

The Story of Gregorio Cortez

A farmhand and vaquero (cowboy), Gregorio Cortez had not gotten into much legal trouble until a sheriff shot his brother while looking for a horse thief. On June 12, 1901, Karnes County sheriff W.T. "Brack" Morris, accompanied by two deputies, sought out Cortez because a resident in the town stated he recently acquired a mare after trading a horse with Gregorio Cortez. According to official testimony, the deputy who translated Morris's questions to Cortez was not a proficient translator. When Cortez said, "You can't arrest me for nothing," Morris believed he said, "No white man can arrest me." As a result, Morris shot and wounded Gregorio Cortez's brother Romaldo Cortez, and in retaliation, Cortez shot and killed the sheriff and fled. While trying to escape, Cortez was apprehended by a sheriff (Glover) and his posse in a nearby county. In the attempt to capture Cortez, Glover and one of his men, Schnabel, were killed. Cortez soon gained a reputation as a gang leader and sheriff-killer, and a \$1,000 reward was offered for his capture. Hundreds of men, including the Texas Rangers, sought to capture Cortez, but Cortez was able to evade them for 10 days. On June 22, 1901, Cortez's acquaintance, Jesus Gonzalez, led a posse to Cortez. Many consider Gonzalez a traitor to his people.

Tejanos, who saw Cortez as a hero able to evade the rinches, were the recipients of violence. By the time Cortez was captured, at least nine persons of Mexican descent had been killed and three wounded.

Once Cortez was captured, many organizations were founded to support Cortez and assist him in gaining legal representation. One lawyer, B.R. Abernathy, was instrumental in Cortez's trial, and instead of being charged guilty of first-degree murder of Schnabel, Cortez was charged with second-degree murder and was sentenced to fifty years in prison. However, a Texas Court of Criminal appeals reversed the verdict and sentenced him to life in prison for the murder of Sheriff Glover. While in prison, Cortez worked as a barber, and meanwhile, many supporters of Cortez attempted to get him pardoned, and in 1913, the attempts proved fruitful. Cortez was granted a conditional pardon.