

# Civilian's mom has memories of 'Pancho' Villa raid 67 years ago in New Mexico

Story and photo by  
ENS E.J. Dahl

It was 67 years ago next month that a ragged band of Mexican troops, led by the revolutionist Francisco "Pancho" Villa, invaded a small town in southern New Mexico.

That raid became a small part of history: it may have been the last time that American soldiers fought on American soil, and it led to an expedition against Villa, led by GEN John J. Pershing.

But for Viola Crosby, mother of NAS employee Pat Crosby, Villa's raid is more than a date in the history books. It's a childhood memory.

Mrs. Crosby's stepfather, Joe Hachey, was a member of the 13th Cavalry Band stationed at Columbus, New Mexico, in the spring of 1916. The Mexican border, a few miles to the south, was patrolled by the Army as a result of tensions between U.S. citizens and the troops led by Villa.

On the early morning of March 9, Villa's men made their first large-scale attack across the border, against the 700 or

so residents and troops in Columbus.

"There were 17 killed," Mrs. Crosby remembers. "Eight soldiers and nine civilians."

She and her mother, along with many of the other women in town, took refuge in one of the officer's homes during the fighting. "When the shooting started, we hid under the bed," she said.

In a story she wrote later about the attack, Mrs. Crosby described the scene in those pre-dawn hours: "The citizens of Columbus were terrified. They huddled inside their darkened homes, not daring to light lamps for fear of becoming a target."

Much of the fighting took place in the main street of town, as the attackers tried to get to the bank. "The Mexicans said the Americans were cowards because they lay down to shoot, and the Mexicans stood up," Mrs. Crosby said-but that difference in tactics may have won the battle for the U.S. troops.

After more than an hour of fighting, Villa's men retreated across the



border. The town's residents came out to find several buildings burned, and the streets littered with the bodies of dead men and horses.

During the year following the raid, Columbus was a busy place, Mrs. Crosby said.

During his visits, the general would stay with a colonel who lived across the street from them.

"Whenever the general came in to spend the night, Momma used to go over to cook dinner for the colonel-and I was chief bottle washer," she said.

During World War I, her stepfather was stationed at "Yukon," west of NAS Jax, at a time when the base was known as Camp Johnston. She later married an Army man, and was in Jacksonville on the days both World Wars ended.

in Jacksonville, where his family was from. They celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary at the Chief's Club in 1974, she said. Crosby died in 1979.

Military life was considerably harsher years ago than it is today, Mrs. Crosby said, adding that she doesn't understand what soldiers and sailors of the 1980s complain about.

"You take my husband-he was a sergeant for 20 years," she said. "Can you think today of anybody staying in 20 years as a sergeant?"

Despite the slow rate of

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promotion, Mrs. Crosby said she knew back then the virtues of a military career. She was married 14 days before her husband was due to be discharged.

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Pershing—who would later be the commander-in-chief of the American Expeditionary Force in World War I—made frequent stops in Columbus in his efforts to catch Villa.

"I knew General Pershing," she said.

During his visits, the general would stay with a colonel who lived across the street from them.

"Whenever the general came in to spend the night, Momma used to go over to cook dinner for the colonel—and I was chief bottle washer," she said. "He was a lemon pie man, and Momma used to always make him a lemon pie."

Years later, she added, her mother met Pershing again. "She went down to Hot Springs to take the baths, and General Pershing was there. He remembered lemon pie."

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"Oh, they were wild, really wild," she said of the celebrations in 1918 and '45. "In 1918, when the war ended, they were riding on top of the street cars. You couldn't stir them with a stick downtown," the crowds were so thick, she said.

Her husband, Elmer, retired from the Army in the '50s and they settled

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"I wouldn't marry Pop until he promised he'd stay in the Army. He was a farm boy, and I didn't want no part of a farm," she said.

"I always wanted to go back there (to Columbus), but my husband was not a sight seer," she said. "When he travelled, he was going somewhere."

In 1981, however, she got the chance to revisit

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the site of the battle. Her granddaughter was getting married in Denver, and her oldest son offered to take her down to New Mexico in his motor home.

"I was very disappointed," she said. "The town was just a ghost

town. There was nothing there I remember at all." She explained there are a few houses left, and the old railroad station is now a small museum, commemorating the raid, but that's about all.

"We drove out to where we had lived, and there

was nothing left, just nothing." Her photographs from that trip show a flat, lifeless town, covered with sagebrush and dust.

One memory of that battle stands out among all the rest, Mrs. Crosby

said. One sergeant, a man named Hebert, rode "a beautiful blue roan" horse that was killed in the fighting.

"I cried when I heard that, because that was the prettiest horse," she said.