"Not a word of fiction, nor a fancy sketch": Festival as a Reconstruction of the Past in Helena, Texas

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> *. . . festivals are vehicles of mythic expression—our modern way of presenting ourselves to ourselves in light of the formative forces and experiences that made us what we are. We have been transformed by history and our myths must follow suit, for myth is of the present though it draws its sanction from the past.* (Bauman 1986:40)

The past century has been marked by accelerated social change and technological growth, perpetual transformations that have touched our society at many levels. The wake of progress is especially visible in small rural communities, whose political, economic, and cultural autonomy has been shaken in the process of modernization. While many have abandoned America's small towns in favor of more urban settings, those who remain may experience a growing sense of marginality as their dwindling communities are threatened with cultural homogenization and increasing dependency on outside resources.

Helena, a sleepy south-central Texas town, consists of a cluster of older wooden houses, two service stations, and a pair of state historical markers. Although Helena flourished in the nineteenth century as a social, political, and agricultural center, the community is now a borderline ghost town, long past her prime. Having at one time presided over the bustling community, the courthouse square is now the site of a historical museum which stands on the neatly manicured lawn, a solitary monument to an era when the town was county seat. However, at least once a year, the abandoned courthouse square temporarily resumes its role as the center of activity during the annual Indian Summer Days, a community festival held each October. Sponsored by the Karnes County Historical Society, whose members are predominantly descendants of Helena's Anglo-American majority, this cultural performance (and its 1921 ancestor, the Old Settlers'

Homecoming Pageant) is a reenactment which recalls the pioneer era; this period, if short-lived, represents the town's finest hour.

Festival, a complex and multivalent genre, is productively analyzed as a dialogue among members of a community and also as a public display event which speaks to those outside it. Such events offer an illuminating kaleidoscope of images that have been strategically selected for public presentation. According to Richard Bauman, "the community-based festival represents a mechanism by which the members of a community deal expressively with the forces of modernity" (1983:157). Festival scholar Beverly Stoeltje has commented on the efficacy of cultural performances to communicate:

> In these events, a culture is encapsulated, enacted, and placed on display for itself and for outsiders. Each performance constitutes a discrete complex event, characterized by a definite time span, an organized program of activity, performers, audience, place, and occasion. Often quite glamorous, these performances focus on a prominent theme in the experience of the social group. (1988:589)

Stoeltje was referring here specifically to an etiological myth: that of the American West, whose development has been endowed with the image of the Frontier, a great veil of civilization which swept across the country generating law and order throughout the chaotic and untamed wilderness that preexisted Anglo and European settlement. During festival, with its playful and liminal potential, the past may be enacted to recall appropriate traditions with which members of a community may inform the present in a useful and desirable way. Myth and history become intertwined in the multivocal arena of public display. Seemingly benign but overt themes and messages often mask a more private discourse that takes place among members of the community itself. Scholars who turn to festival as an analytical tool with which to gain insight into a community must be aware of the layers of information encoded in this context. Members of a community may be eager to share the *real* story, yet it is essential to bear in mind the notion of invented traditions, a concept Eric Hobsbawm has defined as:

> responses to novel situations which take the form of reference to old situations or which establish their own past by quasi-obligatory repetition. It is the contrast between the constant change and innovation of the modern world and the attempt to structure at least some parts of social life within it as unchanging and invariant, that makes . . . it so interesting. (1983:2)

Research on festival must be sensitive to interaction between the past and present and the way this interaction translates into festival

discourse. Because of the multivocal, many-layered nature of festival communication, a detailed analysis which examines an event's smaller components is necessary. However, in keeping with the scope of this article, I will focus on the community's strategic use of history via festival to negotiate its identity in the present. Let us turn to Helena's history, or histories.

The town was founded and settled in 1852 by Thomas Ruckman of Pennsylvania and Lewis Owings of Arkansas. During this era, Texas was a popular destination for both domestic and foreign settlers who flocked to the state in search of land and prosperity. Ruckman and Owings recognized Helena's location as an auspicious site for a new settlement, since it straddled the junction of two major stagecoach routes and sat along the banks of the San Antonio River. The surrounding land provided the essential natural resources for the young town: clay and lumber for building, and fertile land for cultivation. The two men established a mercantile business which flourished and attracted other adventurous settlers who came to try their luck on the new frontier. In 1854, Ruckman and Owings successfully petitioned the state legislature to form Karnes County, and Helena became the county seat. Befitting her role, Helena produced an array of businesses, a courthouse, a church, and a school. An oasis for weary travelers, the town served as the regional center of commerce and social life.

Helena played an active role in the frontier boom, the national movement to colonize and civilize North America. Often this process resulted in the displacement of previous inhabitants, as in the case of many American Indian peoples throughout the continent. Those who were not easily moved were "saved," "civilized," cr often obliterated. Whatever the case, the settlers often mapped their own notion of civilization onto the new community. Beverly Stoeltje has observed that:

> those who created and disseminated the frontier myth were largely powerful and influential members of the Eastern elite, who nurtured a myth that would validate their social structure as they preferred it, and thereby serve their special interests. (1987:247)

For Ruckman, the tenets of civilization were peacefulness, orderliness, morality (such as he prescribed it), and productivity, qualities he saw embodied in Helena's Anglo population. In 1890, he conducted the Karnes County census and recorded impressions of his rounds in a long essay entitled "The Census Taker." In his account, he depicted Helena as a model community:

> It has a good substantial rock courthouse, a jail, a two-story masonic building also of stone and a good sized church, about two hundred inhabitants of quiet moral citizens, attending sticking [sic] to their own affairs. (1890:15)

Situated in culturally plural south-central Texas, Helena was surrounded by communities of diverse ethnic origins. Mexican, Polish, German, Czech, and Bohemian settlements, as well as an ex-slave colony, shared Karnes County's jurisdiction. In his rounds as census taker, Ruckman found to his delight that members of these communities were picking up the cue from their Anglo neighbor and contributing in their way to the *civilization* of the wild frontier. In "The Census Taker,' he reported what he perceived as progress in Flaccus, the ex-slave colony:

> These people, one time slaves, have more correct notions, moral and religious, attending strictly to their own business that were a few years ago turned loose from bondage, penniless and inexperienced, are now up and about with the world in every particular. They deserve great credit for the progress they have made in a quarter of a century. From poverty to plenty, from ignorance to good common education, from loose notions of morality to a high standard of morals & religion. (Ruckman 1890:21-22)

However, if we listen to other chroniclers of Helena's early days, we will hear tales of violence and conflict, often set in Helena's saloons, which were apparently one of the town's more popular drawing cards. Ruckman's daughter, Eudora Butler, recorded her memories of Helena in a somewhat different light than did her father:

> "Folks used to call it Outlaw's Paradise," she says. "And from the things that went on it must have been. As far as I know not a single sheriff lived through a term in office until the 1880s.
>
> "Gun fights and stabbings were a common occurrence," she continues, "and from where we lived I could hear the cowboys and trail drifters shooting up the town at night. Why no one got around to building a church until I was fourteen years old!" (Butler 1936:25)

From her beginning then, Helena has been characterized by a "split" personality, including both the resourceful, productive pioneer and the rowdy, violent outlaw.

Helena's reign as county seat was relatively short-lived. Local legend accounts for her decline. During a barroom brawl, the son of a wealthy rancher was shot and killed. Vowing to kill the town that killed his son, the man sold the right of way through his land to prospecting railroad builders. Helena was bypassed by the railroad,

and despite the protest of Helena's citizens, Karnes City, conveniently located along the railroad tracks, subsequently became the county seat. While Karnes County grew in commercial importance with the advent of the railroad, Helena declined in population and status.

Although not mutually exclusive, other accounts of the arrival of the railroad in Karnes County offer alternative explanations for the construction of the new station in Karnes City. One source relates that the citizens of Helena failed to see the need for a railroad line through a town that already boasted the most important stage stop in the region. Thomas Ruckman, recognizing the necessity to keep pace with modern transportation, attempted to override the town's haughtiness and rally the financial support to sponsor the station. However, his fund-raising efforts fell short of the necessary amount, and the town lost its opportunity to become a stop on the San Antonio-Aransas Pass Railroad line.

Another version suggests that B.F. Yoakum, the railroad prospector who was "the pioneer railroad builder of the Southwest," was wary of the town's reputation as a haven for violence. Accordingly, he decided that "it would be better for everyone" if the train were routed through Karnes City rather than Helena (Butler 1936:26). Whatever the case, the results were the same. Modernity, in the form of the railroad and the commerce it brought, and violence, as suggested by oral history, are thus two key factors in the demise of the town as a booming frontier community.

Left to rest on her fading laurels, Helena watched as her Anglo inhabitants moved away in search of more prosperous surroundings. With the passage of time, and a growing familiarity arising from proximity, ethnic boundaries softened, and interaction among non-Anglo ethnic groups increased. The latter, growing in number and solidarity, likely appeared threatening to Anglo domination of the area.

In 1921, residents of Helena hosted the Old Settlers' Homecoming weekend, a reunion for the town's founding members and their descendants. According to a newspaper account of the event:

> There were many people here from various parts of the state who came to Karnes County in the early days to assist in the spread of civilization, at a time when it took stout hearts to undergo the hardships necessary to such an undertaking. (*The Karnes Citation:* April 28, 1921:1)

One of the highlights of the weekend was the pageant entitled: "Coming to Texas," a parade that featured enactments of the various

groups who had claimed political power over Texas. Apparently authenticity was an important criterion for the pageant's success. The newspaper account of the "Coming of Texas" parade is revealing:

> The first [feature] was an "Indian tribes on the march" showing the Lipan Indians moving westward out of Karnes County before the coming "palefaces." This was enacted by the school children, who represented braves, boys on 'paint' ponies, other children and squaws, two carrying a tepee and one a real live papoose.
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> The second feature was the landing (portion illegible) . . . fashioned sail boat, under the flag of the Bourbons, to the shores of Matagorda Bay.
>
> The young ladies who occupied the French boat in the Texas History Pageant have received a great many compliments. Miss Clydie Brown made a very striking La Salle as she distinctly resembles the great Frenchman, and was clad in a very rich court costume of green velvet and white fur. Miss Lucille Dietz also made a handsome courtier in purple velvet and purple plumed three cornered hat, while Miss Francis Yeary had on a lovely yellow silk robe especially becoming to her style of beauty. Miss Ruth Keepers and Miss Marguerite Dietz, also among the famous beauties of the county, were very fine in dark purple and green velvet suits.
>
> The fourth "flag" furnished the comedy of the pageant and was true to history also. It showed the coming of the Mexican settlers . . .
>
> . . . The fifth feature, "Coming to Texas" was conceded to be the most realistic. It showed an old-fashioned covered wagon, a "prairie schooner," driven by Lynn Carver as the pioneer 'immigrant' and carrying Mrs. A.L. Hasklins, who was born in Texas in 1845; Mr. William Winerich, who came to Texas about 1840, and Mrs. J. Ruckman Sr. The old ladies wore slat bonnets and smoked corn cob pipes, the little boys long or half-long trousers and the girls little long calico dresses with "pantalets." The wagon carried splint or rawhide bottom chairs and a massive four-poster bed. Many of the party walked and men and boys of old Texas pioneer families of Helena, including the Robuck, Ruckman, Elder, and Lorenz families rode as guards with old muzzle loading guns ready for instant use. (*The Karnes Citation* April 28, 1921:1)

By assuming their parts in the parade, the Anglo participants obscured the link between the other ethnic groups represented and their roles in Texas and local history. This connection is the source of the other groups' historic roots and consequently of their symbolic power. Anglos represented themselves, rendering their own all the more realistic with the use of actual pioneers, wearing and displaying authentic articles dating from that era. In so doing, the Anglo actors set up a contiguous or metonymic link with the time of the official settlement of the area. Metonymy connects phenomena which are related but are separated by some factor such as time or space. In the case of the Old Settlers' Homecoming pageant, costumes worn by participants drew on the relationship between the community and the

pioneer past, the period during which this type of clothing was worn. At a time when the people of Helena were feeling their socioeconomic stronghold on the area slipping, the staging and recreating of history helped to reestablish their "original" claim to power and to evoke a more prosperous era.

The quest for the truthful depiction of the community began appropriately with its founder himself, Thomas Ruckman. In "The Census Taker," he proposed:

> . . . to give you the facts–Not a word of fiction, nor a fancy sketch. Every incident related is litterally [sic] true, and every description as nature has made it, and as near as the eye can take it in and as accurate as the pen can portray it. (Ruckman 1890:1)

In the same earnest spirit, a critic of "The Story of Texas" described the parade as depicting events that were ". . . just picked up whole out of the past and sat before present eyes for a brief review" (*The Karnes Citation:* April 28, 1921:1). Yet as we have seen, some details in the depiction of reality necessarily belie a certain amount of subjective input on the part of its authors. Because of their suspension between the past and the future, the real and enacted, and between what is considered authentic and contrived, festivals occupy a liminal space wherein participants may play with their past. In the process of enactment and demonstration that took place at both the Old Settlers' Homecoming weekend and Indian Summer Days, participants were playing with and reestablishing their sacred charter, that is, the image of themselves and the pioneer era that was forged during this liminal period and then perpetuated. With the opening of festival consciousness, reality and history become malleable. What was defined as real in the context of festival was renegotiated and crystallized for future use. If participants were framing their celebrations within a historical context, they were linking themselves up with a larger force to draw on its power as a symbol. In the words of Kenneth Burke:

> . . . art converts "truth" into a symbolic process by creating a correspondingly important setting for the important traits being expressed and thereby excluding the irrelevancies and providing form (Burke 1968:213).

What seemed to be important to "The Story of Texas" participants was to locate the origin of Anglo domination in Karnes County and to symbolically bring it forward into the present in an effort to reassert this image with what few resources remained. What was

excluded, distorted, and minimalized was "foreign" competition for power and its claim to legitimation in the historic past.

Not only was the voice of the other groups silenced, but their symbolic representation was overtly manipulated to render them illusory and playful, not to be taken seriously. Most likely, it was not accidental that the Lipan Indians were portrayed by children. This choice of actors played on the stereotype of American Indians as childlike, and, in this context, incapable of holding political power. From the Anglo perspective, the tepee may have seemed an ephemeral home, while the Anglo pioneers held their parade in the shadow of their more permanent, albeit transformed, architectural structures.

As with the representation of the Lipan Indians, the choice of women to portray the French contingent of the parade is revealing. Here the community seemed to be playing on the stereotypical image of the French as being effeminate. Such negative imagery was especially effective as it provided a striking contrast to the description of the Anglo pioneers. For in the "most realistic" feature, even the women seemed to have a masculine nature. The older women smoked corncob pipes and the little girls wore pantalets. In this comparison, the Anglo women and children were depicted in a far more masculine light than the French men, one of whom was a well-known explorer. In the context of a pageant held by a community in which masculinity is a positively valent cultural construct, the depiction of the French explorers as feminine was undoubtedly a disparaging statement on whatever claim to power they may have had in the area.

That the Mexican flag should have been considered comical is a realistic portrayal not of the reign Mexico once held over the area but rather of the contemporary social situation of the Mexican-Americans in Karnes County. This direct jab at the era when Texas was still a part of Mexico reflects the fact that the Mexican-Americans' ancestors had most recently posed a threat to Anglo domination at both a state and county level. At the time of the pageant, the Mexican-Americans were also the only other group in the procession who were still living in the area. Many Mexican-Americans have had to leave Karnes County over the years, having been squeezed out of the livestock and agricultural market by unfair trade policies implemented by the Anglo population. Mexican-Americans are still referred to as "Mexicans" by Anglos in this area and are linguistically, as in many other respects, held apart from the dominant culture. At the time of the pageant, there was no shortage of Mexican-Americans in Karnes County, and yet they, as well as the rest of the groups portrayed in the pageant,

were barred from representing their own ancestors in the historical parade.

The derogatory image of the other groups depicted in the Old Settlers' Homecoming parade situated the Anglo pioneers as the original and hence most powerful and legitimate settlers of the area. In the context of the pageant, this negative imagery symbolically protected Anglos from cultural, economic, and political incursions of the other groups (including the more prosperous Anglos) living in the county. The men "who rode . . . with old muzzle loading guns ready for instant use" acted as guardians from the past who came forward in time to protect the sacred order.

Beverly Stoeltje has commented on festival's capacity to impose social order:

> Large-scale behavior of any period operates with goals, strategies, and rhetoric directed by the politically powerful forces of the place and time. These hegemonic forces implement their goals by utilizing some cultural formation which coordinates the familiar and the strange with ideas and images easily identified by the general populace, and by linking a plan for action to a compelling natural or super-natural force that voices authority and provides the populace with the illusion that the right forces are in control, and that "we" are winning in a battle against "them." (1987:239-40)

The sight of several founding members of the community dressed in pioneer-era clothing, parading in the old wagons, may have made the members of the community feel powerful, as though the town were regaining its strength. However, such was only an illusion, as the town gradually had to open its boundaries to allow non-Anglos to live in Helena proper, or the town would have stood virtually empty. In studying such events as these, we are not in search of an accurate portrayal of the past but rather an interpretation which gives us insight into the worldview of those inhabiting the present. According to Richard Bauman, "the efficacy of myths is not measured by the standard of historicity. More important by far is the way that they establish a charter for the present" (1986:25).

Not only do these myths form a charter for the present, but they also form a basis for new myths and their expression. In this light, the departure from the Old Settlers' Homecoming to the 1985 Indian Summer Days is indicative of the growing need on the part of Helena's residents to highlight the positive, internally harmonious image of their heritage, and to de-emphasize the negative violent one. Both festive events invoke a selected portion of history to strengthen the Anglo hegemony established in the past and symbolically carried into the present. They both glorify the pioneer past as a means of

tapping the community's historic importance. On the occasion of the Indian Summer Days festival, residents of Helena call upon the pioneer era again for symbolic affirmation, but in a more subtle and conventionalized manner, and perhaps with different motivation.

Towards the middle of the twentieth century, it looked as though Helena might indeed "die" as foretold by the legendary rancher. Many of Helena's historic buildings deteriorated or burned as time took its toll on the forsaken town. Most people were content to let it go, but during the 1970s, the American bicentennial era, interest waxed in restoring the remnants of the town and in preserving it as a historical marker. The reactivated Karnes County Historical Society raised funds to restore and renovate the old courthouse and to convert it into a historical museum. The museum features displays such as a pioneer kitchen and a schoolroom, peopled with mannequins dressed in pioneer attire. Other buildings, such as the old Helena post office (Helena no longer has its own post office) and a pioneer farmhouse, have been moved onto the premises of the old courthouse square, a sacralized space, now enclosed by a chain-link fence.

In 1985, Indian Summer Days was similar to small-town festivals held nationwide. It featured work skills demonstrations of such activities as candle-dipping, blacksmithing, the chuck-box, and so on. Residents of Karnes county sold homemade items and food that showcased the talent of the women in the community. Photographs and paintings celebrating the beauty and agricultural abundance of the county were also for sale, as were books about the area written by a local historian. Tables managed by members of the Karnes County Historical Society offered calendars and historic photographs of the community.

Here the pioneer days were not invoked as an event, as in the "Coming to Texas" pageant, but rather as a lifestyle characterized by productivity, resourcefulness, and most importantly, independence. A peaceful aura surrounded the festival, as if the spirit of Thomas Ruckman prevailed after all. There was a notable absence of weapons and of the mention of violence that had been at the forefront of the pageant. If there were allusions to the hardships faced by the settlers, they referred to the more environmental challenges of pioneer living in Texas, such as rattlesnakes and dust storms.

Another apparent difference which distinguished Indian Summer Days from the "Coming to Texas" pageant was the participation of Mexican-Americans, many of whom currently lived in Helena. Several Mexican-American men who were members of the local Veterans of Foreign Wars chapter (VFW) and who attended the festival in uniform

were awarded honors for their work on the farmhouse that had just been moved onto the museum grounds. Shirley Ruckman, president of the historical society, told the assembled crowd that these men deserved thanks for their willingness to "sweat out in the hot sun" to ensure the completion of the project before the festival. The presentation of awards to Mexican-Americans may indicate a growing tolerance for others in contrast to the earlier pageant, when the Mexican group provided the comedy of the parade. The recognition and honoring of the Mexican-American community's participation in the town's historic preservation may not be a concession to their involvement in the pioneer era, but it is certainly an index of their contribution to the survival of Helena as a viable community.

While it seems that the residents of Helena nurture a pleasant picture of the pioneer past, behind the scenes the tenor of this era is still debated even among members of the Anglo population. In an interview, Mary Carver, Thomas Ruckman's granddaughter, and Shirley Ruckman, who has married into the family, responded to my questions about some of the more colorful aspects of the town's history:

Mary: Well horrible, of course there were some horrible things that happened that in my estimation should have been forgotten, to think about it you know it was horrible.

Shirley: But it's part of the history and part of the folklore of the area, you know, but it needs to be included. But I'd like to hear it confirmed somewhere. (Carver, Ruckman 1985)

For those who are willing to listen, the "horrible things" are readily substantiated by other voices in Helena. For if festival represents the public level of community discourse, there is a more private one that is not on display. Other residents, descendants of non-Anglo ethnic groups who live in Helena, were willing to discuss the darker aspects of Helena's history, but behind closed doors. One man ordered me to "cut off the tape recorder so I can tell you what *really* happened." The inclusion here of these narratives that were revealed by several consultants would betray their confidence and are thus inappropriate for publication. However, if their contents remain unknown, these stories suggest a history that presents a less rosy pioneer past than the Indian Summer Days festival would suggest. Out of respect and/or perhaps fear of the feelings of the festival organizers, these narrators have chosen to maintain their version of the past on a more discreet plane. The suggestion of the violence whose influence may explain the demise of Helena as a prosperous community is thus hidden from the public gaze at Indian Summer Days.

Because of the dual character of Helena's past, it is not unusual that today's residents of the town should have an ambivalent perspective on their history as well as different stories to tell. The private nature of the subordinate discourse, while it adds drama, seems to enhance the position of the Anglo mediators of the public image, who have chosen to downplay the negative and violent images of the pioneer past. Perhaps references to the violent character of the past serve as painful reminders of Helena's downfall from the position of county seat, not to mention the decline of Anglo domination of the area. However, inherent in the subdued voices is a legitimation of authenticity which also draws its sanction from a relationship with the historical past. The events surrounding the birth and death of Helena as an Anglo-dominated community are communicated in disparate and ambivalent dialogues which reflect the relative positions of narrators who are residents of the town. If Indian Summer Days presents an Anglo symbolic discourse, the absence of those who do not concur with this particular evocation of the past from this event is hardly surprising. It is not their festival, although it is advertised as a public event. An advance notice for the 1984 festival reads:

> Another early craft, quilting, served a social as well as practical function when ladies gathered for the traditional "quilting bee." Festival goers will be made to feel right at home by these talented ladies, who will invite onlookers to join right in as they stitch fancy designs on a handmade quilt top. (*The Kenedy Advance Times*, October 10, 1984)

The versions of the past that come forward in time via festival and narrative are also fancy designs stitched in the minds of those who relate them. Although the public nature of such an event as Indian Summer Days might suggest that the town is expanding its boundaries to include other participants, the festival may actually serve to fortify the town's separation from those outside the community as well as delineate the factions that exist within it. Anthony Cohen says of small-town festivals:

> They are symbolic statements designed to perpetuate the boundary, not to demolish it. Their efficacy depends upon the outside world being unable either to recognize the boundary at all or recognize it in the terms in which it is defined by those 'inside.' The pitch of this private symbolic discourse often puts it beyond the discernment of the outsider's ear. (Cohen 1985:309)

If we are to be responsible in our role as cultural analysts, we must be attuned to the multiplicity of voices which communicate in such a context as the small community festival. It is essential to tune our outsiders' ears to the pitch of the multivalent discourse with which

individuals and communities creatively draw on their history to serve their immediate agendas. Unless we avail ourselves of the potential for the communication of a multitude of disparate voices, we may come out with only part of the story.

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