

### Shelby's Expedition to Mexico: An Unwritten Leaf of the War

Don E. Alberts

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## Review

Alberts, Don E.

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**Edwards, John N. and Beasley Jr., Conger , Editor.** *Shelby's Expedition to Mexico: An Unwritten Leaf of the War*. The University of Arkansas Press, \$29.95 ISBN 1557287325

### Migration to Mexico

Ex-Confederates moved from one Civil War to another

Most Civil War readers are aware that various parties of ex-Confederates migrated to Mexico shortly after the end of the Civil War. The common assumption may very well be that these immigrants or would-be colonists settled into a warm and comfortable land of opportunity or escape. In fact, as vividly brought out in Conger Beasley's new edition of **Shelby's Expedition to Mexico: An Unwritten Leaf of the War**, nothing could be further from reality. Mexico was at the time immersed in its own civil war, with widespread brutality and anarchy commonplace, especially in the sparsely populated northern desert reaches between Texas and Mexico City. Any foreigners penetrating that region had to take the side of either the French Imperialist troops of Maximilian or those of the deposed president Benito Juarez.

The core of this book is not new. Its author, John Edwards, first published its predecessor, *Shelby and His Men*, in 1867. That work described the wartime exploits of Gen. Jo Shelby and his noted brigade (somewhat incredibly tabbed the Iron Brigade by later historians). Edwards was Shelby's adjutant, close friend, and disciple, who simply idolized his chief during and after the war. **Shelby's Expedition to Mexico** details that Confederate commander's actions during the last desperate months of the war in the Trans-Mississippi theater, followed by a two-year adventure as Shelby and probably 500 volunteer cavalymen from his and other units crossed into northern Mexico on an incredibly arduous ride southward to that nation's capitol.

Edwards first published this book in 1872, after his and Shelby's return to the United States. It appeared again in 1889 and in pieces during the early 1900s, but this edition is undoubtedly the most useful and informative to the reader interested in a very little known aspect of Civil War history.

That usefulness derives from Conger Beasley's skillful editing of the original work and his extensive and informative annotation, which identifies people, places, associated events in Mexican history, and literary references, all of which may, indeed, be only vaguely known to even the dedicated student of the Civil War in the West. Beasley devotes considerable introductory information on author and newspaperman Edwards and his writing style, which was typical of the times, with what now seems to us as romantic gushing and swooning over such subjects as the ideal woman, the knightly Confederate warrior, and the Lost Cause, as well as Shelby's seemingly infinite skill and wisdom. He puts all this into a reasonable and understandable historical context, including excellent maps, while preserving the flavor of the original publication.

The edited text describes the Shelby Brigade's ride from Arkansas through Texas at war's end, and the utter chaos in that part of the Confederacy. The unit's decision to try its luck in Mexico and, after entry into that country, its mistake in unanimously deciding to side with the Imperialist faction, rather than with the more numerous Juaristas, set the stage for months of arduous and incredibly bloody adventures that followed. Even after arriving in Mexico City, Shelby's and Edwards' prospects for successful business and colonization efforts declined rapidly, as Emperor Maximilian decided he had little need for the former Confederate military unit even though his own fortunes soon reached the point where his army was impotent and he himself was assassinated. John Edwards described all this in great detail and left us the story of probably the most colorful and important adventure of ex-Confederates in postwar Mexico.

**Shelby's Expedition to Mexico** is an expertly edited reprint of the history of a most unusual and enlightening chapter of the Civil War. A publication of the University of Arkansas Press' *Civil War in the West Series*, it will be both enjoyed and valued by anyone interested in the war in the western states and territories.

*Don E. Alberts is the retired chief historian for Kirtland AFB in Albuquerque, president of Historical Research Consultants, and is heavily engaged in historical preservation, research, and writing on the Civil War in the*

*Far West. His publications include: General Wesley Merritt: Brandy Station to Manila Bay, Rebels on the Rio Grande: The Journal of A.B. Peticolas, and The Battle of Glorieta: Union Victory in the West. He can be reached via email at Cactus0063@aol.com.*