

# THE MYSTERY OF AMBROSE BIERCE

BY CAREY McWILLIAMS

OF LATE the mystery surrounding the disappearance of Ambrose Bierce in 1913 has become encrusted with an outlandish accretion of fanciful stories, marvelous explanations and ingenious conjectures. The newspaper writing on the subject is already voluminous and shows no sign of abating. Once a clue is run down, however, it always turns out to be false. In fact, so many bad ones have been announced that many investigators have now wearied of the chase.

It is, admittedly, a discouraging task and it has bred a crop of cynics who go to the length of holding that Bierce never entered Mexico at all. The case has become the special property of obliging gentlemen of the sort who appear periodically at headquarters and confess to the slaying of William Desmond Taylor or the planting of the Preparedness Day bomb in San Francisco. The general feeling that the mystery is insoluble has only fortified these romantics, who have no hesitancy in advancing the most extraordinary hypotheses. One man traveled from El Paso to Los Angeles to inform a newspaper acquaintance of mine that Bierce had been poisoned in his backyard!

Within the last few months a number of wholly new explanations have been advanced. This revival of interest has probably been provoked by the publication of four books about Bierce within the last few years. The fact that none of these biographies dealt conclusively with the

question of his disappearance, if one may make exception of Dr. Danziger's highly imaginative account, opened the flood-gates for an inundation of fanciful yarns. It would be an idle act to summarize all of these stories, for most of them are patently nonsense. But a few of greater plausibility have also been put forward.

One of them came from a Washington attorney who represented Pancho Villa at the capital during the Mexican revolution. According to this account, Bierce met his death seventy-five or eighty miles south of the Rio Grande at the hands of General Tomas Urbino, a Durango chief operating under Villa. No proof of the authenticity of this story was offered, but it was suggested that it could be verified by Colonel Dario W. Silva, "the Robin Hood of the Revolution," formerly military secretary to General Villa. Silva was with Villa during the major portion of the uprising and witnessed such exciting incidents as the ransom of Don Luis Terrazas and the execution of Thomas Benton. The mention of these incidents suggests the chief limitation of prior investigations into the Bierce case: the failure to interpret facts in the light of what occurred in Mexico prior to December, 1913, and what was actually happening about that time. In fairness to Colonel Silva, his story should not be considered apart from the Benton affair, for, as he points out, the disappearance of Bierce was for the revolutionists merely another "Gringo case."



Benton, an English subject, was a wealthy landowner in Chihuahua. He left his estate, the Hacienda Remedios, on February 14, 1914, to interview General Villa in Chihuahua. He was never heard from again. His disappearance was featured in the press and quickly became a *cause célèbre*. No single episode was of equal importance in turning the tide of American opinion against Villa and surely none provoked such a storm of protest from the British and American governments. The case was investigated with typical Wilsonian lassitude and incompetence and, although the evidence that Villa had murdered Benton admitted of little doubt, nothing was done about the matter other than to send the Mexican government a series of charmingly ineffective diplomatic notes.

But from the time of the Benton furore Villa feared to have foreign names appear in his casualty lists. The case had demonstrated that the "mysterious disappearance" of an American or Englishman was a matter that could not be hushed up. Silva says that he was instructed to eliminate from the official reports any reference to the death of foreigners. Regardless of whether Bierce's death can be fixed prior or subsequent to February 14, 1914, the atmosphere of evasion and duplicity which thwarted the early investigations of his disappearance can be traced to the sensation that was aroused by the death of Benton.

In February, 1914, Villa's forces had proceeded from Juarez to besiege the City of Torreon, then in the hands of the Huertistas. During this campaign, Silva was acting as military secretary to Villa. He remembers that word was received at headquarters that a large ammunition train, destined for Huerta, was *en route* from the north. In this connection, it is signifi-

cant that on February 3, 1914, President Wilson lifted the embargo on the exportation of arms and ammunition to Mexico. After information about the train had been received by Villa, plans were adopted for the capture of the train. A short time later a dispatch was received from General Gallegos, a Villista leader now deceased, announcing its capture. The report, according to Silva, came through the headquarters of General Felipe Alvarez, who was in charge of Villa's forces in Durango and who was subsequently killed during the Catholic disturbances about the time of the 1929 revolution. The forces accompanying the expedition had "resisted" and forty-five men were killed. Silva remembers that the dispatch listed among the dead two Syrians and an Englishman whose name was "A. Pierce."

Silva says that he recalls the incident for a number of reasons. In the first place, the dispatch listed the names of three foreigners; and, secondly, it was one of the largest ammunition trains captured during the revolution. As to the names of the foreigners, he insists that the name of the Englishman was "A. Pierce" and not Bierce. Because of the reference to an Englishman the dispatch was promptly destroyed. Silva was informed at the time that a British passport was found on the body of "A. Pierce"; hence the conclusion that he was an Englishman. It was understood at headquarters that the ammunition train was financed by Maximiliano Damm, a German-Mexican mine-owner, operator of the famous Promontorio mine near Tepehuanes, and known along the border as a Huerta sympathizer.

This story told by Colonel Silva is the basis for the report made current by the Washington attorney; it is also, in all probability, the real source of the George Weeks account of Bierce's disappearance.



While not wholly incredible, it is subject to serious and apparently insurmountable objections. Frederico Damm says that he knows nothing of such an expedition, although his brother, Maximiliano, refuses to confirm or deny the story. W. W. Graham, British vice-consul in Durango and a man who had known Bierce in San Francisco in the nineties, was in Durango at the time. According to Mr. Graham, the railroad from Fresnillo to Torreon was in the hands of the Villistas, who had just taken Torreon, and the road was absolutely impassable and out of repair. Other experts corroborate this statement. They agree that during February, 1914, Villa controlled, practically without dispute, the territory from El Paso to a point about half way between Escalon and Jimenez stations on the railroad north of Torreon. Huerta held Torreon and all communications to the south, and so well guarded were these lines of travel that, when Villa finally captured the city after the bitterest fighting of the revolution, General Velasco and most of his garrison managed to escape in safety.

With these facts in mind, why should an expedition try to approach Torreon from the north? Every inference would indicate that the approach from the south or east would have been infinitely safer, particularly the route from the south along a well-guarded line of communication. The logical avenue of approach would have been by way of Vera Cruz. There is no evidence that Bierce was ever in the south; while it is established that he was in Chihuahua. The records of the State Department fail to disclose the issuance of a passport to Bierce, although he had announced England as his ultimate destination. Aside from all this, there are circumstantial objections to the story of even greater weight, which will be outlined later.

## II

Another, and far more plausible, story is that unearthed recently by Tom Mahoney of the *El Paso Post*. Mr. Mahoney's story is based on an interview with Major Gaston de Prida. It is De Prida's theory that Bierce joined the Villista forces in Chihuahua about Christmas, 1913, and was killed in action less than a week later.

De Prida was censor of outgoing cables in Mexico City during 1917, when George Weeks, an American correspondent who was interested in the Bierce case because of his acquaintance with Day Bierce, a son, in Chico, California, years previously, announced that he had solved the mystery. De Prida was ordered to investigate the story which Weeks had released to the press. He went to Chihuahua, Parral, Ojinaga, Icamole, Sierra Mojada, and many other cities during 1917 and 1918. He investigated the stories of Bierce's disappearance that had been issued previously by Weeks, DeCastro (Danziger), and O'Reilly, but was unable to substantiate any of them.

Then De Prida discovered one Salvador Ibarra, a telegraph operator in Chihuahua, who recognized a photograph of Bierce shown him by De Prida. Ibarra had been a second captain in one of the last of Torbio Ortega's companies to leave Chihuahua for the siege of Ojinaga. He remembered having seen an elderly American, resembling the man whose picture he was shown, during the assault at Ojinaga. He never saw the man again. But no further details could be elicited that would tend to support the story.

However, an investigation recently undertaken tends to confirm at least parts of this report. During November and December of 1913 Villa had made great strides. He had captured Juarez on Novem-



ber 15. Eleven days later he had defeated the Federals north of Chihuahua, and they evacuated the city on November 29 and fled northeast to Ojinaga, a point on the Rio Grande about 125 miles away. Bierce was in Chihuahua during December, 1913. Villa was then organizing his Division to the North in Chihuahua and the attention of all Mexico was directed to the approaching attack on Ojinaga. The siege of Ojinaga began on January 2, 1914, and the city was captured on January 11.

It seems highly plausible that Bierce would have accompanied the army from Chihuahua to Ojinaga and that if he had survived the fighting at Ojinaga he would have written to his daughter. After the capture of Ojinaga, a large force of American correspondents joined Villa and accompanied his army south to Torreon. Most of these correspondents have been interviewed and not one remembers having seen a man resembling Bierce. Villa did not break with Carranza until October, 1915; in fact, it was only subsequent to this date that he became actively hostile towards Americans. Hence the familiar story that Bierce was assassinated by Villa because he had announced his intention of deserting to Carranza is beyond the range of probability.

Captain Emilio Holmdahl, a soldier of fortune who was attached to Villa's forces, confirms De Prida's theory. He informs me that an elderly American did accompany the army from Chihuahua to Ojinaga. His description of this man, who was seen frequently at headquarters, could easily fit Bierce at the time he entered Mexico. In gathering information for General Villa after the battle of Ojinaga, Holmdahl learned that the "old gringo" had been shot in action. Moreover, Zach Lamar Cobb, formerly collector of customs in El Paso, tells me that there was a story cur-

rent in El Paso shortly after the battle that Bierce had been killed at Ojinaga.

However, Norman Walker of El Paso, formerly city editor of the *Herald* and later correspondent with the Associated Press, covered the battle of Ojinaga and feels certain that Bierce was not with the army at that time. Mr. Walker followed the revolution closely from 1910 to 1922 and never heard any definite story of Bierce's demise other than the well-known rumor of his assassination at the hands of Villa. It should be remembered that Villa, Urbino and Fierro were legendary killers of almost fabulous reputation. If a man disappeared, it was common to assume that one of them had killed him. Lieut.-Col. A. A. King, of Fort Bliss, at my request, tried to confirm the report that Bierce was killed at Ojinaga, but was unable to do so.

### III

There are still further stories. . . . Odo B. Stade, another member of Villa's staff and the author of a history of the revolution, informs me that during the early part of 1914 he knew an elderly American who was attached to the army. This man was about seventy years of age, of medium height, with gray hair. He was very asthmatic. He told his fellow officers that he was an American, and that, if they wanted to give him a name, they might call him Jack Robinson. He scoffed at the tactics of the Mexicans, sneered at their campaigns, and pointed out errors with the eye of an expert. Toward the end of his service he showed a keen interest in hospital-trains and the transport of the wounded. He wore a beard and told Mr. Stade on one occasion that he had been a writer in the States.

After the engagement at Guadalupe, in November, 1914, "Jack Robinson" quar-



it. While I was at Chihuahua I had several exchanges of correspondence with a young lady in Washington, who was endeavoring to get some trace of Mr. Bierce through my office, and after my transfer to Washington in 1916 I had a personal interview with the same person. In response to this lady's request I investigated the subject at the time and could find no evidence that Mr. Bierce had been in Chihuahua.

In September, 1914, the late Franklin K. Lane, then Secretary of the Interior, wrote to General Scott, Chief of Staff at Washington, requesting an investigation. General Scott wrote to Felix Sommerfeld, a confidential agent and adviser of Villa, as follows:

September 9, 1914

*My dear Mr. Sommerfeld:* The Secretary of the Interior, Mr. Franklin K. Lane, is very anxious to get news of a man by the name of Ambrose Bierce, who went to Mexico last year and his friends have heard nothing from him since last December. He is quite a poet and writer, was 71 years of age when he left Washington last Fall, was feeling exceedingly strong and healthy. He went to Juarez last Fall and had credentials to permit him to pass through the Constitutionals' territory and was accredited to the Villa forces. He did not enlist and did not take part in the activities of the campaign so far as we know. It was his intention to join with the cavalry and go along as an observer. He had a considerable sum of money with him. The last heard of him was a letter dated December 26 and posted at Chihuahua. In this letter he said that his subsequent addresses would be indefinite, that he intended to go horseback and by rail, when possible, through to the West coast of Mexico and from thence to South America. He expected to be gone a year or two.

The Secretary would like you to have confidential inquiry made to trace Mr. Bierce. Anything you can do in this direction will be greatly appreciated by him and by the Secretary of War.

*Very respectfully,*

H. L. SCOTT.

*Brig. General, U. S. Army.*

Mr. Sommerfeld went to Chihuahua and tried to get some word of Bierce. He found that Bierce had left the city some time in January and that no one had heard of him after that date. Further inquiry was abandoned because the south was held by hostile forces at that time. Otis Aultman, a photographer now living in El Paso, stayed for a few days during the month of December, 1913, in a lodging house in Chihuahua in which he claims Bierce was residing.

At this time Bierce was in almost daily communication with his secretary, Miss Carrie Christiansen, the lady referred to by Mr. Letcher. His letters to her, seldom more than a day apart, trace his journey in a definite manner. Miss Christiansen destroyed the letters, pursuant to instructions, but she wisely jotted down the facts in them in a notebook. This notebook, in her handwriting, passed to Bierce's daughter, Mrs. Helen Bierce Isgrigg, on the death of Miss Christiansen, and is now in Los Angeles. I quote the notes in full:

Ambrose Bierce left Washington Thursday evening, Oct. 2, on 10:10 train for Chattanooga. Oct. 3 reached Chattanooga, 5 P.M. Oct. 4 visited Missionary Ridge, ascending it from Orchard Knob. Oct. 5 visited Chickamauga, stopped at Hotel Patten; Oct. 6 reached Murfreesboro, stopped at Hotel Hermitage; Friday evening Oct. 10, reached Nashville from Franklin. Walked fifteen miles at Chickamauga, at Chattanooga ten miles; Stone River twelve miles, Nashville, Oct. 9, at Franklin seven miles. Little rain. Probable trip to Johnsonville, Saturday, eleven miles west on the Tennessee river; if possible there to Shiloh, Pittsburgh Landing, by steamboat. Thence to Corinth, thence to New Orleans, thence to San Antonio.

At Chickamauga made a sketch of monument to Grizzly's battery with its inscription and sent it to Grizzly. Sunday, Oct. 12, left Nashville for Johnsonville. Due at Pittsburgh Landing sometime Monday if low



water does not prevail. Expect to stay there a day or two and then to New Orleans by rail. Letter from Shiloh National Park, Oct. 15. Left Nashville 2:15 P.M. Sunday, Oct. 12 arrived at Shiloh, 8 A.M. Wednesday, a long and tedious voyage by steamboat. Stopped at every landing to put on freight. Landings are not towns, just roads coming down to the water. River beautiful but at so low a tide that the country could not be seen over the banks. The park so abundantly marked that following route of brigade and regiment is easy. The fields across the river still as described in "What I Saw of Shiloh," and Savannah, eight or ten miles below, looked familiar; to remain a day or two about Shiloh; then to go on.

Oct. 18 remained at Shiloh three days; expect to go to Corinth, the nearest railway station, 19. Oct. 18 did nothing but sit in the sun. Oct. 17, found the graves of twenty men of regiment who fell at Shiloh. Their names are all right in the cemetery record, but only half the bodies had been identified. Greatly less than half of all the cemetery—more than three thousand—are named. The Confederate dead still lie where buried—on the field marked, but none of them named. Monday, Oct. 20 waiting for an auto to take trip to Corinth. Snow falling, a regular blizzard. Oct. 22, Hattiesburg, Miss.

Left Shiloh Monday, Oct. 20 afternoon in a blizzard and ramshackle automobile—a deadly combination. Got to Corinth so stiff with cold could hardly write name in hotel register. Corinth immersed in a sea of coal gas from the engines. Next morning Oct. 21, fled south on early train. New Orleans, Oct. 21 at night. Missed connection at Meridian, where a State fair was on. No bed, so took a night train to Hattiesburg. Good hotel, first square meal since arriving at Shiloh and first sure-enough bath since leaving Nashville.

New Orleans, Friday, Oct. 24, 1913. Interviewed by three reporters. Sat up night of 23; ill of asthma, but well again on 24. Weather had been cold and stormy, everybody wearing overcoats. But now the sun shines in evidence, the horses are twittering in the streets, and the autos hopping gaily from limb to limb. Good to see New Orleans. People in streets are not in a hurry; corridors of hotels are crowded; men play

billiards as they did years and years ago, and the bars—Oh, you should see a New Orleans bar. The drinks they make, the trays and trays of the same sent upstairs; the general air of leisure and love of life! I'm only an on-looker, but I like it, remembering Washington and New York with compassion.

Lost about ten pounds. To talk Mexico the afternoon and evening and hope to visit the border Sat. morning, Oct. 25. Return of asthma, unable to lie down at night, but up and about through the day. Hope to go on to San Antonio, Sunday, reaching there Monday morning, unless remain over Sunday at Houston. Weather beautiful. Going to stroll along the river among the cotton bales. "All my old haunts are lost to me, and excepting a few blocks immediately about the St. Charles Hotel, it is a strange city. I can't find even places where Pollard and I dined and drank a few years ago."

Reached San Antonio Mon., Oct. 27. Texas in the grip of a blizzard—a norther? San Antonio population of 110,000, but Alamo can be covered with a hat. Oct. 28. At Shiloh on a headstone of the 9th Indiana group is the bald inscription, "411, T. J. Patton." He was the adjutant of the regiment and fell early in the engagement. For more than fifty years the poor fellow has been lying there, denied his rank. I've corrected that and though he will sleep no better for it, I shall.

Wed. Oct. 29, 1913, weight 165 pounds. Some woman claiming acquaintance with relations called up. Said she had a picture of AB's mother. Weather still cold. Oct. 30, health improving. Among callers was Lloyd Spencer, manager of theater. Passed an hour in Alamo; name means cotton woods. Rather interesting with relics, old documents and bad poetry—the shrine of each Texan's devotion. Expect to go to Laredo; shall probably return to San Antonio.

Oct. 31, 1913. Just in from Army post, Fort Sam. Houston. Officers of Third Cavalry sent in for company (AB). Met them all; treated like a foreign ambassador. Colonel hardly dissuaded from parading a troop or two of regiment in honor. Some have been stationed in San Francisco; others had met at club in Washington, most of them familiar with work. I thoroughly



enjoyed the day. Nov. 1, 1913, rode a little and walked about five miles. Weather has moderated. Nov. 2. All Soul's Day; bright and beautiful, church bells ringing everywhere. San Antonio seems to be a pious town; many churches, some of them pretty old, as such things go in America. Nov. 5, 1913, telegraphed me evening of Nov. 4, telegram never received, no trace of it in main office here. Left San Antonio Nov. 5. Nov. 7, 1913 reached Laredo Thursday, going by rail Wednesday night at speed of fifteen miles an hour. Laredo is a town of 18,000, 3,000 being Americans. English is not spoken by any of the Mexicans, apparently not even by the waiters and chambermaids of the American hotel. Mexicans run the city govt. and even the Federal offices, particularly, it seems, the post-office. On the other side of the river, Nuevo Laredo is about half as large. It is held by Huertistas. About a 1,000 Americans don't go there. To remain at Laredo a day or two.

Laredo, Nov. 8, 1913. Nov. 7 saw a man, interviewed, recognized AB by Miss Campbell's portrait. He was editor of the *Herald*. The only newspaper in English in Mexico City. Told an entertaining story of a former member of Porfirio Diaz's cabinet who had an old copy of *Cosmopolitan* and bored all his friends by reading and quoting from "The Wine of Wizardy." Name forgotten, but a man of great literary distinction in Mexico, author of important books. Man who told story, Crowell, has never been north of San Antonio, but knows work of AB.

Nov. 10, Monday, visited military post, Ft. McIntosh, but did not make himself known. On Saturday visited Mexican quarter, four-fifths of town. Exceedingly interesting and picturesque; could easily translate most of the signs. Sat on river bank overlooking a vast expanse of Mexican ter-

ritory, alluringly spread out but inaccessible. This is the region of mañana. Have almost regained lost health and have regained five pounds of lost weight.

Tuesday, Nov. 11, leave Laredo for days at a time. Thurs. Nov. 13, out of town down the river 11 and 12. Traveling with companions, comrades; enough of them or not enough according to what one meets. Twenty or thirty miles south of Juarez, Mexico, Nov. 28, 1913.

At El Paso found friendliest relations between rebels and Americans, with hardly any restrictions, only those of custom officers on intercourse between two cities. Crossed into Juarez. Cordially received and given credentials to accompany the army.

Chihuahua, Mexico, Dec. 16, 1913. Ridden in four miles to mail a letter. *Jornada del Muerta*, thousands of civilian refugees, men, women and children. Train load of troops leaving Chihuahua every day. *Expect next day to go to Ojinaga*, partly by rail. Mexicans fight like the devil, though not so effectively as trained soldiers. Addicted to unseasonable firing, many times at random. Incident at Tierra Blanca. Refuge behind a sharp ridge. Story of gringo; present of sombrero.

It is difficult to doubt the authenticity of this record. It corresponds with the known facts and is subject to verification. The notes are in Miss Christiansen's handwriting and a lady less likely to forge such a record never set pen to paper. It is scarcely necessary to underscore the lines in which Bierce announced that he expected to leave for Ojinaga. In the face of this record, can it be seriously contended that had he survived Ojinaga he would have failed to communicate with his secretary? To my mind, it is unthinkable.