

Little House on the Prairie in Sonora: Borderlands, the Comcáac, and World History

In brief, this article attempts to undo the erasure of the presence of indigenous peoples by reflecting on the ways that the near complete absence of indigenous peoples in the well-known “Little House on the Prairie” television shows and books served to elide the massive assault against indigenous sovereignty in the second half of the 19th century by Euro-Americans in the borderlands/frontier regions of both the United States and Mexico. Making use of a short case study of the Comcáac of northwestern Mexico, it calls on those teaching world history to take indigenous sovereignty seriously and to emphasize the continued presence and importance of indigenous peoples as they fought against great odds to maintain access to their ancestral lands and cultures against this assault.

Existence by Resistance

As Indians, I think we've been told we're supposed to be dead and gone so many times that we've internalized it . . . In a society build atop our graves, survival has become an act of resistance

—Julian Brave Noisecat¹

The epigraph above tells you quite a bit about where this essay about the Comcáac—the Tiburón Island people in present-day Sonora, Mexico—will end up. Like Julian Brave Noisecat (a member of the Canim Lake Band of Secwepemc [Shuswap] Nation of central British Columbia, Canada), indigenous peoples across western North America have been incredibly resilient in the face of attempted genocide; ethnic cleansing; Indian removal; land, water, and resource thefts; and the erasure of their cultures. Indigenous peoples still exist, and that existence is the result of over 500 years of resistance. The epigraph, however, tells you little about why I think the confluence of self-reflection, historical memory, the process of researching and writing indigenous history, and the history of the Comcáac

serve as an excellent way to enter into broader discussions of a host of important issues that we tackle or should be tackling when we teach and learn about Latin America in world history courses. In this article, I will use the history of the Comcáac on the northwestern hinterlands of New Spain and then later Mexico to shift the usual discussion around the Spanish arrival in the Americas from one focusing on race mixing and cultural hybridity, which did occur in areas where sedentary indigenous empires held sway, to one focusing on how Spaniards (and later Mexicans) dealt with peoples they found to be barbaric.²

Let me begin with some context and then some anecdotes that I have found to often mirror our students' understanding of indigenous history and culture when they enter our classes. These are my memories, memories that I have spent years reflecting upon, relearning, reworking, and rewriting. They have shaped the way I think, even if only unconsciously (subconsciously?), and probably served at some level to spawn my interest in researching and writing about indigenous peoples even though I neither specifically trained nor originally set out to do so (and have veered off to other topics of interest on a regular basis). In fact, I was initially drawn to the study of post-revolutionary Mexico.

In post-revolutionary Mexico I perhaps naively thought that I would find, at least from the vantage point of state officials, a move away from the official recognition of indigenous people and communities as distinct polities. As the title of my first book *From Many, One* underlines, the Mexican Revolution's liberal project attempted to create a single nation of equal citizens out of a pre-colonial and colonial past of many Mexicos.³ But the liberal project (stretching from colonial times and culminating in the 1992 land reform opening up indigenous lands to national and international investors) was not generally a voluntary project for indigenous peoples. Instead, it undermined indigenous corporate and cultural identities (and access to their ancestral lands and resources) through *mestizaje* (racial and cultural mixing) and the promotion of a single national identity.⁴ What I found in both state and national archives while researching the U.S.-Mexico borderlands, however, was that there was a dual process going on: the liberal project *and* a continued de facto recognition by officials of indigenous polities. Indigenous people continued to identify and act as members of indigenous communities; state officials responded in kind. Indigenous peoples (both then and now) harnessed this continued recognition to push back against the liberal state's attempts to promote liberal "equality." The real story that I encountered was neither one of an all-powerful state imposing its will on indigenous peoples nor one of indigenous peoples' triumphant victory over an overzealous state. Even though the federal government was often more ephemeral than not on the fringes of post-revolutionary Mexico,⁵ local political forces stepped into the breach to advance the national liberal agenda as best they could. This view from the borderlands then, in the words of Pekka Hämäläinen and Samuel Truett, helps us to "see how imperfectly the fledgling heirs to empire imposed their modern logic of incorporation and control on those they claimed as citizens and subjects."⁶



Image 1: Locale of the Comcáac people. Map commissioned by the author, created by Tracy Ellen Smith, January 2021.

Absent Indigenous People Everywhere

There is the context. Here is one portion of my intellectual formation that helps explain why it was that, when I went to the archives of Mexico's Education Ministry to study the political centralization of the post-revolutionary Mexican government and stumbled across evidence of the state's negotiations with borderlands indigenous groups around the terms of their incorporation into the state's post-revolutionary liberal project, I immediately took notice and adjusted my research plans accordingly. When I was young, my family traveled across the United States by car to visit indigenous historical sites while on month-long vacations. I was also in the Boy Scouts and attended YMCA summer camps. These things came together to form my initial ideas about indigenous peoples in the continental United States. My family took me to a range of indigenous historical sites, some that I knew were indigenous at the time and others that I did not. We visited the ceremonial Indian effigy mounds scattered across my home state of Wisconsin, including my favorite state park, Aztalan. Sadly, it was named by early Euro-American settlers who incorrectly believed that it was an abandoned outpost of the Aztecs from central Mexico.⁷ We also visited the Black Hills and the Badlands in South Dakota. I don't recall remembering them as being indigenous lands . . . but clearly this must have been covered because we stayed at State and National Parks and went regularly on Park Ranger guided tours. The Park Rangers surely would have mentioned that these were Lakota (Sioux) and Cheyenne lands, despoiled by settlers after the discovery of gold in the 1870s. Or perhaps they didn't mention it as present-day park and national forest websites don't emphasize this even though one state park is named after George Armstrong Custer, he of the famous Battle of Little Bighorn (or as I recall learning of it, Custer's Last Stand), one engagement in the broader post-Civil War wars that the United States waged against indigenous peoples to remove them from their lands to make room for Euro-American settlers.⁸ My favorite place to visit of all was Mesa Verde. There we toured and actually climbed into the cliff dwellings of the Pueblo people. We learned about their reliance on corn and the wear patterns in their teeth from grinding lime-treated corn on stone metates.⁹ As a member of my local Boy Scouts troop, I did summer camps at Indian Mound Scout Reservation where there is an Indian mound right next to the dining hall. I actually preferred Camp Lazynski, an extension of Indian Mound, because it was unimproved and made me feel closer to nature.¹⁰ Prior to scouting I did YMCA summer camps at Minikani, which the website reminds me is based off either a Menomonee or Chippewa word. Either one would do as we were told that the camp location was named in honor of the original inhabitants of the land, but I couldn't for the life of me tell you which one, and it wasn't a point of emphasis when I was there.¹¹ Even though indigenous names were ubiquitous (and anger over indigenous fishing rights was a regular topic of conversation in my neighborhood), other than at the occasional Boy Scouts' sponsored "Pow Wows," I don't ever recall meeting a living indigenous person.

Because I met the indigenous people that I did meet only at Pow Wows, I had this idea, reinforced by popular culture, that indigenous peoples lived on reservations, still dressed in traditional Plains Indian ceremonial garb from the 19th century, and were one with nature. Little did I know that the vast majority of indigenous peoples in the United States lived off reservation,¹² and that the other things that I “knew” about them were either inaccurate or outright wrong. Nonetheless, I fell in love with this version of indigenous people, so much so that one summer when my mother served as a camp counselor in crafts at Indian Mound, I spent my time running around in moccasins and reiterating the Boy Scout nature camp memory trick that I had learned: Red Oaks had pointy leaves like Indian arrow tips and White Oaks had rounded tips like the White man’s bullets (as if indigenous people didn’t also fight with rifles). I say all of this not to ridicule the United States National Park Service, the YMCA, or the Boy Scouts (though the Scouts clearly have a history of serious problems).¹³ Instead, I offer you my memories because the wide-ranging presence of indigenous names but the near complete absence of actual indigenous peoples (as far as I knew) was probably not at all uncommon for people my age and served to take the hard edges off of the dispossession of land and resources that modern nation-states engaged in to the benefit of people like me.

“Little House on the Prairie”

A recent but seemingly unrelated roundtable in the *American Historical Review* tied this all together for me, reminding me of my love for the “Little House on the Prairie” television show and the ways that the book series—where the first book, *Little House in the Big Woods*, takes place in Wisconsin—was taken as a serious subject of study and a truthful rendition of history in my nearly all White suburban grade school.¹⁴ In both the book and the TV series indigenous peoples are mostly absent, and when they are present they serve as soon-to-be gone curiosities. And Euro-American pioneers were able, through the dint of their own hard work and ingenuity as well as the grace of God, to transform an “untouched” wilderness and turn it into the United States super power in which I currently live and work. As Caroline Fraser notes, Laura Ingalls Wilder’s dream was “to promote” an America where “courage, self-reliance, independence, integrity, and helpfulness” abounded. But Wilder’s daughter, Rose Wilder Lane, who heavily edited her mother’s work, turned her mother’s family’s life from one of repeated failures in the face of adversity on the frontier—a frontier that had already been largely cleared of indigenous people through organized violence—to a libertarian utopia in the style of Ayn Rand.¹⁵ As a child I didn’t know how to separate the utopian fiction from reality. In fact, I didn’t know that the reality of the “Little House on the Prairie” wasn’t true. The utopian fiction, however, was quite effective. The ubiquitous absence of indigenous peoples coupled with the focus on the domesticity of prairie women in their homesteads, served to elide the violence that was required to remove

indigenous peoples from their land as well as the difficulty that everyday people had in making good as pioneers in the absence of ample governmental support. In the words of Margaret Jacobs, this focus on women and homesteading “has ennobled pioneering as an act of benign settlement.”¹⁶

The Comcáac

Although the United States and Mexico in many ways have quite different histories, the ways in which colonialism was deployed at the edge of empire are stark reminders of the similarities between the two. I will argue here that the ways in which “Little House on the Prairie” elides the violence of indigenous removal during the second half of the 19th century in the United States makes for a good entry point into the history of Mexico during the same time period. The Dakota War of 1862 and Ulysses S. Grant’s post-Civil War Peace Policy, which unleashed the U.S. military on indigenous peoples who refused to settle on reservations, served to clear much of the region upon which Laura Ingalls Wilder and her family unsuccessfully (multiple times) homesteaded.¹⁷ Scott Manning Stevens, Director of the Native American and Indigenous Studies Program at Syracuse University, rightly reminds us that: “The frontier for the Native nations of North America was a place of frequent military conflicts and almost constant pressures from land-hungry settlers. More disturbing perhaps is the fact that most of these events, defining historical events to the Native nations involved, are all but forgotten by members of the majority culture.”¹⁸ The 19th century was a pivotal time for indigenous sovereignty in both the United States and Mexico, perhaps *the* pivotal time, as the last of the major territories of indigenous peoples were stripped from them.

The corrective that I am calling for here is that we need to not only teach about the European conquest of indigenous peoples in Mexico during the initial 16th century contact period when we focus on the fall of the Triple Alliance (i.e., the Aztecs),¹⁹ but also again in the second half of the 19th century, when, as Raphael Brewster Folsom reminds us, Mexico “began to approach native peoples in much the same spirit the United States did, expecting *stateless* native peoples either to assimilate to the mainstream or to disappear.”²⁰ The italics in Folsom’s quote is mine because it is worth highlighting that fact that indigenous peoples were not stateless except from the point of view of nation-states like Mexico and the United States. It is also worth noting that students and teachers alike can be deceived into believing in the supposed inevitability of the completion of the conquest of North America (or ignoring the fact that it had not yet occurred) by the maps to which they are routinely exposed that assume the eventual outcome of conflicts between the United States and Mexico and the indigenous nations they vied against. These maps use the eventual outlines of Mexico and the United States even before they existed in fact. Or they avoid any outlines at all, creating a vast open space without borders, symbolically

wiping the existing indigenous peoples from the face of the earth.²¹ More importantly, most people underestimate the power of indigenous nations and the length of time that they were able to not only resist Euro-American encroachment but also thrive as independent powers in their own right.²² This ability to resist and redirect external attempts at control should include the Comcáac, a small indigenous group that has lived and thrived along a once 150-mile-long by 4-mile-wide stretch of the littoral desert and islands of the Gulf of California in Sonora for as many as 2,000 years.

In his 1951 *Historia del Estado de Sonora*, Eduardo W. Villa, historian and former Secretario de la Dirección General de Educación Pública del Estado de Sonora (head of Sonora's Public Education system), argued that the Comcáac were unredeemable. He noted that their always small population had shrunk to almost nothing and that their once extensive ancestral lands had been reduced to only a few scattered ranchos. The Comcáac, he said, had only themselves to blame. Their degenerate cultural practices and warlike temperament had forced the government to repeatedly launch military campaigns against them. Even now they were in a state of "complete backwardness, semi-savage, living half-naked in miserable huts, feeding themselves with the products derived from their primitive form of hunting and fishing . . . In a word" they were a "savage tribe."²³ The sense that the Comcáac were unredeemable was not inevitable. The 20th century provides a plethora of examples. First, the Comcáac signed a peace compact with the Sonoran government in 1924 and agreed to attend state and federal schools in exchange for unfettered access and control of Tiburon Island while ceding regular access to a major portion of their ancestral homeland; state officials required further that the Comcáac interact with the government through a non-indigenous interlocutor.²⁴ Second, the Comcáac would negotiate a government-sanctioned fishing cooperative in 1938, agreeing to relocate from Kino Bay (which was growing in importance for modern Sonoran commerce) to Desemboque.²⁵ Finally, in 1971, the federal government set aside a small strip of Comcáac ancestral lands as an *ejido*, state-recognized communally owned and farmed land. In addition, the Comcáac established a second permanent settlement at Punta Chueca, a de facto recognition of the loss of their ancestral lands.²⁶ 20th century Mexico was, in general, one in which most indigenous peoples were viewed as redeemable and governmental officials acted in accordance with this belief.²⁷ As anthropologist and Comcáac expert Thomas Bowen told me "the change in attitude toward the [Comcáac] from brutal to redeemable" was "logical" because in the 19th century "there were still several armed conflicts, but by the 1920s that was all over and they were reduced to their lowest population level—not much of a threat at that point, I guess, hence redeemable. I suspect school texts are about the last thing to relinquish long-held myths—here in the US as well."²⁸ This helps explain the long life of the myth of the savageness of the Comcáac, which lasted a half a century after they posed a military threat to the Mexican state. It also served as a justification for Mexico's stripping them of the vast majority of their ancestral lands.

Of course, threats to the Comcáac over lands and resources did not begin in the 19th century. In fact, most scholars argue that the 1750s, which saw a “full-scale war” between the Spaniards and the Comcáac that lasted twenty years, was an early turning point. But the truth of the matter was that Comcáac resistance to Spanish encroachment on their ancestral lands resulted in a stalemate. It would not be until 1844 that the Spanish and then Mexican government would begin to launch a series of episodic military incursions (lasting until 1904) that decimated the Comcáac, reducing their population from approximately 2,000 to down to as few as 200 and leaving Comcáac sovereignty in tatters. These incursions included two 1844 invasions by federal troops. The first, under Captain Victor Araiza, killed 11 Comcáac and took four children hostage but failed to clear the Comcáac from their ancestral lands. The second, aimed at capturing all of the Comcáac on Tiburon Island and permanently resettling them was led by Colonel Francisco Andrade by land and Don Tomás Espence by sea. They officially took possession of Tiburon Island, burned 94 Comcáac homes, 97 Comcáac canoes, and captured and relocated 104 Comcáac families, some 384 Comcáac in total. The children were divided up amongst Sonoran families so that they could be raised in a “civilized” manner.²⁹ In 1904, Sonora’s governor, Rafael Izábal led “160 soldiers . . . 42 mounted Tohono O’odham auxiliaries and 40 cowboys” against the Comcáac (and some Yaqui Indians who had fled to Comcáac territory to seek refuge). The combined force killed 15 indigenous people, burned Comcáac canoes and campsites, and took a number of women and children captive. Governor Izábal called off the invasion when the Comcáac leader Juan Tomás agreed to “surrender and present [the Comcáac] to the Governor for relocation within six months.”³⁰ Like in the United States, however, the government was not the chief threat to the Comcáac; settlers who viewed the land as valuable and untapped and free for the taking were the main culprits. Or perhaps, I should say that the two worked in tandem, even if they did not closely coordinate their actions. Moreover, like in the United States, these settlers would tell stories about themselves that made their taking control of these lands as both inevitable and less violent than it was.

The Encinas Clan

In 1844, the very year that the government launched the two military expeditions against the Comcáac, brothers Pascual and Ignacio María Encinas—fleeing from Apache raids in eastern Sonora—established the hacienda San Francisco de Costa Rica in the Siete Cierras region west of Hermosillo, smack dab in the middle of the Comcáac’s ancestral lands. The two brothers and those that attached themselves to their hacienda drilled wells, built cattle pens, and cleared brush to plant crops. Even though these lands were not at the time under the control of Mexico, the government granted the lands to the Encinas brothers. And even before he got to know the Comcáac, Pascual Encinas viewed it as his duty to “befriend them in order to offer them protection and prevent conflict.” Once he got to know

them, Encinas granted the Comcáac access to local springs—water sources that he had appropriated from them—a chapel, and a school. He also introduced them to his *tienda de raya* [company store] in hopes of tying them to his estate via debt peonage. According to anthropologist William J. McGee, Encinas had the “idea that he could control the [Comcáac] and gradually assimilate them into civilized life,” resulting in new “relations between the Indians and the colonists.” Some, like Mashem, who served as a Comcáac interpreter, chose to attach themselves to the Encinas hacienda.

However, not surprisingly, the vast majority of the Comcáac mostly kept their distance. Nonetheless, they did weave the hunting of Encinas’s free range cattle into their routine. Only a decade after the Encinas clan established their hacienda, the “peace” broke down and the Encinas’s cowboys launched a 10-year war against the Comcáac, killing half of them and clearing them from more of their ancestral lands. The newly cleared land created space for the establishment of two additional ranches. Encinas’s grandson by marriage Roberto Thomson would later view the war as necessary for the “peaceful possession of his [great uncle and grandfather’s] ranch.” By 1860, according to McGee, the Comcáac were brought to heel, viewing Encinas “as a governor whose approval was required prior to” the Comcáac selecting who would be their chief.³¹ McGee was wrong about this (if the 1904 invasion is any indicator) but this vicious war, where the Encinas clan paid for Comcáac scalps, clearly ended Comcáac sovereignty over their ancestral lands.



Image 2: Mashem, Comcáac Interpreter, from J. W. Powell, Director, “Seventeenth Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology to the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, 1895-96, Part I,” Plate XVII, at [Annual_report_of_the_Bureau_of_American_Ethnology_to_the_Secretary_of_the_Smithsonian_Institution_\(1894\)_14579564](https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/annual_report_of_the_Bureau_of_American_Ethnology_to_the_Secretary_of_the_Smithsonian_Institution_(1894)_14579564). Public Domain (see <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/bibliography/37968#/summary>).

Los Pioneros

But our story of the similarities between the United States and Mexico isn't over. Although Mexico did not use images of pioneering women a la "Little House on the Prairie" to take the edge off of the violence used to secure indigenous lands, it did have its own means of eliding the truth. Roberto Thomson's *Pioneros de la Costa de Hermosillo, (La Hacienda de Costa Rica 1844)*, an obscure hagiography of the early pioneers who settled permanently on the Comcáac's ancestral homeland served and still serves the same purposes and often in quite similar ways, especially in terms of how settlement of the frontier of Mexico was remembered and memorialized. In the final section of this article, I want to focus on three things: 1) how *Pioneros* establishes a shared, imagined past that is "true" so as to take the edge off of the multiple forms of conquest and imperialism used by those who settled on the Comcáac's ancestral lands even as they acknowledged the removal and subjugation, often violent, of the Comcáac; 2) the ways in which *Pioneros* advanced the Comcáac's ancestral lands as worthless and empty prior to the arrival and permanent settlement of people of Euro-Americans, erasing the ways in which the Comcáac themselves had intervened in the local environment and reshaped it to serve their needs; and 3) the ways in which *Pioneros* exalts the blood, sweat, and tears through which those of Euro-American descent "earned" their right to Comcáac lands, something that (although not mentioned) the Comcáac themselves must clearly not have invested (according to this train of thought).

Let's start with the ways in which *Pioneros* promotes a shared, imagined past. *Pioneros* is a collection of testimonials put together by Roberto Thomson (but published posthumously), of Pascual Encinas, who with his brother Ignacio María established the Hacienda de San Francisco de la Costa Rica. Each of the selections is meant to glorify (mostly) Pascual and his brother by arguing that they created something great out of practically nothing. The brothers sought Comcáac lands in order to take advantage of increased exports in cattle to Arizona, which was undergoing a mining boom. The Encinas family first exported cattle through cattle drives, but then expanded their exports once the Guaymas-Nogales railroad was completed in 1882.³² The introduction to one chapter in *Pioneros* entitled "Testimonios del Dr. William J. McGee," is composed of portions of *Los Seris* which is in turn based on the field notes of renowned anthropologist M.J. McGee who visited the region to study the Comcáac in 1894 and 1895.³³ This chapter sets the tone for a shared, imagined past. The editor of *Pioneros* notes that the stories told about Pascual Encinas by McGee and the other chapters by Thomson, a number of which are his retelling stories told to him by others, are remarkably similar in spite of the fact that they were trained quite differently and had different purposes in telling their stories. According to the editor, McGee's chapter is "fundamentally scientific and based on his profound knowledge" while Thomson's chapters are based on lived experience and family lore. Thomson's approach is "sentimental, simple, and human."³⁴ The combination of portions of McGee's work with the more contemporary

stories collected by Thomson allows the reader, according to the editor, “to know the past of what is today a flourishing agricultural zone, the pride of Sonora,” bringing to light “the forgotten names” of Pascual and Ignacio María Encinas and their men and all that they did, at the risk of their lives, to turn a “virgin jungle of ironwood trees and mesquite on the Sonoran River delta” into the Hacienda of San Francisco de la Costa Rica.³⁵

In the end, it is worth noting that the shared, imagined past rescued from the dustbin of history requires a bit of fiction to make the story hang together. Notably, the great grandson of Ignacio María Encinas, Lic. Luis Encinas Johnson (Governor of Sonora, 1961–1967), the author of *Pioneros*’ introduction, notes that by the second half of the 20th century, all the hard work of his great grandfather and his great uncle came to naught due to the over drilling of wells and overuse of the aquifer by those who settled in the Hermosillo coast after its initial settlement. In sum, the Hermosillo coast was an untouched dust filled desert that required the arrival of the Encinas brothers to turn it into, in the words of Encinas Johnson, “one of the most important agricultural zones in Sonora and in Mexico itself.”³⁶ The fact that it can no longer be described in these terms is not the fault of the valiant “original” settlers of the land, the Encinas brothers.

As already alluded to, in order to advance the story of the Encinas brothers taming the wilderness and bringing progress to it without focusing on the violent removal of the Comcáac from their ancestral lands the contributors of *Pioneros* needed to depict the region as untouched and unimproved. In other words, the Comcáac were barbarians and savages because they failed to improve their ancestral lands. This is untrue. Ethnobotanists have demonstrated the ways in which the Comcáac had altered the region to suite their purposes prior to the arrival of the Encinas brothers. Furthermore, the Encinas brothers and the authors of *Pioneros* had ample contemporary evidence, such as the Comcáac incorporating the hunting of the cattle of ranchers into their subsistence patterns to strike down this shibboleth.³⁷ But they elected not to notice it.

Nearly every contribution to *Pioneros* depicts the region as untouched. Encinas Johnson calls it “virgin and rugged . . . inhospitable and dangerous.”³⁸ Gastón Cano Avila, founding member of the Society of Sonoran History, argued that the Encinas brothers “opened up the land” at a great cost to themselves in order to create a ranching and agricultural trading center in the midst of a “spiny desert.”³⁹ Thomson himself argues that the Encinas brothers’ arrival marked the “first time in history” that oxen tread on the “virgin jungle . . . situated in the midst of [Comcáac] territory.” Importantly, when the caravan was brought to a stop, Pascual Encinas is said to have said, “Here is where, with the favor of God, we will form the hacienda that one day will be converted into the center of a prosperous and renowned agricultural region” and that it would be named “SAN FRANCISCO DE LA COSTA RICA.”⁴⁰ The naming and claiming of the region would be only the first step in its passing from an untouched virgin landscape to a prosperous economic center as the result of the Encinas’s hard work . . . a topic that we turn to next.

Although the contributors to *Pioneros* recognize the presence of the Comcáac and in spite of the fact that McGee argues that it was the Encinas's settlement on Comcáac lands that began the dispossession of the Comcáac from their ancestral lands, the Comcáac's presence seems to have no effect on the lands themselves. The contributors to *Pioneros* argue that this was not just the result of God's blessing but also the hard work—the blood, sweat, and tears—that the Encinas clan (and their often unnamed followers) engaged in. They also mention, at times, the “military discipline” that the Encinas clan had over those attached to their hacienda, a discipline that made the hacienda successful, but also that (unspokenly) separated the barbarous Comcáac from the newly arrived rational settlers.⁴¹ I should note here that Pascual Encinas is portrayed as being much more lenient in his interactions with the Comcáac, who were viewed as needing a different approach to make them amenable to settling on the hacienda and subjugating themselves to Pascual's authority.⁴² This depiction, of course, fails to account for the extermination campaign that Pascual led between 1855 and 1865 that nearly decimated the Comcáac. Encinas Johnson, perhaps because he was a politician and owed his political rise to regional elites, is the most inclusive in who he includes among those deserving praise for their hard work. He mentions, for example, that although many of the settler's names have been forgotten, they should include one Alfredo Noriega as well as a Mr. Morgan. He also mentions that a group of Italian families—the Ciscomani, Clerici, Baranzini, Cecco, Prandini, and Giottonini—settled in the region, worked hard to prosper, and, in time, “formed Mexican families.” As such, the Italian families serve as a model for the Comcáac, who also could have settled down permanently and formed Mexican families of their own had they only assimilated themselves into Mexican society.⁴³ Thomson himself is probably the most glowing in his praise and his detailed description of the nature of the hard work required by the Encinas clan to be successful, so successful that “the fame of Costa Rica” reached into the United States where it was noticed by his father, who migrated to Mexico to sign a labor contract to attach himself to the hacienda.⁴⁴

Conclusion

Dr. William J. McGee, he of the scientific disposition, like many anthropologists of his time, believed that the Comcáac were, as a result of their backwardness, destined to be absorbed by mainstream Mexican society or to die off. He praised Pascual Encinas as a harbinger of modernization, “an intrepid pioneer,” and the first person ever able to open up the Comcáac lands to permanent settlement.⁴⁵ This erasure of the Comcáac brought about not by their barbarity and savageness but rather by a concerted effort by New Spain, Mexico, and local settlers takes us back to the beginning of this essay. When we teach world history, we show great interest in and recognition of historical (even ancient) indigenous peoples. Their past presence and unique cultural practices are remembered through institutions, such as the

Comcáac Museum, which sits along a broad stretch of shoreline in Kino Bay that is now dedicated to local commerce and the tourist industry.⁴⁶ Often, these institutions, like the focus on historical indigenous peoples in our history books and classes, coupled with the apparent absence of present-day indigenous peoples makes it easy to forget that they are still here, still fighting to preserve their language and their culture. The Comcáac's population has rebounded from their nadir of about 200 people in the 1920s to approximately 1,000 today. In addition, they are still a distinct people with their own language, Cmiique iitom, an ancient language that predates the arrival of the predecessors of the Aztecs and that continues to tie them to their ancestral lands and local environment.⁴⁷ As they did in the past, they still work together to maintain their distinct (though changing) culture, and they still negotiate with the Mexican government and other non-Comcáac peoples through tribal bodies and processes; in other words, as a distinct indigenous people.⁴⁸ They may have retreated from the breadth of their ancestral lands under the pressure of a series of vicious assaults that reached its peak in the late 19th century, but through their resistance they were able to carve out a few remaining footholds—especially in Desemboque de los Seris and Punta Chueca—where they continue to advance their own political, social, and cultural agendas.

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NOTES

¹ Julian Brave Noisecat, "Indian Country: A Postapocalyptic People," *The Nation*, June 15/22, 2020, 30–33 (quote on 31).

² David J. Weber, *Bárbaros: Spaniards and Their Savages in the Age of Enlightenment* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005); Matthew Babcock notes that it was actually Spanish policies that led the Apaches and other indigenous groups to adopt raiding, the very thing that the Spanish deemed barbaric, as a means of livelihood. See Babcock, *Apa che Adaptation to Hispanic Rule* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 1–18.

³ Andrae M. Marak, *From Many, One: Indians, Peasants, Borders, and Education in Callista Mexico, 1924–1935* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2009). For an explanation of the idea of many political and cultural Mexicos, see Lesley Byrd Simpson, *Many Mexicos* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 4th and Silver Anniversary Edition, 1960).

⁴ Florencia Mallon, “Indigenous Peoples and Nation-States in Spanish America, 1780–2000,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Latin American History*, ed. José C. Moya (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 282–289; Rachel St. John, *Line in the Sand: A History of the Western U.S.-Mexico Border* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 8; Emilio Kourí, “Interpreting the Expropriation of Indian Pueblo Lands in Porfirian Mexico: the Unexamined Legacies of Andrés Molina Enríquez,” *Hispanic American Historical Review* 82, (February 2002), 69–117; Robert H. Holden, *Mexico and the Survey of Public Lands: The Management of Modernization, 1876–1911* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1994); and Andrae Marak and Gary Van Valen, “Introduction: Transnationalism of the North American West,” *Transnational Indians in the North American West*, eds. Clarissa Confer, Andrae Marak, and Laura Tuennerman (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2015), 1–17.

⁵ Stephen E. Lewis, *Ambivalent Revolution: Forging State and Nation in Chiapas, 1910–1945* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005), 218; Alexander Dawson, *Indian and Nation in Revolutionary Mexico* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2004), xv; Alan Knight, “Cardenismo: Juggernaut or Jalopy?” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 26 (February 1994), 73–107.

⁶ Pekka Hämäläinen and Samuel Truett, “On Borders,” *The Journal of American History* 98 (September 2011), 359.

⁷ Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, “Aztalan,” at <https://dnr.wisconsin.gov/topic/parks/aztalan>. Accessed on August 28, 2020.

⁸ I am reminded by colleagues that the United States National Park Service actually does a much better job of incorporating indigenous history and viewpoints into their tours now than they did 30 or 40 years ago. United States Division of Agriculture, “Black Hills National Forest,” at <https://www.fs.usda.gov/blackhills>. Accessed on August 29, 2020; Black Hills & Badlands Tourism Association, “Black Hills & Badlands SD,” at <https://www.blackhillsbadlands.com/>. Accessed on August 29, 2020; United States National Park Service, “Badlands National Park,” at <https://www.nps.gov/badl/index.htm>. Accessed on August 29, 2020; and South Dakota Game, Fish, & Parks, “Custer State Park,” at <https://gfp.sd.gov/parks/detail/custer-state-park/>. Accessed on August 29, 2020.

⁹ United States National Park Service, “Mesa Verde National Park,” <https://www.nps.gov/meve/index.htm>. Accessed on August 29, 2020.

¹⁰ Three Harbors Council Boy Scouts of America, “Indian Mound Reservation,” at <https://www.threeharborsscouting.org/camping/indian-mound-scout-reservation/61340>. Accessed on August 29, 2020

¹¹ YMCA, “YMCA Camp Minikani,” at <https://www.minikani.org/>. Accessed on August 29, 2020.

¹² David R.M. Beck and Rosalyn R. Lapier, “American Indians Moving to Cities,” in *Why You Can’t Teach United States History without American Indians*, eds. Susan Sleeper-Smith, Juliana Barr, Jean M. O’Brien, Nancy Shoemaker, and Scott Manning Stevens (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 210–226.

¹³ For more on the ways in which the Boy Scouts of America “used a structured engagement with nature” to promote modern White manhood, see Benjamin René Jordan, *Modern Manhood and the Boy Scouts of America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 2 and 126.

¹⁴ Abosede George, Clive Glaser, Margaret D. Jacobs, Chitra Joshi, Emily Marker, Alexandra Walsham, Wang Zheng, and Bernd Weisbrod, “AHR Conversation: Each Generation Writes Its Own History of Generations,” *American Historical Review*, Vol. 123, no. 5 (December 2018), 1505–1546; Laura Ingalls Wilder, *Little House in the Big Woods* (New York: Harper Trophy, 1971 [1932]).

¹⁵ Caroline Fraser, *Prairie Dreams: The American Dreams of Laura Ingalls Wilder* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2018), 509.

¹⁶ For more on the ways in which gender serves as a means of softening the violence of colonialism, see Jacobs, “AHR Conversation: Each Generation Writes Its Own History of Generations,” 1530. See also Cynthia Culver Prescott, *Pioneer Mother Monuments: Constructing Cultural Memory* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2019).

¹⁷ Richard White, *The Republic for Which It Stands: The United States during Reconstruction and the Gilded Age, 1865–1896* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 290–305. See also, Greg Grandin, *The End of the Myth: From the Frontier to the Border Wall in the Mind of America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2019), 68–82.

¹⁸ Scott Manning Stevens, “American Indians and the Civil War,” in *Why You Can’t Teach United States History without American Indians*, Susan Sleeper-Smith, Juliana Barr, Jean M. O’Brien, Nancy Shoemaker, and Scott Manning Stevens, eds. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 145–146.

¹⁹ Matthew Restall, *Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Charles Gibson, *The Aztecs Under Spanish Rule: A History of the Indians of the Valley of Mexico, 1519–1810* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1964); and James Lockhart, *The Nahuas After the Conquest: A Social and Cultural History of the Indians of Central Mexico, Sixteenth Through Eighteenth Century* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992).

²⁰ Raphael Brewster Folsom, *The Yaquis and the Empire: Violence, Spanish Imperial Power, and Native Resilience in Colonial Mexico* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 210 (the italics are mine).

²¹ Juliana Barr, “Borders and Borderlands,” in *Why You Can’t Teach United States History without American Indians*, Susan Sleeper-Smith, Juliana Barr, Jean M. O’Brien, Nancy Shoemaker, and Scott Manning Stevens, eds. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 9–25, especially 22; Daniel Immerwahr, *How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019), 3–19; and Anne F. Hyde, *Empires, Nations, and Families: A History of the North American West, 1800–1860* (Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press, 2011), 15–18.

²² Pekka Hämäläinen, *The Comanche Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008); and Brian DeLay, *War of a Thousand Deserts: Indian Raids and the U.S.-Mexican War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009); Lance R. Blyth, *Chiricahua and Janos: Communities of Violence in the Southwestern Borderlands, 1680–1880* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012); Maurice Crandall, *These People Have Always Been a Republic: Indigenous Electorates in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands, 1598–1912* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019); John Kenneth Turner, *Barbarous Mexico* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1969 [1909]); and Terry Rugeley, *Yucatan’s Maya Peasantry and the Origins of the Caste War* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996).

²³ Eduardo W. Villa, *Historia del Estado de Sonora*, 2nd ed. (Hermosillo: Editorial Sonora, 1951), 56.

²⁴ Convento Celebrado entre el Gobierno del Estado y el Gobernador de los Seris, 4 August 1925, *Archivo Historico General del Estado de Sonora*, Tribus/Seris, Tomo 3814.

²⁵ Edward H. Spicer, *Cycles of Conquest: The Impact of Spain, Mexico, and the United States on the Indians of the Southwest, 1533–1960* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1962), 116; and Edwards H. Davis and E. Yale Dawson, “The Savage Seris of Sonora – II,” *The Scientific Monthly*, Vol 60, no. 4 (1945), 267–268.

²⁶ Thomas Bowen, “Seri,” *Handbook of North American Indians*, Vol. 10, Southwest, ed. Alfonso Ortiz, (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institute, 1983), 231–236.

²⁷ Alexander Dawson, *Indian and Nation in Revolutionary Mexico* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2004), xix–xx; Alexander Dawson, “From Models for the Nation to Model Citizens: Indigenismo and the ‘Revindication’ of the Mexican Indian, 1920–1940,” *Journal of Latin American Studies*, Vol. 30, no. 2 (May 1998), 279–308; and Claudio Lomnitz, *Deep Mexico, Silent Mexico: An Anthropology of Nationalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 73–78.

²⁸ Thomas Bowen, personal correspondence, 5 January 2015.

²⁹ Thomas Bowen and Mary B. Moser, “Seri,” *Encyclopedia of World Cultures*, David Levinson, Editor-in-Chief, *Middle America and the Caribbean*, Vol. 8, James W. Dow, Editor, and Robert B. Kemper, Associate Editor (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1995), 232–233; Bowen, “Seri,” 232–234; and W.J. McGee, *The Seri Indians of Bahia Kino and Sonora, Mexico: Bureau of American Ethnology, 17th Annual Report, 1895–1896* (Glorieta, New Mexico: The Rio Grande Press, Inc., 1971), 88–91. The Comcáac adults would, over time, slip away from their resettlement and back to their ancestral lands . . . without their children.

³⁰ Thomas Bowen, *Unknown Island: Seri Indians, Europeans, and San Esteban Island in the Gulf of California* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2000), 255–256.

³¹ Luis Encinas Johnson, “Presentación,” in *Pioneros de la Costa de Hermosillo (La Hacienda de Costa Rica 1844)*, ed. Roberto Thomson (Hermosillo, Sonora: Artes Gráficas y Editoriales Yescas, S.A., 1989), 9–10; Roberto Thomson, “La Hacienda de Costa Rica,” in *Pioneros*, 32–37; William J. McGee, “Testimonios del Dr. William J. McGee,” in *Pioneros*, 69–73; Roberto Thomson, “La Sequia de 1877,” in *Pioneros*, 43–47; Bowen, “Seri,” 233–234; Roberto Thomson as told to H.H. Dunn, “Sons of the Stone Age: The Seri – Modern Mexico’s Most Savage Indians,” *Travel*, Vol. 56 (April 1931), 43.

³² Consuelo Boyd, “Twenty Years to Nogales: The Building of the Guaymas-Nogales Railroad,” *The Journal of Arizona History*, Vol. 22, no. 3 (Autumn 1981), 295.

³³ Thomson drew from W.J. McGee, *Los Seris: Sonora, Mexico* (Mexico City: Instituto Nacional Indigenista, 1980); see also, WJ McGee, *Trails to Tiburón: The 1894 and 1895 Field Diaries of WJ McGee*, transcribed by Hazel McFeely Fontana, Annotated and with an Introduction by Bernard L. Fontana (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2000 [1895]).

³⁴ Thomson, *Pioneros*, 67.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 68.

³⁶ Luis Encinas Johnson, *Pioneros*, 10–12.

³⁷ Thomas E. Sheridan, “Human Ecology of the Sonoran Desert,” in *A Natural History of the Sonoran Desert*, 2nd ed. (Tucson: Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum Press, 2015), 101–112; Andrae M. Marak, *From Many, One: Indians, Peasants, Borders, and Education in Callista Mexico, 1924–1935* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2009), Chapter 4. See also Paul Jentz, *Seven Myths of Native American History* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2018), Chapter 3.

³⁸ Encinas Johnson, *Pioneros*, 9–10.

³⁹ Gastón Cano Avila, *Pioneros*, 18.

⁴⁰ Thomson, *Pioneros*, 29.

⁴¹ Cano Avila, *Pioneros*, 19.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 23.

⁴³ Encinas Johnson, *Pioneros*, 10–11.

⁴⁴ Thomson, *Pioneros*, 30–31.

⁴⁵ McGee, *Pioneros*, 68–69.

⁴⁶ Instituto Sonorense de Cultura, “Museo Comcáac,” at <http://isc.gob.mx/devel/espacios/museo-comcaac/>. Accessed on October 23, 2020.

⁴⁷ Natalia Martínez-Tagüena and Luz Alicia Torres Cubillas, “Walking the desert, paddling the sea: Comcaac mobility in time,” *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology*, Vol. 49 (March 2018), 146–160; Natalia Martínez-Tagüena and Rodrigo F. Rentería-Valencia, “Social Cohesion and Environmental Governance Among the Comcaac of Norther Mexico,” in *Stewardship of Future Drylands and Climate Change in the Global South: Challenges and Opportunities for the Agenda 2030*, Simone Lucatello, Elisabeth Huber-Sannwald, Ileana Espejel, and Natalia Martínez-Tagüena, eds. (New York: Springer International Publishing, 2019), 321–335.

⁴⁸ Here I provide just two of many potential examples of current Comcáac interactions with non-Comcáac. See, for example, the list of Comcáac collaborators, organized by tribal governors and the Traditional Council of Elders in Gary Paul Nabhan, *Singing the Turtles to Sea: The Comcáac (Seri) Art and Science of Reptiles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003) and the Comcáac coordination with the National Commission of Natural Protected Areas, “The Comcáac Indigenous Community—National Commission of Natural Protected Areas (Mexico),” at <https://natureforall.global/success-stories/2017/1/20/the-comcaac-indigenous-community-seris-comisin-nacional-de-reas-naturales-protegidas-conanp>. Accessed on January 4, 2021.