



**MEET THE MOTHER
OF OLD EL PASO
THE GREAT WESTERN
Her Name Was Sarah Borginnis
and She Could Tie Her Lovers in Knots
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Illustration by Susan Ulmer
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El Paso and *The Great Western* sounds as though it might have been a railroad, but it wasn't. It was more like a love affair.

Many famous names abound in the Mexican border history of this area, conjuring up visions of El Paso's romantic past. Images of high adventure and colorful goings on are suggested by the very sound of such names as Cabeza de Vaca, Estevanico, Coronado and Onate, followed by Mangas Colorado, Victorio, Geronimo, Cochise, Billy the Kid, Pancho Villa, General Pershing and Sarah Borginnis . . .

Sarah Borginnis?

Yes, Sarah Borginnis. Definitely. She belongs on any list of borderland greats perhaps even near the top, for she is the mother of El Paso, if El Paso has one.

Sarah was renowned along the border more than a century ago as *The Great Western* and was worthy of the title. Sarah was more than six feet tall, and every inch a soldier, with her inches distributed in a ratio of 44-25-38. Atop this gigantic confection was an abundance of braided blond hair.

Sarah was commissioned an officer in the U.S. Army back in 1847 by General Winfield Scott. He made her a colonel in recognition of her bravery in the Battle of Fort Brown, fought on the site of today's Brownsville, Texas.

Sarah was toasted as "The Heroine of Fort Brown" for many years after that battle, during which time she became equally celebrated in boudoir as well as war, being called at least on one occasion as "The Greatest Whore in the West," because of her diligence in the pursuit of her duty on many fronts.

Sarah received her first mention in print as *The Great Western* in the *Niles Register*, which was the Time weekly news magazine of that day. The July 4, 1846 issue had a story concerning a delegation from the Louisiana Legislature arriving at Matamoros, Mexico, across the Rio Grande from Brownsville, to help celebrate General Zachary Taylor's recent victory at Fort Brown.

A young lieutenant (later to be celebrated as a Confederate General) Braxton Bragg, offered up a toast to Sarah, citing her valor and dubbing her as not only "The Heroine of Fort Brown," but also *The Great Western*.

From that day forward she became increasingly famous and was much written about. The first book telling about her adventures was written by Brantz Mayer and titled, *The Mexican War*. It was published in 1847.

Mayer wrote in the florid style of the period, describing Sarah's actions as "the deeds of a woman whose courageous spirit bore her through the trials of this bombardment (the siege of Fort Brown), but whose masculine hardihood was softened by the gentleness of her female heart."

Mayor further observed that "Woman everywhere has her sphere of power over the rougher sex, but the woman of the camp must possess qualities to which their tender sisters of the saloon are utter strangers."

How Sarah happened to get into the Army in the first place was explained by Mayer:

"A good soldier joined one of the regiments with his tall, gaunt wife whose lofty figure and stalwart frame almost entitled her as much as her husband to a place in the ranks of the gallant Seventh. Unwilling to abandon her liege lord upon his enlistment, this industrious female was immediately employed as one of the laundresses, three of whom are allowed to draw rations in each company and are required to wash for the soldiers at a price regulated by the council of officers."

Sarah arrived at Corpus Christi with her husband's unit, and was soon keeping "mess" for officers as well as doing the laundry chores for the enlisted men. Her husband was placed aboard one of the transports and shipped to the Brazos, where he disappears from history. Perhaps he died in combat.

Anyway, Sarah continued by land with the rest of the Army. She bought a cart and donkey, loaded it with luggage, cooking utensils and supplies and followed along the line of march to the south, taking care of and cooking for the members of her "mess."

Upon arriving at the Rio Grande, opposite Matamoros where the Mexican army was encamped, Sarah surveyed the scene, took in the situation and snorted in disdain.

Mayer reports that she turned to one of the officers with Taylor and remarked:

"If the general will give me a pair of tongs, I will wade the river and whip every scoundrel Mexican that dares to show his face over there on the opposite side."

A few days later, May 1, General Taylor marched most of his army to Point Isabel, leaving part of the Seventh Infantry behind to guard the fort. Left behind also was *The Great Western* and eight other women. They set up a mess tent near the center of the works to provide meals.

On the morning of May 3, Sarah was cooking breakfast when artillery shells began falling within the fortified area. All of the women except Sarah were removed to the empty ammunition magazines below ground for safe keeping. There they were employed sewing sandbags cut from old tents, but *The Great Western* remained above ground cooking in the open air, amid falling shot and shell. When she wasn't employed with pots and pans, she had her musket and ammunition up at the breastworks firing at anything coming into range.

After seven days the siege lifted when Taylor's army returned. The highest praise went to *The Great Western* and her 'exceptional

conduct. She was cited in the official reports for her gallantry in action.

Following this, there is a period where *The Great Western's* actions and movements are obscure. One story has it she went to Mexico City. This is advanced by the highly respected historian, Arthur Woodward. Arthur supports this version with limited documentation, so she probably wasn't there long. It is certain she was in Saltillo on Washington's Birthday, February 22, 1847, running "a sort of hotel" called the American House, but she closed it the next day to join Taylor's army in what became known as the Battle of Buena Vista.

Taylor led his 4,800 green troops the next day in a strategic retreat to a place called the Hacienda de Buena Vista, a few miles south of Saltillo. There they dug in, anticipating an attack by Mexican General Santa Ana and his army of 20,000 soldiers the following day. Santa Ana's troops were poorly trained, but brilliantly uniformed.

When Sarah heard a fight was likely, she closed up the American House and loaded her girls into a wagon filled with camp kettles, blankets, sheets, mattresses, coffee and whiskey. Rattling a few miles down a dusty trail, Sarah and her love birds passed through Angostura Pass and pulled up in a tree-shaded area where Dr. Charles M. Hitchcock was setting up surgery.

Here the women stopped and put on several gallons of coffee to boil before scrubbing the tables used for amputations. They finished their job at about the same time the sound of firing opened. Sarah and a rosy-cheeked assistant from Holland—known to her many lovers as Dutch Mary—loaded wooden yokes on their shoulders and walked into the fury of battle carrying buckets of steaming coffee for "their boys."

After their coffee gave out, the two women took as many of the wounded as they could assist with their empty kettles, and staggered back to Dr. Hitchcock's field hospital, by now already littered with wounded.

At about this time the Second Indiana Infantry broke and ran, followed soon by the Arkansas Rifles. This cowardice left the Second Illinois outflanked, so they, too, took off, leaving Captain John Paul Jones O'Brien's artillerymen to fend for themselves. Without protection, they found their position leaking Mexicans from all sides and were forced to fall back with three cannon. The fourth had been carried away by the foe.

Captain George Lincoln, a distant cousin of Abraham Lincoln (then a member of Congress from Illinois,) soon rallied the Second Illinois and finally got the Arkansas boys turned around, too.

But the Hoosiers kept running.

The Great Western, while tending the wounded, saw the Indiana sprinters coming toward her, led by a long-legged Hoosier who yelled at her:

"Run for your life. Taylor is whipped!"

The Great Western dropped her bandages, ran out and grabbed the tall Hoosier by the jacket and swung him around.

"You miserable son-of-a-bitch," she yelled at him, "there ain't enough Mexicans in all of Mexico to whip old Taylor. You just spread that report and I'll beat you to death!"

With this, she drew back her free left hand and smacked him a backhand blow that knocked him to the ground. By this time the

other Indiana soldiers had pulled into view and were so impressed by Sarah's action and words, they turned about—most of them—and took their chances against the Mexicans.

Soon Jeff Davis and his nifty, red-shirted First Mississippi Rifles came swinging by, headed into action, and Sarah shoved her frightened victim into their ranks.

Sarah and Dutch Mary then loaded more kettles of steaming coffee onto their shoulders and headed back into battle.

They were soon among the Second Illinois, which regiment had regained its poise and was fighting well. Captain Lincoln, noticing the two women, whirled his white mount and yelled to his weary troops:

“Cheer up boys! Lookee here—we got a lot to hurrah about. The ladies are on our side!”

Those were his last words, as a musketball struck him in the left side and he fell forward on his horse's neck, causing the animal to bolt. Lincoln was thrown off.

While Sarah ran to retrieve his horse, Dutch Mary rushed to his side. Lifting his head into her lap she was surprised to find him smiling. A shudder ran through her when she realized he was dead.

The two women loaded his body onto his horse and walked it back to Dr. Hitchcock's hospital where his death was confirmed.

Darkness brought a halt to the fighting. When the sun rose the next morning neither side was sure which had won, but Santa Ana retreated toward Agua Nueva, indicating he didn't consider himself a victor.

Losses were heavy on both sides. The girls loaded many of the wounded into wagons

and began the trek back to Saltillo, where Sarah's American House hotel was converted into a hospital.

Colonel Sam Curtis, a native of Wooster, Ohio, and commander of the Third Regiment of Ohio Volunteers, was one of her patients. Fortunately he kept a journal, unpublished but available in the Bancroft Library at the University of California in Berkeley.

He describes in it how he was moved into the American House to recuperate from malaria. The improvised hospital was run, explains Sam, “by a woman who seems to be part of the army. She is commonly called *The Great Western* for her size. She is nearly six feet high and well proportioned. She distinguished herself at Fort Brown during the bombardment in attending the sick and wounded and is said to be a useful soldier. She has several servants, Negroes and Mexicans, and she knocks them about like children. While I am writing, she is watering her horse, a fine white horse that Lincoln was killed on.”

Sarah was also observed by others at about this time. Dr. Frederick A. Wislizenus, an Austrian physician in the employ of the U.S. government as a spy, stopped at Saltillo. In his report, published as a Senate Document the next year, he wrote:

“I stopped for some hours in the hotel of *The Great Western*, kept by a celebrated *vivandiere*, honored with that *nom de guerre*, and whose fearless behavior during the battle of Buena Vista was highly praised; she dressed many wounded soldiers on that day, and even carried them out of the thickest fight.” These observers are somewhat vague. Curtis says Sarah was “nearly” six feet tall, and the Austrian doctor calls her a “*vivandiere*,”

French for a sutler, or one who accompanies the army to sell food and drink.

George Washington Trahern, probably the first cowboy to reach Texas, since he was in charge of tending the cattle for Taylor's army, also kept a journal. In it he suggests that Sarah must have been taller than six feet.

Trahern describes *The Great Western* in his diary, (also found in the Bancroft Library) as being so tall that, while standing, he could kiss her nipples only by stretching on tip-toes.

"You can imagine how tall she was," he wrote, for "she could stand flat footed and drop those little sugar plums right into my mouth, that way. She was an immense woman, could whip most anybody in a rough and tumble fight."

She may have remarried after the death or disappearance of her husband, Borginnis, for Dr. Wislizenus calls her "Bourjitte," and other accounts have it Bourdette, Bouget and Bourgett. In the 1850 census, taken while she was living in Socorro, New Mexico, Sarah gave her name as Bourgette, and her age as 33. Her birth, she said, took place in Tennessee.

Sam Chamberlain wrote a book called *My Confession*, about his experiences in the Mexican War. In it he tells a hilarious account of one of her "marriages."

Shortly after the fighting came to an end, the great migration to California commenced. The First and Second Dragoons and a battery of light artillery was dispatched to California from Mexico under the command of Lieutenant Colonel John Washington, a distant relative of the first president and an old friend of *The Great Western*.

This detachment reached a point called Palomas Pass, near Arista Mills, in the vicinity of Saltillo, where advance cavalymen spied three large freight wagons approaching, with a woman mounted on a white horse riding in the van. It was *The Great Western* on Lincoln's horse. She was outfitted in a royal-purple velvet riding dress, topped with a massive black cavalier's hat from which nodded a white plume.

She advanced past the advance guard and approached the commanding officer.

"Colonel Washington," she said, "I request permission to accompany your detachment to California, which—I hear—has more to offer in every respect than does this bloody, trampled over desert."

She was informed that the only way she could accompany them would be to marry one of the dragoons and sign on as a laundress.

"I am always happy to serve," she said, "and I'll marry the whole squadron and you thrown in but what I go along."

At this she turned her horse, and according to Chamberlain, road up and down the line crying out:

"Who wants a wife with \$15,000?"

When there was no immediate response, Sarah reminded them she had other assets. She flounced her velvet skirts high in the air, flipped up her pettycoats, and exposed her inner thigh.

"And," she added, "the biggest, er . . . leg in Mexico. Come my beauties! Don't all speak at once. Who is the lucky man!"

Many of the men knew she was supposed to have a husband already in the army and were somewhat reluctant to step forward.

Finally a man named Davis, in E Company, timidly stepped out and said:

“I have no objection to making you my wife, if there is a clergyman to tie the knot.”

They both knew there were no chaplains in the army, at least that portion of it, so *The Great Western* rode her horse over to where the man was standing.

“You,” she instructed him, “bring your blanket to my tent tonight, and I'll learn you to tie a knot that will satisfy you, I reckon.”

“Such,” wrote Sam Chamberlain, “was the morals of the Army of Mexico. Mrs. Davis, *nee* Borginnis, went down on Company E books as ‘laundress’ and drew rations as such.”

Sarah’s romance with Davis continued until after they had crossed over the Sierra Madres and descended into the valley of the Rio Bavispe, an Eden of fruit trees lying some miles southeast of Tucson.

Here a party of New Mexicans had come down to pick and dry their fruit so they could transport it back up to the Santa Fe area. One of these individuals was as huge a man as Sarah was a woman. *The Great Western* saw her “Hercules” bathing in the river one day and was awed by what she saw. According to Chamberlain's account, “She conceived a violent passion for his gigantic proportions.”

Sarah couldn't sleep because of this passion for her gigantically endowed paramour, so she “sought an interview and with blushes told of her love,” said Chamberlain. “The

Samson, nothing loath, became the willing captive of this modern Delilah, who straightaway kicked Davis out of her affections and tent, and established her elephantine lover in full possession without further ceremony.”

The Dragoons moved on toward California, leaving *The Great Western* behind to make love for several days with her “Hercules,” as they called him. When their passion abated they must have parted, for she showed up in El Paso a short time later without him, but with her money intact.

On April 12, 1849, Lieutenant William Henry Chase Whiting encountered her crossing the Rio Grande near the present site of El Paso, Texas. He wrote in his journal that she was the first person they met, “passing in a dugout...never has anyone been more delighted at the sight of American officers than she appeared. Her masculine arms lifted us, one after another, off our feet. She was now about moving to the American side to await the coming of the army.”

The Great Western invested part or all of her \$15,000 in a partnership with a St. Louisian named Benjamin Franklin Coons. They bought a place called Ponce’s Ranch, which stood where the White House Department Store was in downtown El Paso. They ran a combined store, hotel and restaurant in their building, which was the first in El Paso.

Many travelers saw and mentioned her at this place. C.C. Cox wrote in his diary that he arrived there July 10, 1849, and found “*The Great Western*, a female notorious in the late war.”

Rip Ford, an early drover and cowboy, passed by on the way to the gold fields in California. He wrote in a letter home (now in the Bancroft Library). “On our side an

American woman known as *The Great Western* kept a hotel. She was tall, large and well made. She had a reputation of being something of the roughest fighter on the Rio Grande and was approached in a polite, if not humble, manner by all of us, the writer in particular.”

Lewis B. Harris stopped at her-hotel and wrote to his brother, “We found the far-famed *Great Western* at this place. She was celebrated in the Mexican War, and did good service in a number of battles. She is about six feet, one inch, in height, and well proportioned. She treated us all with great kindness.”

Coons later leased his share of the buildings and grounds to the United States Government for use as a military post and moved on to California, later gaining a sort of second-hand fame by relating to a young newspaperman named Sam Clemens the story about a jumping frog. Sarah leased out her portion, too, and moved up to Socorro, New Mexico where another army post was established. It was here she gave her age as 33 in the 1850 census and was in love with a younger man, Albert Bowman, a Dane, who was only 24, but a sergeant.

Sarah’s medical experience caused her to be sent to the newly completed Fort Fillmore, (near Las Cruces and Mesilla, New Mexico, in 1851 to help establish a hospital.

In late February 1852 she accompanied Major Samuel P. Heintelman to reoccupy the post at Fort Yuma. There she supervised the establishment of another hospital and opened a hotel and tavern on the bluffs overlooking it.

Yuma apparently was a pretty wild army post. In 1855 a young Lieutenant Sylvester Mowry arrived there and wrote to his friend

Edward J. Bicknell at Providence, Rhode Island, that “We are surrounded by squaws all day long, entirely naked except for a little fringe of bark.” He said their price was low, that “a pound of beads worth \$2.50” would buy a “tender moment” with from 15 to 20 Indian maidens.

Mowry confided that he was not purchasing this commodity, however, for a venereal disease he had contracted earlier from a squaw in Oregon had “caused me to have a mortal aversion to squaws.”

Young, virgin Mexican girls provided by *The Great Western* were another thing, however, which he enjoyed often he said in his letter.

“Tonight,” Mowry confided in another letter to Bicknell, “is my wedding night . . . I have just got a Sonoran girl . . . for a mistress. She is 17, very pretty, dark hair, big black eyes and clear olive complexion.”

When silver was discovered near Patagonia, Arizona, *The Great Western* went there to set up a combination hotel, saloon, restaurant and love parlor in 1857.

Jeff Ake was an 11-year-old boy then and he sold her eggs “and stuff” for the restaurant. Jeff wrote in his memoirs that Sarah carried two six shooters on her hip, “and she could use them She had killed a couple of men in her time. She was a hell of a good woman.” Jeff said when the Civil War opened she moved with the rest of the Confederate sympathizers back to Mesilla, New Mexico.

Ake wrote that the army captain told them they had just three days to clear out. The captain suggested they pass the word along, which they did to "Thompson and Davis, my brother-in-law, and Wadsworth, Jack Pennington, Marshall and *The Great Western*,

'The greatest whore in the west' my Dad called her, and the family all pulled out. *Great Western* sent her girls back to Mexico, where they come from."

* * *

At Tucson the Confederate sympathizers picked up Moses Carson, Kit's older brother, and headed east. They reached La Cienega, now Silver City, New Mexico, where they expected to find a military escort, only to learn the soldiers had departed earlier.

They engaged in an all-day fight with a large number of Apaches in the pass near Cook's Peak, with *The Great Western* again exhibiting her usual bravery under fire. They got their train—including one wagon of gold—back together and continued on into Las Cruces, New Mexico where the Akes bought property and started a hotel.

Exactly where Sarah was during the Civil War is undocumented, but most of the Confederate sympathizers went to San Antonio and it is likely she did, too.

At any rate she was back in Yuma after the war was over. It is recorded that she died there December 23, 1866, and was one of the first army officers to be buried in the new Yuma cemetery, with full military honors including an army band.

This cemetery, on the northwest slope of the hill upon which Fort Yuma stood, was badly neglected over the years, and in August 1890 the Quartermaster's Department removed all of the bodies—159 of them—and reburied them September 9, at the Presidio Cemetery at San Francisco.

Thus, Sarah finally made it from Corpus Christi and Matamoros all the way along the Mexican border to California, and lies there in death today as she would have wished in life . . . surrounded by her boys.