



Episode 5, Great Mexican War Posters, Washington D.C., and El Paso

Wes Cowan: Our first story investigates a strange film poster, and takes us to the front lines of the Mexican Revolution. By 1913, the Mexican Revolution had become front page news across the United States. The rebel leader, Pancho Villa, in particular, captured the imagination of the public with his Robin Hood philosophy of giving land back to the poor. But it wasn't just Villa's ideology that won him public attention. A revolutionary new invention, the movie camera, allowed extraordinary images of Villa's bloody struggle to be shown in movie theaters across the United States. Nearly a century later, a mysterious poster found in a San Francisco basement may be a missing link to the Mexican Revolution, and one of the first battles ever caught on film. The poster is in the hands of Robert Sharpe, whose son found it in the basement of his new home.

Robert Sharpe: My son called me and he said, Dad, you've got to see this!

Wes: I'm Wes Cowan and have arranged to meet with Robert. I'm a fan of early cinema and I'm curious to see what he's found. What strikes me about this poster is its sheer size. Holy smokes. What do you know about it?

Robert: Well, you can see it says The Great Mexican War, and there have been a few, but I think that this has to do with the Mexican Revolution in the 19-teens.

Wes: Robert points out a picture of the rebel leader, Pancho Villa. But there's another prominent figure who I don't recognize.

Robert: It says here, "Pictures taken by Dr. Charles. A. Pryor, Associated Press Reporter and President, El Paso Feature Film Company."

Wes: He looks like a real swashbuckler, doesn't he?

Robert: But I don't know who Pryor is.

Wes: Robert's son also found a second piece of canvas. It's a kind of scrapbook of news clippings from the period. Most of them come from San Francisco in 1914. So it's like authenticating the....

Robert: I think authenticates it. And so it begins to focus in on the timeline of when all this came about.

Wes: Okay. So, what is it that you want me to find out?

Robert: Well, I'd like to know what's the story behind these posters. And, also, who is this fellow Pryor? I never heard of him in history. And so, that's a mystery.



Wes: I've never heard of Charles A. Pryor, but it's an intriguing story. Great posters. I'll like to spend a few minutes alone with it, if you don't mind?

Robert: That's why you're here. So, please, be my guest.

Wes: Let's take a look a little more closely here. This is a pretty remarkable thing. It is not a single sheet of paper. There are six separate sheets of paper here. In the vernacular of the film world, this would be called a six sheet poster. And it's very clearly a chromolithograph. Now chromolithography was a technique that became popular in the 1880's and then persisted really up through the early part of the 20th Century. There's no doubt that this is an authentic poster. And the news clippings make clear just how big a story the Mexican Revolution was in the United States. Some of the key battles took place just across the Texas border. Learning more about this guy Pryor may help me figure out the significance of the poster. Take a look at this. General Villa – and I assume that's Pancho Villa – famous rebel chieftain, and Dr. Charles A. Pryor. And so here they are. I wonder if Pryor actually knew Villa. Most of the news clippings are from San Francisco. And then there's this little triangle that says, "Schmidt Litho, SF". I guess that would mean Schmidt Lithography Company, San Francisco. I'm going to put in a couple of calls to the San Francisco Historical Society, and to the Associated Press. Yeah, I'm trying to find out if you have any record of a reporter names Charles A. Pryor. No? Well, that's curious. No record... Okay. The AP has no record of anyone by that name working for them. Maybe the San Francisco Historical Society will have something in their files. Meanwhile, I'm headed to a mecca for film research, the Library of Congress in Washington D.C. You've got to be Kim.

Kim Tomadjoglou: Hi, Wes. Your portfolio is a dead giveaway.

Wes: If anyone can tell me the story behind this poster, it's Kim Tomadjoglou, an expert in early cinema. I'd emailed her a picture, but this is the first time she's seeing it for real.

Kim: This is amazing. I had no idea it was this big.

Wes: So, have you ever seen the poster before?

Kim: No. It's very unusual. The design, the iconography, the color. I've never seen actually a film poster this large, ever.

Wes: Kim confirms my suspicions – the enormous size, linen backing and metal grommets suggest the poster was designed to hand outdoors. Have you ever heard of this movie, The Great Mexican War?



Kim: No, and I didn't find the title in the copyright book and I actually think that a film titled The Great Mexican War doesn't exist, or it never did exist.

Wes: There's another important clue on the poster. It reads, "Four reels in motion pictures."

Kim: It could be four reels of miscellaneous footage in the war that never had a title, and it's put together as a program that was possibly taken around as a travel program in a lecture circuit.

Wes: Kim says our poster is from a period when the novelty of news film was captivating Americans. Less than two decades earlier, Thomas Edison had helped pioneer movie cameras. And some of the earliest and most popular movie images were from wartime. In 1898, Edison's cameramen had traveled to Cuba to the Spanish American War. But battle scenes were deemed too dangerous for filming and re-enactments were shot in New Jersey. I asked Kim if she's ever heard of Charles Pryor. Have you ever heard of this guy, Charles A. Pryor? I mean, he's all over this in these different vignettes.

Kim: We've heard of Pryor here in the division because we have a very nice collection of 15 reels of footage shot during the Mexican War and Pryor is credited in a number of the reels.

Wes: So wait a minute, you have actual footage here that was taken by Pryor?

Kim: Yes.

Wes: Kim offers to show me the reels.

Kim: You can have a seat.

Wes: Thank you. Wow, great footage here. As Kim suspected, it's not a conventional movie; more like a collection of news footage. And some of this looks like moving images from a battlefield. "Burning dead rebels at Ojinaga." How gruesome. This seems as if it could be a scene from the poster. Hey, and look! It's our man! Charles A. Pryor, Associated Press reporter and camera man who made the pictures. I wonder what else he did? It looks like he made a real splash in 1912, after the Titanic sunk. Huh. Seems Pryor met up with the rescue ship and photographed the survivors, which he turned into a traveling slide show. The poster says Pryor was President of the El Paso Film Company. That's right on the Texas/Mexican border. I wonder if that's where he was based when he was shooting this film? Maybe I need to follow in his footsteps and go back to El Paso to see if he might have left some trace there. I've arranged to meet with David Romo, an author who's retraced Pancho Villa's footsteps. Great. Listen, I'm on the trail of this filmmaker, Charles A. Pryor. I've got this poster that I'm trying to run down and I want to know....David's never seen the poster, but he has heard of Pryor.



David Romo: Definitely. He came here to El Paso in 1913 in search of Pancho Villa.

Wes: During the early years of the revolution, Villa's struggle against the dictator Porfirio Díaz were viewed favorably by many Americans. El Paso became a safe haven for Villa, who would hide out from the Mexican army across the Texas border. The presence of the bandit in El Paso attracted journalists like Pryor from around the world.

David: Pancho Villa is a mythic figure still today. I mean, he was kind of like the Robin Hood of the poor. Not only in Mexico, but to the poor here along the border.

Wes: David describes Villa as an early Che Guevara-like figure. A champion of workers and farmers who wanted to return the land to the Mexican peasantry. Yet, he also had a streak of Jesse James – robbing trains and sparing no one in his bloody campaign. David points to a rooftop where tourists and journalists came to actually watch the combat.

David: So here we are. This is probably the best ringside seat to the Mexican Revolution in El Paso.

Wes: God, what a view. Almost 100 years ago, Villa's rebels and Mexican government troops were duking it out right here.

David: People would pay 25 cents, a dollar; and if the battle did not materialize, they would get their money back guaranteed. Look, let me show you a postcard from a book that has this exact location that says, "A safe and comfortable place to view a Mexican Revolution." There was a huge demand for graphic violence. And these American photographers, they were kind of, they were mercenaries of the camera, so to speak. I mean, they knew that people wanted this.

Wes: So what about filmmakers? I mean, they must have been crawling all over this place.

David: Oh, yes. Several filmmakers came down to El Paso to try to actually sign a contract with Pancho Villa.

Wes: David explains Villa was such a popular figure, the rebel leader actually struck a deal with a major movie company, the Mutual Film Corporation. They actually paid Villa \$25,000 for exclusive rights to film his battles. And they even added a screenwriter, actors and supplied Villa with a new uniform. But, how does Charles Pryor fit into all of this? You know, this poster shows Pryor like out in the thick of things. I mean, this doesn't look scripted. This looks like he's trying to put himself in the scene of the action. Why do you think he would have risked his life?



David: Well, it's probably not his great love for revolution. Let me show you something. When Pryor comes to El Paso, there's several new movie theaters that are constructed here. Movies were extremely popular at this time. I mean according to one newspaper article, El Pasoans spent more on movie tickets than they did on bread. This is the Alhambra Movie Theater and it was constructed the same year that Pryor showed his film here in El Paso in 1914.

Wes: David says at the time, many films about Mexicans exploited stereotypes with titles like, "Mexican's Crime" and "The Greaser's Revenge". Pryor also wanted to cash in, but with something new. He had taken some of the first movies of military conflict during the battle of Ojinaga in January, 1914. His film showed here in El Paso in that same year. What do you make of this? I mean, he's all over this poster.

David: He wants to say that he's the real thing. Kind of like a...

Wes: There's no doubt that Pryor was a witness to war. But, David finds his self-promotion a little over the top.

David: It kind of reminds me of the Barnum & Bailey Circus Poster.

Wes: Yeah. Yeah. It really is.

David: And that's what it was – for a lot of these people, it was just one big circus.

Wes: It seems that some of my earlier research may also have borne fruit. Okay, I got something from the San Francisco Historical Society. Let's see what they have to say about Mr. Pryor, if anything. Inside are copies of newspaper articles from 1914. Wow. I didn't expect this. "He recently exhibited his film in San Francisco and was requested by the Associated Press to discontinue use of advertisements in which he described himself as an agent of the news agency." Well, little wonder the AP doesn't have a record of him. Looks like Mr. Pryor got himself into a little bit of trouble after his film. You know, Robert's going to be very interested to hear this. I tell Robert his poster is an early record of a public seizing on film to learn of the world outside U.S. borders. But while Pryor had taken some of the first moving images from a battlefield, it seems he played a less than heroic role in his own life. And I think you're going to be really interested in this information I got from the San Francisco Historical Society. He gets into some serious trouble.

Robert: Oh, my goodness.

Wes: C. A. Pryor, manager of Mexican War Motion Pictures is accused of grand larceny. Theater owners allege that Pryor took their money, 550 bucks apiece, and then he never delivered the movies.

Robert: Any record of him being a doctor?



Wes: Well if you look in those newspaper articles you'll find out that, yeah, he was a doctor. He was a veterinarian.

Robert: Oh.... [Laughs]

Wes: And so, why did Pryor and his films slip from the public record? The articles make clear that in 1914, the same year he toured the country with *The Great Mexican War*, he was arrested, discredited and went broke.

Robert: C.A. Pryor, former promoter, in prison. Good grief! No wonder I hadn't heard of him after...

Wes: So, you know, I mean, here we have this poster. Ironically, you know, trying to show him as a standup, upright guy. And in reality he's not so trustworthy. You know, I'd say he's not a swashbuckler, but a scam artist?

Robert: My hero.

Wes: There's a little bit more I want to show you. So, come on, let's go.

Robert: Okay.

Wes: I've invited Robert and some friends I made in El Paso to a special screening. Well, thanks everyone for coming. I think we've got a real treat for you today. For the first time in 90 years, you're going to see footage that was shot right around here. And our filmmaker was a guy named Charles A. Pryor, and he produced and filmed *The Great Mexican War*. When this film premiered, Americans celebrated General Pancho Villa as a hero. Just two years later, his story took a dramatic turn. In 1916, the U.S. Government decided to support one of Villa's rivals, Venustiano Carranza for President. Villa, feeling betrayed, launched a brazen nighttime raid across the border into New Mexico attacking U.S. soldiers and killing innocent civilians. American public opinion quickly turned against Villa. The U.S. Army, led by General Jack Pershing, invaded Mexico but was unable to find him. In 1923, Pancho Villa was assassinated by gunmen who were never found.