

Melinda Rankin (1811-1888)

Melinda Rankin was born in Littleton, New Hampshire on March 21, 1811. She attended and taught school in New Hampshire until the 1840s when she, like many people from the New England area of the United States, moved westward.¹ From that time on and over the course of the next forty years, she engaged in teaching and missionary work for the Protestant church. As a missionary, she embarked on a series of travels throughout the Southern United States, the Rio Grande region, and Mexico that changed not only her life, but also the lives of those whom her missionary work touched. Melinda is considered to hold the “distinction of being the first [Protestant] missionary to establish lasting work in Mexico.”²

In 1840 Melinda learned about the need for teachers in the Mississippi Valley. Not only were teachers needed in this area due to the influx of immigrants, but the Protestant church sent out a call for missionaries to come to the Mississippi Valley to help spread Protestantism and halt the rapidly growing Roman Catholicism, which was spreading because many of the new European immigrants to the region were Catholic.³

Because of her upbringing as a white-Protestant from the eastern United States, Melinda was anti-Catholic. Protestantism originated in the Protestant Reformation which began in the 16th Century in Europe. The main goal of this movement was to reform the beliefs and practices of the Catholic Church. Many in Europe believed that the Catholic Church had been corrupted by greedy religious officials and that the church had digressed from the true teachings of God. This movement gained popularity and spread throughout many countries in Europe which threatened the Catholic Church’s power and influence.⁴ Protestantism soon spread to the newly colonized United States because many of those early colonists were Protestants who came to escape religious persecution by Catholics or other Protestants. By the 1840s and 1850s when immigration of Catholics from Europe began to increase, many people who were descendants of those early colonists and considered themselves “natives” of the United States opposed this influx of Catholic immigrants and lashed out against them. The Protestant church in the U.S. also sent missionaries to newly settled regions of the U.S. to help spread Protestantism and halt the spread of Catholicism in reaction to this new surge of Catholic immigration.⁵

On her way to Mississippi she traveled by way of Kentucky where she stayed for two years and established several schools. She then continued on to Mississippi and Alabama in 1842 where she remained for about five years establishing several schools and worked to educate the poor.⁶ Later in life she wrote that “had public sentiment been my guide some forty years ago, I should probably have settled down in my New England home with the belief that it was highly improper for me to undertake any signal enterprise

¹ John C. Rayburn. *Melinda Rankin, Crusader of the Rio Grande*, October 1961. McLean County Museum of History Archives, 1

² Deborah Baldwin. *Protestants and the Mexican Revolution: Missionaries, Ministers, and Social Change*. (Urbana: The University of Illinois Press, 1990) 20

³ Melinda Rankin. *Twenty Years Among the Mexicans: A Narrative of Missionary Labor*. (Cincinnati: Central Book Concern, 1881) 20

⁴ “The Protestant Reformation,” <http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h1136.html>

⁵ Michael Streich, “Immigration and Catholicism in the 1800s,” <http://www.suite101.com/content/immigration-and-catholicism-in-the-1800s-a171359>

⁶ “Death of a Good Woman,” *The Daily Pantagraph*, December 7, 1888

for the advancement for Christ's kingdom.”⁷ However she followed her heart and began her work to help spread the teachings of the church.

While Melinda was in Mississippi, the Mexican-American War broke out on April 25, 1846. The Mexican-American War began because of the United States' annexation of Texas which had previously been a territory of Mexico. A large number of citizens of the U.S. had migrated to Texas beginning in the 1820s. These Americans were attracted to the territory of Texas because of the abundance of cheap and undeveloped land. In 1824 after the new Mexican Republic adopted a constitution, these American immigrants agreed to swear a “loyalty oath to the new nation and professed to be” Catholic (which was the only religion allowed in Mexico at the time). Another stipulation of Mexico allowing the immigrants from the United States to move into their territory was that they would discontinue their practice of slavery which had been outlawed by the Mexican Constitution of 1824. The settlers agreed to follow these stipulations in order to receive generous land grants from Mexico. However, the settlers did not hold up their end of the agreement and would not abide by the stipulations of the Mexican government to which they had agreed. In particular, many settlers would not free their slaves or discontinue the slave trade within the territory. Many of these settlers may have viewed their agreement to the above stipulations as a formality since they believed that the U.S. government would eventually purchase the territory from Mexico and they would be U.S. citizens again.⁸

Soon these immigrants outnumbered the native Mexicans living in the territory. The Americans who had moved to Texas continued to clash against the Mexican government and the stipulations that were created for them to settle in Texas. They declared their independence from Mexico in 1836 forming the independent state of Texas. After declaring their independence from Mexico (which Mexico did not recognize) many Texans expressed a desire to join the United States and delegates were sent to approach the U.S. government. This was a hot button issue with many Americans against the idea of annexing Texas. However in 1845 the U.S. government finally approved the annexation of Texas and sent Texas terms for being admitted as a state. Texas agreed to those terms and became the 28th state on December 29, 1845. The Mexican government was infuriated by this action. They refused to recognize Texas' independence and treated them as a rebellious state which needed to be retaken. Mexico also stated that the U.S. had no right to annex that territory in the first place and war broke out less than five months after Texas received its statehood.⁹ After fifteen months of fighting, a temporary armistice was agreed upon by the U.S. and Mexican governments. After almost a month of deliberating, the Mexican government rejected the U.S. delegations terms for peace and hostilities resumed. After another week of fighting, U.S. forces captured Mexico City, the capital of Mexico, which brought an end to the War. After several more months of negotiations, in February, 1848 the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was approved by both sides. Mexico officially surrendered Texas and the U.S. also purchased two additional territories from Mexico, New Mexico and

⁷ Rankin, 2

⁸ Margaret Swett Henson. “Anglo American Colonization,” The Texas State Historical Association. <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/uma01>

⁹ Drew VandeCreek, “The Mexican American War,” Northern Illinois University Library, <http://dig.lib.niu.edu/mexicanwar/origins.html>

California.¹⁰ However, the Mexican-American War would create a lasting distrust of Americans by Mexicans because many Mexicans lived with the fear that the U.S. might try to invade Mexico again. This fear would come to affect Melinda's missionary work in the future.

When the War ended on February 2, 1848 Melinda came in contact with soldiers returning to Mississippi from the War. From these soldiers she learned about "the moral destitution prevailing among the people of Mexico." Mexico was a heavily Roman Catholic country thanks to the fact that it was conquered by Spain hundreds of years earlier. Melinda felt it was her obligation as a Protestant-Christian woman to bring "a pure Christianity" and "the light of the Bible" to the people of Mexico.¹¹ At that time the Mexican Constitution did not allow religious freedom and things were still very chaotic in Mexico after the War.¹² In light of this, she decided to begin her work in Texas (which in her opinion was equally in need of the word of the Lord) and eventually moved to Mexico when the conditions were right.¹³

She left Vicksburg, Mississippi by herself taking passage on a small river steamer bound for Texas. While traveling, she became acquainted with a man who was bound for Huntsville, Texas. He had traveled to Washington D.C. to try and find a female teacher for the Female Academy at Huntsville, but had been unsuccessful. When Melinda told the man that she was a teacher and bound for Texas, he offered her the position on the condition that she would help him care for his young niece who was also traveling with him. Rankin agreed and they continued on to Natchitoches, Louisiana where they then traveled overland by horse carriage to Huntsville.¹⁴ After she began teaching in Huntsville, she also began writing for some religious and educational periodicals. She wrote a small publication in 1850 called *Texas, 1850*. In that book she wrote about the "great need of evangelical laborers in Texas, not only on its own account, but on account of its prospective influence over Mexico."¹⁵ It is clear that she was even more anxious to move closer to Mexico and begin her missionary work with the Mexican people. She remained in Huntsville for two more years building more schools. She then learned from a Presbyterian minister, Reverend Daniel Baker, that the area around Roma, Texas (where he had just returned from) on the Rio Grande was a favorable area for the spread of Protestantism.¹⁶

In May of 1852 Rankin left Huntsville and decided to go to Brownsville, Texas. Brownsville was right across the Rio Grande from Matamoros, Mexico which was as close to Mexico as she could get for the time being. Brownsville also had a large population of Mexicans living there since the territory between the Rio Grande and the Nueces Rivers was now under the control of the U.S. (having been taken away from Mexico during the previous war). She felt that this would be a start to her work with the Mexican people until the day when she could cross into Mexico to spread

¹⁰ U.S. Department of the State, "Manifest Destiny III: Guadalupe-Hidalgo, Nicholas Trist, and the American Southwest," http://future.state.gov/when/timeline/1830_timeline/mexam_treaty.html

¹¹ Rankin, 22-23

¹² Rayburn, 2-3

¹³ Rankin, 24

¹⁴ Rankin, 26-30

¹⁵ Rankin, 33

¹⁶ Rankin, 34

Protestantism.¹⁷ She traveled via Jefferson, Texas to New Orleans and then took passage via a steamer across the Gulf of Mexico to Brazos Santiago, crossing the Laguna Madre to Point Isabel, then by stage coach across land to Brownsville.¹⁸

When she arrived in Brownsville, there was no hotel in town so Melinda moved in with a German woman until she found a suitable place to live. She quickly found a two room building that was available to rent which served as both a school and her home. As soon as the school opened, five girls immediately enrolled. Before long, her school had expanded to enroll thirty or forty students. In addition to teaching the traditional academic subjects of reading, writing, and arithmetic, Rankin also taught the Bible on a regular basis. On top of her teaching, she also actively distributed Bibles and religious literature to the Spanish speaking residents of Brownsville and even managed to send some of these things across the river to Mexico.

Melinda's first few months in Brownsville were tense. There was a constant threat of violence breaking out and spilling over the U.S.-Mexican border due to the general upheaval of the Mexican government. The fact which troubled her most was that a man whom she referred to as General Carvajal (an unsuccessful Mexican revolutionary who had fled Matamoros), had taken up residence across the street from her home. Carvajal was friendly to Melinda and volunteered his men to guard her home seeing as she was a single woman living alone. But she lived in constant fear that if Carvajal was attacked, her house would be also and it would probably have been destroyed in the process.¹⁹

In the winter of 1852 Melinda was forced to close her school. This was due to a group of French Catholic missionaries who had arrived in Brownsville with plans to build a large convent. She knew that her facilities and resources could not compare to what the Catholic missionaries had brought with them so she decided to return to New Orleans to raise money to build better facilities. Unfortunately she collected little money during the month she spent in New Orleans. She then decided to make her way back to the East Coast where she believed there would be better prospects for soliciting money for her cause. On March 4, 1853 she arrived in Philadelphia where the Presbyterian Board of Education granted her \$500, (about \$14,000 in today's money) for the project. While on the East Coast, she also collected \$500 in Boston. She then continued to collect money on the way back to Texas as well. Although the cities of Cincinnati and Louisville were largely non-responsive, she found Natchez, Mississippi to be financially generous, and by the time she reached Texas in April 1854, she had collected \$2,500, (about \$70,000 in today's money).²⁰

When she returned to Brownsville by May 3rd of that year, she bought a lot and immediately began to construct a new school which was to be called the Rio Grande Female Institute. This school was associated with the Presbyterian Church of the United States and opened in the fall of 1854. Melinda's school had one major advantage over the existing school run by the Catholic missionaries; her school offered an English course which Spanish-speaking parents of the area recognized as essential for their children to learn now that Texas was a part of the United States. In 1855 Melinda's sister Harriet

¹⁷ Rankin, 38

¹⁸ Rankin, 34-35

¹⁹ Rayburn, 5

²⁰ Rayburn, 6-7

Rankin Kimball joined her in Texas and served as an assistant teacher in the school. Unfortunately, a severe yellow fever epidemic struck Brownsville in the summer of 1858 and on September 17, 1858 Harriet died after a two-day illness. Melinda herself became ill in 1859 but was nursed back to health by the grandmother of a former pupil.²¹

Melinda would be forced to close her school again in 1859 due to the continued political unrest that plagued the Mexican-American border and the civil unrest in Mexico itself which often spilled over the border into Texas. Melinda took refuge in Matamoros, Mexico after the Mexican outlaw Juan Cortina took over Brownsville on September 28, 1859 and held the city hostage (the beginning of what is now known as the Cortina War). Cortina and his associates barricaded themselves inside Fort Brown and terrorized the district. She returned to Brownsville after about four weeks and opened her school once again.²² Her school remained open until 1862 when pressure from Confederate forces in the southern United States forced her niece (whom she had left in charge of the school beginning in 1861 while she was back East) to close the school because the Confederates said that the school was “supported by an abolition society of the country called the United States” during the U.S. Civil War.²³

The loss of her school was not the end of her career as a teacher or a missionary; it was actually a blessing in disguise. Upon her return to Brownsville, she learned that in 1857 a new Mexican Constitution had been passed by the Juarez Party, or the Liberal Party. In it there was no longer an official religion of Mexico (though religious tolerance was not officially guaranteed until December 1860). This meant that Melinda was now free to fulfill her dream of working in Mexico. With this new religious freedom, Mexicans began crossing the border and coming to Melinda for Bibles, stating that they “could now distribute protestant books without any hindrance, and we will pay you for all you can let us have.” With that, Melinda gave them her entire supply.²⁴ In about October of 1862 Melinda opened a school in Matamoros, Mexico with 25 students in attendance. However she had a very hard time maintaining a lease on a house for her school. In March of 1863 Melinda was forced to close her new school because she was unable to secure a stable house “on any term.” She also felt that because of the continued upheaval in Mexico, she would be better off returning to the United States until things became more settled in Mexico in the future.²⁵

Following the failure of her first attempt at opening a school in Mexico, she headed back to New Orleans once again. A terrible storm made it impossible to board the steamer that was to carry them there so Melinda and her two nieces were forced to spend several days in the Texas port of Bagdad. Bagdad was sympathetic to the Confederacy which meant that as “Yankees,” the Rankins were not treated well. Since they were not allowed to rent a hotel room, they spent several days crouched in the hold of a small schooner named *The Honduras*, which was anchored near the shore until the U.S. Bark “Arthur” arrived to protect their ship. They arrived safely in New Orleans on March 27 and Melinda served there as a nurse for Union soldiers until the fall of 1863 when she

²¹ Rayburn, 8-9

²² Rayburn, 9

²³ Rayburn, 12

²⁴ Rankin, 85-86

²⁵ Rankin, 98-99

became the head of a school for recently freed African-Americans sponsored by the Presbyterian Church.²⁶

In March of 1865 Melinda decided to journey to Mexico again in yet another attempt to set up a mission and a school. She had planned a journey from Matamoros to Monterey, but the French, under Napoleon III, had invaded Mexico in 1862 in an attempt to establish an Empire, propping up Maximilian Hapsburg as the new Emperor of Mexico. Northern Mexico was then divided into three zones of control: Matamoros belonged to France, Juarez controlled Monterey, and Cortina controlled the area in between. During the invasion, Melinda waited in Matamoros for 10 days in the hope that the situation would calm down. However she grew impatient and made the 270 mile, four day stagecoach trip to Monterey.²⁷

Fortunately, when she arrived in Monterey she found the state capital of 40,000 people to be receptive to her mission. However, the local Catholic authorities resisted the spread of Protestantism and constantly came up with pretexts to evict Melinda from her buildings about once a month. In late summer 1865 the French Imperialists captured Monterey shortly before Melinda planned to travel to New York for fundraising purposes. Because Melinda saw the French as intruders upon Mexican sovereignty, she refused to ride in the stagecoach with French soldiers as her guards. She ended up riding in an unescorted coach through Cortina territory instead. Despite the fact that she left all of her valuables behind, the coach was captured by Cortina-supporting bandits who took her party to their camp. Here she cooked food and cared for the medical needs of Cortina's men until Cortina released them. After being delayed in Brownsville for four weeks by a yellow fever quarantine, Melinda reached New York City on October 1, 1865.²⁸

After staying in New York long enough to raise about \$14,000, (about \$400,000 in today's dollars) through personal solicitations and a large contribution of \$10,000, (about \$275,000 in today's dollars) from E.D. Goodrich of Boston, she returned to Mexico in May, 1866 and with the help of a U.S. businessman, purchased a building for the new mission in Monterey.²⁹ While the building was being remodeled to suit her needs, Rankin began to recruit people to go out into the community and distribute Bibles and other religious material. Melinda then proceeded with her work which included directing workers, holding public Sunday worship, supervising at least two meetings per week, and conducting school for Mexican girls. Fortunately she was assisted by native leaders who visited rural homes and farms.³⁰ Before long, Monterey became known as the headquarters of Protestantism in northern Mexico.

On December 7, 1869 on the eve of the "Purissima" celebration (intended to honor the Virgin Mary) a statue of the Virgin was knocked off of a bridge and shattered. Although the vandals were never identified, Melinda's mission was blamed (though there was no reason to suspect them other than the fact that they were Protestants). After boys started throwing rocks through the window and scribbling "Death To Protestants" on nearby signs, the U.S. Consulate promised to protect the Rankin mission but the guard

²⁶ Rayburn, 14-15

²⁷ Rayburn, 16-17

²⁸ Rayburn, 18-19

²⁹ Rankin, 129-130

³⁰ Rayburn, 20

they sent fell asleep at his post leaving the mission vulnerable to attack. After that, native converts guarded the mission instead.³¹

Political unrest arose again in the Monterey territory after October 12, 1871 when Benito Juarez was selected as the first president of Mexico by the Mexican Congress following a close election. General Geronimo Trevino, governor of Nuevo Leon and close friend of Juarez's chief opponent Porfirio Diaz, began a revolt because he claimed that the election of Juarez was unfair since Juarez did not receive a clear majority of votes. Because of the revolts against Juarez, local mission workers had to hide to keep from being drafted into the rebel army of General Trevino (which gained control of the Monterey territory where Melinda's mission was). At one point, Melinda herself was forced to give \$64 of her own money to Trevino's army in order to keep them from confiscating her mission property.³² In May of 1872 the *Juaristas* (government troops) captured Monterey. Melinda's niece was sent to safety while Melinda remained behind to protect the mission even after her male assistant was required to flee by climbing the high back wall. When the *Juaristas* finally came, Melinda had only food and water which she passed through the bars of the mission windows to the hungry *Juaristas*. This kept her safe until they began to plunder General Trevino's home across the street which allowed Melinda to run to safety at a friend's home nearby. That evening, government officers arrived in Monterey and restored the peace.³³

In September, 1872 Melinda Rankin submitted her resignation to the directors of the American and Foreign Christian Union, the society which she had been a member of since 1856 and who was partially responsible for helping to fund the missions and schools she founded. She decided to retire at this point because of her frequent illnesses, being overworked, continued political turmoil in Mexico, and lack of funding from New York.³⁴ John C. Rayburn quoted her as saying that "I had entertained the hope that I might continue to labor and die in the field...indeed, it had been the long cherished desire of my heart that I might make my last resting place with the Mexican people, and with them rise in the morning of resurrection, as a testimony that I had desired their salvation."³⁵ At first, the board in New York refused to allow her to sever her connections with Mexico and demanded that she remain there, but eventually she managed to relinquish control of it to the American Board of Congregational Church by March of 1873, who then transferred it five years later to the Presbyterian Church of the United States.³⁶

In 1875 Melinda moved to Bloomington, Illinois, after living in Haverhill, Scioto County, Ohio for several years. She chose Bloomington because her nieces Emma Dick, Ellen and Luella Kimball, who were the children of her sister Harriet, lived there. In Bloomington she bought a home on Douglas Street. She purchased an 80-acre farm outside of Kappa, Illinois which was occupied by her nephew W. Kimball. She also had taken a role in raising her sister Harriet's children, after Harriet's death in 1858.

Towards the end of her life, she wrote a book about her missionary work in Mexico. The book, entitled *Twenty Years Among the Mexicans: A Narrative of*

³¹ Rayburn, 21-23

³² Rayburn, 24

³³ Rayburn, 25-26

³⁴ Rankin, 193-194

³⁵ Rayburn, 27

³⁶ Rankin, 194 and Rayburn, 28

Missionary Labor, was published in 1881. A copy of this book is in the McLean County Museum of History's library. Not only did she leave an impression on the Mexican people, but the people of Mexico left a deep and lasting impression on her. In her book she stated that her "experiences with the Mexicans has proved that they are a kind people, if treated with kindness. I can truly say I have never found firmer and better friends among any nation of people than I have among some of the Mexicans."³⁷

Melinda Rankin died on December 6, 1888 at the home of her niece, Emma Dick. She was buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington. The inscription carved on her tombstone reads as the following: "Pioneer Protestant Missionary in Mexico—a Remarkable example of Faith, Courage, and Consecration. She rests in peace. Her works do follow her."³⁸

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³⁷ Rankin, 81

³⁸ Rayburn, 29