



Photograph of Pancho Villa
(c. 1911)

“My sole ambition is to rid Mexico of the class that has oppressed her and give the people a chance to know what real liberty means. And if I could bring that about today by giving up my life, I would do it gladly.”

—PANCHO VILLA

PANCHO VILLA

1894-1920

THIS RENEGADE GENERAL PLAYED AN INTEGRAL ROLE IN THE MEXICAN REVOLUTION.

BY Nathan Lee Adamus

Outlaw, governor, rebel, prison escapee and hero of the Mexican Revolution, Pancho Villa led an action-packed career as a raider and revolutionary across the northern states of Mexico.

BANDITO BEGINNINGS

Pancho Villa was born José Doroteo Arango Arámbula to poor peasants Agustín Arango and Micaela Arámbula in 1878. He grew up in a hacienda located in San Juan del Río in the Mexican state of Durango. Pancho, the oldest of five children, became the man of the house after his father died. He briefly attended school but later quit to raise money for his

family. He was surrounded by crime and poverty and vowed to do whatever it took to keep his family afloat.

Although historians question the validity of the story, legend has it that Villa left Durango at 16 but later returned to track down a hacienda owner who was accused of raping his sister. He killed the man, stole a horse and rode off into the sunset where he roamed the hills as the bandit "Arango." Later he joined an outlaw band led by Ignacio Parra, one of the most infamous Durango gangsters of the time.

Not much is known about Villa prior to a mule jacking and assault charge in 1902. He faced the death sentence for his crimes, but his relationship with a powerful local leader saved his life. Instead of facing execution, the court forced him to join the army.

LASTING LEGACY

NAME:

José Doroteo Arango Arámbula renamed himself Pancho Villa and was also known as "La Cucaracha."

DATES ACTIVE:

1894-1920

AREAS ACTIVE:

Northern states of Mexico and New Mexico

CLAIM TO FAME:

Besides being a Robin Hood-type bandit in his early life, Villa is most celebrated and remembered for his role as an integral leader in the Mexican Revolution.

MEXICAN REVOLUTION QUICK FACTS

1910-1920

ORIGINAL CAUSE: Dictator Porfirio Díaz increased economic growth, but this mainly made rich landowners richer while the landless underclasses were exploited. Francisco Madero, joined by Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata, launched a revolution against Díaz.

KEY POLITICAL FIGURES:

Porfirio Díaz - Dictator the revolutionaries sought to overthrow.

Francisco Madero - Ran against Díaz in a 1910 election for Mexico's presidency, which turned out to be rigged in Díaz' favor. Madero then led the opposition and launched attacks on the Díaz-controlled Mexican federal army. He succeeded in ousting Díaz and had a short-lived tenure as president.

General Victoriano Huerta - This commander of the Mexican federal army opposed Madero as president and with support from Mexican and US politicians, he was installed as Mexico's president in 1913 after Madero's assassination.

Venustiano Carranza - Carranza took over after Huerta, but Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata were not fans of his leadership and continued the revolution to fight him.



He later deserted and surfaced in Chihuahua where he killed an army officer and took his horse.

In an effort to remain hidden, Villa changed his bandit name from Arango to Francisco “Pancho” Villa. His friends—who clearly thought very highly of him—simply called him La Cucaracha, which means “the cockroach.” And no, the well-known folk song was not written in his honor, although the outlaw may have inspired several Mexican Revolution versions of the famous song.

From 1903 to the start of the Mexican Revolution in 1910, Villa operated as a Mexican Jesse James or even Robin Hood, robbing banks and raiding the homes of those he deemed unnecessarily wealthy.

OUTLAW-TURNED REVOLUTIONARY

In 1910, Villa met Abraham González, a local representative for politician Francisco Madero who was an extreme opponent of dictator Porfirio Díaz. González told Villa that his sharp outlaw skills were wasted on frivolous crimes, and he convinced Villa to join the fight against Díaz and wealthy hacienda owners.

Villa became a major piece of the Mexican Revolution and succeeded in driving the dictator Díaz into exile. Madero took over the presidency and saved Villa from execution. General Victoriano Huerta accused Villa of insubordination and had Villa scheduled for execution. Madero saved Villa’s life by converting the sentence to jail time instead. Of course, Villa escaped.

Madero’s presidency was cut violently short when he was assassinated. General Huerta proclaimed himself Mexico’s provisional president. Villa then joined forces with Venustiano Carranza to take the

“I am not an educated man. I never had an opportunity to learn anything except how to fight.”

—PANCHO VILLA

usurper Huerta down.

During the second part of the Mexican Revolution, Madero was assassinated and Huerta proclaimed himself Mexico’s provisional president. A number of governors and military leaders sought to overthrow Huerta, and Villa aligned himself with revolutionary leader Venustiano Carranza who was elected Governor of Coahuila in 1911.

In 1913, local military officials elected Villa the provisional governor of Chihuahua. His reign only lasted a year, but he succeeded in recruiting a number of successful military leaders to protect the region and formed deals with Hollywood that helped fund the Mexican Revolution.

Although Villa was monumental in Carranza’s rise to power, his unorthodox methods of torture and fear caused quite a few problems. By 1914, the already sour relationship between Villa and Carranza was strained. After ignoring Carranza’s orders to leave the

LEGACY IN POPULAR CULTURE

Pancho Villa is not a common figure in American popular culture, but he remains one of the biggest folk heroes in Mexico. He appeared as himself in several films between 1912 and 1916 and the character of Pancho Villa shows up frequently in television and film. In 2003 Antonio Banderas played him in the HBO original film *And Starring Pancho Villa as Himself*, which focuses on the filming of *The Life of General Villa* in 1914.

Even though his tactics were often cruel and unusual, Villa’s character has reached mythical proportions and he is often described as a modern-day Robin Hood in Mexican folklore.

Actor Damian Alcazar plays General Rodolfo Fierro in the film *And Starring Pancho Villa as Himself* (2003).





city of Zacatecas alone, Villa decided to attack anyway. The battle was a huge victory that marked the end of Huerta's regime, but Carranza was still less than pleased and refused to allow Villa to enter Mexico City upon his return.

Villa also felt that Carranza was disguising his true intentions and that once he became president, he would assume the role of a dictator. Villa's instincts were right, and Carranza ignored the rules set forth by the National Convention. Carranza was immediately removed from office, and Villa joined forces with revolutionary general Emiliano Zapata. The two sides were locked in a fierce battle, and the United States eventually sided with Carranza, likely due to Villa's controversial military tactics and the assumption that Carranza's ideology was the quickest route to a stable Mexican government.

BATTLE OF ZACATECAS

In June 1914, Villa led the bloodiest battle of the Mexican Revolution—uphill and against orders. Carranza sent word to Villa to divert his troops south instead of north. This made little sense strategically, and Villa resolved to obey the orders and then resign.

At the urging of his advising officers, however, Villa reconsidered and decided to instead capture the strategic city of Zacatecas. The mountainous city was a major source of silver, and Huerta's federal troops were posted at the mountain's peak. Villa and his men won the uphill battle in a costly but decisive victory.

GUERRILLA ATTACK IN NEW MEXICO

On March 9, 1916, Villa decided to retaliate against the US, sending 100 guerrillas to attack Columbus, New Mexico. Although some historians site revenge as his motivating factor, others believe that Villa was in serious need of supplies as his ongoing battle with

Carranza had left his army depleted. In response to the raid, Woodrow Wilson sent 5,000 Army soldiers to pursue Villa through Mexico. The search never produced Villa, but the US pressure was enough to severely reduce his influence in Mexico.

After a series of lost battles with Carranza's forces, Villa met with interim president Adolfo de la Huerta in 1920 and agreed to peacefully retire. In exchange for the gesture, he was given a pension and a 25,000-acre hacienda in Canutillo, Chihuahua.

On July 20, 1923, Pancho was assassinated during a visit to Parral. Although he usually traveled with an entourage of bodyguards, Villa chose to venture into town with only a few companions. On his drive through the city, a street vendor ran after his car and signaled to a group of seven riflemen who fired more than 40 shots into his 1919 Dodge roadster. Villa and two of his bodyguards were killed. A third bodyguard was badly wounded but survived and managed to kill one of the assassins before escaping.

LEADERSHIP ATTRIBUTES

Despite Villa's spotted reputation and violent methodology, he was an incredible leader. Although he was uneducated at the onset of the Mexican Revolution, Villa took advantage of his imprisonment under Huerta and learned to read and write. He was already an intimidating presence and the boost in education made him a formidable mental opponent as well.

Villa became a powerful motivational speaker and fundraiser. He was quite skilled at recruiting soldiers, politicians and influential leaders, and his slick tongue and charm may have single-handedly prevented war between the US and Mexico during the Tampico Affair.

Even though his tactics often relied on intimidation, Villa's military strategies became a blueprint for future political revolutions and guerrilla warfare. ●

VILLA'S EVIL SIDEKICK

All the best desperados have a repulsive sidekick, and Villa's right-hand man was built for the role. During the height of Villa's tenure, he aligned himself with a psychotic hitman named Rodolfo Fierro. Villa was not shy about doing most of his own dirty work, but he regularly relied on Fierro to carry out executions, raids and assassinations. Nicknamed El Carnicero or "The Butcher," Fierro was a reckless hothead who enjoyed his liquor.

Mexican journalist Martín Luis Guzmán reported that Fierro once captured somewhere between 200 and 300 soldiers and gave them the option to either join Villa's army or try to escape by running across a field and climbing a wall to freedom. Those who didn't join the army were set free in groups of ten while Fierro fired pistols at them as they ran. Only one prisoner escaped during his two-hour killing spree.

Another story claims that Fierro got in an argument with a man over whether a person who was shot while standing would fall forward or backward. Fierro was insistent that you would fall forward and became so enraged that he shot the man and watched him fall forward just to prove his theory.

ABOVE Villa (center) and his men. His forces were called the División del Norte, which reached about 50,000 men at its height.