

“Plata O Plomo”

By Steven W. Hooper

“Plata o plomo” are Spanish words that translate to “silver or lead”. This chilling threat is attributed to the infamous Colombian drug smuggler Pablo Escobar. The phrase implies that the threatened has only two choices: accede to the drug traffickers demand by accepting a bribe (silver) or take a bullet (lead) for refusing. Even before Escobar established his drug cartel in the 1980s, many law enforcement officers around the globe had been forced by organized crime syndicates to make this difficult and life-changing decision. One of those officers was U.S. Customs Patrol Inspector Loy Cash (L.C.) Henry (1895-1934) of Del Rio, Texas.

The date was June 19, 1934. It was a very warm Tuesday afternoon when there was a knock at the door of Inspector Henry’s residence in Del Rio, Texas. A stranger speaking in Spanish asked Henry for directions to a nearby home; but he seemed to have a problem understanding Henry’s directions. The temperature that day was 100°F. Considering the location was a few blocks away, Henry offered to drive the stranger to the location.

As the pair neared the requested destination, the stranger pulled a Luger and fired three shots into Henry’s torso and fled. Inspector Henry would be transported to the local hospital where he would die the next day. Before his death, Henry was able to identify his attacker from a photograph and relate what the attacker said before firing at him, “I give you this with the compliments of Mayor Martínez.”

Inspector Henry had identified Rafael Domínguez as the person who shot him. At the time Marcial Martínez was the mayor of Villa Acuna, the Mexican town located across from Del Rio, Texas. So, it was suspected that Martínez had organized the plot to kill Henry.

In his book *Border Contraband*, Professor George T. Díaz reported that Martínez and his politically connected brother-in-law, Jesus Ramón, operated a major liquor and drug smuggling operation in Mexico. Ramón was under Federal indictment in 1929 for liquor smuggling and was still a fugitive at the time of

Henry's assassination. The government also had several witnesses who claimed they had purchased illicit drugs from Ramón.

Professor Díaz wrote that the day before Henry was murdered, Mayor Martínez had offered Henry a monthly bribe to allow his smuggling operations to continue without U.S. Customs interference. Inspector Henry had refused the bribe and was slain by Domínguez the next day.

The *Brownsville Herald* reported in its July 3, 1934, edition that Henry was killed "for knowing too much" about the operation of the illicit drug gang operating on the other side of the border. Henry's efforts along with those of other U.S. Customs officers were said to have "practically smashed its operation on this side of the border."

Domínguez was arrested for Henry's murder and placed in the Villa Acuna jail. But he was soon released. Pressure by the U.S. Counsel in Piedras Negras led to the Mexican President ordering a large-scale military manhunt for Domínguez' capture.

Upon his capture, Domínguez admitted to killing Henry but denied Mayor Martínez' involvement in the murder. The U.S. filed for the extradition of Domínguez so he could be tried in Del Rio, but he was eventually tried in Mexico and sentenced to ten years in prison. Mayor Martínez was charged in Mexico for involvement in the crime, but he was acquitted.

Inspector Henry was well liked and respected on both sides of the border. He could not be threatened or bribed because he had *integrity*, a quality to which every U.S. Customs officer aspires. Inspector Henry will always be remembered as someone who was the very definition of *integrity*, "he did the right thing, even when no one was looking."

Inspector Henry is buried in the Westlawn Cemetery located in Del Rio, Texas. He is honored on the National Law Enforcement Memorial, the Customs and Border Protection Wall of Honor in Washington D.C. and the Texas Peace Officers' Memorial in Austin, Texas. Inspector Henry was survived by his wife Ewin Tennessee (Neely) Henry and their daughter Mary Ola Henry.

Primary Sources

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