

Texas Ranger Tales

by Mike Cox

By most accounts, William Gerald Tobin's career as a Texas Ranger left a lot to be desired. But he had an idea that left Texas, and the Southwest, an enduring gastronomical legacy.

Born in South Carolina in 1833, Tobin came to Texas 20 years later with his brother Dan, settling in San Antonio. He soon married well, hitching up with Josephine Smith, daughter of former city mayor John William Smith.

He first rode as a ranger in 1855, a year later serving as city marshal of the Alamo City.

In 1859, hearing that rancher-bandit-Mexican patriot Juan Napoleon Cortina had raided Brownsville, Tobin decided to raise his own company of volunteers and march to the aid of the terrified Valley community. On his way south, he sent a letter to Gov. E.M. Pease offering his services as a Ranger captain. The governor took him up on his offer and gave him an official commission.

Not long after Tobin and his rangers rode into Brownsville, the situation got even worse. A party of vigilantes – historians today suspect Tobin's men – lynched a Cortina officer who had been captured before the arrival of the Rangers. That made Cortina so mad he threatened to burn the whole town down. Brownsville survived, but it took another company of Rangers under the celebrated John "Rip" Ford plus elements of the U.S. Army to squelch Cortina's mini-war on South Texas.

Despite his lackluster duty in the Valley, Tobin got swept up in the martial spirit at the outset of the Civil War and gained a commission as a captain of Confederate Army. He survived the war and returned to San Antonio.

In the 1870s, he turned his attention to what may have been his strongest suit: Business. He leased a structure in San Antonio known as the Vance Building and opened a hotel he called the Vance House.

Somewhere along the way, he acquired a taste for a particular dish favored in San Antonio and South Texas. That appetite on Tobin's part would play a part in this food's Americanization – and Texas iconization.

By the early 1880s, he had hit his entrepreneurial stride in the Alamo City. And then he had his grand idea: Canning chili. In 1881, Tobin negotiated a contract with the federal government to sell canned chili con carne to the Army and Navy.

Carne, of course, is Spanish for meat. One would assume that beef would have been the chief ingredient that Tobin used in his product, but he opted for goat meat.

Having figured a way to make money off the government, which is close to alchemy, Tobin opened a chili con carne processing plant and canning operation. But just as his venture had begun to take off, he died on July 28, 1884. (No truth to the rumor that he died of chronic indigestion.) Soon after his death, the business went bust.

In fairness to history, it must not be intimated that this former Texas Ranger invented chili. All he did was think to can it.

Some say chili came from the Spanish, who supposedly found that antelope meat tasted better when cooked with onions, tomatoes and chili peppers. Others claim that chili originated over the campfires of California-bound Texans during the 1849 gold rush.

More likely, Tejanos – Mexican of Texas origin – developed chili as a way to get a lot out of a little meat.

No matter how chili came to be, long before Texas became a state in 1845, Mexican women sold chili and tortillas on the streets of San Antonio. Eventually these street vendors came to be known as "Chili Queens," and they lasted until health regulations forced them out of business.

The next evolutionary development was the invention of chili powder, which came about 1890. Three years later, Texas introduced the rest of the nation to chili at the Columbian Exposition in Chicago.

Not until 1921 did someone finally get around to following up on Tobin's idea of canning chili. That was Lyman T. Davis of Corsicana, who started peddling canned chili from the back of a wagon. He named his product after Kaiser Bill, his pet wolf.

Wolf Brand Chili, of course, remains on the grocery shelf today. But nowhere on the label is any credit given to former Ranger William Tobin for his Texas-sized idea – putting chili in a can.

Mike Cox is the author of 11 non-fiction books and is on the boards of the Former Texas Rangers Association and Foundation. A historian and long-time collector of Texas lore, Cox and his wife, Linda, operate Saddlebag Books, a used and rare book store specializing in Texana and Western Americana.

