some point in its passage south, down the Atlantic coast, around Florida, and into the tranquil waters of Mobile Bay, the boy was discovered and brought before the captain of the *Desdemona*. Something in King's look, some spirit, some keenness of intellect or physical promise, led the captain to take an interest in the boy's welfare. He became a "cabin's cub," and under the tutelage of Capt. Hugh Monroe he learned the ins and outs of riverboat navigation. In 1837, at age thirteen, he went to work on Capt. Joe Holland's boat, which operated on the Alabama River from Mobile to Montgomery. From Holland he learned still more, including an eight-month stint at a school in Connecticut—the only formal schooling he ever had—and afterward returned to work on the Alabama River. He became a pilot in 1840, when he was sixteen.

Rivers were crucial to America's future. Before railroads, they offered the key to commercial development. Rivers were the underlying reason for the Lewis and Clark expedition. Thomas Jefferson envisioned a river route from the Mississippi all the way to the West Coast; the Northwest Passage was thought to be a waterway. At about the time the Lewis and Clark expedition returned from the west, Robert Fulton was revolutionizing river transportation. The steamboat would be the first big breakthrough of the machine age in travel. So in learning the craft of riverboat piloting, Richard King was riding the wave of the present and the foreseeable future. The mighty Mississippi wasn't the only navigable river in the country.

Richard King added a new page to his growing frontier résumé when he went to Florida in 1841 and received a crash course in American imperialism. The Seminole War (1835–1842) was a bloody exercise in conquering and depopulating a people who had lived in that aboriginal land for centuries.

Not that there wasn't plenty of hatred to go around on both sides. Halleck Tustenguggee, one of the leading Seminole chieftains, hated whites so much that it was said he killed his own sister when she advocated compromising with the enemy. On the American side, the purpose was plain. Col. William J. Worth, who took command of the army in Florida in May 1841, issued orders to "find the enemy, capture, or exterminate." There was nothing new about this policy except its brutal succinctness.

The Americans resorted to savage tactics against the "savages." At one point the army purchased thirty-three Cuban bloodhounds to track down the elusive Seminoles and to wage war against what Governor Robert Reid called "beasts of prey." Reid, incidentally, was considered a gentleman, an intellectual, and a humanitarian. There were military-type battles, to be expected in war, but there were also instances of guerrilla-type tactics. Out of a desire to avenge an embarrassing surprise attack by a band of Seminoles, Lt. Col. William Harney later captured several Seminole men and ordered them hanged in front of their wives and children.

The methods that seemed to work the best were those of duplicity and betrayal. Army officers would invite groups of Seminoles to friendly powwows, then arrest them and ship them west. To many Seminoles, forced emigration was as bad as death. It was in such a manner that Colonel Worth deceived Halleck. Colonel Worth invited him and his warriors to a feast, then ordered them surrounded, bound in chains, and hauled away in wagons to the embarkation point at Tampa. Brokenhearted, Halleck said, "I have been hunted like a wolf, and now I am to be sent away like a dog."

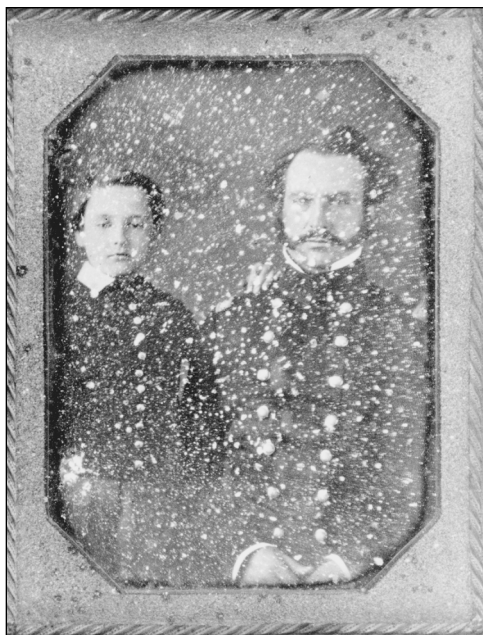
Richard King saw some of these methods firsthand. In 1841 he served on the steamboat *Ocochohee* under the command of Capt. Henry Penny. Once again it was Colonel Worth who sprang the trap. He invited Chief Hospertarke, eighty-five years old, on board, along with eighteen warriors. He offered them whisky and supplies, but as soon as they were safely on the boat, they were arrested.

Many of the men who played a role in the Seminole War would later wind up in Texas: General Zachary Taylor, General Winfield Scott, Colonel Worth, many others. Lt. George Gordon Meade remarked in a letter to his wife that in Texas he was happy to meet “many of my old fellow-campaigners in Florida.” Some of the most important men in King’s future took part in the Seminole campaigns. One of them was Mifflin Kenedy. Another was William W. Chapman.

The friendship between King and Kenedy that began in Florida was one of those that shapes lives. Born to Quaker parents in Pennsylvania in 1818, Mifflin Kenedy taught school, sailed to India, and saw a bit of the world before settling on river navigation in 1836. For the next several years he worked on the *Champion* on the Apalachicola and Chattahoochee rivers in Alabama. Following their days in Florida, Kenedy and King pursued their riverboat careers in Alabama, and in 1846, during a visit to Pittsburgh, Kenedy met an army engineer who was rounding up boats to work on the Rio Grande. Kenedy saw an opportunity and invited the younger King to join him. For the rest of their lives Kenedy and King would be closely associated in many ventures, and both would rise to prominence in the frontier of South Texas.

The friendship of W. W. Chapman (1814–1859) and Richard King was another matter entirely. A graduate of West Point, Chapman also saw duty in Florida, in 1838, and later in Mexico was brevetted a major for gallantry displayed at the Battle of Buena Vista (1847). Afterward he served as army quartermaster in Matamoros and later Brownsville during the yeasty years of 1847 to 1852. He became friends with Richard King at some point, and he and his very interesting wife, Helen Blair Chapman (1817–1881), were deeply engaged in the life and times of that era. An inveterate writer of letters, Helen Chapman had a lively mind, a good education, and a novelist’s capacity for characterization and evocative detail. Together and separately, their lives were intertwined with those of Richard King and his wife-to-be, Henrietta Morse Chamberlain. And they remain intertwined today, a century and a half later, in ways that the Kings certainly would not have wanted and that present-day heirs and assigns do not, either, as will be shown in these pages in the fullness of time.

The Mexican War, like the Seminole War, was a consequence of American expansionism. Its roots were more complex, however, as



William W. Chapman and son Willie, ca. 1849.

Mexico, unlike the Seminoles in Florida, constituted a sovereign nation. As did Texas itself, until January 1845, when the United States annexed Texas as the twenty-eighth state. Now the interests of the United States and those of Texas were officially one and the same. President James K. Polk was committed to expanding the territory of the continental United States, and he did so through artful diplomacy, military plans, and a general overarching rationale with a compelling name: Manifest Destiny.

In 1845 the phrase appeared for the first time in an article for the *Democratic Review*. It caught on immediately. The writer, long thought to be John L. O'Sullivan but recently identified as Jane Cazneau (indefatigable journalist and author of *Eagle Pass; or Life on the Border*, 1852), proclaimed that "the fulfillment of our Manifest Destiny" is "to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free developing of our yearly multiplying millions." Manifest Destiny was but a name for long-standing policy, exemplified by Thomas Jefferson's authorization of the Lewis and Clark expedition at the beginning of the century, the goal of which was nothing less than to lay claim to territories that would offer "room enough for all our descendants to the thousandth and ten thousandth generation."



Helen Chapman and son Willie,
ca. 1846.

Not everybody went west, however. New England intellectuals like Emerson and Thoreau attacked the war, Emerson writing in one poem, “Behold the famous states/Harrying Mexico/With rifle and with knife.” Even among those who prosecuted the war, there were some who felt the United States was completely in the wrong. A young lieutenant in General Taylor’s command, for example, wrote in his memoirs that the Mexican War was “the most unjust war ever waged by a stronger nation against a weaker nation . . . an instance of a republic following the bad example of European monarchies.” His name was Ulysses S. Grant.

But as long as there was a continent to conquer, the idea of Manifest Destiny would prevail. Frederick Law Olmsted, a cultivated northerner who hated slavery—and who would later design New York’s Central Park—traveled through Texas in 1854 and, in his laconic manner, put the matter for land acquisition more succinctly than anybody: “We saw the land lying idle; we took it. This to other nations is all that we can say. Which one of them can cast the first stone?” Although very critical of the kind of racism and ignorance he observed in Texas, Olmsted was yet moved enough to prophesy:

“Texas has an Arcadian preeminence of position among our States, and an opulent future before her, that only wanton mismanagement can forfeit.”

The main geographical, territorial point of dispute over which so much blood was spilled in the Mexican War was the establishment of a boundary between Texas and Mexico. Texas regarded the Rio Grande or Rio Bravo or Rio del Norte—it went by all three names—as the boundary. The river runs nearly two thousand miles, looping down out of New Mexico to traverse the desert north of El Paso, knifing through the Big Bend country into the flat desert scrubland before the terrain yields to subtropical farming land and then on down to the sea, petering out in a slow, imperceptible dispersal of its waters into the Gulf of Mexico. Before dams the river flowed desultorily or swiftly, deep or shallow, threading its way southward, randomly shifting its channel, leaving *resacas* (sunken beds or depressions) to mark its former course. For centuries the river performed its natural functions, providing water and shade from trees along its banks. Aboriginal men and women used the river in all the ways they knew, but things changed with the coming of Europeans.

Following the bloody events of 1836, when Texas defeated Mexico and became an independent republic, Texas claimed the Rio Grande as its southern border, but Mexico refused to recognize that claim. Instead Mexico insisted that the Nueces River, 130 miles farther north, should be the boundary. The dispute, of course, had to do with land. It is easy to understand Mexico's view. All of Texas had once belonged to Mexico, and the area along the Rio Grande, on both sides of the river, had been thoroughly settled for almost a century. In 1749 José de Escandón acquired permission from the king of Spain to grant leagues of land in that part of northern Mexico stretching from the modern Mexican states of Coahuila, Nuevo Leon, and Tamaulipas across the Rio Bravo into Texas all the way to the Nueces River. Under his guidance and stewardship, families moved onto the lands and built ranchos and towns. Missions were established to convert or pacify the Indians.

The grants varied in size from narrow *porciones* that fronted on the river to huge tracts encompassing thousands of leagues of land. Escandón also established five *villas* or towns along the river, *villas del norte* as they were called. Four of them—Guerrero, Mier, Carmargo,

and Reynosa—were on the south bank of the river, northwest of where Matamoros and Brownsville would later be built. The fifth, Laredo, was on the north bank of the river. Many of the ranchlands owned by citizens of the four south-bank towns lay on the northern side of the river. The point is emphatically this: the river was a river, not a boundary. What was being created here in this arid region was a civilization Spanish and Mexican in its articulations and institutions, and the people felt themselves separate from both interior Mexico and the rest of what eventually became Coahuila y Texas. About twenty thousand people lived on about a thousand ranches. Escandón's *entrada* (entrance) had been highly successful. Those original settlements and ranches nourished Tejano culture for a century before the occupation by Americans changed nearly everything. The other salient fact often ignored by Anglo historians, romancers of the West, is that the Tejanos had stocked the range with longhorn cattle. Thus the famed Texas longhorns, so celebrated in song, legend, and history, were in fact Tejano longhorns. South Texas was not an empty place on the map; there were Tejanos and their livestock, cattle and immense amounts of sheep, on that land, as there had been groups of indigenous peoples there before them and, though reduced in numbers, still there when the "Texans" came.

Almost all of the new land that became Texas descended from earlier Spanish or Mexican holdings. Fort Texas (later Fort Brown) was situated on a rancho. Downtown Brownsville was part of a rancho; everything the Anglo-Americans built (and usually renamed) was originally Spanish land-grant holdings descending through the generations to become the property of Mexican citizens following Mexico's independence from Spain in 1821.

The Anglo-Americans overran and eventually supplanted a century-long continuity of settlement, ownership, and community. The Rio Bravo/Rio del Norte/Rio Grande thus became a political and divisive boundary separating families in Matamoros, for example, from their kin on the other side of the river: two riverbanks, two countries. Such division seemed unnatural and wholly against the grain of a century of relative stability based on the ancient patterns of stock raising and farming, trade and religion, and a common language. The boundary seemed completely arbitrary to one nation and completely justified to another. Now all that land, owned by Mexicans and Tejanos dating

back to 1749, was subject to new claims by the light-skinned Americans.

It was into this complex arena of new American energy that Richard King came in 1847. There was nothing holding him in Alabama, and the whole country had been talking about Texas and Mexico for over a year. Back in the winter of 1845, when President Polk had sent out a call for 50,000 volunteers to help the U.S. regulars fight Mexico, young men from all over the country had jumped at the chance for adventure and glory. When King arrived the war had blown past the border into the interior, but it was still uppermost in everybody's mind and the events of the previous year were still fresh. King would have met plenty of officers and soldiers who had been part of General Zachary Taylor's "Army of Occupation," as it was called.

In August 1845, two years before King came to Texas, General Taylor, Old Rough and Ready, a wily veteran, "a gallant, brave old man," one lieutenant called him, brought a command of over two thousand regulars to the primitive new trading post of Corpus Christi on the Gulf of Mexico, about 170 miles north of Matamoros. There was an improvisational, up-for-grabs feeling about the entire American venture into darkest Texas that moved one of Taylor's officers, Colonel Hitchcock, to remark: "As for Texas, her original limit was the Nueces and the hills ranging north from its sources, and she has never conquered, possessed, or exercised dominion west of the Nueces, except that a small smuggling company at this place, living here by Mexican sufferance, if not under Mexican protection, has chosen to call itself Texas, and some of the inhabitants have chosen to call themselves Texans."

On March 8, 1846, General Taylor and his Army of Occupation began the long march from Corpus Christi to the border, following the road of the Arroyo Colorado, an old trail used by traders and smugglers. Thereafter it would be called Taylor's Trail. Taylor marched first to Point Isabel, then to the Rio Grande opposite Matamoros, a stone's throw away on the other side of the river. A raising of the flag on the banks of the Rio Grande prompted Lieutenant Henry to note that it proclaimed "in a silent but impressive manner that the 'area of freedom' was again extended." At first Matamoros seemed to Lieutenant Henry "like a fairy vision before our enraptured eyes," but then he admitted maybe he was laying it on a little thick. The Mexican

women, however, fulfilled every dream. “Nearly all the latter have well-developed, magnificent figures,” Henry wrote; “they dress with as little clothing as can well be fancied.” Later he returned to the same theme: “If you are a lover of nature—*unadorned*—you can gratify your taste by walking up to Fort Paredes any pleasant evening, and witness the fair ones bathing in the Rio Grande; no offense is taken by looking at them enjoying their aquatic amusements.” Excited, some soldiers dived in, only to be turned back by Mexican guards. One day, fourteen soldiers deserted by swimming across the river. After two soldiers were shot dead in the water by U.S. troops acting on orders, officers such as Colonel Hitchcock regarded such actions as “an unpleasant state of things.”

Taylor ordered that a fort be constructed across from Matamoros; he named it Fort Texas. On the Mexican side preparations for war were obvious. Artillery was moved into place, and priests blessed the artillery pieces one by one. The main battles would not take place at the nascent fort, but rather eleven miles away, north of Brownsville, at Palo Alto, a broad, flat plain. At first, Taylor’s army thought they would be opposed by Mexican forces led by General Pedro Ampudia, a man whose reputation preceded him in lurid terms. Ampudia was notorious for having boiled in oil the head of one of his foes in Mexico. But instead it was not Ampudia but General Mariano Arista, a man the Americans held in much higher regard, who led the Mexican army at Palo Alto on May 8. The decisive factor was the American army’s superb light artillery, whose tactics were developed by Major Samuel Ringgold, who died from wounds suffered that day.

The Battle of Palo Alto ended indecisively when the prairie grass caught on fire and great billowing clouds of smoke forced both armies to cease firing. The next day, at a nearby site, Resaca de la Palma, the Americans routed Arista’s soldiers. Arista and his men held good defensive ground, in the empty lake bed carved by the Rio Grande in one of its former channels, but the Americans prevailed, and Arista’s army fell apart. There were many dead and wounded, many deserters, and some three hundred who drowned trying to cross the Rio Grande. A Mexican ferryman later described what he saw in the aftermath of the defeat: “They came in flocks, running and crawling like *torgugas* [turtles], and they fell into the water flat on all fours like *tortugas* and never stopped till they were in the brush of the *Republica*

Mejicana. They had been at the fight of what we call Resaca de la Palma, and I was very glad that I had not been with them.”

News of these victories spurred enthusiasm for the war throughout the nation, and the names of heroes were kept alive on the border. Richard King would have known those names. Ringgold Barracks at Laredo was named in honor of Major Ringgold; Fort Brown, originally Fort Texas, was renamed in honor of Maj. Jacob Brown, who, left in charge of the fort by General Taylor, was killed by Mexican cannon fire from across the river; and the first boat Richard King commanded on the Rio Grande, the *Colonel Cross*, was named for a popular officer, Truman Cross, “a high-minded, chivalric gentleman” killed in April by unknown assassins. Reminders of the battles were vivid in 1847 when King arrived, and for years to come. After the war, American army officers and their wives dined on an ornate silver service set abandoned by General Arista during the pell-mell flight from Resaca de la Palma.

Though the Mexican War is now largely forgotten by the rest of the country, the memory of it along the border and throughout South Texas remains strong in the minds of some who feel a measure of ambivalence about the political identities forged by blood and treaty. Such feelings come out in all sorts of ways, even today. Yolanda Gonzalez, a librarian at The University of Texas at Brownsville, located on the grounds of Fort Texas/Brown, told me of the fight that occurred back in the 1980s when a new library was to be named. When the Mexican-American and Mexican communities learned that the library was going to be named after Zachary Taylor, objections were raised and it was called instead the Arnuflo L. Oliveria Library, after a prominent educator in the valley. According to Mrs. Gonzalez, Zachary Taylor arranged to rent the land on which Fort Texas/Brown was built from an ancestor of hers who owned the land (it was a rancho then), but Taylor’s government had never paid a dime for it. Each year Yolanda Gonzalez totes up what the U.S. government owes her family.

Similar, in Corpus Christi a recent effort to memorialize the encampment of Zachary Taylor’s army there in 1845–46 has collapsed in the face of opposition. Proponents planned to construct Artesian Park in downtown Corpus Christi, with a hundred miniature pup tents to symbolize the American army and a hill to symbolize Aztec pyramids. Anthony Quiroz, an assistant professor of history at

Texas A&M-Corpus Christi, said of the controversy, "I knew it was going to ruffle some feathers. The truth is there are still scars. For Mexican-Americans, this war represents stealing their homeland."

So it was in the late nineteenth century, after the conquest, after the dust had presumably settled. Late in his life, in 1892, Mifflin Kenedy wrote: "For many years, Captain King and myself tried to Americanize that portion of the country [in Cameron County, on the Rio Grande], but we failed; it is very little more American in feeling today than it was in October 1848 when the Americans evacuated Matamoros and crossed over to this side."

The war in Texas spelled golden opportunities for steamboat pilots on the Rio Grande. The army required a lot of shipping of men and supplies from the gulf upstream to Fort Brown and Rio Grande City, Roma, and Camargo. In fact, the needs of the army created the economic opportunity that would propel Richard King and Mifflin Kenedy into achieving wealth in Brownsville, which wasn't even built yet when King arrived.

Acting upon Kenedy's invitation, King arrived just in time to provide the U.S. Army with reliable transportation of both goods and men. On June 13, 1847, King secured a position as one of three second pilots on the *Colonel Cross*, a side-wheeler of 160 tons, built in Shousetown, Pennsylvania, in 1846, owned by the United States Quartermaster Department (USQMD). After just seventeen days he was transferred to the *Corvette* (149 tons, Brownsville, Pennsylvania, USQMD) as first pilot. Sometime later, just before he turned twenty-four, he was made captain of the *Colonel Cross*.

The twisty, shallow, sandbar-treacherous Rio Grande would put King and Kenedy to the test. Most newcomers to the region remarked upon the disparity between the river's impressive name and its actuality. Abner Doubleday spoke of the army's disappointment upon first seeing the river: "Our people too labored under the delusion that the Rio Grande being a thousand miles long must form near its mouth a deep and wide line of defense and that it would be good policy to take possession of it as soon as possible. In reality it can be forded at a great many points during the dry season, and its convolutions are so remarkable that in a line of twenty-five miles from Brownsville to the mouth of the river the distance is more than a hundred miles by water."

Major Luther Giddings, an Ohio volunteer who went up the river by steamboat in the summer of 1846, called it “the most crooked stream on the continent,” and he didn’t think much of the *tierra caliente* through which it flowed either, saying if the river “were but straight, its homeliness would be complete.”

Problems faced in negotiating the river were formidable. Steamboats had difficulty getting enough power to go upstream against a strong current. Boats that made six miles per hour on the Mississippi were hard-pressed to make two miles per hour on the Rio Grande. The only wood available for power was mesquite, which burned slowly and with little blaze. Sandbars and shallow spots in the river were a constant threat. Swarms of mosquitoes tormented crew and passengers alike. There was always the danger of a boiler exploding. Boats more or less crept up the river, taking an average of four to six days to reach Roma, the northernmost point of navigability. Mifflin Kenedy made one memorably fast trip from the mouth of the river to Camargo (south of Roma, on the Mexican side) in three days, in 1846.

Although King and Kenedy left no accounts of their experiences on the Rio Grande, there were other observers in those years who did. Major Giddings described an ascent he made on a “frail and filthy little steamboat” in August 1846. The boat carried four companies from his regiment; their destination was Camargo, where General Taylor would assemble his army for the eventual campaign at Buena Vista in the interior.

It took the boat Giddings was on over a week to reach Camargo, slowed down as it was by high water, the ignorance of pilots, and lack of wood for the boilers. Soldiers had to be dispatched to bring back wood from picket fences, and in some places the river’s banks were out and the boat wandered around until it found the proper channel again. On both sides of the river dwellers at the *rancherías* gathered to watch the boat’s struggles. Flocks of waterfowl fluttered away when the boat came near, and sometimes the bloated carcasses of dead animals floated past in the flood-raised river. The whole trip, Giddings pronounced, was “more tedious than hazardous.” The incompetence of the pilots that Giddings spoke of was a commonplace of army observers in 1846–47. That is why the coming of Kenedy and King, both excellent and experienced pilots who would learn the shifting subtleties of the Rio Grande quickly, was a blessing to the army,

which relied on the steamboats to move men to the staging area at Camargo.

Teresa Vielé, army wife and journalist, sailed with her husband on the *Corvette* in 1852, the same boat Richard King had piloted back in 1847 when he came to South Texas. The journey from Brownsville to Ringgold Barracks at Rio Grande City where Lieutenant Vielé was stationed moved at the usual slow pace. They were afloat four days on the “serpentine” river and were stuck several times on sandbars, for which they were in a way thankful, she said, as these incidents were novel and relieved the dominant feeling of tedium.

In November 1847 a very famous passenger steamed down the Rio Grande aboard the *Colonel Cross: General Zachary Taylor*. Perhaps King was at the helm. Fresh from victory at Buena Vista, Taylor was on a journey that would take him to the White House. Richard King was on a journey, too, that would carry him beyond the river into the grasslands of the interior. But he still had many trips to make up and down the Rio Grande.