The missing head of Pancho Villa

What does the stolen skull of a Mexican revolutionary have to do with my friend and me, living in Colorado a century after his death?

by Amy Frykholm in the September 2025 issue
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An undated photo of Mexican revolutionary Pancho Villa (US Library of Congress / George Grantham Bain Collection)

One Friday, as I sat down at a table at the community meal my church hosts, Josefina and Nora were talking about the head of Pancho Villa. “Amy,” Josefina asked me, with just enough slyness that I couldn’t be sure if she was joking or serious, “do you know where the head of Pancho Villa is?”

“The head of Pancho Villa is missing?” I replied innocently.

In truth I knew nothing about Villa, and I did not know about the mystery of his head. Villa’s history had never been told to me, or I hadn’t listened. When I sang “La Cucaracha” as a fifth grader in South Dakota, no one mentioned that it was used as a fight song for Villa’s army. I had only a feeling, the sediment of the song’s mockery but not its content. And I had no idea why this might be coming up during an ordinary lunch on an ordinary day in 2024, a few months before the reelection of Donald Trump.

Josefina, who was born in Chihuahua, a northern state of Mexico which was Villa’s home and the stronghold of his power in the early 20th century, told me that both her ex-husband and her son were named after him. When I asked her to say more, she hesitated, as if I had touched on a too-sensitive subject and she regretted bringing up the story in the first place. She did tell me that for her ex-husband’s family, Villa was a hero, a brave man who stood up to corruption and greed. Her version of Villa resonated with the one I would later learn had once been offered by Woodrow Wilson: “a sort of Robin Hood [who] had spent an eventful life robbing the rich in order to give to the poor.”

When I got home, I googled, “Where is the head of Pancho Villa?” I learned that the answer is unknown. Villa was assassinated in 1923 in the town of Parral, near the hacienda where he had retired from revolutionary and military life. It’s likely that he was killed by agents of his political rival Álvaro Obregón, then president of Mexico.

Three years after Villa’s death, his grave was exhumed and his body decapitated. No one knows who did this. The only suspect was Emil Holmdahl, who was arrested and then released for lack of evidence—or, some say, due to political pressure from the north. Holmdahl was an American, a soldier of fortune who had fought in several wars and served under the American general who went looking for Villa in a

campaign called the Punitive Expedition. Holmdahl, however, did not have Villa's head in his possession.

A hundred years later, the only working theory is that Holmdahl sold Villa's head to a powerful and influential person in the north. Then the trail falls into legend: that it perhaps ended up in the hands of Prescott Bush, who was a member of the Order of the Skull and Bones at Yale University, a secret society that has had several US presidents as members (including Prescott's son, George H. W. Bush, and grandson, George W. Bush). Skull and Bones denies that it has the skull, though it was known in the 20th century to possess other such "trophies." However great the story is, the connection between Villa's head and the secret society is dubious, with very few historical facts to back it up.

But the reason the story sticks is maybe the same reason that Josefina asked me if I knew where the head was: the missing head of Pancho Villa has a lot to say about the Mexican-American border, the secrets of American empire, and even the way that those things are evolving during the Trump administration. Maybe Josefina thought that the location of Villa's head is something that all White Americans know, hiding it from their Mexican neighbors in some 100-year-old act of revenge.

While I couldn't exactly go in search of the head—others far more qualified have tried—I decided to go in search of the story. I wanted to understand what it has to do with Josefina and me, living as we do in Colorado, just inside the northernmost border between Mexico and the United States—the border that existed before Mexico ceded some of Colorado and Wyoming and all of Arizona, California, Nevada, and New Mexico to the United States under the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, at the end of the Mexican-American War.

On the cover of a biography by Paco Ignacio Taibo II, Villa smiles broadly into the camera, wearing his signature sombrero and a thick black mustache. He's dashing, I think. A dimple on his chin. A five o'clock shadow. There is something open and daring about his smile. There are wrinkles at the edges of his eyes, as if from squinting into the sun. He looks like a sun-made person. A person who slept in the open air.

And he was. He spent a great deal of his life hunted in one way or another, both as a criminal and as a revolutionary. Taibo describes a mystery—a man of many legends and lies. Villa told the story of his own life in so many different ways to so many

different people that no one, in fact, can tell where the truth lies. During Villa's lifetime, journalist John Reed took it upon himself to tell the story of Villa and shape his reputation for an American public. It's from Reed that Wilson's image of Villa as a Robin Hood comes, and Villa was a romantic figure in the United States—until he became reviled.

Villa was born in 1878 in the Mexican state of Durango to *los que no tienen historia*, as Taibo calls them: those who don't have a history. His name was Doroteo Arango, but he changed it later in life to evade detection and then to claim a more fabulous history for himself. His parents were probably sharecroppers. In her book *The General and the Jaguar*, about the relationship between Villa and the United States, journalist Eileen Welsome notes that even observers at the time described the conditions for Mexican sharecroppers as a form of slavery.

Villa eventually joined a gang of marauding cattle rustlers, who made life difficult for the ranchers and the owners of the large haciendas that made up the elite of Durango and Chihuahua. He was arrested more than once, but he also made himself into the occasional businessman. He opened up a butcher shop and was known for distributing the goods that he stole to the poorest people of those states, becoming much loved despite a reputation for absolute brutality.

During Villa's early years, Mexico was ruled by a dictator named Porfirio Díaz. Díaz had stabilized the political situation in Mexico after a string of presidents and a time when political infighting had cost Mexico dearly. It was in the midst of this turmoil that Mexico had ceded a third of its territory to the United States after the lopsided Mexican-American War. In the early 20th century, Mexico was still reeling from this loss and had a great deal of distrust of its northern neighbor.

After Díaz stepped down and fled to Europe under extreme pressure, there was a fierce and bloody battle to be his successor. This is called both the Mexican Civil War and the Mexican Revolution, because it involved both an overthrow of an authoritarian government and fighting between factions from different geographical regions of Mexico. Villa headed one of these factions.

Just as many Mexican citizens were living in the United States at the start of the war, so also were many US citizens living in the northern part of Mexico, ranching and mining. In the midst of military and political fighting, these Americans would sometimes be driven out by violence and then go back during periods of relative

calm. The state of Chihuahua, which borders modern-day New Mexico and Texas, had a lot of these people. By the time the revolution started, most of Mexico's natural resources were owned by foreigners, along with railroads and businesses. "American real estate holdings totaled over 100 million acres," writes historian John Mason Hart, "and encompassed much of the nation's most valuable mining, agricultural, and timber properties."

Since the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, the United States had several times eyed a complete takeover of Chihuahua. The same process that had encouraged settlers to California and the Southwest, displacing and killing the region's Indigenous peoples in the name of claiming land for the United States, was also in place in northern Mexico at this time. Welsome says that settlers were drawn by the "glittering promise" of Mexico, but she doesn't make clear what the settlers hoped for politically. Were they opportunists of the most basic kind, in search of cheaper land and the possibilities presented by instability? It could be that Americans who crossed the border to ranch believed that eventually, one way or another, that land would become American land, especially with their help. They certainly didn't think they were becoming Mexican citizens. In the story of Villa and its relevance for today, it's important to note that the US maintained an expansionist mindset well into the 20th century. It didn't see its southern border as fixed.

Despite this uneasy relationship between the two nations, Villa initially saw the US government as his friend. In the chaos following the fall of Díaz, the United States at first claimed that it didn't have any intention of intervening in Mexico's internal affairs. Then President Wilson appointed an ambassador to Mexico who didn't speak Spanish and had no diplomatic experience. When a US-brokered deal for a post-Díaz government fell through, Wilson told Congress that he had only good intentions and there was nothing more he could do for the Mexican people but "await the time of their awakening to a realization of the actual facts. We cannot thrust our good offices upon them. . . . We can afford to exercise the self- restraint of a great nation." Wilson's words drip with self-righteous condescension; it is hard to read them any other way. Especially given what happened next.

Rather than await another time, the US lifted an embargo on arms flowing south into Mexico. This flow of arms was precisely what revolutionaries like Villa needed to build their armies and prepare for war against the government. He called Wilson "the most just man in the world. All Mexicans will love him now, and we will look on the United States as our greatest friend, because it has done us justice."

Villa amassed an army called the Division of the North, which peaked at more than 50,000 soldiers. He promised land reform, prioritized food for the hungry people of Chihuahua, and frequently distributed aid. He was also a merciless general, quickly killing anyone who he felt might betray him. Villa saw his brutal and bloody struggle as one against “the exploiters, the persecutors, the seducers,” and he saw that this struggle “could be of benefit to others who were persecuted and humiliated as I had been.”

Mexican revolutionaries of all stripes, including Villa, took refuge in the United States at various points, launching their attacks on each other and on Mexico’s federal army from places like El Paso and San Antonio. But the friendship between the US and Villa was short-lived. As the US debated its interests, it eventually decided to back Villa’s rival, José Venustiano Carranza. In a decisive battle for the border town of Agua Prieta in 1915, the US camped troops on the border and told Villa they would remain neutral in the fight that followed. Instead, they aided Carranza.

Villa felt betrayed. “This is the way the United States repays me for the treatment and protection I have given foreigners in Mexico. Hereafter I don’t give a _____ what happens to foreigners in Mexico or in my territory.” It wasn’t just that the US backed his rival. Villa was also convinced that “Carranza had cut a deal with the Americans that would make Mexico little more than a protectorate,” as Welsome puts it. Villa pointed to specific agreements Carranza had made, such as giving the US a stake in railroads and oil fields, a say in the appointment of ministers, and a 99-year lease on Magdalena Bay, on the Baja California peninsula.

At this point, Villa declared that his troops would not “fire a bullet more against the Mexicans, our brothers” and would “prepare and organize ourselves to attack the Americans in their own dens and make them know that Mexico is a land for the free and tomb for thrones, crowns, and traitors.”

After this, there were incidents that decayed the relationship further: a massacre of American businessmen on a train heading into Chihuahua and a Villa-led attack on the New Mexican border town of Columbus. The US public demanded revenge. There had long been factions that saw Mexico not as a neighboring country but as a yet unconquered territory. The cry to find and kill Pancho Villa was accompanied by the voices of others who wanted to extend the US border all the way to the Panama Canal.

In an effort to appease these voices in an election year while also feeling increasing pressure from conflict in Europe, Wilson sent General John J. Pershing and troops into Mexico to find and kill Villa. This manhunt was intended as revenge that would fall short of the all-out war with Mexico that some wanted and that Wilson was desperate to avoid.

But US troops were not welcomed in Mexico. The villagers saw them as intruders and invaders. And they had good reasons for their suspicions that the American troops might want more than they said they wanted. During the interminable, often quite dull, and ultimately unsuccessful hunt for Villa, Pershing started devising a plan to pacify Mexico, starting with Chihuahua. He began by undermining the Carranza government in the eyes of the US, sending missives back home about its corruption and incompetence, a view that many in the administration already held. Then he sent a telegram to General Frederick Funston, outlining how US troops could take control of Mexico—all of this, in the eyes of the Americans, for Mexico's own good.

The search for Villa went on far longer than intended, and the next president of Mexico, Álvaro Obregón, ordered US troops to withdraw. Because of Wilson's reluctance to go to war with Mexico, he agreed.

While Pershing never found Villa, Villa and his forces had nevertheless been greatly reduced by all of this fighting and fleeing. Villa accepted a political deal in which he would withdraw to the Chihuahuan town of Parral and live out his life in retirement. And this is essentially what happened—until his assassination, likely by Obregón, and the subsequent disappearance of his head.

Fast-forward 100 years. In 2023, the Mexican government declared a "Year of Francisco Villa" to honor Villa's legacy in the Mexican Revolution. In some ways, history remembers Villa for standing up to both authoritarians and foreign invaders and saving the Mexican nation. Forged in instability, the US-Mexico border remains a place of violence, disruption, and fear, even as the stories that we tell about it and the assumptions we make about it have changed. In all the current talk of territorial integrity, we easily overlook, or conveniently forget, that the US has only been interested in that integrity at specific times and for specific reasons. At other times, it has been far more interested in how it can extend its influence and its territory.

And now we hear a resurgence of these expansionist interests in the rhetoric of President Trump. There is something about the way Trump talks that makes 100 years ago seem like no time at all. In his inaugural speech, for example, he invoked his desire to take back the Panama Canal. “We have been treated very badly from this foolish gift that should have never been made, and Panama’s promise to us has been broken,” Trump said. “Above all,” he continued, “China is operating the Panama Canal. And we didn’t give it to China, we gave it to Panama—and we are taking it back!” While this example may seem a little off the map when considering our relationship with Mexico, Trump’s rhetoric is a strong reminder of the kind of neighbor the US has been.

When I asked Josefina about the US’s relationship to Mexico and to her native state of Chihuahua, she scoffed. “Oh, always, always, they wanted this land. And if you listen to Donald Trump now, it’s all about taking whatever he wants.” To someone listening through the lens of the history of Chihuahua, Trump’s claim on canals and waters, his renaming of the Gulf of Mexico, and his interest in Greenland and Ukraine’s mineral rights all sound exceedingly familiar. It’s the rhetoric of an imperial bully.

In *How to Hide an Empire*, political scientist Daniel Immerwahr writes that empire was never the American idea of itself. Instead of *colonies*, it preferred the term *territories*, which is still in use today for Puerto Rico, Guam, and 12 other lands the US holds. The myth of the United States relies on us being against empires—the British Empire, the Empire of Japan, the Soviet “evil empire”—and those who use the language of empire to describe the US usually do so as a form of critique.

Following in that tradition, when we discuss immigration, we raise the idea of territorial integrity far more frequently than the idea of empire. We imagine that the borders of the United States should be immutable, that such immutability is indeed what makes a country a country. Sovereignty is equated with border control and immigration control. We’re willing to spend billions of dollars on a border wall that instantiates once and for all where the US-Mexico border lies.

And yet, as Trump’s rhetoric shows, the question of America’s borders is not settled. The mystery of the head of Pancho Villa illuminates our peculiar relationship with Mexico in fascinating ways. In a short story called “The Skull of Pancho Villa,” Chicano writer Manuel Ramos switches up the story of imperialism that the legend implies. In Ramos’s version, Holmdahl leaves the head in the possession of a

Mexican American coconspirator, who takes it back to Los Angeles, where it stays in the family closet for decades. They take it out for celebrations, and the narrator's grandmother sings, "Corrido de Pancho Villa" to it. She calls the skull "Panchito."

What Ramos's mostly comic version of the story reveals is just how tangled up the history of these two countries is, how complicated the border is, how the flow of people and language and stories and cultures is not stopped by a border wall or by anti-immigrant rhetoric. When Josefina and Nora tell me the story of Pancho Villa and what it means in their families, they are sharing with me a part of my own past, one that was made invisible to me by other narratives that have dominated my understanding of my own nation.

What I learned from the head of Pancho Villa is that sovereignty is not absolute. It's a mechanism of power, and 100 years of hypocrisy are not lost on the people who live in the borderlands, a memory that Chihuahuans carry in their bodies and in their family lines, some under the name of Pancho Villa.