

MEXICAN WAR

By 1846 New Albany was a thriving town with a population of over 8,000 – the largest city in Indiana. Boat building was at its height and the frontier had moved far to the west – all the way to Texas. Texas seemed far away to New Albany's residents, but events there suddenly plunged the nation into war and before long New Albany men were fighting in the hot and dry mountains of Mexico in a fight over the Texas border. . .

New Albany's streets had a festive air on the Fourth of July, 1847. Throngs of excited people crowded the riverfront. A cheer went up as a gilded river packet steamed into view. The packet's deep-throated whistle added to the din. New Albany's volunteers were coming back from the Mexican War. In an earlier day the troops would have come marching in to receive the tribute from the city. But this was a new age and New Albany was a river town. The soldiers were coming home by steamboat.

The year before they had left New Albany to sail down the river to New Orleans by boat. Crowds had lined the riverbank to cheer them on. Now they were coming home. War was a new experience for most of these volunteers, but they knew military tactics and they earned glory at the bloody battle of Buena Vista.

Before the war they had been the Spencer Greys, an independent volunteer company formed at New Albany in 1844. They had never been in battle, but Captain William Sanderson, who commanded them, was a good drillmaster. When the war broke out the Spencer Greys had the reputation as the finest military company in Indiana.

The Mexican War promised adventure, and soon the Greys were part of the Second Indiana Regiment which had camped near New Albany before it left for Mexico.

When the New Albany men left the boats at New Orleans, they camped at the battle ground where Andrew Jackson had defeated the British in a smashing victory in 1814, the last battle of the War of 1812. New Albany had been an infant village then, but in 1846 it was Indiana's largest city. New Orleans was the beginning of real Army life – camping in a swampy area full of mosquitoes and insects. It was not like the precision drills back home.

But 10 days later the orders came to move. The Indiana regiments left the river behind and started days of hard marching to reach another river – the Rio Grande. Before long they were in the thick of the fighting at Buena Vista. Ten of New Albany's volunteers who had set off so jauntily gave their lives in the battle. There's a tall stone monument in Fairview Cemetery dedicated to their memory. The fading inscription tells that it was erected by the people of Floyd County as a memorial to these gallant men.

But the others came back full of tales of adventure. There was Second Lt. Henry Pennington and Cpl. Benjamin Scribner, son of [Abner] Scribner, one of New Albany's founders. Both were to serve with distinction later in the Civil War. Captain Sanderson also served in the Civil War. Other names in the list of volunteers are still familiar in New Albany – Austin, Bailey,

Burris, Cunningham, Gwin, Lilly, Mitchell, Stephens, Tuley, Sinex – and many more who set off to serve their country for \$7 a month.

They told stories of battles in far-off places, of beautiful Mexican señoritas, of strange architecture and beautiful landscapes and of the new country they had helped to win for the United States. The home-folk listened wide-eyed to these first-hand accounts of the far West. Only a few years before New Albany had been on the western frontier. Now the lure of a new frontier made many a New Albany man restless - proof enough that the town had grown up. The restless ones were soon to have a chance to travel to these new lands. Within two years the news spread like wildfire that gold had been discovered in California and New Albany adventurers set out for the new west that the Spencer Greys had helped make a part of the United States.

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