A History of Gunfighting in El Lopino

Michael Macdonald
Juan Valdez, most people agree, was first in our town to wear the sombrero. Juan Ortega had been champion for as long as any could remember. He held his position longer than his skill merited. The stories of Ortega’s declining skill toward the end are probably only extensions of the old legends. Some talk of his taking four shots to kill one man, others of his shooting completely over a man’s head and injuring a woman sitting in her window across the street. I know as fact that he missed a charging steer that had been stung by a swarm of hornets. The steer trampled the flowers in the church garden which were to be used to decorate the altar of Our Lady on the feast of the Assumption. He drank tequila well. His challengers could hardly hold a gun after hours of settling the formalities of the duel in the cantina. Juan Valdez, a crafty and noble gunfighter, chose to fight on May 17, the day when the cantina closed early for the procession of Our Lady of the Holy Blood. Juan Ortega had no chance to fight the duel with his famous drinking ability. He had the advantage of the two o’clock blaze at his back, which he thought would carry him as always before. Juan Valdez wore his now famous sombrero with the carved lemonwood crucifix on the brim. His eyes shaded by his white sombrero from the glare of the green sun, he shot the old drinker through the heart.

Legend perhaps extends details beyond their proper perspectives. Juan Valdez was said to have killed two men by shooting them each through the left eye with the bullets blazing simultaneously from the bore of both of his famous silver pistols. I know for fact that he was indeed the noblest gunfighter of all time. He did not really need to wear the white sombrero as champion: since he had the advantage of having the blaze of the green sun at his back, he had no need to shade his eyes from the sun’s powers. People said that he wore the sombrero for luck and as a symbol of his position as champion. I know his reason for wearing it to have been that the wood of the carved lemonwood crucifix was from the garden of Our Savior’s sorrows. He was a most holy man and a servant of Christ. Each time he killed, he would pray on the grave of his mother, and he would have a mass read for all babies whose fathers had died before they were born.

Pedro Garcia should have been drowned by the toothless hag of a midwife who brought him into the world. Maria Santina, his unfortunate mother, a saintly girl who was raped on her way home from Lenten devotions, died before Pedro was yet born. He crawled out of her dead womb, and he refused to cry when the midwife slapped him
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to make him breathe. The wretched Pedro Garcia challenged the champion, Juan Valdez, to a duel. He was too poor to afford his own drink, so Juan Valdez had to buy tequila for him in order to consummate the ceremonial rights of the duel. Pedro Garcia, miserable creature that he was, drank the tequila only so that he might eat the free lunch provided by the cantina. By the time Garcia had finished stuffing himself, the champion, who had been fasting in order to receive the body and blood of Our Savior in the Holy Eucharist, was overcome with drink. Garcia refused to take more than one drink himself. The sky was grey that day when Pedro Garcia killed Juan Valdez.

The rights of conquest permitted Garcia to take what he wanted belonging to the slain Juan Valdez, so he took the famous sombrero with the lemonwood crucifix. He could not even afford to buy a sombrero of his own. The white sombrero fit Garcia like the gold crown of a king on the head of an ass, pure and radiant against his dirty, ragged clothing. It was said by some who stood close to Garcia that he was able to kill Juan Valdez because his rusty pistol misfired coming out of the holster, and the wild shot struck the champion in the chest. In his next duel the black hand of Satan did not intercede in Garcia's favor as against Juan Valdez; the rusty pistol refused to fire, and Juan Sanchez shot three times at Pedro Garcia who could but stand and wait for the bullet that would kill him. Juan Sanchez claimed the famous sombrero of Juan Valdez, which had already become a symbol of the champion, and, ignorant clown that he was, he wore it on top of his own sombrero which he had bought the very morning of the duel especially for the occasion to reflect the rays of the green sun. Juan Francisco Melenez claimed the sombrero of Juan Valdez as well as Juan Sanchez' new sombrero, and he wore both on top of his grey one. Thus the tradition of passing along the sombreros of all past champions came to be. Fredrico Ortega, who inherited the sombreros of seven past champions, initiated the practice of also claiming and wearing the sombreros of each and every challenger he killed. Some say that he wore a total of 35 sombreros when he was killed by Juan Aurio. I know for fact that the number was only 29 sombreros. Carlos Renales, who inherited 74 sombreros when he killed the champion, Pepe Valachez, initiated the custom of wearing only 25 sombreros besides his own and the sombrero of Juan Valdez at the top of all. He stood only four feet three inches tall, and the weight of the sombreros was too much for him to support.

The reader may at this point in my account, over the discrepancy of statistical record, come to question the sources of my information and wonder as to my historiographic stance. As an historian, my style resembles most that of Herodotus: I give as many divergent accounts of an event as are available, allowing the reader to choose the best from among the many, in order that the history may remain ul-
timately objective. If I may at times show a preference of one version of an event over another, it is because I realize that, as Collingwood suggests, history in the final analysis exists only in the mind of the historian. History is a fiction, if you will. Since the facts in themselves reveal only that of history which is superficial and ultimately meaningless in itself, the historian must recreate the events and the characters and relive history himself. Though I have tentatively granted the reader the use of the term “fiction” as applicable to history, I must say myself that I do not regard history as a fiction. History is real in the ultimate sense of the Hegelian Idea. From the facts of history, it is true, we may not discover the whole story of history. History as a living spirit exists in the dialectic of the people. I am a native citizen of El Lopino and am more attuned to the spirit of the events of our town than would be the reader. Educated as you have no doubt discovered me to be, I am also more able than the masses of our town to make objective interpretations of the events, unaffected by the forces of myth which cloud the vision of our citizens.

Miguel Rodregues, who had an additional thumb on his right hand where his little finger should have been, accidentally shot the sombreros from the head of the champion, Rajual Oreo. Since Miguel had displaced the symbol of the champion in shooting off the sombreros, it was decided that Rajual could no longer be champion, and Miguel won claim to the sombreros. There was much argument as to what should be done with Rajual Oreo. Since he was no longer champion, he was officially dead, and many thought that he should be buried. Pepe Melene finally brought up the idea that Rajual would not have to be buried but that he was officially dead, and that he could never fight in a duel, and that he could visit the cantina only through the back door, and that he should be treated as a ghost when he was seen in the street.

The precedent set by Miguel Rodregues was established as a rule of the duel; instead of shooting the champion, the challenger shot at the sombreros on his head. By the time Jose Marques became champion, there were five holes in the sacred sombrero of Juan Valdez. It was Jose Marquez who made the ruling that a challenger could not shoot at the sombrero of Juan Valdez but must shoot at one of the lower sombreros. He was later shot through the head by Francisco Marcede whose left leg was shorter than his right.

Rodrigo Manez had dreams of getting shot in the head. When he was but a baby he had seen his father accidentally killed by a challenger who shot too low. It was Rodrigo Manez who said that sling-shots should be used instead of pistols so that the champion would not be accidentally shot in the head.
Pedro, the orphan, whose parents had been eaten from the inside out by maggots from sleeping naked among flies, wisely said that the men who were officially dead should not be permitted to sleep with their wives in case they should have a child possessed by the devil. Since the soul of the father might be in hell, the father might be an agent of the devil. Father Francisca decided that the widows of those officially dead should stay at the presbytery. Juan Miguel Veron, who was then champion, said that the champion should be responsible for the widows and see that they were protected. He wore a purple band on his wrist as a symbol of his duty.

Rio, who had lost his left arm when he was gored by a mad goat as a small boy, suggested that a challenger might throw rocks, since he was unable to hold a slingshot. Burrito, who could lift a horse and rider on his shoulders, wanted the duel to be decided by feats of strength. Since he was much too strong for anybody to conquer, his idea was not accepted.

The ghosts, who still ate and drank tequila but did not work, since they were dead, became a problem for our town. The champion, Jorge Orlando, was in many ways like the famous champion, Juan Valdez. As well as possessing great prowess in the duel, being able to hit a tin can with a rock at 30 paces, he was like the great champion in his dedication to Our Blessed Mother. Even when he was an altar boy holding the paten to prevent a fragment of the body of Our Savior from touching the floor, he would gaze into the eyes of the statue of The Virgin at the side altar and sometimes forget to genuflect after communion. Jorge Orlando suggested that he be blessed as a saint by the priest and that the souls of the dead be put under his charge. He wore a silver star on his shirt as a symbol of his position. He transformed what had become a burden on our community into a useful element. He had the ghosts work the lands which he, as champion, had assumed from all of the dead, and he put them to work in their spare time manufacturing sombreros like the famous sombrero of Juan Valdez, which he sold to tourists.

I have mentioned the name of Jorge Orlando in conjunction with the name of the champion, Juan Valdez, and compared the Christian spirit as well as the physical prowess of the two champions. You students of history will undoubtedly assume that I am an adherent to the "great man" theory of history because of my interpreting the characters of these two great champions as significant symbols in the progression of the history of our town. I must categorically deny such interpretations of my history. I regard the characters of Juan Valdez and Jorge Orlando through the objective eye of the historian, though the masses may have viewed these men through a symbolic perspective. In adhering to the great man theory, the historian reduces his account to the level of myth. My history is not of a mythical nature.
The characters of these most important champions, Juan Valdez and Jorge Orlando, are significant to history because of the exemplary nature of the lives they led. They represented the archetypal values of knighthood, combining skill in combat with the Christian values of charity and reverence to the Holy Mother. In the characters of these two champions the masses of our town find values worthy of imitation. The masses aspire to walk in the footpaths laid by Juan Valdez and Jorge Orlando. It is men such as Juan Valdez and Jorge Orlando who form the cornerstones of history, providing the ideals on which civilization is founded.

Many in our town who were complete paupers and who owned no land participated in the duel and became a burden on the champion, who got nothing from killing these men and still had to feed them. Pedro Melachez had the idea that only those with land could fight in the duel. Aurero Pele later decided that a man without land could fight if he had enough money to challenge.

Regino Ortega, who had attended the university and who was supposed to be the smartest man in our town, said that the physical element of the duel was barbaric in this modern age, and that the champion should be decided by a debate. It was acknowledged that the duel should be fought in an intellectual manner, but everyone knew that Regino Ortega would surely become champion since he could speak four languages and had read the Bible all the way through, which not even the priest had done. I must interject at this point an evaluation of the reasons stated by the masses for holding Regino’s argument suspect. The inarticulate nature of the masses prevents their defining their intuitive perceptions in any but symbolic terms. Regino Ortega was in fact a charlatan. His family had made their fortune by playing on the ignorance of the town. Regino was most accomplished in the art of sophistry of any member of his family. As is common with the uneducated, the people of our town imagined Regino to be intelligent because they could not understand what he said. If Regino Ortega had intelligence, I myself could never penetrate the infinity of concentric circles within his reasoning to discover it. A poker game was proposed as an alternative form of intellectual conflict to the debate proposed by Regino Ortega. It was finally decided to determine the duel by the casting of dice. A lottery later replaced the dice. The one who drew the stick with the black dot became champion.

Those among the dead began to complain about the fact that there were many who had never participated in the duel. Families who had never fought owned vast tracts of land and were prosperous while those who would risk their lives were left among the dead, and their children became homeless paupers. Raul Gomez made it compulsory for every man with land or money to participate in the duel. The one
whose lot was marked with the black dot became champion and the
ten who drew lots marked with a red dot joined the dead.

It was pointed out that the champion was at an unfair disadvan-
tage in the duel. He had most to lose, being in control of all the lands
and money of the dead, and he had only one chance out of the many
of winning. It was decided to sell tickets so that the champion, who
had the most money in the town, could buy as many tickets as he
liked and could have a better chance of winning.

A tourist from the north, who had visited our town several times to
observe the festivities of the duel, pointed out how the duel had de-
generated from its original purpose. The champion, he said, should
be the one who is the most powerful and most worthy of the som-
breros, the purple band and the silver star. Now even the weakest
have a chance of becoming champion, he showed us.

As I have already indicated, Hegel has had considerable influence
on my approach to history. It is for this reason that I foresaw good
times to come for our town in the words of the northern tourist. If
the dialectic is to continue, the thesis must be met with antithesis.
Our town was becoming complacent toward the duel. The criticism
from the north served to generate a new concern for the significance
of the duel among our people.

The Rock Insurance Company became champion. They had more
money than the entire town. George Glem wore the sombreros, the
purple wrist band and the silver star as field representative of the
champion. He said that the dead, even in hell, have some rights. He
decided that, if the dead in their spare time would make jewelry to be
sold to tourists, they could spend a night with their wives when they
filled their quota. The wives of the dead had by this time overflowed
the walls of the presbytery and were begging in the streets for food.
George Glem built a fine building for the wives to stay in. It was such
a fine place that tourists and traveling salesmen stayed there also
when they came to town. The children of the dead, George Glem sent
to school so that they could learn to read the notices that he nailed to
the wall of the cantina.

A man whose name nobody knew challenged George Glem to a
duel. He refused to drink tequila or even go into the cantina. George
Glem stood in the street with the green sun at his back and took out
his checkbook. The man didn't wear a sombrero. He wore dark
glasses to shade his eyes when he faced the green sun glaring over
George Glem's shoulder. The man didn't reach for his checkbook. He
drew a pistol from his holster and shot George Glem through the
heart. He refused to accept the sombreros and the purple wrist band
and the silver star. He got on his motorcycle and rode out of town. I
was told by a small child that she had seen him urinating in the street
beside his motorcycle before he left.