

FELIPE NERIO AND VIVIAN ESPINOSA COLLECTION

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COLORADO HISTORICAL SOCIETY
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INVENTORY: FELIPE NERIO AND VIVIAN ESPINOSA COLLECTION

INTRODUCTION:

Accounts of the reign of terror spread by the Espinosa brothers, Felipe Nerio (generally referred to as Juan) and Vivian, are conflicting. Indeed, the very reason behind their brutal killings remain a mystery. Some say they commenced their murder spree when Juan had a dream in which the Virgin Mary advised him that it was his duty to kill "Gringos." Others claim that they murdered all white persons that crossed their path in revenge of lost money and property during the Mexican War. And still others say the Espinosas committed their horrendous crimes to expiate their father's sins. Whatever the real reason, it is known from Juan's personal diary confiscated at the time of his death that they murdered at least thirty individuals.

Prior to their days of outlawry the Espinosas, along with a sister, lived on their family's ancestral estate near Cucheti. It is said that their first victim was their sister's American lover who was killed at the estate. Following this murder the two Espinosa brothers headed to the San Luis Valley and the Sangre de Cristo Range. There, they rounded up a band of "cut-throats," and thus, began their days of outlawry.

The Espinosas' victims were often miners and those travelling by wagon train. Following the killing of two well known prospectors from California Gulch named Lyman and Seyga, a group was formed by Captain John McCannon and Joseph Lamb to avenge their murders. The posse succeeded in killing Vivian, but Juan escaped.

After Vivian's death it is said that Juan took on a new partner believed to be his nephew and together they continued the murder spree. The pioneers of Colorado wanted to see an end to the Espinosas' outlawry. Colonel Samuel F. Tappan, commander of Fort Garland, sent for Thomas Tobin, well known scout and frontiersman, and asked him to take the Espinosas dead or alive. Tobin was promised a generous reward for their capture or death.

After four days of searching, Tobin and his party tracked down the two Espinosas. Tobin shot both men and according to most accounts cut off their heads which he then put in a sack. He returned to Colonel Tappan at Fort Garland not only with their heads but with all of their belongings.

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Tobin was never recompensed as promised by then provisional governor John Evans. However, just prior to his death in 1905 the legislature passed a bill awarding him \$1000 of the original \$2500 promised.

SIGNIFICANCE:

The collection contains correspondence, both originals and copies, from such men as Thomas Tobin and Joseph Lamb retelling their stories surrounding the killing of the Espinosas (1889-1908), a manuscript written by Tobin entitled "History of the Espinos" (original and copy, 1895), and excerpts and clippings from newspapers and magazines pertaining to the Espinosas' reign of terror (1863-1957).

PROVENANCE:

The records found in the Espinosa Collection were donated by their creators. Thomas Tobin donated his manuscript in November 1901. He also presented his letters at that time. Joseph Lamb presented his correspondence to the Society in the early 1900's as well. The various clippings and excerpts were gathered by the Society's staff.

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- FF 1: Correspondence (originals), 12/14/1895-10/1/1908
- FF 2: Correspondence (originals), n.d.
- FF 3: Correspondence (copies), 6/20/1889-4/14/1904
- FF 4: Manuscript written by Thomas Tobin entitled "History of the Espinosas" (original), 3/23/1895
- FF 5: Manuscript written by Thomas Tobin entitled "History of the Espinosas" (copy), 3/23/1895
- FF 6: Clippings and excerpts from magazines and newspapers, 5/21/1863-3/1957