

“The Scalp Hunters”

When I was at San Diego, a great many complaints were made by citizens there, and persons arriving from the Gila, of a gang of lawless men who had established a ferry over the Colorado, where not only they practised the greatest extortions, but committed murders and robberies . . .

--Letter from General Persifer Smith to Capt. Irvin McDowell, May 25, 1850.

The Yuma Crossing at the junction of the Colorado and Gila Rivers was once a key overland gateway to California. When the Gold Rush began in 1848, thousands of emigrants hurried across the hot Sonora Desert and forded the quarter-mile wide Colorado River at Yuma on San Diego County's eastern border.

One of the first ferry landings at Yuma was run by Dr. Able Lincoln, a physician from New York, who had recently fought in the U.S.-Mexico War. Mustered out at Mexico City in 1848, Lincoln had started for home but turned west when he heard word of the gold strikes in California. The difficult crossing of the Colorado River convinced Lincoln that a ferry business could be as valuable as gold. He built a boat and began carrying gold seekers across the river in January 1850.

The ferry was lucrative success. Lincoln would write home to his parents in April, reporting he had ferried over 20,000 emigrants, all bound for the gold mines of California. “I have taken in over \$60, 000,” he boasted. “My price, \$1 per man, horse or mule \$2, the pack \$1, pack saddle 50 cents, saddle 25 cents.”

Strangely, despite his profits, Lincoln did not expect to stay at the crossing longer than six months and “perhaps not more than a month.” “I shall sell at the first opportunity,” he wrote, adding ominously, “This is an unsafe place to live in.”

Undisclosed in the letter to his family was the news that Lincoln had taken on an uninvited partner.

His name was John Joel Glanton. Like Lincoln, he was a veteran of the war with Mexico. After the war Glanton led a gang of “scalp hunters” along the borderlands—killing Apache Indians for a bounty offered by the governor of Chihuahua, Mexico: \$200 per scalp for a warrior, lesser amounts for women and children. When Glanton expanded his bloody trade by killing Mexicans as well as Indians, a bounty was offered for *his* scalp. The gang headed west and arrived at the Colorado only weeks after Lincoln started his ferry.

Glanton muscled in and took over Lincoln's operation. The price of passage across the river rose to \$10 and more, extracted at gun point when necessary. For the next three months, the Glanton gang robbed and terrorized emigrants at the river crossing.

Competing ferries downstream from Glanton never had a chance. Persifer Smith reported:

There were two others already there—one kept by the Youmas Indians, and the other by an Irishman. This gang took the Indians' boats and cut holes in the bottoms, so as to render them unserviceable; and a few days afterwards they

seized the Irishman and brought him up to their camp, where he was tied. The next morning the dead body of the Irishman, with his hands still tied, was found in the water, with a ball through his head.

Chief Caballo en Pelo of the Yumas called on Glanton to work out a deal. The Indian chief offered to give up ferrying men and baggage but would swim the animals across, “thus they would get along quietly.” Glanton refused the compromise and kicked the Yumas out of camp.

Furious with the insult, the Indians vowed to kill every white man at the crossing. But before they could attack, Glanton and several of his men went to San Diego to buy supplies. The Yumas bided their time.

In San Diego, the men banked \$8,000 of their profits with Judge Benjamin Hayes. They purchased their supplies, and then headed back to Yuma--not before one of Glanton’s men managed to provoke a fight with a soldier in town and shoot the man dead. David Brown was quickly arrested but with no jail in San Diego, he was placed under guard. Brown bribed the sentry and escaped to Los Angeles.

When Glanton and company returned to the ferry landing on April 21, the Indians were waiting. Around noon, as many of the men slept in the mid-day heat, several hundred Yumas rushed the camp and clubbed to death Glanton, Lincoln, and nine others. Three men chopping wood on the riverbank escaped by reaching a boat and rowing furiously downstream.

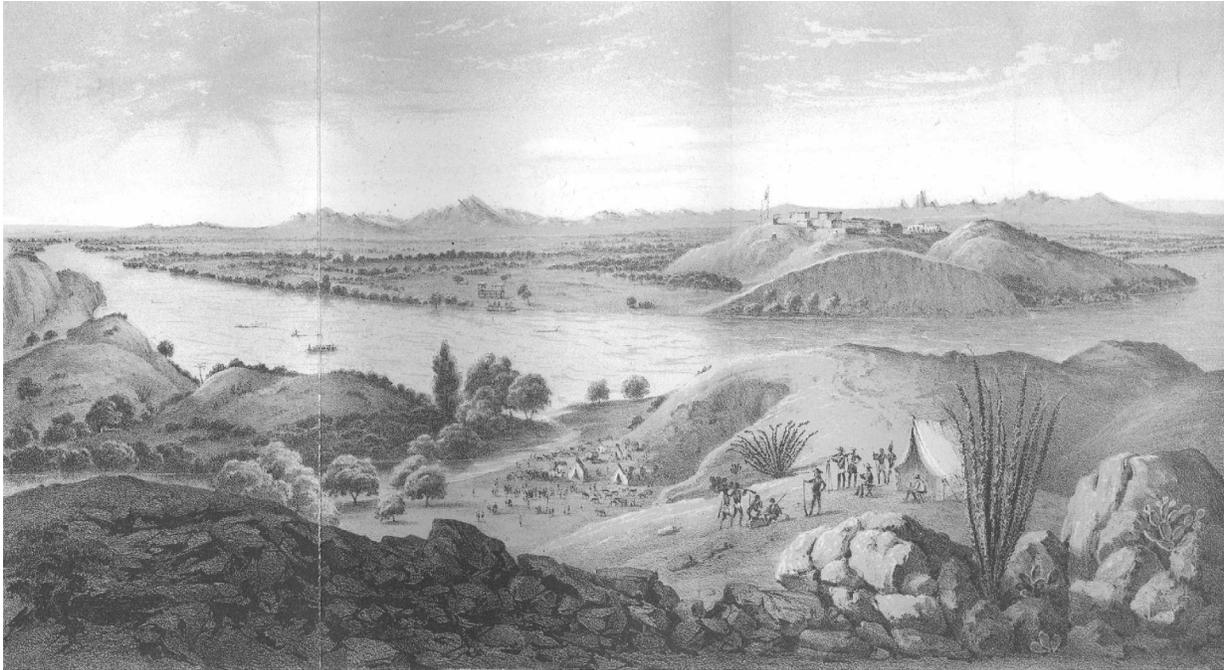
Reports of the massacre came when the three fugitives reached San Diego. Excited by the news, San Diegans held a public meeting and then petitioned the governor to send troops immediately to the Colorado “to punish a terrible murder committed on American citizens there.”

Governor Peter H. Burnett ordered the commander of the California State Militia to organize an armed volunteer force and proceed to “the ferry on the Colorado, and pursue such energetic measures as may be necessary to punish the Indians, bring them to terms, and protect the emigrants on their way to California.”

More than 100 recruits from Los Angeles and San Diego headed for the river under the command of General J. C. Morehead. “The Gila Expedition” would be an inglorious farce. Arriving at the river crossing four months after the massacre, the Indians had quieted down. General Morehead provoked a fight, anyway. After killing about twenty Yumas and destroying their crops, the militiamen declared victory and turned for home.

The Glanton episode did result in a permanent Army post on the Colorado, established in November 1850. Soldiers from Fort Yuma would protect emigrants at the river crossing for the next thirty years.

Perhaps the most interesting legacy of the Glanton gang would be the classic novel by Cormac McCarthy published in 1985. *Blood Meridian, or the Evening Redness in the West* tells the story of “the kid” and his experiences with scalp hunters led by the renegade soldier John Glanton, killed by Indians at a ferry landing on the Colorado River.



Sketch of the Yuma Crossing as it appeared in 1852. From John Russell Bartlett, *Personal Narrative of Explorations and Incidents* (New York: D. Appleton, 1854).

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