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The Headless Horseman as depicted in 1867 by artist R. Orr in Mayne Reid's *The Headless Horseman: A Strange Tale of Texas* (Courtesy Steven Butler of Richardson)
THE EVOLUTION OF A LEGEND:
THE HEADLESS HORSEMAN OF TEXAS,
OR IT MAY NOT BE TRUE, BUT IT MAKES
A GOOD STORY

by Lou Ann Herda of Cypress

It is late at night. The meeting you attended in Cuero did not let out until nine p.m., and your drive towards San Antonio along Highway 87 starts out as a peaceful ride. The dark sky is full of twinkling stars and traffic is light. As you drive along, lightning flashing out of the corner of your left eye draws your attention. Puzzled, you glance in that direction, only to see that the lightning is not coming out of the sky but is, instead, coming from the ground. Suddenly, the lightning intensifies, coming closer to your car. You slam on the brakes as a horse gallops across the lanes in front of you. The lightning that you saw is coming from the hooves as they hit the ground. You see that there is a rider mounted on the horse, but that something is eerily missing from this rider. *It is his head!* Then you see that the head is dangling from the pommel of the saddle, thrust inside a sombrero, the eyes flashing as coals of fire. The rider dashes across the road and flashes off over the horizon. You have just experienced one of Texas’ more illustrious legends, El Muerto, the Headless Horseman.

In 1928, J. Frank Dobie called this lone rider “The Headless Horseman of the Mustangs,” but that was after the August 1924 *Frontier Times* edition where editor J. Marvin Hunter called him simply “the Headless Horseman.” However, since its first telling in
the mid-1800s, the headless horseman of Texas has evolved into quite a legend that gets better each time the story is told.

Over a period of twenty years in the late 1800s, Texas historian and writer J. Warren Hunter learned about Texas history first-hand from his friend Creed Taylor at Creed’s home in Kimble County. Creed, who is best known for his role in the Sutton-Taylor Feud, the longest and bloodiest feud in Texas history, told Hunter a great many stories about when he fought in so many of Texas’ early battles with the Mexican army.¹

One of these stories concerned what two of Creed’s friends, William “Bigfoot” Wallace and John McPeters, had done. By the year 1848, when Creed said the action took place, Bigfoot Wallace was already a legend because of his role in the fateful Mier Expedition and as a survivor of the Black Bean incident. His days as a Texas Ranger under legendary leader Captain Jack Hays were just beginning, although his prowess as an Indian tracker as well as Indian killer kept the man busy for decades. John McPeters, an almost unknown now, fought at the Battle of San Jacinto and also became a Texas Ranger, serving under “Mustang” Gray as well as others. Creed, himself a former Texas Ranger who served with Gray the same time as McPeters, seemed to tell the story as an aside, something that he happened to remember when he was talking about his friend McPeters. Hunter listened to the quick tale of how Wallace and McPeters had tracked and killed a number of Mexican horse thieves near the Nueces River, south of present-day Uvalde. Wallace had decided to use the ringleader’s body as a warning for anyone else who wanted to follow his example. After being shot and

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As the story goes in Hunter’s 1898 manuscript called The Life of Creed Taylor, Eighty-Six Years on the Texas Frontier, Wallace and McPeters had tracked and killed a number of Mexican horse thieves near the Nueces River, south of present-day Uvalde. Wallace had decided to use the ringleader’s body as a warning for anyone else who wanted to follow his example. After being shot and
killed, this man, called both Vuavis and Vidal in the story, was decapitated by Wallace. His body was put onto a wild stallion that the two men caught and tied between two trees, and his head was thrust inside his sombrero, secured with a strap, and tied onto the pommel of the saddle. Then the horse was let loose to ride across the hilly countryside. Over time, either Wallace or McPeters or perhaps both of them could have related this story to Taylor. However, a story as good as this bears repeating by the deed-doer, Big-foot Wallace, who was described by writer Sam Haynes in *Soldiers of Misfortune* as “a colorful character whose anecdotes about life on the frontier in later years make him something of a Bunyanesque character in Texas lore.” Strangely enough, though, neither John Duval nor A. J. Sowell, who each listened to Wallace’s stories and wrote about his life in Texas, included this most curious crime in his biographies.³

In this earliest rendition of the tale, Creed did not put himself at the scene of the crime; however, he had had his share of killing Mexican men. In 1824, when he was a boy of four years, his family settled in DeWitt’s Colony near Gonzales, where he later took part not only in the fracas over the Mexican cannon, but was also at the Siege of Bexar, fighting alongside famous Texan martyr Ben Milam. It was at this battle in December 1835 where he met the man who would later be known as El Muerto.

During the siege, Creed relates that Bate Berry, a longtime friend of Creed’s, found a Mexican deserter on a hill near where the Texians were holed up inside a house in San Antonio. Berry, who years later was reprimanded by General Andrew Jackson for scalping Mexicans in the Mexican War, brought his frightened captive into the house where the Texians demanded his life. The officer, whose name was Lieutenant Vuavis under General Woll’s command, pled for his life in exchange for information about Woll’s future activities against the Texians. He especially appealed to fifteen-year-old, dark-skinned Creed, who he mistakenly took for a Mexican. Taylor, who spoke fluent Spanish, interpreted for the officer, but the Texians already knew the information he divulged. For
whatever reason, the officer was allowed to live and, later, to be set free, but his appearance made a lasting impression on the young soldier.⁴

Years later, Vuavis, working under the alias “Vidal,” began terrorizing Texas ranchers by stealing their horses. Unfortunately for Vidal, he was tracked by one of the best trackers in Texas at that time, Bigfoot Wallace. Creed added his own comments to the story by explaining why the headless body of Vidal did not decompose rapidly, since, after the horse was loosed, he was seen by others out on the Texas hills, including soldiers stationed at Fort Inge, near Uvalde. Creed suggested that a Mexican’s diet, which he said was made up of hot peppers and garlic, helped mummify the body and kept it from deteriorating in the hot Texas sun.⁵

The exact date of the crime was never mentioned, only that it took place in 1848. However, since McPeters was mustered into service under Henry E. McCulloch’s Company on October 25, 1848, and was not mustered out until December 8, the deed must have been done earlier that year.⁶

It is a fact that Bigfoot Wallace had a grievance against the Mexican army. The original reason he came to Texas from Virginia in 1836 was to avenge the deaths of his cousin and his brother, who were both killed at the Goliad massacre. And since Bigfoot barely survived the ill-fated Mier Expedition and the squalid conditions at Perote Prison, there were more than enough reasons why he wanted to “take pay out of the Mexicans.”⁷

Another curious addition to the story is the reference to Captain Mayne Reid’s 1865 novel The Headless Horseman, or a Strange Tale of Texas. Hunter suggested that Creed’s story was an impetus for Reid’s own tale, for, as he said, Reid was stationed at Fort Inge at the time. Bigfoot Wallace was also listed as being at Fort Inge in 1850, so, as the story goes, he could have told Reid the legend that he perpetrated.⁸

This is when the story begins to take on a mysterious twist, for Mayne Reid was never stationed at Fort Inge. Yet, in his 1865 novel, he was able to describe the fort as though he had been there.
Mayne Reid, who wrote Westerns much like Zane Grey, was originally from Ireland. He came to the United States early in 1840 and spent the next decade living like a true Texan. His heroics during this time created plenty of fodder for the numerous novels he wrote after his return to England in July 1849.

Although the idea of Fort Inge had already been conceived, it was not inhabited until months after Reid had left Texas. Unless Reid had somehow taken a stagecoach, traveling at break-neck speed across the United States and back down to central Texas, it was nearly impossible for him to have seen the fort. Yet, he was mysteriously able to include the fort in his tale of the headless horseman.9

In chapter nine of *The Headless Horseman, or a Strange Tale of Texas*, Reid describes the fort with accuracy, including the “star-spangled banner suspended above [the fort].” He also describes the stockade stabling for two hundred horses, the barracks, the hospital, the commissary, the guardhouse, and so forth. The strangest part about his strange tale is how he could have known such detailed information about the fort without having been there. Virginia Woods, Uvalde County historian, surmises that perhaps Reid had accompanied Bigfoot Wallace on one of his many excursions across the Texas plains, while Bigfoot was carrying the mail to El Paso. Reid had lived in El Paso, so it would have made sense for him to go along for the ride to see old friends and acquaintances, or perhaps do business. Since the beheading of Vidal would have happened not long before Wallace started carrying the mail, the story would have been fresh on his mind. Then he would have bragged about his deed to Reid, who was undoubtedly a most willing listener, regaling his own tales of derring-do, swapping stories with one who was of such a like-mind.10

Another thought was that he may have seen the sketches made of the fort, with the “star spangled banner” flying on the hill. But since these detailed sketches were made in 1867, years after his story hit the presses, this again would not be proof. Thomas Cutrer, Reid’s biographer for the *Handbook of Texas*, says that
Reid’s source for the headless horseman was a South Texas folk-tale.11

Unfortunately, Reid’s notes that may have contained his inspiration for writing about a headless horseman in south central Texas have been lost either because of the fire that consumed his home or as a result of the planes which bombed the archives in London during World War II. Two of Reid’s biographers, Thomas Cutrer and Dr. Joan Steele, refer to Dobie’s headless horseman tale as possibly being Reid’s inspiration for his tale. Ty Smith, Fort Inge historian, contends that there must be “some nugget or kernel of truth that has sprung from the rumors” concerning Reid being at Fort Inge, but that he had “just not found it.”12

The next person who was involved with the headless horseman story was James T. De Shields, Texas historian and dry goods salesman. De Shields wrote numerous articles for several publications, including the Fort Worth Press. His stories were of the old times in Texas, told by the ones who were there. He would contact various people—Texas Rangers, soldiers in various battles that Texas was involved in, frontiersmen—and would pay them for their contribution. Then he would rewrite their stories, not giving credit where it was due. His first novel, Cynthia Ann Parker, won considerable attention, lending him much credence.13

J. Warren Hunter initially contacted De Shields in 1906 with hopes that he would buy his Creed Taylor manuscript and turn it into a novel. He had heard that De Shields was looking for information about the Old Timers and wanted to offer him what he had. De Shields bought what has become known as the Hunter Manuscript and over a period of many years, he inserted information or crossed out various words or sentences and added his own interpretations to the original. Twenty-one years after J. Warren Hunter’s death, De Shields published Tall Men with Long Rifles. This 1935 biography was the story of Creed Taylor’s involvement in the Texas Revolution. In De Shields’ typical fashion, he did not give credit to Hunter, and, in fact, the title page of the book states,
“As told to the author.” Creed had been dead since 1906, so there was no one left to defy him.14

Among De Shields’ papers and manuscripts, located at the Daughters of the Republic of Texas Library near the Alamo, there is an undated typeset copy of his own version of the headless horseman story. In his version he added a great deal of information not in the original manuscript, and often struck out the name “Wallace,” replacing it with “McPeters,” if it made the story sound better. He also added Creed Taylor to the story, saying that the three men were each “heavy losers of horses by Vidal’s raid. . . .” He further added that the saddle used on the wild mustang was one that was stolen by the bandits. Indeed, his story is more palatable and enjoyable than the original and, again, makes a good story.

In 1924, J. Marvin Hunter, J. Warren Hunter’s son and publisher and editor of the Frontier Times, published his own headless horseman tale. In this tale, he writes that the horses taken by Vidal and his bandits were Creed Taylor’s, and not only were Creed’s horses stolen, but also a Mexican’s named Flores, who was not given a first name. J. Marvin goes on to retell the story in a much more vivid manner than in the original. This included how Vuavis (who he calls “Vivois” because his father’s handwriting was often illegible) had “lingered about San Antonio and Goliad after Santa Anna’s defeat at San Jacinto, when he turned out to stealing and became the most noted horse thief in all Southwest Texas.” He also changes the date of the story to 1850 since, “[Vidal and his men] had chosen a most opportune time since only a few days previously the Indians had raided the settlements on the Cibolo and the Guadalupe, and in consequence of this raid, nearly every available man in the country had been called out to chastise the Comanches.” It just so happened that both Creed and Flores were still at home and could begin their tracking of the thieves.15

Perhaps the younger Hunter set the year at 1850 because the fort was inhabited by then and because Bigfoot Wallace was included in the fort’s roster for that year. Nonetheless, McPeters
is left out of this rendition, and Flores takes over as the silent vindicator.

Hunter also ties in the Mayne Reid connection by saying that his headless horseman novel “was founded on fact, and the parties responsible for the headless rider and his ghostly adventures were well known about San Antonio and throughout Southwest Texas during those days . . .”¹⁶

He ends his article with direct quotations from Creed Taylor, which was most interesting since this information was not in the original Hunter Manuscript. It could have been possible, however, that J. Marvin had heard the story from either his father or from Creed Taylor himself during the years that he was growing up. He may have even written down what Creed said, keeping the information handy for just the right occasion, though this has not been corroborated.

Although too lengthy to quote verbatim, Creed’s language is very colorful and descriptive, again making the story more interesting for the reader. As he gets to the end of the story, Creed says,

“I heard afterwards, in fact Wallace was my informant, that soldiers at Fort Inge were greatly wrought up on seeing a man without a head, mounted on a superb stallion galloping around the country, scaring the life out of Indians and Mexicans, and frightening scouts and the few settlers out of their wits, and that they finally killed the horse by laying in wait at a watering place and shooting him . . .”¹⁷

In this rendition, J. Marvin used portions of his father’s original manuscript, but again added his own flare for the pen, making the story more interesting. At the end of his article, he inserts that Creed, who “was not given to boasting or exaggeration,” was asked if he had gotten his story from reading Mayne Reid’s novel. Creed answered that he had never heard of Reid’s novel but that
he had remembered a “Rid, one of the regulars who was stationed at Fort Inge, but had no acquaintance with him and never knew he had written a book of any kind.”

By 1926, J. Frank Dobie was secretary-editor of the Texas Folklore Society. He had published numerous books, including a very popular *Legends of Texas* in 1924. The headless horseman tale is not included in that book, possibly because he had not heard of it yet. But by the time J. Marvin Hunter had published his August 1924 edition of *Frontier Times*, Dobie found it to be most intriguing and decided to include it in his *Tales of Old Time Texas*, copyrighted in 1928. He saw that not only was the story fascinating, but it also included popular characters from the nineteenth century.

Using his own creative bent, Dobie created a tale with lasting effect. He described the surroundings so that the reader could put his imagination right where the action was. For the most part, his telling is an almost duplicate of the Hunter story from *Frontier Times*, except Dobie puts Vidal’s body and dangling head specifically upon a mustang, an animal Dobie knew a great deal about. He also may very well have had available Reid’s *Headless Horseman* novel, for he quotes the 1886 edition, saying that Reid “added to the legend that he heard growing up.” He further suggested that Reid’s “phantom horseman of his tale was the patron—the ghostly guard—of the lost mine of the long-abandoned Candelaria Mission on the Nueces, to protect it against profane prospectors.” Dobie enjoyed telling the legends of lost mines in Texas.

Dobie also detailed the making of the headless horseman by adding the following:

Bigfoot Wallace, always daring and eccentric, now made one of his original proposals. In the captured *caballada* was a black mustang stallion that had been herd-broken but that had never felt a cinch under his belly. Bigfoot proposed that he be roped, saddled, and mounted with Vidal’s body. . . .
black mustang was roped, tied up, blindfolded with a red bandana, and saddled. Then the Texans cut off Vidal’s head and, with chin-strap and thongs, fastened the horse thief’s sombrero firmly to it. Next, making deft use of buckskin, they laced the sombreroed head to the horn of the saddle. It was a Mexican saddle, rawhide-rigged, with a wide, flat horn. They dressed Vidal’s headless body in full regalia—leggins, spurs, serape—and then . . . fixed it in the saddle. They tied the dead man’s feet in the stirrups and double-fastened the stirrups to each other under the mustang’s belly so that they could not fly up. Then, with a wild and terrifying squeal, he broke away into a run that, as we have seen, scared up a legend not yet dead.20

Dobie ends his exciting tale saying that the three men drove the horses back to their respective ranches and that they “agreed to keep still for a while.”21

Since that time, the tale of the headless horseman has continued to evolve. Contemporary writers such as the late Ed Syers, Charley Eckhardt, and Zinita Fowler include their own spin of this gruesome tale of revenge among their tales of Texas ghosts and legends. Ed Syers, who referred to the headless horseman as “El Muerto del Rodeo,” makes a final addition to Vidal’s demise in his 1981 tale. He stated that Vidal’s mummified remains were buried in an unmarked grave at somebody’s ranch in Ben Bolt. The headless body of old Vidal rode quite a long way if he was carried from Uvalde County to Ben Bolt in Jim Wells County.22

By 2001, writer Jo-Anne Christensen had demoted El Muerto from legend to tall tale. She does not include in her tale the names of the perpetrators or the year Vidal was killed and beheaded. She instead says that he met his “end when a band of vigilantes caught up with him and measured out a bit of Wild West justice.” She does say that he can still be seen on the Coastal Plains where “El
Muerto is intent upon perpetrating the eerie illusion that he will not die.”

Charley Eckhardt told Ed Syers, he “questions getting a dead man astride a wild mustang.” Texas storyteller Tim Tingle says that it’s not so much if the story is true but how well the story is told.

Which takes us back to the beginning, for Ol’ Vidal is not quite finished with his wild ride across the Texas Plains. As contemporary writer Lee Paul tells it:

eyewitnesses claimed the horse spouted flames from its nostrils and sent lightning bolts skyward with each clop from its hooves. The eyes in the head under the tattered sombrero were said to be like two fiery coals chipped from the cinders of hell. Some even claimed the specter glowed with an eerie green light and smelled like brimstone as it thundered through the tumbleweeds and desert sage.

Perhaps one of the most curious things about this tale is that when I first began investigating, I was not aware that the eighty-sixth annual meeting of the Texas Folklore Society would be near Creed Taylor’s home, which was in Noxville, about thirty-six miles from here. One can still see where his remains lie in a family cemetery not far from there.

And what does Taylor’s kin say about all this interest in his creation of a headless horseman? Creed’s great-great-granddaughter from his first marriage, Mrs. Dovie Hall of Boerne, said there is no doubt as to the veracity of the story. She also says that Creed’s grandson by his second marriage, Mr. Lynn Taylor, also agrees that the story is true. Bena Taylor Kirkscey, another direct descendant of Creed’s from his first marriage, dislikes that the Hunter Manuscript was altered and that it’s “difficult to decide fact from fiction.”

One thing that cannot be discounted is the fact that John Bate Berry, Creed Taylor, and John McPeters all lived in Kimble County
in their later years. It might be that they tried to outdo each other as they reflected on their tales of younger days.\textsuperscript{27}

So is the headless horseman of Texas fact or fiction? That may never be determined. But as John Lienhard recently said on National Public Radio’s \textit{Engines of Our Ingenuity}, “I think, what a strange business history is! It’s at its best when it still deals with questions—when the truth of things still hovers beyond certainty.”\textsuperscript{28}

\textbf{ENDNOTES}

1. For more information about the Sutton-Taylor Feud (or the Taylor-Sutton Feud, according to who is talking), read C. L. Sonnichsen’s \textit{I’ll Die Before I’ll Run—The Story of the Great Feuds of Texas} (New York: Devin-Adair, 1962).


5. This telling of the story made me curious. Because forensics has always fascinated me, I wanted to know what would have happened at the scene of the crime. So I contacted the El Paso Medical Examiner, Dr. Corrine E. Stern, and asked her the most obvious question: “What would happen if someone got his head cut off and shoved in a sombrero?” I was concerned that his brains would immediately fall out. She consoled me, saying no, if the head was cut off at the neck, the brains would not come out. “The basilar skull protects that from happening. However, as the brain decomposed, which would begin to happen—shortly if the weather was very warm or over a period of a couple of days if it was cooler—the brain matter would come out of a hole in the skull called the foramen magnum (where the spinal cord turns into the brainstem and enters the skull).” I then posed
the question of the Mexican diet, as Creed had stated in his story, asking if it would help mummify the body. She addressed the mummification process saying that, in West Texas, the bodies “tend to mummify because of the dry climate,” but that a body can go from “freshly dead to skeleton in a week if the temperature is high enough.” E-mail transmission, April 23, 2002, from Dr. Corrine E. Stern, Chief Medical Examiner, El Paso County, Texas, to Lou Ann Herda.

6. Charles D. Spurlin, copyrighted 1984 by the author, and created from The Compiled Service Records of Volunteer Soldiers Who Served During the Mexican War in Organizations from the State of Texas, National Archives microcopy number 278.

7. John Crittenden Duval, The Adventures of Big Foot Wallace, the Texas Ranger and Hunter (Macon, GA: Burke, 1870). See also Sowell, cited above.


10. Thomas Mayne Reid, The Headless Horseman, or A Strange Tale of Texas (London: Chapman & Hall, 1865), 48–49. Mention of Big-foot Wallace being a mail carrier can be read in Sowell’s (1989) Life of Bigfoot Wallace. I frequently corresponded with and spoke by phone to Virginia Davis, historian with the Uvalde Historical Commission, about Reid and the headless horseman tale. Eventually, my son Taylor Lang and I drove to Uvalde to see where the old fort was and to make her acquaintance. Although the fort is long gone, the flag is still flying. Another interesting fact about Reid is that, while he was in Philadelphia, he befriended Edgar Allan Poe and defended Poe and his honor after his untimely death.

“It was at the base of [the White Mountain] that Mayne Reid drew his inspiration for those famous stories of his that charmed us as boys, and made us long to be Texas Rangers, and destroy Comanches and Mexican desperadoes. He lived in El Paso for a year or more, gathering the material for his marvelous tales.” Henderson McCune, “The White Mountain,” Overland Monthly and Out West Magazine 16 (91): 25.

11. Conversation with Virginia Davis at her home in Uvalde, July 3, 2002. I’ve seen the sketch of the fort that has the year 1867 written at the bottom. Mrs. Davis also contacted Ty Smith concerning Reid,
and his answer was in an e-mail transmission from Davis to Lou Ann Herda on May 7, 2002.


13. “De Shields, James Thomas.” The Handbook of Texas Online. http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/view/DD/fde45.html [Accessed Sun Aug 18 18:49:36 US/Central 2002 ]. Also, in a December 2, 1895, letter from former Texas Ranger “Rip” Ford, who was paid to send De Shields information about his service on the Texan frontier, Ford chided De Shields for not giving credit where due. He wrote, “I have signed the article forwarded. It is the right way to do. Any other method would be unjust to a writer. No one would believe you had written all the articles you may publish. Then it is right to let every man be responsible for what he writes. Suppose someone disputes what is said in my article about Col. Hays. Could you reply? Surely not . . . .

14. James T. De Shields, *Tall Men with Long Rifles* (San Antonio, TX: Naylor Co., 1935). In comparing the information about Creed’s introduction to Vidal during the Siege of Bexar between *Tall Men* and Hunter’s Manuscript, there are many instances where De Shields quotes Hunter verbatim. On p. 61, he uses the exact wording from pages 7 and 18 of the manuscript, recalling portions of Creed’s headless horseman as well as Creed’s descriptions from the siege. Still, there is nowhere in De Shields’ book that mention Hunter’s years of gathering information straight from Taylor.


16. Ibid., 12.

17. Ibid., 14.

18. Ibid., 14.


21. Ibid., 154.


24. Tingle to Herda in a conversation during the 2001 TFS meeting.
25. www.theoutlaws.com/ghosts1.htm
26. Email transmission from thedove@boernenet.com (Dovie Tschirthart Hall) to Lou Ann Herda, April 7, 2002. Email transmission from BenaTKirk@aol.com (Bena Taylor Kirkscey) to Lou Ann Herda on April 6, 2002.
27. Neither Creed Taylor or Bate Berry is listed among those mustered into service during the Siege of Bexar, as per the Muster Rolls of the Texas Revolution (Austin, TX: Daughters of the Texas Republic, 1986). See also O. C. Fisher’s account of those who lived in Kimble County in the latter 1800s in It Occurred in Kimble County and How—The Story of a Texas County (Houston, TX: Anson Jones Press, 1937).