

Reviving the Saint Patrick's Battalion

By Dan Leahy



Batallón San Patricio *Comandantes* marching in the Elissa Grissen parade
(Hidalgo del Parral, April 2002)

In Autumn 1990, I attended a strategy session in St. Paul, Minneapolis on how to defeat the proposed free trade agreement between Canada, the United States and Mexico, known as NAFTA, the North American Free Trade Agreement. There I met a man named Tom Laney who worked at a Ford production plant in St. Paul and was building relations between his UAW local union and the Ford workers at the Cuautitlán plant outside Mexico City, who were organising a union.

Tom told me story. He said there were a group of Irish soldiers who switched sides and fought with the Mexican army against the US forces in 1847. I said that I didn't believe him. He said that there was a large plaque honouring their solidarity at the Plaza de San Jacinto on the outskirts of Mexico City. I still didn't believe him. He said that he had a photograph of the plaque and I told him to send it on to me.

I returned home to Olympia, Washington and to my work at the Evergreen State College as a faculty member and as the Director of the Washington State's only Labor Education and Research Center.

A few days later, Tom's photograph arrived. At the top of the plaque was the symbol of the battalion, a Mexican eagle over a Celtic cross. Under the battalion symbol, the plaque read: 'In memory of the Irish Soldiers of the Heroic Battalion of St. Patrick martyrs who gave their lives in the cause of Mexico during the unjust North American invasion in 1847.' There were 71 names chiselled in stone.

I read those names and Mexico became a different place for me. I had never been to Mexico. I had no desire to be yet another *gringo* tourist. Now, however, I felt like I had a real connection, a legitimacy, a reason to go, a place in history. After all, there were no Leahys on that plaque, and they must have been there. I needed to do some research.

Researching the Battalion

I asked my staff and students at the Labor Education Center to research the battalion. They found books, dissertations, essays, novels, and stories. There was history, but like a lot of interesting history it was buried and out of print.

There were a lot of arguments about why the Irish soldiers had switched sides. They were Catholics. The Mexicans were Catholic. The US Army was Protestant. They didn't much care for slavery. Mexico had outlawed it, but the US wanted to expand it by taking Mexican land. Some said it was the brutal conditions in the US army; some said they were drunk; others said it was the señoritas. All those reasons sounded good to me. This war had the highest desertion rate in US history for good reason.

In August 1991, I flew to Zacatecas, Mexico, for the third round of the NAFTA negotiations. It was my first trip to Mexico and much to my surprise, I found a town full of cowboys and farmers who looked a lot like my Irish uncles in Eastern Washington, except, of course, that the Zacatecans spoke Spanish. I also met organisers from an independent labour federation called the FAT which had organised the alternative 'people's forum' that I was attending.

The Labor Center Mission

When I returned from Zacatecas, I organised a Labor Education Center mission to develop relations with the FAT. We arrived in Mexico City in mid-March 1992, a few days before St. Patrick's Day. There were five of us from the Labor Center, myself, Ellen Shortt, Mary Rose Livingston, Kathleen Byrd and Helen Lee. Tom and Barb Laney soon joined us from St. Paul. We were hosted by a cadre of union organisers and Ford workers from the Cuauitlán plant.



The revived Batallón at San Patricio/Melaque, 1995

We visited the Museum of Anti-Interventions in Churubusco. The Convento de Churubusco was the site of the last battle of the battalion in the war of 1847. Outside the walls of the Convento were markers honouring the battalion. After we toured the museum with its history of foreign invasions, we were walking around outside and discovered a side street, right in front of the

museum. It was a street named after 'Capitán John O'Reilly, Cmdte, Batallón de San Patricio.' History was coming alive.

Our hosts took us up to Plaza San Jacinto on St. Patrick's Day, and Mexican historians recounted to us the battalion's history as we sat in their barracks, now a furniture store. Afterwards, we sat in the square, as our friends played Mexican ballads. Somehow our hosts found a bottle of Jameson whiskey and we drank it until the police arrived. They were Irish, though, so we returned to our hotel rather than the police station.

Reviving the Battalion

When we got back home to Olympia, we started to see the Irish everywhere in Mexican history. Not only were there the battalion members in 1847, but sixty years later there were revolutionary heroes like Dorete O'Arango, Emilián O'Zapata, Alvaro O'Brien and the longest lasting of them all, Genoveso de la O! We also heard that the descendants of the battalion had been meeting with the great Lázaro Cárdenas just before he nationalised Mexico's oil on 18 March 1938.

We also noticed that many of the organisers in Canada and the United States who were making alliances with the Mexicans to oppose the NAFTA were Irish. All of a sudden, we realised that the battalion was still alive building links between the two peoples. When our most famous baseball star, Edgar Martínez, opened negotiations with the Seattle Mariners management, he reportedly started off by demanding the renegotiation of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, the treaty that ended the US invasion of Mexico in 1847.

Setting up the Organisation

Being organisers, we decided to form an organisation, the Heroico Batallón de San Patricio, dedicated to celebrating and expanding links between the Irish and the Mexicans. We set up a non-profit corporation and opened a bank account. We created stationery with the battalion symbol and a list of *comandantes* down the left-hand side. We took 'Solidaridad por la Libertad de un Pueblo' as our slogan. We printed and laminated official wallet-sized credentials making us all 'comandantes,' stamped 'Priority.' We ordered T-shirts with the battalion symbol made by Cmdte. Ricardo in Minneapolis, and developed a book list of required reading.



Then, of course, we made up rules. Comandantes had to have at least four names. Each comandante took on a '*cargo*' - an area of responsibility - a way of shifting resources from north to south. Comandantes could only show their credentials when necessary and they needed to attend their daily mass.

Discovering San Patricio/Melaque

For the academic year 1994-1995, I took a sabbatical from the Evergreen State College and along with my wife, Bethany Weidner, and our two sons, JD Ross and Chad the Rad Kid Queso, left for Zacatecas, Mexico in August 1994.

Zacatecas is located in North Central Mexico, a beautiful old silver-mining town. However, the ocean, a necessity for those of us who grew up on Puget Sound, was far away. I checked out the *Lonely Planet Guide* to Mexico for the nearest town on the Pacific Ocean and it was a place called San Patricio-Melaque in the state of Jalisco, a twelve-hour bus trip.

What was more interesting, however, was that the guidebook said that this town had a ten-day celebration leading up to St Patrick's day, and that the two towns had originated from two Irish *haciendas*. There was no doubt in our mind that those Irish *haciendas* had been founded by veterans of the original battalion.

We immediately switched the site of our gatherings from the Sacred Plaque in Mexico City to San Patricio, Jalisco and sent out communiqués to all comandantes (*arriba y abajo*) to converge on San Patricio ten days before St. Patrick's day, 17 March 1995. Thus began the now historic relationship between the Heroico Batallón de San Patricio and the people of San Patricio/Melaque.

Our First St. Patrick's Day in San Patricio/Melaque

There were about fifteen of us there for St. Patrick's Day 1995. Friends and family came from Washington State. Two Canadians from British Columbia joined us, along with three Icelandic Vikings, Floki, Breki and Steina, from Reykjavik. Two of these Vikings, Breki and Steina, would become famous in battalion annals for tracking down one of the silver medallions minted in 1960 in honour of the Battalion.

We had lots of fun celebrating our first Saint Patrick's Day in San Patricio/Melaque and we established a pattern of activity that lasted for the next seven years.



The swearing-in ceremony

Our Rituals

We found a wonderful hotel, the Puesta del Sol, run by Nacho and Maya Gutiérrez, that became our headquarters. We attended the evening fireworks display in front of the Church on the Plaza de Armas and dodged the 'torojito' like everyone else. We marched in the Saint Patrick's Day parade proudly wearing our battalion T-shirts and carrying Mexican and Irish flags. We attended mass on St. Patrick's Day where Father Antonio welcomed us.

We also held a communal dinner on the beach at the Terraza Cortez restaurant where we read the names of those who were hung by the US Army and said: 'Muero por la Patria.'

We drank bottles of Jameson thanks to the sponsorship of Irish Distilleries and their public relations man, Paul Scanlon. (Here, however, we came up with a new rule. Begin drinking Jameson's during the day and don't consume it all during the Saint Patrick Day's dinner.)

Our Swearing In

We also came up with a ceremony as a part of our communal dinner to initiate new Comandantes into the Battalion. Each recruit would have to tell us their four names and their 'cargo.' Then, Mary Rose or Marcos Frijolero

would hold a hat over their head (sometimes a Malcolm X hat, other times a *sombrero*), announce their name, and all would salute the new Comandante with 'arriba, abajo, al centro, a dentro' while downing 'your best shot to be Irish,' compliments of Irish Distilleries.

Joint Projects

As participation in our annual event grew, we began taking our responsibilities to the San Patricio/Melaque community more seriously. For a couple of years, everyone brought similar things on the plane. One year it was baseball equipment. The next year it was school supplies. We also formed a Mexican civil association, helped fund a health clinic, a mission church and held a book-signing event for Patrick Hogan's *The Irish Soldiers of Mexico*.

The battalion even got in the business of marrying people and organised an elaborate ceremony for the marriage of Cmdte. Lawrence Alford and Cmdta Teresa Terran. Lawrence was a Vietnam veteran living in San Patricio, and doubling as St. Patrick himself in the St. Patrick Day's parade. Teresa Terrán was one of the first people we met in San Patricio/Melaque and remains a loyal member of the battalion to this day.

Also, by 1999, the battalion was listed as one of the community sponsors of the parade itself.

A New Kiosko

There was an earthquake in October 1995 that cracked many of the buildings in San Patricio/Melaque and destroyed the town's Kiosko in the centre of the town square. It was this tragedy that brought us into closer and sustained contact with the community.

We met Dr. María del Carmen González and members of her organisation, Grupo Femenino, at our battalion gathering in 1996. She had detailed plans to rebuild the Kiosko on the town plaza and we pledged to help. Over the next two years, she raised \$16,000 and the battalion contributed a modest \$2,000. The new Kiosko was completed and opened in March 1998 and much to our surprise, there was a beautiful bronze plaque honouring the battalion's contribution. History had in fact come alive. We were very proud to be recognised by the community.

An English Language Contest

Our work with María del Carmen led to other projects. Her brother Flavio taught at the local school, and we proposed a trip for students who could tell the history of the battalion in English. The school set up a contest and battalion members Tini and Tom from Colorado who ran a biking excursion company, offered



San Patricio town officials at the formal opening of the kiosk, March 1998.

a free trip to Ireland for the winners. As it turned out, Ireland was a bit too far for the students, so the battalion brought the two winners, Ramón and Perla, to Washington State for two weeks of touring and celebrations. Several years later, thanks to help from battalion members H. Dale and K. Fortin, Ramón graduated in architecture from the University of Guadalajara and is now a practising architect.

The 150th Anniversary (1847-1997): A Letter from the President

We made a great effort to highlight the 150th anniversary of the battalion, as did the Mexican government, which produced a postage stamp in our honour. We mailed postcards to all the educational unions in Mexico inviting them to San Patricio and brought about fifty people to our headquarters at the Puesta del Sol.

However, our greatest accomplishment was when battalion members in Ireland convinced Mary Robinson, President of Ireland, to send a letter to the people of San Patricio/Melaque.

She wrote, 'The San Patricio Battalion fought with distinction on the side of Mexico and many members of the battalion paid the ultimate price for their bravery. Their participation established a bond of friendship and warmth between the peoples of Mexico and Ireland that lives on to this day'. She concluded her letter by writing, 'I would like to send my warm good wishes to all those who will gather to reflect on the contribution of this Irish battalion in San Patricio-Melaque, for a most enjoyable and fruitful celebration.'



New preparatoria school in San Patricio/Melaque

A New High School

From our work with Flavio González, we met another teacher, Adalberto Vigil, who had a bigger project in mind. He wanted to build a new high school, a Preparatoria, for the kids in San Patricio/Melaque. For several years, there was a community debate about the location of the new high school and the battalion did its best to stay clear of the controversy. By 1999, the site was chosen and the battalion was there for the placing of the first stone, but financing still had to be arranged before construction could begin.

The Battalion and Evergreen Students

By Spring 2000, I felt that the Battalion had established itself well enough to organise a joint project with students from my college. I organised a Spring class called 'The Mexican Nation-State'. Evergreen students studied Mexican Independence and the Mexican Revolution while travelling for the month of April on the route of Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata from Chihuahua to Morelos. We concluded our trip by participating in the May Day Parade in Mexico City that, among other things, honours the struggle of the American worker for the eight-hour working day in the late 1880s.

After one month of travel, high-school teachers Adalberto and Rosa organised a one-month home stay in San Patricio/Melaque. My students lived for the month of May in the homes of the parents who wanted to build a new high school. In exchange my students each made a donation to the school construction fund.

The joint project worked so well this first year that we agreed to do this class and home stay again in Spring 2002.

In Spring 2002, I was bringing more students to Mexico for a month's study of the Mexican Revolution and to San Patricio for another month's home stay.

As was my custom, I first delivered the \$4000 in home stay funds to the San Patricio High School Construction Fund and then flew to Chihuahua to meet my students and begin our travels. I was supposed to return to San Patricio with my students by early May to participate in the opening of the new High School. The battalion was by now the largest private donor to new High School.

We never made it. In fact, we were expelled from Mexico on 2 May 2002.

The Battalion and the People of Atenco

As we travelled in Mexico that April, I asked each of my students to develop a research project that they would present to the people of San Patricio/Melaque in their community centre at the end of May.

Two of my students were studying the *ejido* system of communal land ownership in Mexico. While we were travelling, they became interested in the conflict between the Mexican federal government and the people from an *ejido* called Atenco. The people of this *ejido* were resisting a federal domain decree condemning their land for a new 11,000-acre, six -runway airport on the outskirts of Mexico City.

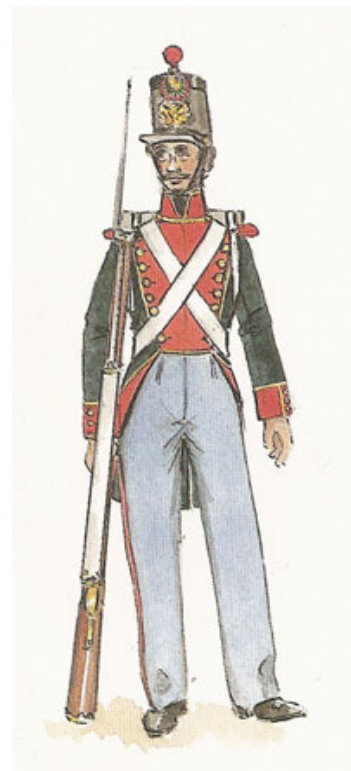
Just before arriving in Mexico City to participate in the May Day Parade, we had spent four days travelling the route of Emilio Zapata in the state of Morelos and studying his movement's main contribution to the Mexican Constitution of 1917, mainly the communally owned land system.

Once in Mexico City, the two students went to visit Atenco and came back with an invitation to march with the people of Atenco in the May Day Parade. We agreed and joined them on the broad boulevard of Reforma and entered the narrow street of Madero from which the parade participants pour into Mexico City's huge square, the Zócalo.

As was our practice when we marched, all my students wore their battalion T-shirts with the symbol of the Mexican eagle and the Celtic cross on the front and 'San Patricio, Home of the Battalion' on the back.

A month earlier, when we had marched in Hidalgo de Parral, Chihuahua, to honour the local heroine Elissa Grissen for leading the expulsion of General Pershing's army, we had proudly marched just behind the Mexican army band. When we entered the community auditorium, we were greeted as descendants of the original battalion and applauded for our commitment to Mexico.

When we entered the Zócalo with the people of Atenco on May Day, we received a different welcome. The private television company, Televisa, tried and convicted us on national television for interfering in the internal politics of



Officer of the San Patricio Battalion
(Glenn Thompson, *Irish Stamps*, 1997)

Mexico. A few of my students were carrying machetes which had been given to them by the farmers and this made sensational photographs in the international press.

The next day, 2 May, as we travelled toward San Patricio/Melaque to attend the opening of the new High School and begin our home stay, we were taken off the bus by federal police outside Guadalajara and four hours later put on an Aeroméxico flight to Los Angeles.

Our official expulsion papers said that we had engaged in activities not sanctioned by our tourist visas. The 'activities' were not specified. Nevertheless, when we got home, we were asked by college authorities and the Mexican consulate to apologise for 'interfering in the internal politics of Mexico', something we had not been formally charged with. We refused.

In a written statement to both the college and Mexican authorities, we apologised for whatever violation of Mexican law we might have committed, but said that while we did not go to Mexico to march with the people of Atenco, we were proud to have done so.

Two months later in August 2002, the Mexican federal government cancelled their plans for an airport on the Atenco land.

The Battalion Continues

Like the original battalion, the revived battalion ran into some problems with a Mexican administration. However, the Mexican tradition of hospitality and the battalion's commitment to honouring and building links between the Irish and the Mexicans will overcome these problems.

The newly built Kiosko remains central to the social life of San Patricio/Melaque. The new High School has opened and students are graduating. Some of the battalion members who were expelled have organised a sustained book drive to provide Spanish language literature to the new High School library. All books are stamped with the battalion symbol. Battalion members continue their participation in the Saint Patrick's Day celebrations and are working on new projects with the town. Our attachment to the people of Atenco remains. 'Land and Liberty' is as Irish as it is Mexican.

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The Saint Patrick Battalion

A song by David Rovics ("Living in these Times", 2001)



My name is John Riley
I'll have your ear only a while
I left my dear home in Ireland
It was death, starvation or exile
And when I got to America
It was my duty to go
Enter the Army and slog across Texas
To join in the war against Mexico

It was there in the pueblos and hillsides
That I saw the mistake I had made
Part of a conquering army
With the morals of a bayonet blade
So in the midst of these poor, dying Catholics
Screaming children, the burning stench of it all
Myself and two hundred Irishmen
Decided to rise to the call

(Chorus)

*From Dublin City to San Diego
We witnessed freedom denied
So we formed the Saint Patrick Battalion
And we fought on the Mexican side*

We marched 'neath the green flag of Saint Patrick
Emblazoned with "Erin Go Bragh"
Bright with the harp and the shamrock
And "Libertad para Mexicana"
Just fifty years after Wolf Tone
Five thousand miles away
The Yanks called us a Legion of Strangers
And they can talk as they may

(Chorus)

We fought them in Matamoros
While their volunteers were raping the nuns
In Monterrey and Cerro Gordo
We fought on as Ireland 's sons
We were the red-headed fighters for freedom
Amidst these brown-skinned women and men
Side by side we fought against tyranny
And I daresay we'd do it again

(Chorus)

We fought them in five major battles
Churubusco was the last
Overwhelmed by the cannons from Boston
We fell after each mortar blast
Most of us died on that hillside
In the service of the Mexican state
So far from our occupied homeland
We were heroes and victims of fate

(Chorus)

Acknowledgement

The editors are thankful to David Rovics for his permission to publish the lyrics and live recording of his song. Other works by David Rovics are available in his website (<http://www.davidrovics.com/>).