

Kidnappings of Gustavus A. Whiteford and Otto Land

On March 19, 1918, Mexican bandits kidnapped American citizen Gustavus A. Whiteford at the Cuyutlan gold mine near Rosamorada, State of Nayarit, Mexico. Several weeks later, on April 7, the same bandits captured naturalized American citizen Otto Land at the El Frontal Mine, also near Rosamorada. Despite receiving the demanded ransom for Whiteford, "General" Felix Diaz, a nearly blind twenty-four-year-old leader of virtually all bandits operating in Nayarit, did not release Whiteford. (This Felix Diaz was no relation of the nephew of President Porfirio Diaz.) On May 24, 1918, while Diaz was away from the camp where the prisoners were held, Whiteford attempted a second escape from his captors, but was caught and subsequently murdered by several drunken bandits. Also at this time, the bandits cut off the right index finger of the now-dead Whiteford and an index finger of the still-living Land. These were then sent to Delius y Cia, a German concern at Tepic, with a note stating that the amputation of fingers would continue until the ransom demands were paid; the fingers subsequently came into possession of the State Department from efforts to gain restitution from the Mexican government. On September 25, 1918, Land gained his release from Diaz by promising to pay fifteen hundred pesos, which he subsequently did. Land died on September 9, 1919. Despite repeated diplomatic efforts to bring the responsible bandits to justice, only Diaz appears to have reaped what he sowed. On March 17, 1922, Diaz was killed while trying to escape from federal soldiers taking him to a court martial unrelated to this banditry. The families and associates of Otto and Land later received compensation from the Special Mixed Claims Commission Established by an Act of Congress of April 10, 1935.

These kidnappings, while noteworthy today for the preservation of the fingers of Whiteford and Land, were far from isolated incidents in Nayarit. Banditry virtually defined the state at this time. According to the memorial filed by Whiteford's widow and children, the bandits had been active for at least three years prior to his kidnapping. They engaged in raids "characterized by wholesale robbery, murder, arson, and rapine," with both the state and federal

government having full knowledge of the bandit identities and their actions. While the Nayarit bandits comprised several groups, they mainly operated under Felix Diaz. His outlaws numbered around a thousand men, while the federal troops but four hundred. In addition to the kidnappings of Whiteford and Land, the bandits operated with impunity in raiding successively the towns of Rosamorada, Compostela, Santiago, Ixcuintla, Las Penas and Tequila, "robbing, looting, and burning the homes of the inhabitants, murdering the men and running the women off into the mountains." The bandits and their leaders were all said to be Mexican citizens, many of whom had deserted the army of Venustiano Carranza.

Both Whiteford and Land worked mines in the state of Nayarit, but would likely not have had much or any contact with one another had the kidnapping not tied them together. G. A. Whiteford was born on July 19, 1866, at Fort Smith, Arkansas. He was a resident of Los Angeles, leaving his family behind to work as superintendent of the Cuyutlan mine, beginning February 18, 1918. On March 20, about fifty or sixty bandits entered the camp and demanded five thousand pesos. Despite Whiteford's protestations that he could not raise that much, he was abducted into the mountains. The bandits then forced him to write to his associate E. G. Thomas in Los Angeles, appraising him of the ransom demand. The first ransom demand of 5,000 pesos soon doubled to 10,000 pesos (plus two revolvers and four hundred cartridges), but despite payment via Thomas, the bandits did not release Whiteford. After Whiteford's murder, Diaz told Land "that he considered all demands met and that Whiteford's friends didn't owe him a cent and said he didn't understand why the men murdered him."

Otto Land was born on August 14, 1872 at Gothenberg, Sweden, and naturalized in El Paso, Texas in 1904. Since 1910 he had resided in Frontal (near Rosamorada) and at the time of his capture he was in charge of the El Frontal Mine. He was kidnapped at this location on April 7, 1918 and taken to a bandit camp at Las Carpas, Nayarit, also the location of Whiteford. He arrived there on April 12, with his ransom set at 6,000 pesos. During the time of Land's

captivity, his fifteen-year-old son Elmer was also abducted, on July 10, 1918, but soon escaped by burning his bonds with a cigar.

The State Department, upon receiving news of Whiteford's abduction, immediately began making representations to the Mexican government, both through Ambassador Henry Fletcher in Mexico City, and Consul William E. Chapman of the American Consul at Mazatlan. Chapman in particular fervently worked to secure the release of Whiteford and Land, but found himself disappointed and outraged by the state's actions. In just one of many examples of Chapman's frustration, on July 3, 1918, he wrote to Ambassador Fletcher that "it is of no use to make representations, because the officials receiving them merely laugh and sneer at them, and enjoy our troubles and the sufferings of these men while they hide behind the sovereignty of their country which they know protects them from punishment—the only thing that would move them to action, in cases like this." Mexican officials dallied and outright lied about their efforts to rescue Whiteford and Land.

Though the definite facts of the case never came to support this conclusively, Chapman was convinced that the bandit activities, particularly given the way Americans had been targeted, resulted from "German intrigue." Americans in Nayarit with whom Chapman corresponded informed him of a "pro-German and anti-American" bias. In one of the earliest communications with State Department officials in Washington, Chapman on April 1, 1918 telegraphed:

Word has been received from Whiteford now believed to be at Viceteno? Ransom doubled and limited to Saturday. Friends doing all possible. Do not know what is best. Can Department make suggestion? We are afraid asking for troops would mean assassination. Germans seem to be involved. Negotiations difficult and uncertain account different bands. German successes in Europe making conditions worse for Americans. Officials haughty. News bulletins take precedence over telegrams, but German Consul has use direct government wire to Mexico City.

On April 14, Chapman further informed the State Department:

...There is one German held by many think only to disguise German effort make trouble for Americans. Operations not characteristic bandits heretofore. Many

evidences German intrigue. Many Germans in Tepic unmolested. I am informed two hundred fifty rifles received Mazatlan from Manzanillo two weeks by Germans and sent south in five carts.

If this German connection is all speculation and insinuation, Chapman had much greater proof in the inertia of Mexican officials to act on the problem. Ambassador Fletcher wrote to the Mexican Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs on April 26, stating that Mexican officials had taken no action against the bandits and requesting urgent instructions be issued to the appropriate authorities. On May 28, the Secretary of State advised Fletcher to bring to the attention of the Mexican Foreign Office that “neglect of local Mexican troops to take effective steps for the release of Whiteford and repeated representations to President Carranza places the Mexican Government liable to possible international reclamation for indemnity on behalf of Whiteford,” foreshadowing the special commissions to come. In late May or early June General Calles passed through Nayarit incidentally on his way to Mexico City, purportedly “actively pursuing” the bandits in attempt to secure release of Whiteford and Land, but in reality simply putting on a show and hosting some dinners. According to Chapman, Calles admitted that he did not even see a bandit on his expedition.

Recognizing the futility of attempting to gain Whiteford’s release through payment of ransom or action of the Mexican government, his friends and the Mazatlan Consulate worked on escape plans for the captives. W. J. Ferris, an American citizen formerly engaged in mining in Nayarit, was recruited for this work by Chapman “because of his acquaintance with many Mexicans there and his knowledge of conditions.” In a first attempt, Land and Whiteford succeeded in stealing away from camp, but they were soon recaptured. It was a second attempt by Whiteford—perhaps instigated by rumblings he had heard over cutting off fingers—that led to his death, at a time when Diaz was absent from the camp.

In a deposition, Otto Land graphically describes Whiteford’s murder after his escape attempt: “When Whiteford was brought back to camp, Rafael Garcia, drunk, shot him in the left breast below the heart. Whiteford’s hands were tied behind him. Then Captain

Arrelano...stabbed him with a knife in each breast and he fell to the ground bleeding. Then a bandit, Jesus (I don't know his last name) shot him in the head. About the time they were killing Whiteford, they tied me and threw me down beside Whiteford and cut off my finger. I lay there almost three hours on the ground." When Diaz returned, he reprimanded the men and expressed regret at the actions of his subordinates. Land believed that, had Diaz been present, "the killing of Whiteford would not have taken place."

The fingers were amputated with a dull knife, then sent along in a bottle of alcohol to Delius y Cia (or Delius & Company), accompanied by a note indicating that further disfigurements would follow if their demands were not met. On July 28, 1919, Chapman telegraphed the Secretary of State:

Now have possession fingers in alcohol. Whiteford and Land. Will forward Land's to the Department as he has requested, and will hold Whiteford's disposition of widow.

Whiteford's finger was sent to Mrs. Whiteford's attorney, William Schreider of Los Angeles. He later returned it to the State Department as part of the claim against the Mexican government.

Following Whiteford's murder and Land's release, the Mexican government continued to do little about the bandit problem. On June 12, 1919, Chapman wrote to George T. Summerlin, Charge d'Affaires of the Embassy, that the Consulate had kept a close watch on conditions in the State of Nayarit—both the operations of the bandits and of state and federal officials. He relates that the bandits still operate in the same areas as they had one year prior, and officials have made no opposition to them, elaborating on official inaction:

This office is fully convinced that these authorities have during all this time passed over most lightly the kidnapping and murder of Whiteford, that it has been impossible to arouse among them any interest in this or any of the other cases referred to either from the standpoint of their official obligations to do all in their power to establish law and order or from the view of serving a moral obligation in the interest of humanity. May I repeat that my informants, Mexicans included, have told me that it was no use to try to secure action from the Nayarit authorities, because they are not interested and care nothing about whether Whiteford was and others are killed and orders from the highest

authority in Mexico will not change their attitude, and I am certain these numerous informants gave absolutely the correct version of the case.

Mexican authorities continued to claim that they were persecuting the case, as when on August 19, 1919 they informed the American Embassy that rebel leaders Mario Luna and Pedro Taiz, responsible for the murder, had been killed in a battle. Chapman informed the Secretary of State that, as “the authorities have never made any effort to ascertain who the murderers were,” the information they provided was absolutely false. Conditions had improved by February 1920, but were still generally unsafe for Americans in remote parts of the State. Diaz’s life ended on March 17, 1922. According to the Third Assistant Secretary, Diaz apparently had been “captured by federal soldiers in the State of Sonora and was ordered taken by Hermosillo for trial by court martial, and that on the way there he bribed his guards and endeavored to escape, but was pursued and shot and killed.”

The parties affected by these kidnappings sought and gained restitution through the Special Mixed Claims Commission Established by an Act of Congress of April 10, 1935:

Docket #	Agency #	Claimant	Nature of Claim	Amount Claimed	Amount Awarded
57	1151	Elmer W. Land	Kidnapping 1918 Nayarit	\$5,000	\$1,500
58	1144	Hilda O. Land	Personal Injury 1918 Nayarit	\$20,000	\$1,500
59	969	Grace Kepler Whiteford	Death 1918 Nayarit	\$100,000	\$22,000
60	139	Zed E. Jones, Administrator of Estate of Otto Land	Kidnapping, 1918 Nayarit	\$78,895	\$10,400
62	1089	Edward George Thomas	Property Loss, 1918 Nayarit	\$76,094.39	\$7,500

Location of Records Relating to Kidnappings of Gustavus A. Whiteford and Otto Land

The following decimal numbers, from the 1910-1929 State Department Central Decimal Files, are known to relate to these cases:

312.11/5669
312.111 L 22
312.111W271
312.1115
312.113/1016
412.11 L 22
412.11 T 361

For further information:

RG 59 General Records of the Department of State

Entry 205-A, 1910-1929 Central Decimal Files (ARC ID 302021)

RG 76 Records of Boundary and Claims Commissions and Arbitrations, 1716-1979

Entry PI-136 189-A, Case Files for Claims Allowed, 1935-1938 (ARC ID 1159367)

RG 84 Records of the Foreign Service Posts of the Department of State

Entry UD 41, United States Diplomatic Records for Mexico, 1825-1940 (ARC ID 657103)

Entry UD 564, United States Consular Records for Mazatlan, Mexico, 1838-1937 (ARC ID 1136834)