

## **THE HEADLESS HORSEMAN OF THE WILD HORSE DESERT**

by Verne Wheelwright

A number of stories or legends are told about headless apparitions that haunt various parts of Texas, but the Headless Horseman of the Wild Horse Desert in South Texas is the one frightening legend who actually existed, was seen by reliable, sober witnesses and was shot repeatedly with rifles by men with reputations for marksmanship. Even Comanche hunting parties learned to avoid him after their arrows, shot true, simply disappeared as the horseman's black stallion galloped away.

Few people saw the mysterious horseman closely, but they agreed that he wore leather leggings, a buckskin jacket and a serape over his shoulder. He sat a typical Mexican saddle with a wide, flat saddle horn.

What terrified those who saw him was that the horseman's head, wearing a sombrero and a big grin, hung from the saddle horn, swinging and bouncing as the big horse ran through the sage, prickly pear and mesquite, easily keeping his distance from the curious, while creating fear among nearly everyone who saw or even heard of him. And he was seen widely, by vaqueros tending their herds, travelers wakened near their campfires at night; by cowboys searching for strays in the bright sunshine and blistering heat of the Wild Horse Desert, by Comanche raiders and by soldiers stationed at Fort Inge. No one questioned the existence of the headless horseman because too many reliable people had seen him, so there was a general fear and anticipation among those who had heard about the headless horseman.

Can you picture yourself sitting on a horse late at night, watching over a sleeping herd, then turning to see a headless rider silhouetted against a bright sky? And if the horse and rider started galloping toward you? Wouldn't that scare the very devil out of you? Try to imagine that scene. Even with your knowledge of the modern world, your own conviction that ghosts don't exist might be shaken. And the mid-nineteenth century was a time when people were aware and fearful of the supernatural — and the headless horseman was certainly not natural.

Some deaths were attributed to sightings of the horseman, with victims expiring from fright upon seeing the apparition, or for unknown reasons soon after an encounter. As stories were exchanged over the years, it was said that some of those who saw the horseman were so frightened their hair went completely white overnight.

The Wild Horse Desert in 1850 was disputed territory. After the Mexican-American war ended in 1848, Texas and the U.S. declared that the Rio Grande constituted the border between Texas and Mexico. Mexico, on the other hand, insisted that the Nueces River, which flows into the Gulf of Mexico at Corpus Christi, was the real border. This dispute left the area between the two rivers, known as the Wild Horse Desert, as a lawless no-man's-land. Although the U.S. had Army posts on the edges of this disputed area, and the Texas Rangers hunted down many of the more notorious of the outlaws, these few hundred military and lawmen were simply not enough of a force to take control of the area. The problems were complicated by the residents on both sides of the border, who justified a never-ending cycle of cross-border raids as retaliation or "gittin even".

This was also a time of open range ranching, when ranchers could graze their herds on public lands, before the Civil War and before the huge King and Kennedy empires on the west

side of the Wild Horse Desert existed. Barbed wire hadn't yet been invented, so ranches wouldn't be fenced in Texas for another forty years. Horses, cattle and other livestock were branded to identify their ownership, but for thieves and rustlers, brands were easy to change with a "running iron". These factors meant that herds of livestock were moved easily from one place to another, and ownership could be changed, or at least confused with the use of a hot branding iron. With this background, rustling of horses and cattle was common in 1850 Texas, and stolen animals by the thousands were moved long distances to cross the border near Brownsville and Matamoros.

Onto this scene rode the headless horseman in the summer of 1850, frightening Indian raiders and Mexican horse rustlers alike. Local ranchers were aware of the horseman, but appeared not much troubled by his presence, as he stayed away from buildings or settlements. He was seen frequently, most often at night and usually by men watching over their animals, whether cattle, sheep or horses on the open range, away from buildings and small towns. Sometimes he was seen sitting quietly erect on the large black stallion as though watching through the darkness, but more often he galloped by into the night, with no sound but the hoof beats of the large stallion. The sight of the headless man was terrifying, and as word of the sightings spread he became known among the vaqueros as "El Muerto" which the Texans translated as either "the man of death" or "death."

According to some writers, "Headless horseman sightings still occur frequently in Texas, and most are thought to be appearances of the famous El Muerto." (Treat, et al. 2005 p.53). Over the years, the legend of El Muerto has inspired books, movies and many short stories in books and on web sites. Yet, there is no suggestion that this horseman ever harmed, cursed or threatened anyone. He simply appeared, never spoke, and by his very appearance frightened people, particularly the superstitious or those with a sense of guilt.

Who was he? The story of how the headless horseman of the Wild Horse Desert came to be is nearly as fearsome as the sighting of the apparition itself.

Texas folklorist J. Frank Dobie (1955) related the historic tale of the headless horseman in his book Tales of Old-time Texas, and several other writers have documented the events as well. All agree that these events unfolded during the summer of 1850, and began when former Lieutenant Vidal of the Mexican army, a deserter and later an informant to the rebelling Texans, stole strings of horses from several Texas ranches, including from the ranch of Creed Taylor, a Texas Ranger and later a historic figure in Texas. Although many of the ranchers along the Nueces were away from the area dealing with a series of Comanche raids, to Vidal's misfortune Taylor was at home, and he set out quickly with a neighboring rancher, Flores, to track the stolen horses. As they trailed the bandits and their recently acquired band of horses along the Nueces River, they encountered another Texas Ranger, "Bigfoot" Wallace who enthusiastically joined the search.

Vidal was not an amateur or accidental horse thief. He had used his good reputation, which he had earned helping the Texans during the war with Mexico, to defray suspicion from himself while he built a successful network of rustlers and horse thieves that moved their livestock into Mexico. By 1850 he was a well-known outlaw with a price on his head. But he was smart and careful, and had not yet been caught.

The ranchers and rangers tracked their horses up the Nueces River toward present day Uvalde and the former site of Fort Inge. On the Leona River about twelve miles south of Fort Inge near a mesquite and prickly pear thicket; the trackers found and ambushed the campsite of the horse thieves. Surprised while sleeping, Vidal and his band were killed quickly. Wallace

suggested that instead of taking Vidal back for the reward, they send a warning to all thieves, rustlers and raiders in the vicinity. With the agreement of the others, Wallace set to work.

He picked a large, black, mustang stallion from the stolen herd. The horse was wild and fearful of humans, but was roped, blindfolded with a red bandana, hobbled and saddled. Wallace then beheaded Vidal's corpse, set the body in the saddle, tied the hands to the pommel and the feet to the stirrups, then tied the stirrups together under the quivering horse's belly. With rawhide, the body was tied securely into an upright position. A piece of rawhide was stretched through Vidal's mouth, forcing it into a wide grin. The head was tied securely to his sombrero, which in turn was tied to the large flat saddle horn. With the rider and his head firmly in their places, the horse was untied and the blindfold removed. The frightened stallion did everything he could to rid himself of his foul smelling burden, but without success. At last, he galloped off into the desert, and Texas legend. All present agreed not to reveal what had happened to Vidal, hoping that the sight of the headless horsemen would frighten superstitious Indians and horse thieves from the area.

It is said that the stallion tried to rejoin wild mustang herds, but the other horses were terrified by the figure on the stallion's back, and fled in panic. Thus the horseman was seen, apparently herding large numbers of mustangs as they raced across the desert. But the stallion and his rider were usually seen alone, rejected by the other wild horses, yet fearful of men, horse and horsemen were united in solitude. Docia Williams (1955) described the black horse as "Wild to start with, afraid of men, and now living with the stench of a decaying corpse on his back, the mustang carried his burden far from civilized areas."

Wallace's apparition was apparently effective, because the sightings and the rumors spread across south Texas quickly, and the legend remains today. The actual horseman continued to ride the Wild Horse Desert for some years, although the record is not clear how many. Eventually, several men working together managed to track the black stallion and capture him, cutting off the big saddle and the mummified rider. The buckskin jacket and corpse held several bullet holes, arrows and even Indian spears. Vidal's dried remains were buried in a small cemetery on the La Trinidad ranch near the small community of Ben Bolt, just south of Alice, Texas. Taylor and Wallace eventually acknowledged the events, and the tale is recounted in Wallace's memoir. But the sightings of the headless horseman of the Wild Horse Desert continued.

With the construction of well-lighted freeways reports of the horseman have decreased considerably, but if you happen to travel the country roads in South Texas at night, watch for a black horse running nearby whose rider at first looks unusual — until you realize that his sombrero topped head is hanging from his saddle horn. Your adventure will then become the most recent sighting of the headless horseman of the Wild Horse Desert.