

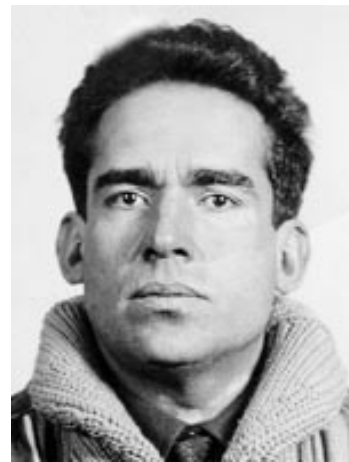
# “The Estrada Insurrection”

*Deportation, followed by a Mexican firing squad, may be the fate of some or all of the body of potential revolutionists arrested here by United States government agents yesterday . . .*

--San Diego Tribune, August 16, 1926

On a quiet Sunday evening in August 1926, a small army of revolutionaries began to assemble east of Dulzura, just a few miles from the border with Mexico. Led by a charismatic renegade army general, Enrique Estrada, the soldiers were poised to “liberate” Tecate and other border towns, and stir up national rebellion against Mexico’s president, Plutarco Calles.

At age 36 General Estrada was already a veteran of many years of revolutionary turmoil in Mexico. The former civil engineering student had turned to soldiering and politics after leaving school in 1910. He achieved success quickly, and by the early 1920s he had served as governor of his home state of Zacatecas and Secretary of War. But he was on the losing side of a rebellion against President Álvaro Obregón the next year and forced to flee to the United States.



General Enrique Estrada

In Los Angeles the general began plotting a return to Mexico as the leader of his own army of revolutionaries. With fellow conspirators--including Aurelio Sepulveda, an active general on leave from the Mexican army--Estrada began collecting money and recruiting men to form a private army of insurrectionists.

To equip his soldiers, Estrada contacted San Diego hardware dealer Earle C. Parker to buy rifles, machine guns, and ammunition. From his store at 615 Fifth Street, Parker ordered 400 Springfield rifles, two Marlin machine guns, and 150,000 rounds of ammunition. He also ordered four monoplanes from San Diego’s Ryan Airlines, the same company that would later build Charles Lindbergh’s “Spirit of St. Louis.”

The most fateful purchase was four armored trucks from a Los Angeles garage proprietor. When the local office of the Bureau of Investigation (later known as the FBI) was tipped to a rumor of motor trucks being armored with nickel/steel plate, the agents decided to investigate. They discovered that a Mexican salesman, flush with cash, had ordered the special vehicles, claiming they would guard gold shipments for a Mexico mining company.

About the same time the New York office of the Bureau got wind of the large purchase of Springfield rifles from a local supplier. The order led directly to San Diego’s Parker Hardware Company. Along with the evidence that someone was amassing materials for war, the agents learned from Baja informants that Enrique Estrada was actively plotting in Los Angeles.

In early August the Springfield rifles arrived in Los Angeles and were moved into a warehouse. The Bureau put the warehouse under surveillance. Other agents tracked Estrada and his conspirators, and in San Diego, special agent Edwin Atherton led a team that scouted the small roads that led to Mexico from San Diego's backcountry.

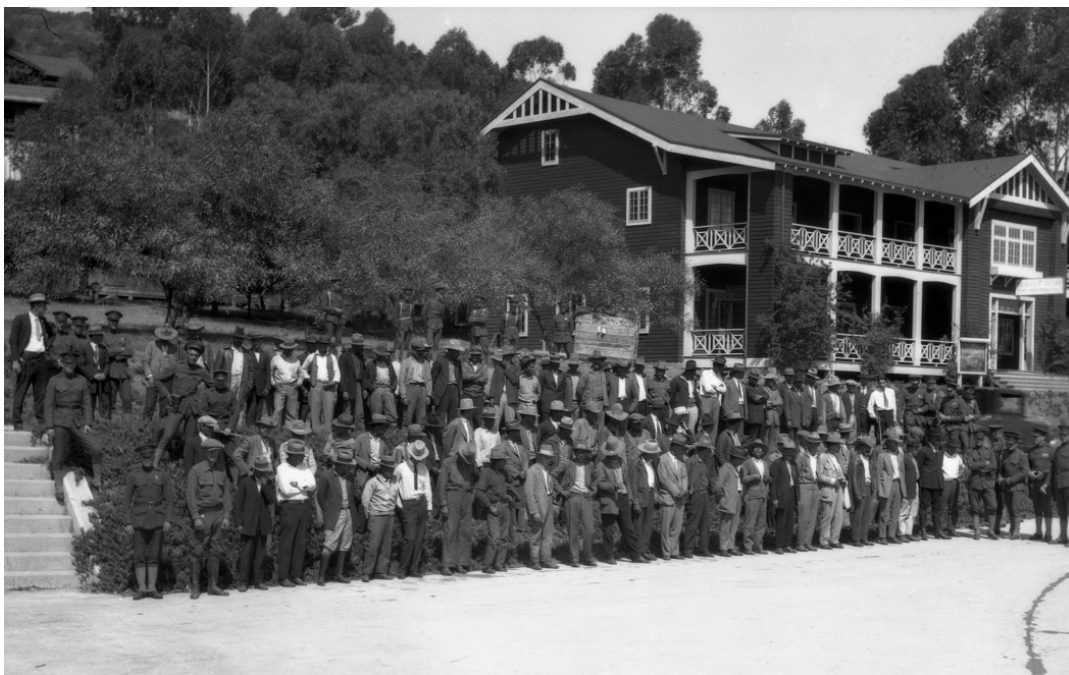
On Saturday evening, August 14, Estrada launched his revolution. A small caravan of trucks and cars left Los Angeles and headed south. Federal agents followed closely behind. The caravan stopped for the night in Santa Ana then slowly drove to Oceanside and inland to Escondido. By late Sunday they neared San Diego.

The Estrada men kept in touch with other by telephone. As their caravan lumbered south, a car would occasionally stop for calls to the general who had gone ahead and was monitoring the progress from a motel room in La Mesa. As soon as they left the phone booth a federal agent trailing the caravan would pick up the phone and call Edwin Atherton who was coordinating the Justice Department team from a room at the San Diego Hotel.

As the revolutionaries passed San Diego and headed inland, the agents guessed the conspirators target would be Tecate with a possible rendezvous point above the border. Atherton's team quickly drove toward the area. Near Engineer Springs, the agents saw a canvas covered truck on the side of the road.

The truck turned out to be one of the armor-plated vehicles commissioned in Los Angeles. The agents arrested several Mexicans with the truck and a handful of men hiding in the brush nearby. Within minutes the rest of Estrada's army began appearing. Amazed, Atherton's men easily collected the subdued conspirators as they arrived by car or truck. General Estrada, his personal staff, and hardware dealer Earle Parker were soon picked up in La Mesa.

The federal agents had captured 150 men without firing a shot. The revolutionaries were packed into an assortment of vehicles and driven to San Diego. When the county jail was found to be too small for Atherton's prizes, the convoy continued to Fort Rosecrans where the prisoners were temporarily housed in barracks. Two days later, Marine guards marched Estrada's army the six miles to the Marine Corps base on Barnett Avenue.



Captured rebels at Fort Rosecrans.

“Death against the wall” was the presumed fate for any of the men deported to Mexico. But there were no extraditions. Estrada and his soldiers were put on the train to Los Angeles in September, where the entire army was indicted in federal court for violating U.S. neutrality laws.

In the trials that followed Earle Parker would be the government’s star witness, providing the details of the conspiracy in return for his freedom. Sixty-two of Estrada’s men pleaded guilty and testified against their former comrades. In February 1927, only Estrada and twelve others were found guilty of crimes. The general received the heaviest sentence: one year and nine months.

Enrique Estrada served less than one year at the McNeil Island Federal Penitentiary in Puget Sound. After his release he tried civil engineering for a short time in Los Angeles before returning to Mexico. Remarkably, Estrada decided to re-enter public life. He represented Zacatecas for several years as a senator and became director general of Mexico’s national railway. A city in Zacatecas was renamed General Enrique Estrada shortly after his death in 1942.



At the Marine base, curious soldiers examined Estrada’s armored car. *San Diego Evening Tribune*.

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From “The Revolutionaries” in Richard Crawford, *San Diego Yesterday* (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2013) pgs. 83-86.