

# The New Balkan Empire

By Tom Sheehan

The show-down came in the middle of Cross Corners, a small town that no longer exists in Texas, and a stray bullet from that face-off hit a lamp hanging lit in the livery. When wind whipped the resulting fire with a frenzy, coming in the open front door and out the back door, while the small gathering of townsmen and ranchers were watching Jerry Zambaza and Gus Luongon staring down each other. Zambaza had been ranching here for 25 years, from a country in far Europe, and Luongon was the shiftless son of a Zambaza contemporary.

The fire, with so much wind behind it, had too much headway to be beaten down before it consumed half a dozen buildings.

And Jerry Zambaza's opponent went down, in a heap, having no idea the little man was so quick pulling his weapon, and never realizing how good a shot he was. Zambaza had said, just before Luongon drew his weapon, "I told you once, Gus, never to cross me again, never to bother my family or my cows. You know nobody does my dirty work for me and this is going to be dirty work."

Later, in the saloon at Corpus, a dozen miles up the edge of the river, Zambaza told his story again, as if it belonged with any death he celebrated, for he saw to it that Gus Luongon was properly buried, if only on the side of a hill while part of Cross Corners still smoldered. It was a continuation of the burial procedure that talk, somehow connected with the death of a man, was a salute in its own way regardless of the dead man's ways in life. Nothing is quicker, he believed, and more final than the death of a man; one minute he's on his horse, the next he's in the ground. It is good to carry death past the grave, for the grave holds without failure someone's son, father, brother, friend or foe.

"He came after me one time too many," Zambaza continued. "First it was my daughter he tried to squeeze some land from, and then he tried to steal more cows. He'd done it before, I am sure. Tracks never lie to me. He thought I would not miss a few cows, but he was wrong. I would give them to a hungry Indian rather than let him have them without my say-so. I can say with all honesty that he was not a worthy man and brought shame on his whole family. His father, an honorable man, would have understood what I say."

He tipped his glass, "To my friend, Alfonso Luongon, who deserved a hell of a lot more than he got from that son of his." When he looked as if he was out on the prairie checking the horizon, the folks there

knew he was thinking about his lost son now gone for too many years to count. Only Jerry Zambaza knew how long it had been since his son had been dragged into the army.

There was silence in the room; folk listened when Jerry Zambaza talked, which was never out of the corner of his mouth, or with twisted lips, or with a tongue that turned two which ways at once. He had started from scratch and almost had his new empire, and his mark was made, though he never paused to realize it, or relish what he had done, for there was more to do.

“I came on a boat with 342 poor souls, the dregs of Europe and Asia clustered within their sweetest dreams. We buried some of them at sea, with those very dreams. The lost souls of the deep I have always called them. 342 got on the boat in Greece, at the port of Corfu, at midnight, as if we were prisoners setting out on an endless journey. I had come overland from my old home in a trek that took me five months, down long rivers, over mountains, across crude straits of the sea sneaking in behind parts of Greece. On the way I fought bandits and robbers and thieves of every sort. I learned in five months what it takes some men out here in the west many years to learn, and they lose a lot while they learn.”

He paused on that assessment, and then said, “I could not afford to lose anything I carried. Even on the ship heading for promise and freedom, it was every man for himself. Thieves abounded there too, in the crew and in the passengers. I saw two of them thrown over the side of the ship in the middle of the ocean by men who believed in each other, who had their own wars. The hungriest thief was thrown over the side even before we got past the big rock of Gibraltar. He had tried to steal a family heirloom from the time of Charlemagne. We knew we had to protect each family, and what each family had; we had nothing else but hope and dreams. There was no sheriff to do justice for us, so justice we did. 246 of us got off the ship in New York. I heard the captain say he only had food for half of us, as if he knew nearly half of us would die on the passage. He counted on it. I swear I was hungry for more than half the trip.”

“From New York it took me two years to get here, where I dug my first post hole. I came alone, all the way. My people back there waited for me. I got my first cow and my first bull, and added more, always adding no matter what it took. It took me ten years to send for my family. Three out of five made it here; my wife, my twins, a daughter and a son.” He stopped talking, looked out over the sea of grass, and said, “One son is missing. I am still waiting for him and I am not done digging post holes yet.” Jerry Zambaza was about to crack the whip again, but mostly on himself.

It was another empire, his Balkans spread, 80,000 acres and growing on top of Mexico like it was a serious mole on the wild perimeter. It began innocently enough; in 1856 a newcomer, speaking poor English and poorer Mexican-Spanish, came into the territory and began to scratch out a living. Inside of 25

years, his land extended beyond the flat horizon of the plains, and he thought of it as his empire. Those he traded with, who were aware that something rare ran inside the man like the bloodlines in a good horse, paid attention to him, yet did not seem aware of his dreams and his intentions. His eyes were on a larger target; he wanted a new nation unto himself and he would call it The New Balkans.

He had not come this far for nothing.

His name was Jerlid Zambaza and the Indians he traded with early in the game gave him a new name, as Indians always have a way of short-cutting names on the way to the true name, so Jerlid Zambaza became Jer-ry. Jerry he was from then on in the New Balkans Empire. The Mexicans, who often came over the river to trade, also adapted to the name, to the goods he moved to them through his empire, to his stance when the little man stood tallest, in any fight with any adversary who questioned his family, his markers, his land, his dealings. The Comanches, Jumanos, Conchos, Lipan-Apaches, Coahuiltecos and other tribes who passed through west Texas and who saw advantages in good dealings, knew Jer-ry as a totem of fair advantage.

Many people realized he brought ingenuity with him, quick response to troubles, keen reading of his opponents, belief in a free society, as long as he could move within its promise. And his word was better than a handshake ... until he was cut of his gain. He had little room for loss, and they all knew it.

"Listen, sheriff," he said once when some of his cattle were being rustled, "I don't like to hang any man, it lacks dignity, but if any man takes one of my cows, I will have him hanging from a stout limb for a week before I see him buried. You tell that to those who practice such deeds, any man who abides within your jail at this time, any men you manage to place behind bars, that the Balkans is not the place to stake a claim to anything at all. Not my cows, not my daughter, not my land."

In this latest action with Luongon he had come upon fifty or so of his cattle held in a make-shift corral in a clustered canyon. The boy on guard, barely fourteen or fifteen, felt the round hit between his feet as dirt and rock were thrown up at him. "Who was the other rider with you?" Zambaza said, as he rode up and aimed the rifle again at the boy's feet. "The next shot is for you who stands guard on my cattle with my brand. You are small potatoes in this. I want the one who left here an hour or so ago from what I see of his tracks. Who?"

The rifle was at the boy's mid-section. "His name. Last time."

"Gus Luongon. He's gone to Cross Corners to find where the other man's herd is so he can dump them off. He said I get a month's pay for helping him add them to the other herd."

"He have more of my cows corralled somewhere?"

“Has another hundred or more in a canyon further up the river. That’s what he told me, but I haven’t seen any of them.”

“What’s your name?”

“Luke Hightower, from Pembert.”

“Well, you get riding, Luke. I catch you again on my land I’ll have you strung up. You tell your daddy what I said. Your daddy around?”

“Yes sir, but sickly. Fell off his horse. Can’t ride no more.”

“Gus say who that other man is, running that other herd?”

“No, but says he’s his pard.”

“Go, Luke, before I change my mind.”

Zambaza watched as the boy rode off. He hoped he would never see him again, and thought once more of his lost son on the other side of the world. It was sad what he faced every day, he realized, but he also had to make amends for another transgression. If he did not take care of things properly, as he had always done, it all would be lost: he’d have nothing for his lost son if he ever showed up. It had been that way on the ship so long ago, and was still that way. A man had to watch what was his and take care of it, from a pocket watch to a whole empire; there was no other way of doing business.

That, in short order, brought him to Cross Corners and the showdown.

From the street he called out Gus Luongon. “Come out here, Gus Luongon. I just sent home the boy you left minding some of my cows you rustled from me.”

Luongon stepped out the door of the saloon to see the little Balkans rancher standing in the middle of the road, obviously a bit slower at everything at half a century of age, twice his own age. “You’re an old man, Zambaza, an old man. Don’t push nothin’ on me that ain’t mine. You got no proof of anythin’ you’re guessin’ I did.’

“This much I’ll tell you. The Hightower boy is gone. My boys have gone after the cows you have hidden up the river, and then they’ll go after that other herd and your partner. That’ll wrap it all up in one saddle bag, and no sheriff and no man will stand against me. You have that chance right now. Once I threw a thief over the side of a ship in the middle of the ocean. He was an out and out thief of the worst sort. I’m not afraid of putting you in the same place, down and gone. I won’t hesitate a minute, even if your father was a dear friend of mine, one who died long before his time. He’d be ashamed of you, a common thief, a rustler, plain and simple. I told you once, Gus, never to cross me again, never to bother my family or my cows. You know nobody does my dirty work and this is going to be dirty work.”

Shame and anger flooded Luongon as he went for his gun. He envisioned the end of everything just before it came.

And the emperor of the new Balkan Empire saw once more a familiar military-like figure, on a tall horse, galloping up to his front door, a known waving in his arms, a known look on his face that years upon years could never erase.

He didn't know if it was another one of his dreams or his hopes or his own good wishes, but he knew he could not live without them, though he had been 25 years living without his son. He remembered he had seen him that other time, on the ship heading away from Greece, coming at him off the horizon in a small boat, trying to catch up to him, waving at him, smiling his surprise.

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