

2013

## More studies in Rio Grande Valley history

Milo Kearney

*The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley*, [milo.kearney@utrgv.edu](mailto:milo.kearney@utrgv.edu)

Anthony K. Knopp

*The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley*, [Anthony.Knopp@utrgv.edu](mailto:Anthony.Knopp@utrgv.edu)

Antonio Zavaleta

*The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley*

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### Recommended Citation

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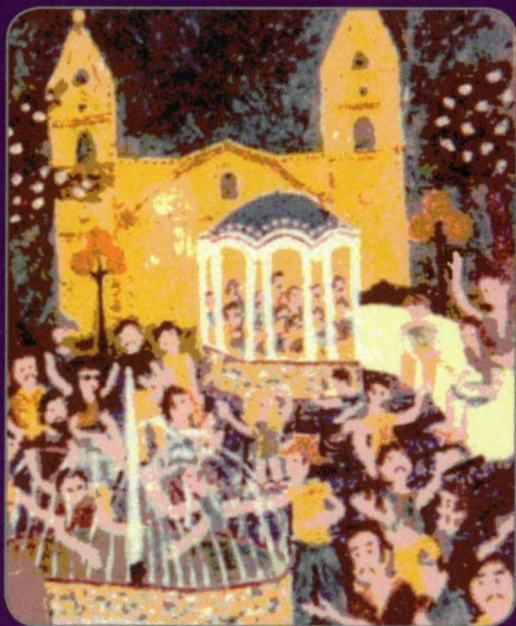
# MORE STUDIES IN RIO GRANDE VALLEY HISTORY

Edited by

**Milo Kearney**  
**Anthony Knopp**  
**Antonio Zavaleta**

Illustrations by

**Peter Gawenda**  
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Volume Eleven

The Texas Center for Border and Transnational Studies  
The UT Brownsville Regional History Series  
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Book design by Camilla S. A. Montoya

Printed in Canada



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## Matamoros' Love Song to Brownsville

Dear daughter of my heart,  
when America took your hand,  
it was hard to let you go.

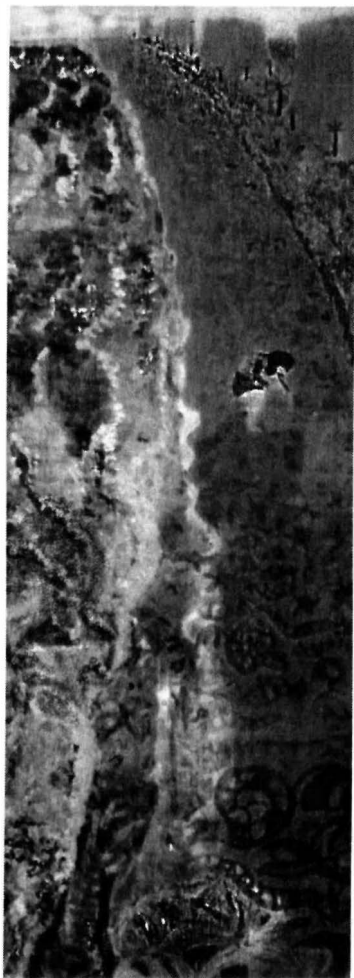
But, little did I know,  
though you were in a different land,  
we would never grow apart.

How often you welcomed me,  
to watch you blossom forth  
in your life across the river.

On Padre Island we walked together.  
You have always shown your worth,  
and have kept me company.

In trouble, you proved true,  
opening your door,  
Despite those who'd come between,  
you object to being mean.  
Trouble-makers you deplore.  
I will always treasure you.

— *Milo Kearney*







# EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY HISTORY



PLAZA DE MERCADO, MATAMOROS, TAMPS (IN THE EARLY SIXTIES)



*Con un pie en cada lado:*  
Origins of El Rancho San Lorenzo de las Minas

by

Mary Jo Galindo

Before the Río Grande Valley became a contested border between the United States and Mexico, and between predominantly Latino and Anglo-American societies, it was the northern frontier of Spanish Nuevo Santander and a border between Spanish Mexico and indigenous societies to the north. The *pobladores*, or colonists, who moved into the region from mining communities to the south in the 1730s, and their descendants to the present day, had to adapt constantly to the changing political, economic, and social environment, as people in borderlands always do. The eighteenth-century colony of Nuevo Santander attracted my attention after looking up my grandfather Pedro Hernández Barrera's family tree. What I learned about my lineage would make me question the version of Texas history that I was taught as a child growing up in Texas public schools. That version did not credit the contributions of Nuevo Santander *pobladores* to this state's modern cattle industry, yet theirs were some of the earliest ranches in Texas, from Laredo to the Gulf Coast.

When I discovered my family's connection to Nuevo Santander and the Texas Longhorn, mascot of my alma mater, I felt like I had recovered some part of history that had been long forgotten or judged irrelevant by the authors of Texas history. The Nueces Strip, as the contested land between the Nueces River and the Río Grande is known, is an enigma. Perhaps paying too much attention to it and to Nuevo Santander in the history books might call into question the rationale behind the Texas Revolution. On one of my first visits to Ciudad Mier in 1998, I brought a poster-sized copy of my family tree. It depicted my grandfather's genealogical line to four founding families of Ciudad Mier, including Joaquin

Bazán and Manuela González, Gaspar García and Gertrudis Barrera, Manuel Hinojosa and Inés Chapa, and Ramón Guerra and Rosalia Hinojosa.

My grandfather always told me that if I ever met someone from the Río Grande Valley with the last name of Barrera or Guerra, then we were probably related. As I scan my family tree I see that a Guerra married a Barrera, who married a Guerra, and so on for a few generations. He also said that the families intertwined in part because, "*No había otras*" ("There were no others"). Later, I would realize that the low population density, the isolation of the *ranchos*, the desire to consolidate wealth, and the cultural practice of celebrating social events with a large communal feast all contributed to the intense intermarriage between neighboring families. I first saw the pattern in my own family tree. For example, three daughters of Gaspar García and Gertrudis Barrera married three sons of José Peña and Ana Apolonia López.<sup>1</sup> The first two daughters married in a double wedding on the same day, January 29, 1779. Wondering if this pattern was unique to my family, I studied three generations of marriages in thirty-two founding families of Ciudad Mier for my Master's Report. More than half of the ninety-four marriages involved a spouse from another landowning family, and about forty percent of the intermarrying families owned *porciones*, or land grants, that were adjacent to each other.<sup>2</sup> A pattern of multiple siblings in one family marrying into the same other family is evident in eighteen percent of the unions examined, and occur in about forty percent of the families studied.<sup>3</sup>

So when I unfurled the family tree in Ciudad Mier for the first time, I was surprised to hear, almost immediately, "*Somos primos* (We're cousins)," from Arq. Gil Javier "Javi" Guerra. He took one look and found a common ancestor, Ramón Guerra. As I learned from Javi, and would continually notice, the history of Nuevo Santander is not lost. The residents of Ciudad Mier traverse their historic streets, live and work in structures that are more than 200 years old, and appreciate their colonial roots on a daily basis. My history had been obscured and lost to me, but I was finally home. Javi,

his grandmother Doña María Berta Hinojosa de Guerra, and their families (who are the landowners of *Rancho El Saladito*) granted me permission to conduct archaeological investigations, and I did so after securing Permit 401-36/0848 from the Consejo de Arqueología del Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH).

### Los Ranchos de Ciudad Mier

Between 1748 and 1755, the civilian colonists of Nuevo Santander established 23 communities, including six along the banks of the Río Grande—Laredo, Dolores, Revilla (Guerrero Viejo), Ciudad Mier, Camargo, and Reynosa (Figure 1). These *pobladores* received *porciones* in 1767 on which to establish livestock ranches (Figure 2). The *porciones* were on both banks of the Río Grande, because Nuevo Santander's northern boundary was the Nueces River (Figure 3). These land grants form present-day Webb, Zapata, Starr, and Hidalgo counties. Ethno-historic information documents the early settler practice of living and growing crops on the south bank, while conducting ranching activities on the north bank of the Río Grande.<sup>4</sup> The *pobladores* and their descendents literally lived *con un pie en cada lado* (with a foot on each side of the river). Thus, these ranches were among the first of their kind in Texas, representing a unique form of civilian colonization based on the relocation of entire families, and without major emphases on missions and presidios.

Archaeological evidence demonstrates that the Río Grande has attracted and united people for thousands of years. The river has been a divider of nations only since 1848 and the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. In 1582, when Cerralvo was first founded as the capital, the colonizers of Nuevo León began displacing indigenous groups. During the early years of Nuevo León, many Indians were captured and sold into slavery for work in the mines near Zacatecas, Sombrerete, and Mazapil.<sup>5</sup> Some who escaped this fate migrated to the banks of the Río Grande, joining groups already there. Defending their *porción* and the colony at large from Indian attack was an obligation that *pobladores* as-

sumed along with land ownership. The ranch became a means for controlling vast areas of unoccupied land with few settlers, and outlasted missions and presidios as social institutions.<sup>6</sup>

As with all of the Nuevo Santander communities that line the Río Grande, Ciudad Mier was established in part because of an easy ford of the Río Álamo—El Paso del Cántaro—and also because this passage led in turn to at least two easy fords of the Río Grande—El Paso de los Arrieros (muleteers) and El Álamo, located at the confluence of the two waterways.<sup>7</sup> Although smuggling, policing, and militarization along the border have received recent notoriety, these are not new practices; rather they are an integral part of an ever-evolving borderlands existence.<sup>8</sup> For residents of Ciudad Mier, and other Nuevo Santander communities along the Río Grande, trading with the French or entities north of the Río Grande was common practice, despite its prohibition during colonial times. Trade policies developed in Mexico City were not easily enforceable along the northern reaches of New Spain.

Cattle ranching in South Texas matured into an industry during the last decades of the nineteenth century, but the origins of livestock raising date to the eighteenth century Spanish colonization efforts at Mission Espíritu Santo,<sup>9</sup> the missions and ranches at San Antonio,<sup>10</sup> and the ranching communities of Nuevo Santander.<sup>11</sup> The first cattle in northern New Spain were brought by Don Luís Carvajal y de la Cueva to Cerralvo from the Pánuco basin of southern Tamaulipas and northern Veracruz.<sup>12</sup> When Carvajal arrived in 1582, he established Ciudad de León (now Cerralvo, N.L.) at the site of the abandoned Las Minas de San Gregorio.<sup>13</sup> The cattle that Carvajal brought were descendants of a herd imported in 1527 for the soldier-colonists at Santisteban de Pánuco.<sup>14</sup> A majority of the families who founded Ciudad Mier brought their livestock with them from Cerralvo.<sup>15</sup>

Carvajal received an *encomienda* (a royal commission) to conquer, colonize, and govern a region known as the Nuevo Reyno de León that encompassed about 1,614,000 square kilometers.<sup>16</sup> Carvajal

was required as part of his grant agreement to herd cattle from the Pánuco region and establish a livestock-raising industry.<sup>17</sup> His greatest contribution was not the cattle, however, but the horses and a herding technique, unique in New Spain, that rounded up feral or semi-feral cattle from horseback.<sup>18</sup>

The descendants of Carvajal's herd were most likely moved to the Río Grande along with Nuevo Santander colonists, and they would eventually be known as Texas Longhorns.<sup>19</sup> The system of cattle ranching that sustained the eighteenth-century colonial settler in Nuevo Santander, and that would develop during the latter half of the nineteenth century into a complex capitalist venture by Anglo ranchers in Texas, was an extension of the system that the Spanish imported and adapted to the New World. It was a method that developed along the coast of Spain using horse-mounted *vaqueros*, or cowboys, and dogs to manage cattle herds for long-distance grazing, periodic roundups, branding, and long-distance cattle drives.<sup>20</sup> Herded, branded cattle in Spain commonly co-existed with wild, unclaimed stock on unfenced ranges.<sup>21</sup> These are all characteristics of the ranching method adopted by Nuevo Santander colonists.

The *mesta*, or stockman's guild, was responsible for administering those laws pertaining to livestock.<sup>22</sup> The *mesta* was managed by an elected official (*el alcalde de la mesta*), who supervised an annual or semi-annual *rodeo* (roundup); monitored the branding of calves, the cutting out of beef for slaughter during the autumn, and the removing of strays from the herds; settled rancher's disputes; and fined or punished violators of the *mesta*'s rules.<sup>23</sup> In accordance with the *mesta* code, Spanish, and later Mexican, *vaqueros* practiced open-range cattle raising, resolving the issue of ownership of the wild and branded cattle during the rodeo.

Cattle rustling began as early as the 1830s, when Anglo newcomers began settling in central and southeastern Texas. These settlers were unaware, or disregarded, the *mesta* code and assumed possession of cattle as they roamed free. When the Mexican *va-*

*queros* tried to reclaim their property, they were labeled *bandidos*, and the Texas Rangers were formed in response.<sup>24</sup> In turn, Anglo cattle rustlers stole cattle from Mexican rancheros on both sides of the Río Grande, with complicity from Texas Rangers and local officials.<sup>25</sup> During the Texas Revolution, Texan army commanders regularly sent detachments south of the Nueces River to gather cattle to feed their troops.<sup>26</sup> The process was repeated by both armies during the Mexican-American War and again by the Confederate Army during the U.S. Civil War. The Cattle War followed the civil war and extended into the late 1870s as ranchers on both sides of the border rustled cattle throughout the Nueces Strip.<sup>27</sup> Thus, the stereotype that portrays all Mexicans or Mexican-Americans as banditos was born and nurtured. To gauge how persistent this stereotype became, just consider the character *Frito Bandito*, who was created a century later to sell corn chips.

### **Origins of Rancho El Saladito**

Rancho El Saladito was the site of archaeological investigations focused on a Spanish colonial civilian ranching settlement (Figure 4). The archaeological project formed a crucial part of a multi-scalar study, which incorporated ethnographic, genealogical, and archival research.<sup>28</sup> The settlement at Rancho El Saladito is divided into two temporally-and-spatially distinct occupations. The ranch is bisected by the Arroyo El Saladito, which delivers both run-off and sulfurous spring water to the Río Grande. Based on artifact analysis and census data, settlement on the east side of the arroyo began shortly after Ciudad Mier was founded as part of the colony of Nuevo Santander, in 1753, and continued until after 1824, when Matamoros became an international port and a conduit of English ceramics.

Oral history tells us that a settlement of one or more *jacales* (structures made of poles and thatch, often covered in daub or plaster) existed in 1928 on the east side of the arroyo.<sup>29</sup> After the property changed hands, construction started on the west side of the arroyo, where settlement continues to the present, and includes a



one-room stone structure, the ruins of a dam, the ruins of a lime kiln, a building stone quarry, and a sulfurous spring. Although oral history puts the beginning of the most recent occupation at 1928 on the west side of the arroyo, certain glass and metal artifacts (solarized bottle glass and square nails) suggest an occupation on the west side dating to at least the late 1800s.

Fortunately, several sets of census data survive for Ciudad Mier, including from the years 1782, 1790, 1800, and a partial census from approximately 1817. Using a combination of genealogical information, land grant records, and census data, it is possible to trace the descendents of the *pobladores* who founded El Rancho San Lorenzo de las Minas, which is the precursor to Rancho El Saladito. The next two sections address both the origins of the ranch, of the colonists, and their descendents who inhabited it.

## General Historical Background

According to oral history, Rancho El Saladito is located within the original boundaries of Ciudad Mier Porción 6, which was awarded to José Ramón Guerra in 1767.<sup>30</sup> Genealogical research conducted by family members also connects them to the José Ramón Guerra and María Rosalia Hinojosa family.<sup>31</sup> Rancho El Saladito was purchased in 1928 by Adolfo Hinojosa Sáenz and San Juana Gómez Gómez.<sup>32</sup>

One of their daughters, Doña María Berta Hinojosa Gómez de Guerra, was about six years old when they bought the property. She remembers one or two *jacales* in the vicinity of the oldest settlement evident at the ranch. Her family never occupied the *jacales*; instead her father hired Francisco Hinojosa Barrera to build a stone house on the opposite side of the Arroyo El Saladito.<sup>33</sup> Francisco, like many of the other ranch laborers, lived in the nearby community of Los Guerra. The house he built still stands today and is maintained by the family (Figure 5).

Adolfo Hinojosa Sáenz and San Juana Gómez Gómez lived on the ranch and coordinated the work of a few laborers. In times

of harvest or slaughter, they employed up to ten people. Most of the laborers came from Los Guerra and went home at night. Occasionally, they would stay overnight at the ranch inside a *jacal* associated with a cooking *bornó* (Figure 6). There was also another *jacal* structure to the immediate north of the stone building, where a covered cement porch is now located.<sup>34</sup>

Adolfo and San Juana's children did not live at the ranch, but they joined their parents there on the weekends. The children lived in Ciudad Mier with their grandmother so they could attend school. They traveled by wagon to the ranch. Their parents grew crops on a terrace between the stone house and the arroyo, and had a smaller garden close to the house with a variety of vegetables. They also raised a wide variety of animals.<sup>35</sup>

Doña María Berta Hinojosa Gómez de Guerra supplied the names of her parents and grandparents. She also knew her husband's parents and his maternal grandparents. Using the baptismal, marriage, and death records for Ciudad Mier, Camargo, and Cerralvo,<sup>36</sup> and census data,<sup>37</sup> I reconstructed the following family tree (Figure 7). Unfortunately, I found no further information about Hildegardo Guerra's ancestors. A wealth of information exists, however, about the Hinojosa and Gómez families. For example, it turns out that the founders of Rancho El Saladito, Adolfo Hinojosa and San Juana Gómez, were both distantly related to the Manuel Ángel Hinojosa and María Juana Sánchez family. Four generations back on San Juana Gómez' family tree is found María Ines Hinojosa, the daughter of Manuel Ángel Hinojosa and María Juana Sánchez. This family received Ciudad Mier Porción 5 in 1767 (see Figure 1). Another of their sons, José Vicente Hinojosa, is three generations back on Adolfo Hinojosa's family tree. Manuel Ángel Hinojosa's sister, María Rosalia Hinojosa married Ramón Guerra, who received Ciudad Mier Porción 6 in 1767 (Figure 1). My research did not establish a connection between Doña María Berta Hinojosa Gómez de Guerra's family and the Ramón Guerra family; however, research undertaken previously by family members has made this connection.<sup>38</sup> Further

research would likely turn up more information about Gil Javier Guerra (my informant's great-grandfather) that would connect these families through time.

Doña María Berta Hinojosa Gómez de Guerra's family tree includes five recipients of Ciudad Mier *porciones* and one from Camargo. In Ciudad Mier, *porciones* 2, 5, 8, 20, 21, and 67 were awarded to José Santiago Barrera, José Manuel Ángel Hinojosa, José Gervacio Hinojosa, Nicolás Gonzalez (*porciones* 20 and 21), and José Antonio Ramírez, respectively (Figure 1). According to census data, there are also several *ranchos* that are associated with her family tree, including Rancho La Bonita y San Nicolás, Rancho Los Arrieros, and Rancho San Francisco.

I focus now on the family of José Ramón Guerra and María Rosalia Hinojosa, who established El Rancho San Lorenzo on their *porción*. Based on the baptismal, marriage, and death records for Ciudad Mier,<sup>39</sup> I have reconstructed the family tree for José Ramón Guerra and María Rosalia Hinojosa (Figure 8). She was the daughter of Manuel Hinojosa and Inés de Chapa, who received Ciudad Mier *Porción* 4. Rosalia's brother Manuel Ángel Hinojosa, as I previously noted, received Ciudad Mier *Porción* 5 and her uncle Gervacio Hinojosa received Ciudad Mier *Porción* 8 (Figure 1). This does not exhaust the list of her relatives who received land grants in Ciudad Mier's jurisdiction, but it helps illuminate the settlement pattern of the immediate area. For example, Ciudad Mier *Porción* 7 was awarded to José Juan Francisco Sáenz and María Teresa Peña (Figure 1). Two of the Sáenz daughters married two of María Rosalia Hinojosa's nephews within six days of each other, in January of 1786.<sup>40</sup> Thus emerges the image of a sparsely populated frontier whose settlers are strengthened by their extended family ties. Marriage bonds united families, property, and land grants. Among the *pobladores* of Nuevo Santander, Rosalia's nephews did not stand out because they married sisters. As previously mentioned, low population density contributed to the frequent practice of multiple siblings marrying into the same

other family, as did the motivation to consolidate land holdings and maximize access to key natural resources.<sup>41</sup>

## Origins of the Guerra and Hinojosa Families

Manuel Hinojosa and Inés de Chapa brought their family to Ciudad Mier from Cerralvo, Nuevo León. This family was one of 19 associated with the ranching settlement of José Félix de Almondoz that was formed in 1734 by 166 people.<sup>42</sup> The ranch was called El Paso del Cántaro, located near and named for an easy ford of the Río Álamo. This branch of the Hinojosa family appears in the historical record in 1749 associated with the colonial settlement of Camargo. They, along with the other 18 families of El Paso del Cántaro, were forced to enroll as settlers of Camargo to prevent being driven off their land.<sup>43</sup> These same families formed the core of the population of Ciudad Mier in 1753, when the town was renamed and organized as part of Nuevo Santander. Ramón Guerra's name appears on the list in 1749, associated with Manuel Ángel Hinojosa's family, but he was not an approved colonist, perhaps because he was not yet married.<sup>44</sup> Ramón Guerra's pedigree can be traced to Don Antonio Guerra Cañamal, who was born in 1629 in Llanes, Spain.<sup>45</sup> He emigrated to the New World before 1624. Because they were third cousins, Ramón and María Rosalia Hinojosa had to petition the church in Cerralvo, in 1752, for permission to marry.<sup>46</sup> By the 1757 census, Ramón Guerra and Rosalia Hinojosa had three children. Their property included weapons, four horses, and three mules.

Several subsequent sets of census data survive for Ciudad Mier, including for the years 1782, 1790, 1800, and a partial census from approximately 1817. Using this combination of genealogical information, land grant records, and census data, it is possible to trace the descendents of the *pobladores* who founded El Rancho San Lorenzo de las Minas, which is the precursor to Rancho El Saladito.

## 1782 Census of Ciudad Mier

In the 1782 census, two families are listed under Rancho de San Lorenzo, along with their ages:<sup>47</sup>

**Table 1: Inhabitants of El Rancho de San Lorenzo as Listed in the 1782 Census for Ciudad Mier, Tamaulipas, Mexico**

Family Number	Family Members	Their Ages
<i>Familia</i> No. 76	Ramón Guerra	65
	José Antonio Guerra	29
	Alejandro	22
	María Ygnacia	19
	María Juana	18
	Gariela	16
	Vicente	15
	Ygnacio	11
<i>Familia</i> No. 77	Alvino Guerra	26
	Rosalía Salinas	28
	María Guadalupe	7
	Manuela	5
	Manuel	3
	Laueano	1
	Hilario	1 month

María Rosalía Hinojosa died in Ciudad Mier, on June 14, 1773. Ramón Guerra, the widower, appears in this census nine years later living with his children on the ranch. The family of his married son, Alvino Guerra, constitutes the remainder of the ranch's population. The order that the ranches appear in the 1782 census and a crosscheck of the inhabitants shows that Gervacio Hinojosa, who received Ciudad Mier *Porción* 8, founded El Rancho San Francisco. Juan Francisco Sáenz, who received Ciudad Mier *Porción* 7, follows Gervacio in the census under the heading Rancho Las Flores. Ramón Guerra, who received Ciudad Mier *Porción* 6 comes next in the 1782 census, followed by El Rancho San Salvador del Santiago Barrera, who received Ciudad Mier

*Porción 2.*<sup>48</sup> Thus, as we follow the census taker's route from the town's center, we get an idea of the layout of the neighborhood and the vast stretches of territory that separated the ranches.

### 1790 Census of Ciudad Mier

There is no heading for El Rancho San Lorenzo in the 1790 census, but the following entries are sandwiched between those given for El Rancho Las Flores and El Rancho Salvador, consistent with the order of ranches as they appear in the 1782 census. Three families along with their ages are listed:<sup>49</sup>

**Table 2: Inhabitants of El Rancho de San Lorenzo as Listed in the 1790 Census for Ciudad Mier, Tamaulipas, Mexico**

Family Number	Family Members	Their Ages
<i>Familia</i> No. 88	Ramón Guerra	73
	Juana	26
	Vicente	23
	Ignacio	19
	Antonia	4
<i>Familia</i> No. 89	José Alejandro Guerra	30
	Lugarda García	27
	Juan José	6
	María Casilda	3
	Juan José	9
<i>Familia</i> No. 90	Antonio Alvino Guerra	32
	Rosalía Salinas	36
	María Guadalupe	15
	Manuela	15
	José Manuel	11
	Laureano	9
	Hilario	7
	José de los Ángeles	5
	María Francisca Guerra	3
	María Rita	2

Clearly Ramón Guerra lived a long and prosperous life. He was 73 years old and still listed as head of a household, although it is likely that his two oldest children still at home, Juana and Vicente, would have cared for him and the ranch. Ramón Guerra died in Cerralvo, Nuevo León, on June 23, 1798.<sup>50</sup> Juana married José Antonio Peña on October 17, 1790, while Vicente married María Josefa Ramírez on November 22, 1791. It is not clear who was the parent of Antonia, age 4. She represents the only new addition to the family since the last census.

In other developments since the previous census, Alejandro Guerra married María Luzgarda García, on March 3, 1783, and they are listed with three children in the 1790 census. His brother Alvino has three additional children with his wife María Rosalia Salinas, for a total of eight.

### 1800 Census of Ciudad Mier

In the 1800 census under Rancho de San Lorenzo are listed five families along with their ages:<sup>51</sup>

**Table 3: Inhabitants of El Rancho de San Lorenzo as Listed in the 1800 Census for Ciudad Mier, Tamaulipas, Mexico**

Family Members	Their Ages
Antonio Alvino Guerra	34
Rosalía Salinas	46
Manuela	23
Hilario	21
José de los Ángeles	16
Francica	14
Rita	12
Felipe	8
María de los Santos	6
José de los Santos Ramírez	29
María Guadalupe Guerra	26

José Alejandro Guerra	40
Lugarda García	38
Juan José	16
Casilda	14
Rosa	8
Juan José	11
José Ventura	6
Espiridiona	4
Ma. Josefa Ramírez	27
José Ma.	6
Magdalena	4
José de los Santos Guerra	2
María Catarina Guerra	35
Francisca	22
Josefa	12

I must first point out an error in the above data from the 1800 census of Ciudad Mier. There is either a recording or a transcription error with Antonio Alvino Guerra's age of 34. He is probably between the ages of 42 to 44, based on his age in the 1782 census of 26 and his age in the 1790 census of 32. He is two years younger than his wife Rosalia Salinas in 1782, but four years younger than her in the 1790 census. Rosalia Salinas' age is consistently recorded in the three sets of data: 28 in 1782; 36 in 1780; and 46 in 1800.

The five families of El Rancho San Lorenzo all consist of the married children of Ramón Guerra and María Rosalia Hinojosa and their families. Alvino Guerra is the oldest, and his family also appears in the 1782 and 1790 censuses. María Guadalupe Guerra and her husband, José de los Santos Ramírez, constitute a family without children. Her husband may be related to María Josefa Ramírez, the widow of Guadalupe's brother Vicente, who has a child named José de los Santos Guerra. Alejandro Guerra and his wife Lugarda (spelled Luzgarza in other places) García have six children, including the youngest Espiridiona, who is



my great-great-great grandmother on my maternal grandfather's line.

Besides María Josefa Ramírez, another widow is listed as head of a family. María Catarina Guerra originally married José Antonio Gregorio Sánchez Solís on November 16, 1775. Her daughters bear the last name Sánchez in later marriage and census records.<sup>52</sup> It is significant that this family does not appear associated with El Rancho de San Lorenzo in the two previous censuses cited. Apparently Catarina Guerra returns to her family's ranch after the death of her husband. Their family is listed as among those living within the town in both the 1782 and 1790 censuses. As we will see in the next example, her daughters continue to call the ranch home after they themselves marry.

### **1817 Census of Ciudad Mier**

For the next part of the discussion, I refer to a partial census from approximately 1817 that I encountered among a private collection of historical documents while doing my thesis research in Ciudad Mier.<sup>53</sup> This partial census documents the residents and livestock of eight *ranchos*, including San Pedro de las Flores, San Lorenzo de las Minas, Santo Tomás de Sabinitas, Santa Barbara de Morteritos, Santa Teresa de Guardado, San José de la Rinconada, San Gregorio del Saleño, and Jesús de Buenavista. A summary of the census data for the eight ranches is given in Table 4. According to this partial census, I have reconstructed the family tree for the residents of San Lorenzo de las Minas (Figure 9).

**Table 4: Population and Property of Ranchos as Listed in the 1817 Census for Ciudad Mier, Tamaulipas, Mexico**

Rancho Name	Families	People	Goats	Sheep	Cattle	Mares	Tame Horses	Horse Colts	Tame Mules	Mule Colts
San Pedro de las Flores	9	45	0	0	13	18	11	1	11	0
San Lorenzo de las Minas	11	63	336	1400	34	22	16	1	14	1
Santo Tomás de Sabinitas	17	80	50	200	22	10	16	0	20	1
Santa Bárbara de Morteritos	6	42	0	0	8	0	0	0	0	0
Santa Teresa de Guardado	14	71	769	2037	16	34	16	3	6	0
San José de la Rinconada	5	36	0	0	54	14	6	0	7	0
San Gregorio del Saleño	10	46	0	0	29	23	9	0	15	0
Jesús de Buenavista	4	28	300	900	30	29	14	10	14	9
<b>TOTALS</b>	76	411	1455	4537	206	150	88	15	87	11

Average # of Families per Ranch	9.5
Average # of Family Members	5.4

In the 1817 census under Rancho San Lorenzo de las Minas are listed 11 families along with the individuals' ages:<sup>64</sup>

**Table 5: Inhabitants of El Rancho San Lorenzo  
de las Minas as Listed in the 1817 Census  
for Ciudad Mier, Tamaulipas, Mexico**

<b>Person and Age</b>	<b>Person and Age</b>	<b>Person and Age</b>	<b>Person and Age</b>
Alexandro Guerra (59)	José Rafael Gonzales (44)	Juan José Álvarez (52)	Blaz Pérez (39)
María del Carmen de Barrera (39)	María Manuela Guerra (44)	María Catarina Guerra (57)	María Petra Álvaren (30)
	Remigio (15)	José Antonio (22)	José Ángel (8)
Rosalía (29)	Gertrudis (13)	José Ángel Guerra (30)	Dimas (6)
Espiridiona (20)	Anna María (12)	María Rosalía Ynojosa (29)	XXXXX
José Julio (18)	María Refugia (6)	María Estefana (6)	José Hilario Guerra (40)
María Luisa (14)	Felipe (4)	Cesaria (4)	María Nicolasa Garza (29)
María Casilda Guerra (30)	XXXXX	María Leandra (2)	Antonia (10)
José Cesario (3)	Santos Ramires (47)	XXXXX	Miguela (6)
XXXXX	María Guadalupe Guerra (46)	Lázaro Bela (38)	XXXXX
Ramón Barrera (47)	Juliana (16)	Josefa Sánchez (35)	José María Guerra (29)

Josefa Ramirez (46)	José María (15)	María Josefa (13)	María Faustina Barrera (26)
María Elena Guerra (24)	Francisca (12)	José María (12)	Faustina (5)
José de los Santos Guerra (20)	Juan Francisco (9)	Manuela (9)	Pedro (2)
Ramón Barrera (14)	Catarina (6)	Florencio (8)	
María Ursula Barrera (9)	Rafael (5)	Estevan (5)	
María Yrenea Barrera (6)	Rafaela (3)	Sabino (3)	
Ygnacio de la Cruz (22)	Micaela (2)	XXXXXX	
XXXXXX	XXXXXX		
José Antonio Guadiana (47)			
María Francisca Sánchez (46)			
XXXXXX			

By 1817, El Rancho San Lorenzo de las Minas continued to be occupied by the descendents of three children of Ramón Guerra and María Rosalia Hinojosa. Their son Alejandro is the oldest resident at age 59. He married September 6, 1813, for a second time after the death of his wife Luzgarda Garcia. According to

this census, he was living with María de la Carmen Barrera and children from his first marriage. Alejandro's daughter María Casilda Guerra was living with the family, perhaps with her three-year-old son, José Cesario.

María Josefa Ramírez, the widow of Ramón and Rosalia's son Vicente, continued to reside on the ranch even though she had since remarried and had three more children. Within their family, we see for the first time a household member that does not appear to be related by blood or marriage. One possibility is that Ygnacio de la Cruz may be a laborer who resided with the family. José María Guerra was the son of Vicente Guerra and María Josefa Ramírez. He and his wife, María Faustina Barrera, resided here with their two children.

María Catarina Guerra was the daughter of Ramón and Rosalia. At 57, she was the oldest woman living at the ranch, second only to her brother Alejandro. She remarried, on September 12, 1802, to Juan José Álvarez. They lived with their son José Antonio Alvarez. María Francisca Sánchez was the daughter of María Catarina Guerra and her first husband, Antonio Sánchez. She had married since the last census and now resided on the ranch with her husband, José Antonio Guadiano. Josefa Sánchez was also a daughter of María Catarina Guerra and Antonio Sánchez. She had also married since the last census and now resided on the ranch with her husband, Lazaro Bela (*vic.* Vela), and their six children. María Petra Alvaren's last name is probably correctly spelled "Álvarez," and she is likely the daughter of Juan José Álvarez from his first marriage. She resided here with her husband, Blas Pérez, and their two children.

María Manuela Guerra was the daughter of Alvino Guerra and Rosalia Salinas. She and her husband José Rafael González lived on the ranch with their five children. María Guadalupe Guerra was another daughter of Alvino and Rosalia. She and her husband, Santos, continued to reside on the ranch, raising their seven children. José Ángel Guerra was the son of Alvino and

Rosalia. He was married to Rosalia Hinojosa, and they had three children. José Hilario Guerra was another son of Alvino and Rosalia. He and his wife, María Nicolasa Garza, resided here with their two children.

### **Summary of Census Data**

In summary, after approximately 70 years of occupation, the population of the ranch continued to increase as the family grew through marriages and births. For the nearly 40 years that documentation is available, this steady growth is observable as the population increased from 15 people in two families in 1782 to 63 people in 11 families by 1817. The familial ties that bound these people are also clearly evident in all but one case. With the exception of Ygnacio de la Cruz, all ranch residents were members of an extended family descending from two of the original *pobladores* of Ciudad Mier, Ramón Guerra and María Rosalia Hinojosa.

### **Livestock Holdings in 1817**

The 1817 census includes information on the livestock holdings of the ranch residents. The following table summarizes the property of the residents of El Rancho San Lorenzo:<sup>65</sup>

**Table 6: Property of Inhabitants of El Rancho San Lorenzo de las Minas as Listed in the 1817 Census for Ciudad Mier, Tamaulipas, Mexico**

Inhabitant	Age	Sheep	Goats	Cows	Mares	Tamed Horses	Horse Colts	Tamed Mules	Mule Colts
Alexandro Guerra	59	400	36	8	3	1	1	2	
Ramón Barrera	47	800	300	8	18	10		8	
José Antonio Guadiana	47			4		1		1	
José Rafael Gonzales	44							2	
Santos Ramires	47	200		5				1	
Juan José Álvarez	52			6	1	2			
José Ángel Guerra	30			2		2			
José Hilario Guerra	40			1					1
Totals		1400	336	34	22	16	1	14	1

Alejandro Guerra, the oldest surviving son of Ramón Guerra and Rosalia Hinojosa, has a significant amount of property: 400 sheep, 36 goats, eight head of cattle, five horses and two mules. The only other two owners of significant amounts of livestock are related

to the ranch and the descendants of the Ramón Guerra family through marriage.

Ramón Barrera married Josefa Ramírez, the widow of Vicente Guerra, who was Alejandro's brother. He is 12 years younger than Alejandro, but he controls the most livestock at the ranch: 800 sheep, 300 goats, eight head of cattle, 28 horses, and eight mules. Ramón and Alejandro were the only ones at the ranch to own goats.

Santos Ramírez married María Guadalupe Guerra, Alejandro's niece and the daughter of Alvino and Rosalia Guerra. He is the same age as Ramón Barrera and controls the following amounts of livestock: 200 sheep, five head of cattle, and one mule. Together with Ramón and Alejandro, Santos is among the only ones at the ranch to own sheep.

In terms of the variety of livestock, sheep are the most common, followed by goats, then horses, cattle, and mules. Everyone except José Rafael González owns at least one cow, the greatest quantity being eight. The next most commonly owned animal is the mule, as six out of eight have at least one. Again the greatest quantity is eight. Finally, at least one horse is owned by five of the six propertied ranch residents. Most people own five or fewer horses, but Ramón Barrera owns 28.

## Conclusions

Rancho San Lorenzo de las Minas provides an excellent window into the development of one of the earliest livestock ranches associated with south Texas' Spanish colonial past. Archival and genealogical research combine to document a steady rate of growth at San Lorenzo de las Minas. The *ranchito* population increased from 15 people in two families in 1782 to 63 people in 11 families by 1817. Marriages and the subsequent incorporation of in-laws' property to the *ranchito* contributed greatly to its economic success. Property ownership at El Rancho de San Lorenzo exhibits some interesting trends. First, age does not appear to correlate



with wealth. Although Alejandro is the oldest son of the original founders of the ranch, he does not own the most property in 1817. Second, marriages have contributed significantly to the wealth of the ranch by incorporating the property of in-laws. Third, the distribution of livestock may indicate specialization by certain families in breeding or training certain animals to the exclusion of others. Such specialization would have influenced the spatial arrangement of settlements across the landscape and is a pertinent consideration when proposing archaeological investigations at a rancho.

## Epilogue

I visited Ciudad Mier, in November 2009, after a presentation of my dissertation research in Roma to the Starr County Historical Society. About 15 people in the audience then traveled with me to Ciudad Mier and Rancho El Saladito, where I had conducted my dissertation research in 2002. The community had been declared a *Pueblo Mágico* in 2008, a designation that came with funds to conserve and improve the urban image and identity of a unique cultural attraction. Many of the buildings around the central plaza had been re-plastered and painted, as a result. The group visited the church and an exhibit of historical photographs, curated by Lic. Antonio Guerra, before hiking around El Rancho Saladito. As an omen of what was to come, a window of the historic ranch home had been broken, but metal bars prevented anything inside from being stolen. Instead, the two picnic tables from the porch were taken. In retrospect, this was life “before” the current drug war. My next visit would be under much different circumstances.

The current wave of violence and misery along the U.S.-Mexico border, and specifically in Ciudad Mier, can be traced to a February 2010 assassination in Matamoros that ignited a war between the Gulf Cartel and *Los Zetas*, a group that had previously worked as mercenaries for the cartel. That same month, a caravan of a dozen black SUVs with tinted windows and CG logos on their doors rolled through Ciudad Mier’s main plaza. Their occupants

attacked the police station, destroying the building and its contents, and kidnapping all the police officers that were not killed in the altercation. Running gun battles through town with automatic weapons became all too common, sometimes lasting for hours. People became captives in their own homes. Bullets scarred homes and historic buildings, and some stores were torched. Adding to the misery, rains from Hurricane Alex, in early July 2010, inundated the community and damaged the water system used to pump and purify the drinking water. Telephone and electricity services have also been affected by the violence that hampers repairs and mobility in general.

In October 2010, after a presentation to the Webb County Archaeological Society in Laredo, I continued on to Ciudad Mier. Javi made me stop in Roma and call him to find out if it was safe to continue. "*Todo tranquilo, hoy*" ("Everything is calm today"), he said, and I proceeded to his house, where he made me park my car in the garage. We would only drive around in his car that trip. We gathered with people in back patios or at the restaurant or business of friends. I had brought him a GPS unit, and we planned a field trip to the *Río Álamo* to survey the proposed parkland, but the morning we were to go, just as breakfast ended, shots rang out, and we changed our plans. Water was being pumped throughout town, but it was coming straight from the river without purification.

Economic signs of distress were evident; not much activity took place in the open at night. Throughout the crisis, more than 150 stores have closed, because their clientele has moved away or because the owners judged it too dangerous to travel on the highway for supplies to stock the shelves. I had brought a pair of Don Cuco's boots back to its maker for new soles and found out that only two people were employed whereas eight used to work in the factory. Because of the water situation, one of my friends was pressing the spring-fed well on his property back into use. The most uplifting part of that trip was meeting mayor-elect Alberto González Peña, and seeing a model of *El Proyecto Económico Álamo*, a plan to return the historic center of Ciudad Mier to an economic

and ecological hub by taking advantage of rich agricultural areas along the Río Álamo to supply the community with organic produce from communal fields. The plan included integrating the historic *Casa de los Tejanos* with a hike and bike trail leading to the gardens, a pavilion for a farmer's market, and playing fields. At the center of all the chaos, I had found people in Ciudad Mier who still harbored a vision for a brighter future.

December 2010 was another dark time in Ciudad Mier. A second assassination within the drug cartel ranks led to a warning of violence directed at the community's members, many of whom fled to shelters in neighboring Ciudad Miguel Alemán. About the same time, the Mexican military established a 600-soldier outpost about 1.5 km from the town. Mayor González took office in January 2011 and announced a \$1.2 million peso grant from the Tamaulipas Institute of Dwellings and Urbanization to repair and restore 303 buildings that had been damaged by bullets, grenades, and fire. The work was accomplished by 202 men and 95 women who were local residents. Four buildings, including the police station were declared total losses. A measure of peace was restored and at least 18 businesses opened in Ciudad Mier during 2011.

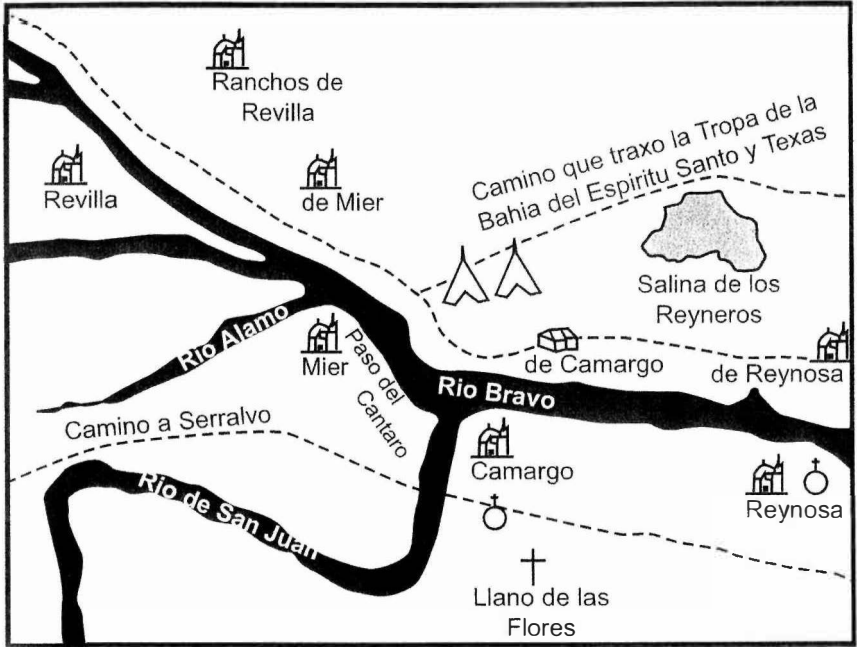
Militarization along the border is not a new concept. In 1891, a journalist in Río Grande City named Catarino Garza relentlessly critiqued Porfirio Díaz's authoritative regime, and compared him to the Anglo newcomers in the Río Grande Valley, especially the local lawmen and the Texas Rangers.<sup>56</sup> Garza crossed into Ciudad Mier to announce his *Plan Revolucionario*, and a six-month-long Garza War ensued. The result was heightened policing and militarization of the border. Between 1915 and 1916, raids associated with the *Plan de San Diego* led to increasing numbers of soldiers and police being assigned to the border. During the Mexican Revolution, the smuggling of firearms into Mexico became associated with smuggling marijuana into the United States.<sup>57</sup> Juan Nepomuceno Guerra of Matamoros began his smuggling career after the passage of the Volstead Act of 1919 by transporting tequila and arms during prohibition. He is credited with founding







the precursor to today's Gulf Cartel.<sup>58</sup> In addition to arms, smugglers routinely returned south with household goods that were in short supply. During World War II, rationed goods like butter, sugar, and coffee were smuggled north instead.<sup>59</sup> Throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, the smuggling of human beings became increasingly common, as legal quotas for Mexican immigrants were often set unrealistically low. Much like the demand for drugs, labor needs in the United States keep the people flowing, even during relatively down economic times.

The buildings of Ciudad Mier have undoubtedly been pockmarked by bullets multiple times during the town's 259 years. The latest rounds have been plastered and repainted by the residents, who cling to a proud heritage. Hopefully, the repairs mirror the healing of human spirits and fuel their optimism for the future of Ciudad Mier. My own sense of optimism is boosted by the planned unveiling of a series of statues on the Capitol grounds this year that will finally honor the original Spanish and Mexican pioneers of Texas and their descendants.<sup>60</sup>

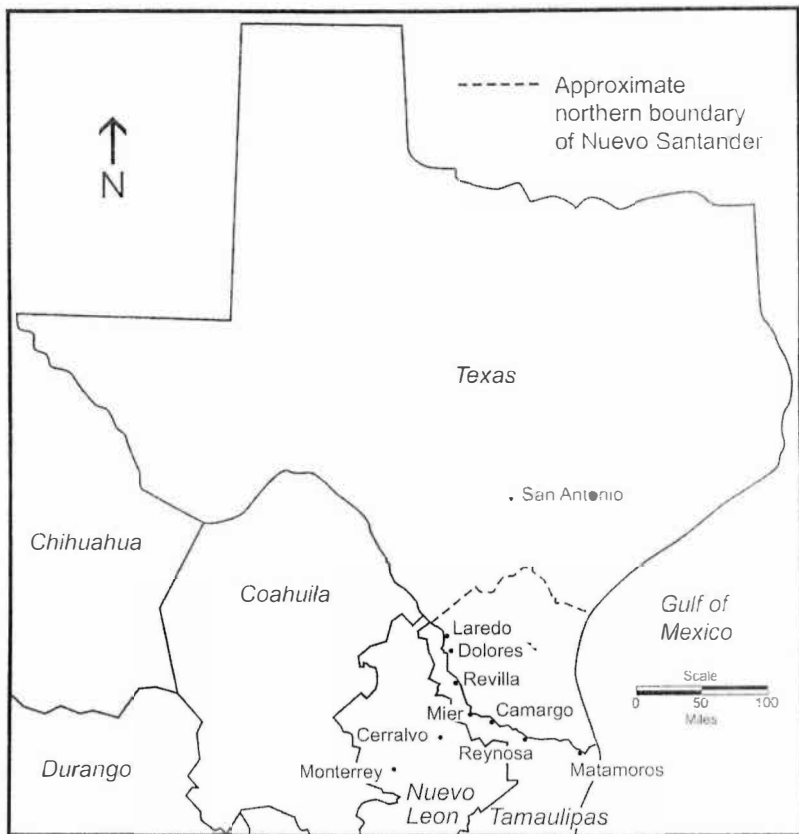
Principal Investigator, SWCA Environmental Consultants,  
Austin, Texas

## Figure Captions

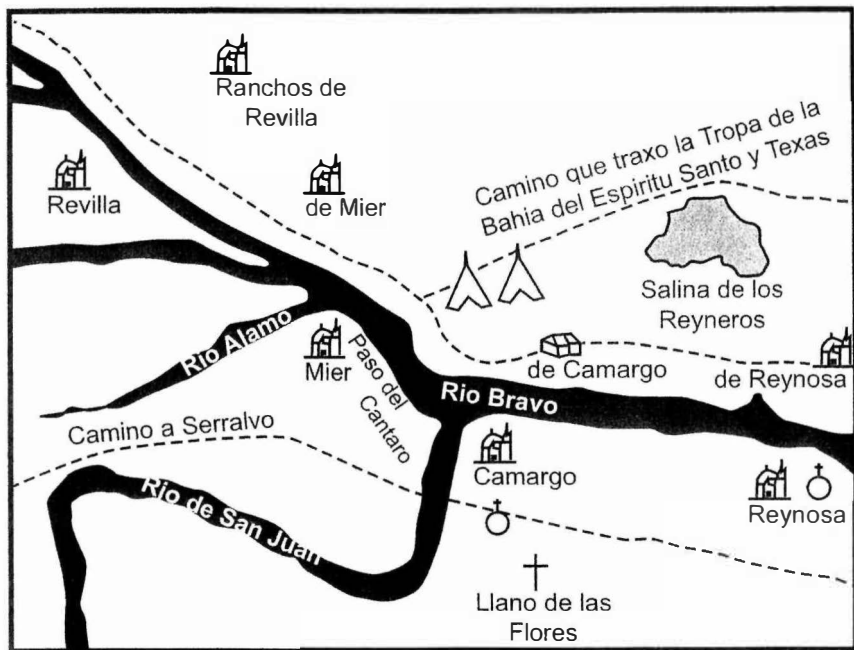





- |   |  |
|---|--|
|  Los pueblos de Españoles   |  not defined in original legend |
|  Los misiones de los Indios |  not defined in original legend |
|  Salt deposit               |  not defined in original legend |




**Figure 1:** Map of the Lower Río Grande Valley rancho communities (Laredo, Dolores, Revilla, Ciudad Mier, Camargo, and Reynosa) founded between 1748 and 1755 as part of Nuevo Santander (Galindo 2003:7).



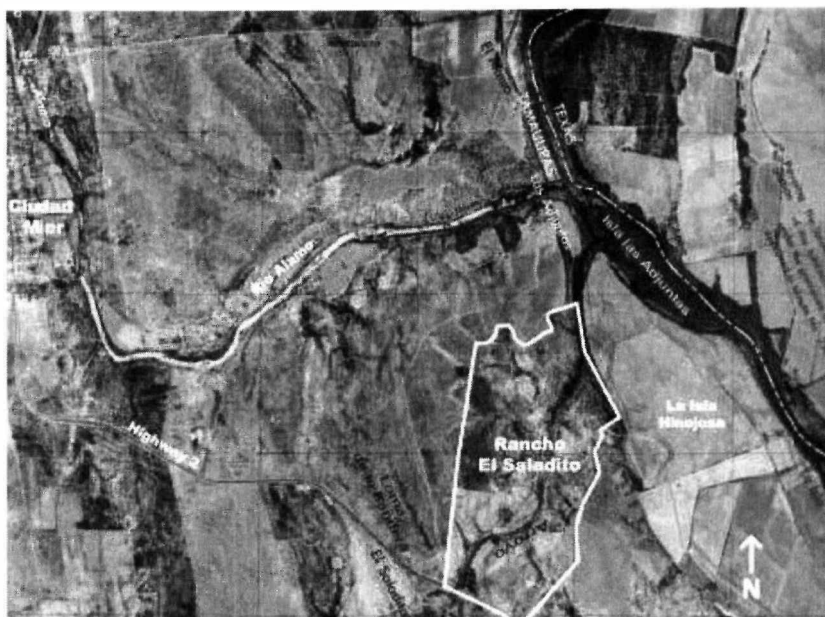
**Figure 2:** Map of the porciones awarded to the Nuevo Santander colonists of Ciudad Mier in 1767 (Galindo 1999:10).



-  Los pueblos de Españoles
-  Los misiones de los Indios
-  Salt deposit

-  not defined in original legend
-  not defined in original legend
-  not defined in original legend

**Figure 3:** Detail taken from a 1792 map of Nuevo Santander illustrating the ranching communities of Revilla, Ciudad Mier, Camargo, and Reynosa on the north bank of the Río Grande (Galindo 2003:151; “Mapa de la Sierra Gorda y Costa del Seno Mexicano desde la Ciudad de Queretaro cerca de los 21° hasta la Bahía de Espiritu Santo a los 28.5°; sus rios, ensenadas y provincias pacificadas por Don José de Escandón,” en *Monumentos para la historia de Coahuila y Seno Mexicano*, Archivo General de la Nación, (Cat. 221) Historia, vol. 29, f. 190, as cited in Reyes Vayssade, et al. 1990).



**Figure 4:** Rancho El Saladito is located east of Mier, Tamaulipas, Mexico, along Highway 2.



**Figure 5:** Sandstone block house constructed by Francisco Hinojosa Barrera of Los Guerras circa 1928 for the Adolfo Hinojosa Saenz and San Juana Gomez Gomez family at Rancho El Saladito.





**Figure 6:** The remains of a cooking horno located southeast of the stone structure.

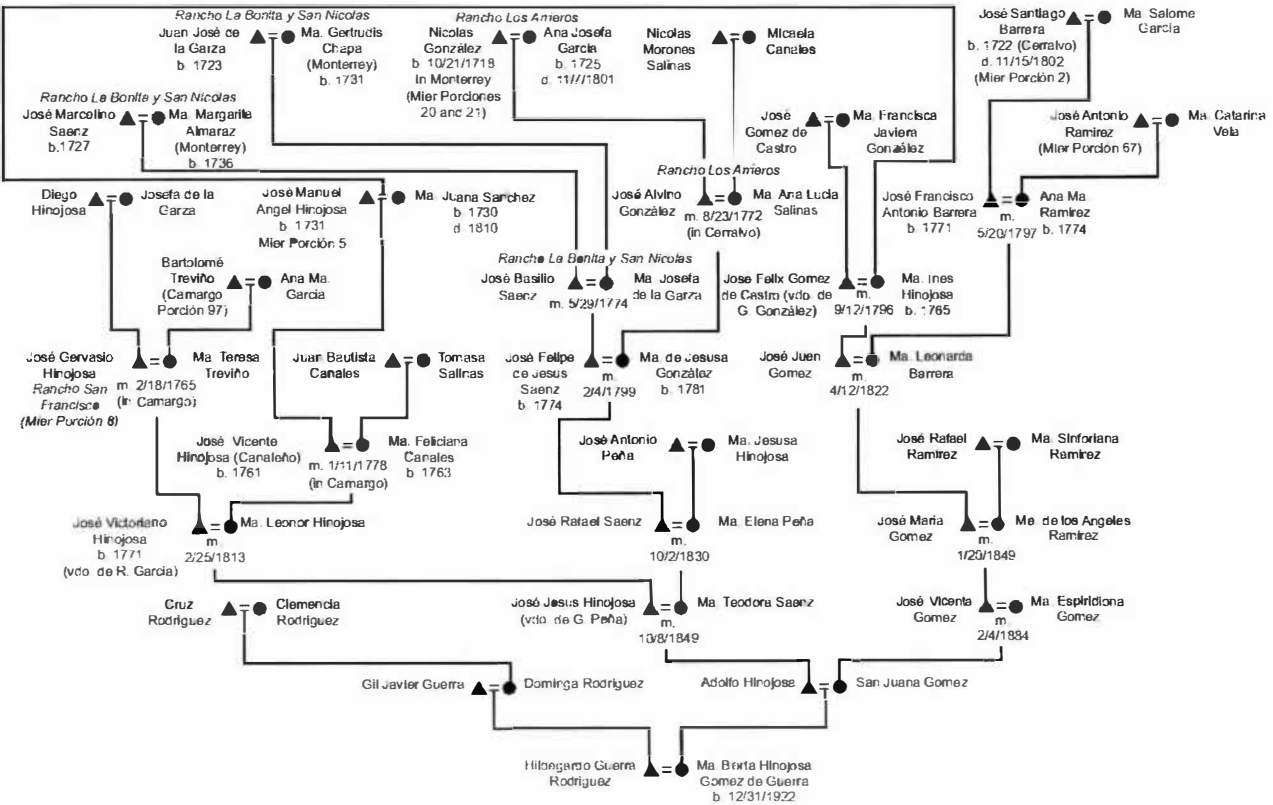


Figure 7: The Hildegarde Guerra Rodriguez and Ma. Berta Hinojosa Gomez de Guerra family tree (SAGA 1989a-h, 1995; Overstreet 1990).

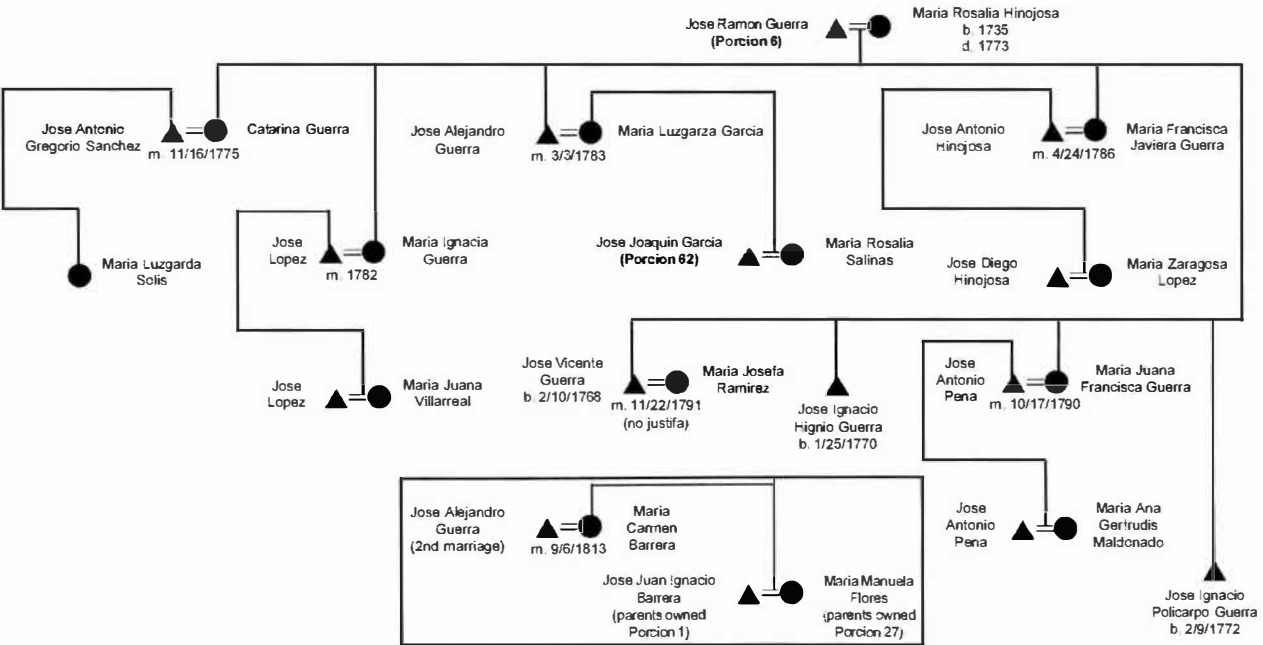
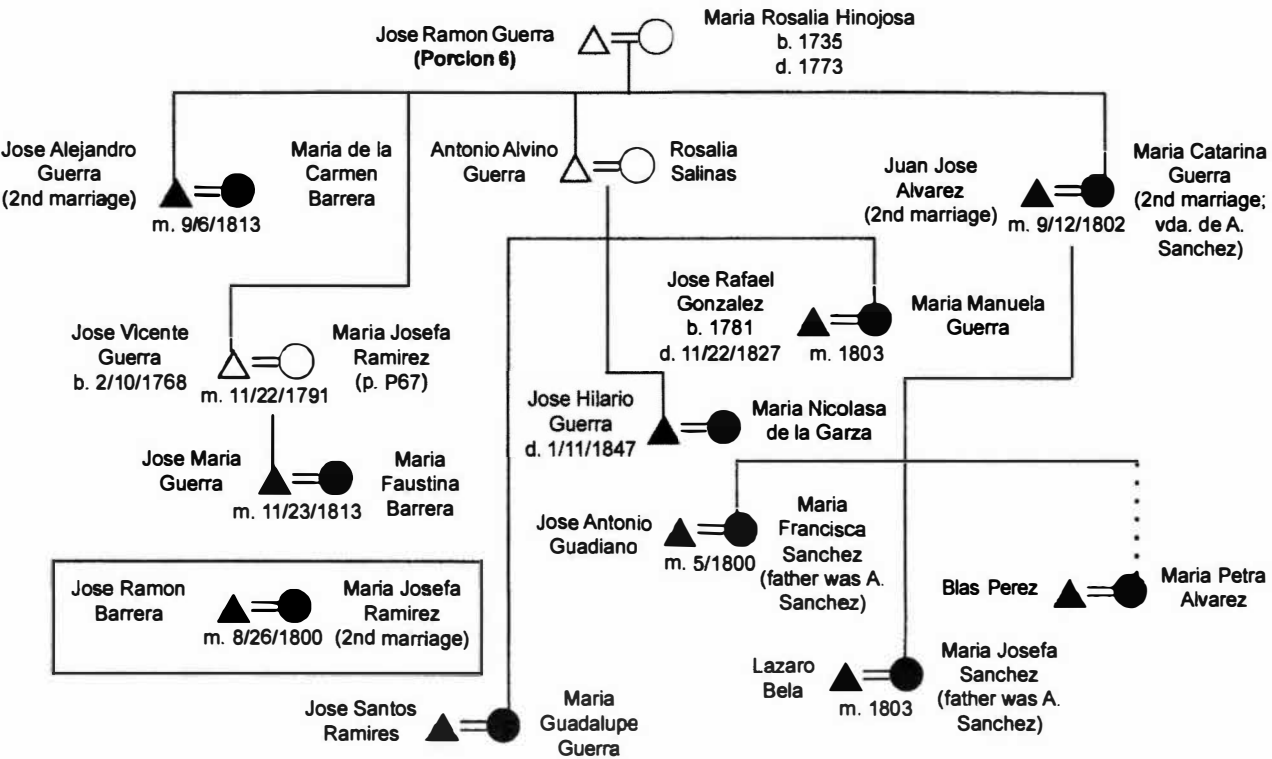


Figure 8: The Ramón Guerra and Rosalia Hinojosa family (Galindo 1999:51).



**Figure 9:** Part of the Ramón Guerra and Rosalia Hinojosa family, with 10 of the 11 families of Rancho San Lorenzo de las Minas indicated by solid symbols (SAGA 1989a-h, 1995). A dotted line indicates an inferred relationship.

## Endnotes

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- 2 Ibid, p. 80.
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- 6 S. L. Myers, *The Ranch in Spanish Texas, 1691-1800* (El Paso: Texas Western Press, 1969), pp. 8 and 56.
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- 8 S. I. Guerra, *From Vaqueros to Mafiosos: A Community History of Drug Trafficking in Rural South Texas* (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation. The University of Texas, Austin, 2011), p. 41
- 9 T. L. Walter, The dynamics of culture change and its reflection in the archeological record at Espíritu Santo de Zuñiga, Victoria County, Texas. *Studies in Archeology*, 23 (Austin: Texas Archeological Research Laboratory, The University of Texas, 1997).
- 10 Cargill et al. 1998; Fox and Houk 1998; Ivey 1983; Ivey and Fox 1981; Jones and Fox 1983; Scurlock et al. 1976; Taylor and Fox 1985
- 11 A. Alonzo, *Tejano Legacy: Rancheros and settlers in South Texas, 1754-1900*. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998); M. L. Bonine, "Households in the Wilderness: An Analysis of Two Spanish Colonial Rancho Sites along the Río Grande, Starr County, Texas" (Unpublished M.A. thesis. Department of Anthropology, The University of Texas, Austin, 2001); Donald Chipman, *Spanish Texas 1519-1821* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992); S. E. Fleming, "Building la frontera: The form and technology of historic ranch architecture in Zapata County, Texas" (Unpublished M. A. thesis. Department of Architecture, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, 1998); S. E. Fleming and T. K. Perttula, "San José de Corralitos: A Spanish Colonial Ranch in Zapata and Webb Counties, Texas," in *Bulletin of the Texas Archeological Society*, vol. 70, edited by T.K. Perttula and L.W. Ellis, (Austin: Texas Archeological Society, 1999), pp. 395-410; E. George, *Historic architecture of Texas: The Falcon Reservoir* (Austin: Texas Historical Commission, 1975); J. Jackson, *Los mesteños: Spanish ranching in Texas, 1721-1821* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1986); O. L. Jones, *Los Paisanos: Spanish Settlers on the Northern Frontier of New Spain* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1979);

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# The Rise of Banking in Matamoros and Brownsville

by

**Louis Benavides**

When I began the research for this article, I believed that it would be a simple item of research because this industry is so controlled and regulated for anyone who wants to get into banking. All you need today is \$25 million to charter a bank in Texas or anywhere in the United States<sup>1</sup> However, as I got into the search I found that very little had been written on the start of the monetary system of the area. Even just finding the names of the people behind the banks proved difficult. The State of Texas Banking Commission did not officially begin until 1905. However the Comptroller of the Currency was already in the business of providing bank charters since 1863.<sup>2</sup> Frank D. Yturria allowed me to look at the book *Texas Banks and Bankers, July 1909* in his private collection. In this book there are four banks listed for the city of Brownsville: Brownsville Bank and Trust, First National Bank of Brownsville, Merchants National Bank, and the Yturria Private Bank. <sup>3</sup> There are people who are well known today: the Longorias; Burton E. Grossman (who worked with the Pan American Bank in Brownsville before starting his own banks in San Antonio), and Alonzo Cantú from McAllen (who raised or “bundled” over \$640,000 for Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in her run for the Presidency). However, a review of the *Texas Banks and Bankers* book shows a few interesting facts. For example, E. H. Goodrich, President of the Merchants National Bank, was the nephew of Charles Stillman on his wife’s side.<sup>4</sup> Also, the Cashier for the bank was J. G. Fernandez, the only Hispanic last name found in the review of the three public banks. This Juan Fernandez would later go on to help form the Los Fresnos Land and Irrigation Company (along with J.B. Scott and S.C. Morton) and create the town of Los Fresnos.<sup>5</sup> Captain

William Kelly, an officer and director of the new First National Bank of Brownsville, was a native Irishman who had first come to Texas with a New York regiment in the Civil War. While he initially became wealthy by working a member of the Stillman-King-Kenedy-Yturria group, by 1874 he had joined the anti-King-and-Kenedy faction.<sup>6</sup> In addition The Merchants National Bank had two Vice Presidents; John McAllen and John Gregg. Their upstream corresponding bank was the Seaboard Bank of New York. The Brownsville Bank and Trust was a new bank, chartered on January 9, 1909. By the end of 1929, Brownsville, as well as Donna, Texas, would both have four state banks chartered in their communities.<sup>7</sup>

You also see the politics of exclusion in the State when, in 1977, three *de novo* charters were denied for the city of Brownsville in one month: Texas Bank and Trust, First State Bank of Brownsville, and First Security Bank of Brownsville. And yet, one person sat on the Texas Bankers Association: R. M. Duffy Jr., who was the Treasurer for the Association in 1977.<sup>8</sup> In October 1950, R. M. Duffy was listed as an officer and director of the Pan American State bank. The only Hispanic listed as a director on any of the local banks in that year was J. A. Garcia, a rancher. In 1966, the Pan American State Bank added Shelby Longoria, an industrialist, to its board, and M. E. Garcia replaced J. A. Garcia.<sup>9</sup>

Banks, cash, currency and credit are things that all people, farmers, ranchers, and businesses need, but they were very difficult to obtain in early Northeastern Mexico, followed by the Republic of Texas, then as a state in the Union, then as a Confederate state and a once again as Texas, a reconstruction state. So how did people obtain credit? The Rio Grande Valley was in the middle of two worlds. The monetary system that explorers discovered on the east coast of North America was based on *Wampum*, used by the various North American Indian tribes. Wampum consisted of mollusk shells or beads, usually held on cords called Wampumpeag, Algonquian for a "string of white shells beads." What made this shell important in the monetary system of exchange was that they

were hard to come by. The cords of Wampumpeag were woven into a belt or a band that was worn. The colors stood for different things: red meant war; black hostility; and white good luck or prosperity. The most valuable of the shells or beads were the black and purple ones. Such wampum was traded as far as the tribes found in the Plains Culture of the United States, including the lands of the Tejas Indians.<sup>10</sup> There were two value systems in the use of this "shell money." The darker colors were the ones normally used in trade, while the white shell beads were of ceremonial importance, especially in peace treaties among the tribes. The shell bead cords carried a symbolic design that frequently meant different things to different tribes or even within a tribe.

White traders began to use the Indian monetary system for two reasons. First, wampum was the accepted method of trade among the Indians, who had the furs that the traders wanted. The Indians would not accept coins or bills, so there was almost no other type of exchange to be found in the New World. The Spanish monks or friars who came to northern New Spain had experience trading with the Indians in Florida and the Caribbean islands, and brought with them colorful glass beads from Europe which they traded with the natives who used the beads for jewelry or to decorate their clothing.<sup>11</sup>

The currency of New Spain was much different. Right away the Spanish saw the silver and gold that adorned the bodies of the Aztec, Mayas, and Incas, and this was obtained and shipped back to Spain. The quantities of silver bullion by themselves were enough to pay for the administration of the all of the colonies in the new world. By 1564, the trade route from China and India was importing silks, ceramics, tea, and spices through the Philippines into New Spain by way of Acapulco across the continent of Mexico to Vera Cruz, where it was grouped with the silver for shipment to Spain. The local economy of New Spain flourished, with the production of cattle, olives, wine, silk, tobacco, and cochineal (the insect that lives on prickly pear cactus and produces a red dye).<sup>12</sup>

The economic diversity in New Spain might have produced a much better economy than that found to the Northeast of the continent had Spanish taxation not siphoned off the profit. The Land owner had to pay a tax; there was a sale tax on all trade from 2% to as high as 14% in some locations.<sup>13</sup> However, the Spanish coin became the currency of choice by many nations during the late 1700's. Spanish silver collected mostly in Cuba paid for the French Navy and Army that joined Washington to defeat the English at Yorktown. Without that Spanish monetary support the United States could today have a prime minister of the Americas and be connected as part of Canada.<sup>14</sup>

Spain began to produce their new silver coin that the Americans called "pillar" in 1536, coined in Mexico City until 1572. Antonio de Mendoza, the first Viceroy of *Nueva España*, established the mint in the back of the confiscated palace of Hernan Cortez. The milled pillar silver coin was begun in 1731, and the milled bust coin in 1771. The Borbón Fleur-de-lis was added to the shield of the coin. The milled Spanish coin produced in Mexico City was used as the new world currency at the time.<sup>15</sup>

England permitted the printing of paper money, but since this money was not backed by silver or gold it was literally worthless. Due to American's illegal trade with other countries (especially the islands in the Caribbean area), a large quantity of Spanish milled pillars were in circulation in the American Colonies. After American independence, this "real" money was declared legal tender in the United States, until the Act of 1857 suspended its usage. The coins were then modified by Americans by cutting them in half to create two half-dollars. As these coins were carried west, away from the major trade centers, they were again cut in half to create the quarter. A piece of eight had a value of 100 centésimos (cents) Two bits were created from the half "tollars." So the use of the Spanish coin created our modern-day system of dollars and cents.<sup>16</sup>

When the U. S. Congress was establishing the American currency, they voted to use the "\$" symbol. The two bars ("II") stands for the two pillars of Hercules (the northern pillar being the Rock of Gibraltar and the southern pillar one of the two peaks in north Africa located in Ceuta or Morocco). Hamilton and Jefferson both expressed their thanks to Spain and her colonies for the financial help in providing the French troops and navy at Yorktown, the "S" standing for Spain. Cattle were driven from what is today the Lower Rio Grande to San Antonio to the Mississippi, where the livestock was divided between the Spanish forces fighting the British and the Americans. The Spanish army would place livestock on ships to sail up the Mississippi to the Ohio River valley for George Rogers Clark's army, which would drive the remaining herd cross country to General Washington's at Valley Forge.

### **Distance creates Opportunity**

The distance from Mexico City created credit problems in the Rio Grande Valley. The Rio Grande Valley also found itself used as the northern buffer between the Texas and Mexico City. In 1817, Lt. Col. Manuel Prado was ordered to mint 8,000 half *reales*. These coins were struck in San Antonio by local merchant and jeweler Manuel Barrera. None of these pieces are known to exist today. The following year, José Antonio de la Garza received permission to mint additional coins. The mint was again located in San Antonio, and an estimated 100 coins are known still to exist. These coins were called *jolas* or *medio reales*.<sup>17</sup> José Antonio de la Garza's coin is credited by some with launching the "Lone Star" symbol for Texas, since one side of the coin showed a single star. In addition, according to Texas lore, the coins were used as the first badges for Texas Rangers, where the word "Texas Ranger" was struck on the Lone Star side of the coin along the edge. Later, the "Lone Star" would be enlarged and made into a real badge.

### **Banking Comes to the Rio Grande Valley**

Opportunity presented itself at the mouth of the Rio Grande, at Port Isabel, and farther south to Tampico, and other coastal

communities. People came from Europe, New York, and many other places to take advantage of the opportunity. The Lower Rio Grande Valley became a free trade zone, where the long arm of the law from Mexico City could not reach.

In 1835, the Mexican government gave permission to begin a bank in Texas, an opportunity seized by S. M. Williams, keeper of the records and tax stamps for Mexico in the Austin Colony and for East Texas. He had come to Texas with the Austin Colony from Buenos Aires, where he had learned the Spanish language and Spanish business practices at the age of fifteen. One of the first steps in starting a bank was that the bank itself required capital. Williams was not able to "capitalize" the bank until 1841. The Brownsville branch of the Commercial and Agricultural Bank of Galveston (which had grown out of a mercantile house began by Thomas F. McKinney and S. M. Williams) was the result. This bank (or Williams) was the negotiator in obtaining a \$5 million line of credit for the Republic of Texas Navy under President Lamar. William died on September 13, 1858.<sup>18</sup>

The Port of Bagdad, on the Mexican side of the mouth of the Rio Grande River, was established to handle local trade. It had originally been laid out in 1828, according to the copies of the original copy of the drawings for the port and that land came out of the Chapa and Longoria ranches on the Southern side on the Rio Grande.<sup>19</sup> However, it was not until 1858 or early 1859 that capital was found to begin construction of the new port. Cotton was purchased in Bagdad and shipped to Cuba, from where it was re-routed to New York, Boston, or some other Northern port.<sup>20</sup>

Richard D. Blossman, Jeremiah Galván, Thomas Gonzales, Mifflin Kenedy, Richard King, José San Román, Charles Stillman, the Treviño Brothers, Humphrey E. Woodhouse, John Young, and Francisco Yturria, plus many others, also tried to make their fortune in this changing and open economy of Northern Mexico. Due to the lack of real money in the area, mostly mercantile houses of business provided credit to the people the house did business

with on a daily basis. The credit grew more sophisticated, becoming commercial credit and trustee holdings. As Andrés Reséndez mentioned in his book, the people of the frontier of Northern Spain/Mexico “no longer found themselves at the terminus but at the crossroads of new trading routes....and began participating as international merchants in their own right.”<sup>21</sup>

In 1847, already a cotton merchant at age seventeen, Thomas Gonzales moved from New Orleans to Port Isabel to begin a light-erage company (loading goods onto and unloading goods from ships). He married Elizabeth Blair, the daughter of a Presbyterian minister, and built a house in Port Isabel. Elizabeth died within the year from a cholera epidemic, and Thomas returned to New Orleans. However, in 1849 he returned to Port Isabel, reassumed control of the lighterage company, and also established companies in Matamoros, Tampico, and Vera Cruz. Port Isabel quickly became a port of entry for those traveling to California. He ran for political office and became a Cameron County commissioner.<sup>22</sup> His brother, Francisco, joined him in Port Isabel. In 1853, Thomas purchased twenty thousand acres of land called *Ganado Mayor*, which originally belonged to Don Domingo de la Garza.<sup>23</sup>

Thomas Gonzales and his family moved to Galveston in 1857. He also established mercantile houses in Brownsville, Tampico, Vera Cruz, and Bagdad. He found that his excellent English and Spanish (free of foreign accent in both) provided him with an advantage that many of his competitors did not have. He and his brother Francisco developed strong business ties with European banks and mercantile houses. Gonzales controlled the largest portion of cotton exports into the Netherlands from the Southern United States and the Rio Grande Valley. His brother's Dutch connections resulted in Francisco becoming their general consul in Texas. Francisco later represented Spain and several other European countries from his home in Galveston.

Starting in 1858, the Lower Rio Grande Valley went through some major changes. A fire destroyed two of the mercantile hous-

es, one of Jeremiah Galván and the other of Phelps. There was over \$250,000 in losses, and several people died in the fire. One of the casualties was Frank North, a partner and nephew of Charles Stillman. Everyone came together to put out the fire, forming a bucket brigade, with “troops from Fort Brown and the river steamers pumping water to the scene.”<sup>24</sup> There was also a yellow fever epidemic that year. The Brownsville branch of the Commercial and Agricultural Bank of Galveston closed.<sup>25</sup> In addition, in 1859 General David E. Twiggs decided to close Fort Brown and to transfer the troops to Fort Duncan and Camp Hudson. Ninety-three of Brownsville’s and the Rio Grande’s finest merchant elite and entrepreneurs warned the general that “Mexican armed soldiers, highwaymen, and Indians” would invade the area. General Twiggs bluntly replied that there was no “danger of Mexicans ... crossing the river to plunder or disturb the inhabitants, and the outcry on the Rio Grande for troops is solely to have an expenditure of the public money.”<sup>26</sup>

Despite these troubles, Francisco Yturria and José San Román opened two of the largest private banks in the Rio Grande Valley in 1859.<sup>27</sup> Yturria helped to organize the Mifflin Kenedy and Company, with the help of Charles Stillman, who also apprenticed San Román. San Román and John Young, a young Scotsman, had left Stillman to go out on their own, and some of the ships purchased by the Mifflin Kennedy and Company were the two steamships owned by San Román and Young, the *Guadalupe* and the *Swan*. San Román subsequently focused on developing his mercantile house. John Young, together with John McAllen, obtained a government concession to operate a ferry between Reynosa and Hidalgo.<sup>28</sup>

With the departure of the Commercial and Agricultural Bank of Galveston, the banks of San Román and Francisco Yturria were able to refuse credit to many of the other operators and smaller importers, thereby reducing the number of wealthy merchants to a favored few. The Yturria Private Bank was used by Yturria’s friends and business partners Kenedy and King and a few of the



elite businessman on both sides of the border.<sup>29</sup> However, Yturria's influence extended beyond the Rio Grande Valley.

One source of credit unique to Brownsville was scrip issued by the county. So that people could use it to pay their taxes, it was printed with blanks left on the check-like forms, with the month and day to be filled in, although the year was printed and the name of the bearer, the secretary, and the register were written in. The scrip was endorsed by Brownsville's mayor George Dyer.<sup>30</sup> So many members of Brownsville's elite speculated so much in this scrip that, in 1860, the district judge directed a grand jury investigation on illegal speculation in county scrip. Those investigated included Charles Stillman, Mifflin Kenedy, Richard King, Francisco Yturria, Stephen Powers, S. M. Williams, William Neale, F. F. Fenn, Albert Champion, Henry Webb, Jerry Galvan, José San Román, J. R. Palmer, J. G. Browne, Alexander Werbiski, H. E. Woodhouse, Henry Miller, and even the Cameron County tax assessor.<sup>31</sup>

When the Civil War broke out, and President Abraham Lincoln announced his Proclamation of Blockade against southern ports on April 19, 1861,<sup>32</sup> Charles Stillman, Mifflin Kenedy, and Richard King entered into an arrangement to register all of their boats under the name of Francisco Yturria and the Mexico flag. These boats would sail to Europe and New York to sell their cargo and return to Matamoros filled with silver and gold coin for use in the Rio Grande Valley. In 1864, Francisco Yturria was appointed Confederate Customs Collector on the Rio Grande. George W. Brackenridge of San Antonio (in Matamoros to take advantage of the profiteering available during the Civil War by forming the company of Breckenridge, Bates and Company) borrowed money from the Yturria Bank. However, when the local people learned of Brackenridge's Union sympathies, he had to smuggle himself out of Bagdad. He was appointed the U.S. Treasury Agent out of New Orleans once that city was captured by Union forces in 1863. After the Civil War he returned to San Antonio, where he used the "capital" accumulated from both of his ventures in Matamoros/

Bagdad and New Orleans to start the San Antonio National Bank and to become President of a San Antonio Trust Company.<sup>33</sup>

At the start of the Civil War, Thomas Gonzales purchased all of the cannons, ammunition, and uniforms for a 150-man artillery unit called the "Gonzales artillery." In the second battle to retake Galveston from the Union forces, the new general in charge of the counter attack, struggling with his battle plan, needed someone who knew Galveston and the wharf.<sup>34</sup> General Magruder called for young Gonzales, with whom he discussed the taking of Galveston. A plan was developed. The battle plan almost did not work, as the Confederates had underestimated the Union naval power in the bay and on the reinforcement naval power used as part of the blockade.<sup>35</sup> But, in a second effort by the rag-tag Confederate Navy, Captain Gonzales' guns aimed at the Union army on the wharf were able to recapture Galveston. Gonzales became known as the hero of Galveston. Shortly thereafter, he obtained a medical discharge which General Magruder personally approved.<sup>36</sup> Gonzales at once moved, with his family, to Tampico and then he returned to Matamoros and Bagdad where he expanded his mercantile house, shipping cotton and other goods primarily to Europe for the remainder of the war. Once the war was over he returned to Galveston.

When the American Civil War ended there were some questions by the Union authorities concerning the transactions of Stillman, Kenedy, and King and their relationship to Yturria. Federal officials were to arrest all four of the men "for aiding and abetting the enemy." Kenedy and King crossed into Matamoros and sought protection from Yturria, while Stillman sailed to New York City, where he remained for the rest of his life. Yturria hid Kenedy and King until the matter was settled. The two men returned to Texas in 1866, after Charles Stillman arranged for pardons by President Andrew Johnson, co-signed by the Secretary of State on May 10, 1866.<sup>37</sup>

In that same year, Benito Juárez's Republican army gained the upper hand in the civil war in Mexico. Republicans rounded up supporters of the monarchy and shot them. At that point, Francisco Yturria left for France, where he stayed until President Juárez gave him a pardon in 1870. Yturria then returned to Matamoros and began to re-establish his holdings.<sup>38</sup>

While most of the trade exchange in the Lower Rio Grande Valley was conducted in Mexican currency, when the need arose, Yturria's bank would exchange their Mexican money for silver or gold U.S. coin.<sup>39</sup> These men were the first "Billionaires" of the state of Texas. The Texas Banking Department, established in 1905, introduced regulations that did not allow a private bank to continue once the owner (one person) passes away. However, after Francisco Yturria died in 1912, his bank continued until 1923, when it was ended by a partition lawsuit from a family member, Isabel Yturria-Garza.<sup>40</sup>

The Rio Grande Valley provided a lifetime of opportunity for many men. The stories of these men made the Rio Grande Valley a richer place not only in monetary wealth but in the wealth of stories that came out of the search for trade, capital and wealth.

The Bexareños Genealogical and Historical Society

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# MID-NINETEENTH CENTURY HISTORY



TEATRO DE LA REFORMA  
MATAMOROS, TAMAUULIPAS





# *The Daily Brownsville Ranchero*

by

Norman C. Delaney

For an eventful eleven year period, from 1859 to 1870, the *Ranchero* was one of the most influential newspapers circulating in South Texas and, for a time, in Matamoros, Tamaulipas, Mexico.<sup>1</sup> Initially published in Corpus Christi, four years later, in the midst of civil war, its editor moved his press to Santa Margarita, on the northeast edge of Nueces County. Only four issues are known to have been published from there before the *Ranchero* appeared in Brownsville, in December of 1864. After only one (known) issue was published there, the newspaper next appeared in Matamoros, on May 15, 1865. After running continuously in that city until June 16, 1866, it re-appeared in Brownsville on September 25 of that year. Excepting for two interruptions, each lasting several weeks, *The Daily Brownsville Ranchero* was published in Brownsville until finally being sold in October of 1870. It then reappeared as the *Ranchero and Republican* under new ownership.

During the eleven years it was being published by its original founder, Henry Alonzo Maltby, major events were taking place in Mexico and the United States: Civil War and Reconstruction in Texas and revolution and foreign intervention in Mexico. The *Ranchero* provides information about events taking place in South Texas and northern Mexico from firsthand accounts as well as articles taken from various newspapers. Its editorials reflect the highly opinionated views of Maltby, its chief editor and publisher. Although there were others connected with the newspaper, assuming subordinate roles during shorter time periods – William Maltby, Somers Kinney, and even John Salmon “Rip” Ford – the *Ranchero* is a reflection of its founder, publisher, and senior editor, Henry Maltby, and its story can best be told through his own written words.

Henry Alonzo Maltby was born in Ashtabula County, Ohio, on November 4, 1830, the son of lawyer David Maltby and his wife, Lucy. Little is known of Henry's early years – no record of him is found in the 1850 federal census – but in 1851 he was in Houston, Texas, as the proprietor of the recently acquired "Lathrop's Circus," which became "Maltby's New York Circus." In May of 1852, the circus performed in Corpus Christi during Henry Kinney's state fair, the first of its kind to be held in Texas. Not long afterwards, Maltby settled in Corpus Christi, holding several city offices, including that of mayor. He resigned from the office of mayor in February of 1857, ostensibly with the intention of joining the filibuster expedition of William Walker in Nicaragua. There is no evidence, however, that Maltby actually reached Nicaragua, and, in fact, his later editorials consistently denounced Walker and filibustering, wherever it was being practiced. Yet these condemnations could well have been written by a disillusioned man. Maltby is next found in Brownsville, until property he owned there was destroyed in a fire that originated in a building owned by merchant Charles Stillman.

Returning to Corpus Christi, Henry persuaded his younger brother William to come from Ohio to join him and assist in publishing a newspaper. William already had newspaper experience from his employment as a printer for the *Cleveland Herald*. The first issue of the Corpus Christi *Ranchero*, a weekly paper, appeared on October 19, 1859. The newspaper's prospectus indicated that it stood behind the principles of the Democratic Party as represented by Presidents Jefferson, Jackson, and Polk. It also claimed to be independent from all factions. The *Ranchero* soon adopted the practice of reproducing facsimiles of the various stock brands of local ranchers from Nueces and neighboring counties.

Although initially critical of the Southern "fire-eating" secessionists, Henry and William themselves became radicalized following the election of Abraham Lincoln in November of 1860. In February of 1861, Henry was elected as a pro-secession delegate to the convention in Austin that voted Texas out of the Union.

With the coming of war, William became an officer in an artillery battery assigned to coastal defense, while Henry continued publishing the *Ranchero*, performing the role, as he put it, of being “as the sentinel upon the watchtower [who], not only spreads the alarm of approaching danger, but records the gallant deeds done by our patriotic soldiers, to the gratification of an ever grateful people.”<sup>2</sup> As a newspaper publisher, Henry was exempt from conscription into the Confederate army, and he received a special dispensation from General John Bankhead Magruder for good measure.

Although the Confederate defenders of Corpus Christi were successful in repelling a Federal naval attack in August of 1862, the situation in South Texas changed dramatically, in November of 1863, with the arrival of a Union force under General Nathaniel Banks. Not long after Brownsville was occupied, Confederate Fort Semmes, on the northeast tip of Mustang Island, was captured, along with its entire garrison, which included Captain William Maltby. As a wanted “rebel,” Henry fled with his press to Santa Margarita, where he continued publishing a *Ranchero* greatly reduced in size, with no advertisements. Although the Federal forces withdrew from coastal Texas, in June of 1863, Corpus Christi remained a city in distress, with its population politically divided and suffering from food shortages, inflation, and a relentless drought. Henry returned to Brownsville, but finding the situation there untenable – a Federal military force would again occupy the city – he and Somers Kinney crossed over to Matamoros, where the two began publishing the *Matamoros Ranchero*. Kinney had previous newspaper experience, having published the *Nueces Valley* in Corpus Christi and *The American Flag* in Brownsville. Later, following his release from Federal custody, William Maltby joined his brother and Somers in Matamoros. (William had spent several months at Vicksburg as a paroled prisoner under the charge of his older brother Jasper, a brigadier general in the Union army.) The weekly *Matamoros Ranchero* was printed in both English and Spanish, with David V. Whiting translating into Spanish. Whiting

operated a custom house and ship brokerage business in both Matamoros and Brownsville.

A thorough year-by-year examination of the *Ranchero* reveals that Henry Maltby was more than an ordinary run-of-the-mill newspaper editor. He saw himself as the “fighting editor,” a crusader whose fiery editorials were intended to make things happen—*his* way. Henry viewed issues in absolutes with no middle ground, literally in black and white. It is unfortunate that on racial matters he was no different than most of his contemporaries, demeaning blacks as “niggers,” Native Americans as “savages,” and the Chinese in the United States as “Celestials” and “John Chinaman.” On the positive side, however, he respected and admired Mexicans and Tejanos, whom he considered “among our most honorable citizens, and we have every reason to feel that our community is more exalted by having them among us.”<sup>3</sup> And there was a humane and compassionate side to Henry as well. After discovering that a Presbyterian clergyman in Brownsville had, along with his wife, cruelly whipped a little girl at the clergyman’s school, the *Ranchero* editor, along with Somers Kinney, denounced the man as a disgrace to his profession. They found that the minister’s excuse that he was only following instructions given him by the child’s guardian only added to the travesty. Believing that there were numerous unreported cases of child abuse within the Brownsville community, Henry called for the humane treatment of all children.<sup>4</sup>

Some might view Henry as more of a Don Quixote, but, in any case, there is no question that his newspaper played an important role in shaping – and, in some cases, reflecting – public opinion. In Somers Kinney, Henry had both a friend and a kindred spirit. He once compared Kinney, whom he jokingly referred to as “Cassius” because of his lean body build, to a skilled barber: “After having gone over his subject not a hair is left standing and perhaps cutting to the quick a little too often. However, that feature of his writing is not all a detriment, for every subject fairly needs skinning alive, at this age of the world.” Henry could have been

describing himself when he wrote at the time of his friend's death: "He never enjoyed his pen-jobbings unless they were trenchant and aggressive. Whether friend or foe felt the same blow, the fact that the blow had been felt was sufficient."<sup>5</sup>

The political situation in Mexico changed dramatically in 1864, when President Benito Juárez was forced from power and replaced by Maximilian, the Austrian archduke chosen to be emperor of Mexico and supported by troops sent by French emperor Napoleon III. Among those Mexicans who chose to support the new empire was General Tomás Mejía, who, along with his Imperial army, was stationed in Matamoros. The *Ranchero* editors enthusiastically supported the new regime. In Maximilian, they contended, Mexicans had found "a staunch friend of all those virtues which should constitute greatness in a people. In him they have found a refuge from impending disaster, if not an actual state of anarchy and confusion."<sup>6</sup> They dismissed the possibility of United States intervention by claiming that the Monroe Doctrine was now obsolete, and in any case the United States economy was already stretched too thin for it to become involved in another war. They enthusiastically offered to serve General Mejía in arms should it be necessary...

Matamoros—Oct. 20, 1865

General!

The undersigned, editors, proprietors and employees in the office of the "DAILY RANCHERO," hereby tender to your Excellency their personal services in the coming contest, in whatever manner your Excellency may be pleased to dispose of them.

With the greatest respect,

H. A. Maltby

S. Kinney

Daniel Whiting

And others

In response, Mejia assured the trio that “should a general call be made upon the inhabitants of this city,” he would “cheerfully accept in the hour of battle, the tender of your services.” Meanwhile, they were encouraged to continue urging “union among the citizens and the development of those highly national ideas upon which its principles are based.”<sup>7</sup> Along with the *Ranchero* editors, a large number of other ex-Confederates in Mexico were attracted by generous incentives for immigrants offered by Maximilian.

When copies of the *Matamoros Ranchero* first reached the northern United States, the newspaper was denounced by the *New York World* as “the one rebel organ left.”<sup>8</sup> But, with Brownsville now occupied by Federal troops, there were enemies closer to home. On one occasion – reported in the *Ranchero* as an “Unparalleled Barbarity” – William Maltby and Somers Kinney had just crossed the Rio Grande with a group of mourners accompanying a hearse for burial in Brownsville, when they were set upon by Federal soldiers. Somers avoided capture, but William was brought before the commanding officer of the sub-district, Colonel John Black, and threatened with imprisonment unless he took an oath of loyalty to the United States and severed his connection to the *Ranchero*.<sup>9</sup> This William did reluctantly, and soon afterwards returned to Corpus Christi to publish his own newspaper, the *Advertiser*. Henry, however, embittered by the war’s aftermath, told his brother emphatically that he would never return to the United States.<sup>10</sup>

Considering the tone and content of *Ranchero* editorials, it is not surprising that the editors would be the objects of death threats. One such letter was written by a “Miguel A. Martinez,” who gave it to a *Ranchero* newsboy in Brownsville to deliver to Maltby in Matamoros...

Dear Friend—

The object of this is to inform you of the imminent danger you are incurring in consequence of the publication by you of that insulting sheet entitled “El Ranchero”; I therefore advise you to come over

to this side, without delay, because if you are apprehended, a buck negro has been detailed to attend to your case; such being the unanimous verdict rendered against you on yesterday. If you do not drop your pen and abstain from following the dictates of your perverted judgement, the day will arrive when you will remember me. Then you will exclaim, "O me!" For not having followed the advice of a friend. Without anything further to add, commend the sentiments of regard and esteem of one who regrets being called a colleague.<sup>11</sup>

Henry responded with mock horror...

Woe to us! Woe to us! We are going to be assassinated, and our light must die out, the light of the *RANCHERO*, and our own individual lights to this mortal fame! We are terribly distressed, and our hand trembles as we write.<sup>12</sup>

Brave words, but soon afterwards came a follow-up revelation.

We have since received a shower of letters and verbal threats sent us from Brownsville. We cannot afford to kick any more of the detestable vagrants into notoriety.<sup>13</sup>

After the Ranchero had been relocated to Brownsville, Somers Kinney would make a startling disclosure:

In the last three years there has hardly been a time when a demand for a retraction has not been on our table; and seldom indeed have we published a number of our paper without threats hanging over us. Whilst in Matamoros a midnight attempt was made to assassinate one of the editors, but the cap snapped [misfired].<sup>14</sup>

Although the editors gave every indication of being loyal followers of Maximilian, they were not docile sycophants when it came to one issue about which they felt strongly – Maximilian’s so-called “Black Decree.” The decree called for the prompt court-martial and execution within twenty-four hours of all enemy prisoners found armed. Outraged, the editors accused French emperor Napoleon III and “his man Friday, the august Maximilian,” of having “destroyed government—introduced anarchy, and its hellish train of consequences—murder, robbery, the violation of women, the starvation of children, and what more the Lord only knows.” The editors further added, “If Mexico suffered and bled under French rule, her miseries have been increased a hundred fold under the policy of Maximilian.”<sup>15</sup> Although this brought forth protest from some Maximilian loyalists, there were no reprisals. In any case, Maximilian’s days were numbered following the withdrawal of French troops from Mexico.

The final issue of the *Matamoros Ranchero* appeared on June 16, 1866. Seven days later, the city was surrendered, and the following day it was occupied by General Mariano Escobedo’s republican army. By then, Henry and Somers were long gone, having fled across the Rio Grande to Brownsville in fear for their lives. Before their departure, they had predicted a bloodbath should Matamoros fall into the hands of the republicans. “The fate of *THE RANCHERO* is to be terrible indeed, should Matamoros fall into the hands of the robbers. It is to be sacked, the editors knifed, and all things hereabouts are to be ripped up generally.” Escobedo and his soldiers—“monsters in human shape”—would bring with them “desolation, murder and ruin” upon a hapless population.<sup>16</sup> Once on United States soil, the editors were fortunate that Colonel Black was no longer in command there, and there was no repetition of what had happened to William. They would remain disenfranchised, however. Despite President Andrew Johnson’s attempt to follow Lincoln’s conciliatory policy of reconstruction, radical Republicans in Congress had prevailed, and Texas, along



with nine of the other states that had seceded, was now under military rule, Tennessee being the one exception.

On September 25, 1866, three months after the editors' flight from Matamoros, the first issue of the *Brownsville Ranchero* appeared. In it, Henry explained his and Somers' hasty departure from Matamoros. "Whether we left the crumbling empire of Mexico from necessity or choice is not altogether a debatable question. It is enough that we are here, and that we came in a hurry. There was a toppling, tumbling, and crashing of empires. There was a roar and a rattle of republican anarchy run mad."<sup>17</sup> In contemplating a chapter in his life now ended, Henry did not hesitate to blame the current situation in Mexico on the people themselves, as though somehow they could have prevented it from happening...

Three months have elapsed since we fled the wrath to come. Three months have glided by since uttering our more than prophetic words of warning to the people of Northern Mexico. Though we prognosticated ruin, riot and bloody republican anarchy, worse even than our most dreaded anticipations have already transpired. As we write, the heavy hand of Providence is upon those who parted with a government without making one sacrifice to save it. The fiat of the Almighty has gone forth, and Mexico is lost, probably soon to be blotted out of existence. The Mexican people have repudiated government in all its forms, and must now bide the consequences. They have courted outlawry and anarchy and a terrible retribution has fallen upon them. Their dismal wail will resound through the land until stilled by the iron gag of the conqueror soon to be. A people who will not govern themselves will certainly have a government forced upon them. In the nature of things this cannot be otherwise.<sup>18</sup>

Despite his earlier vow never to return to the United States, Henry quickly adjusted to his sudden change of fortune. He had, in fact, undergone a remarkable transformation. "The confederate notions once in our head have vanished. Our heart neither beats German, Dutch, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Hindoo, Chinese, Mexican, nor rebellion—but American."<sup>19</sup> As a realist, Henry would have known that, in order to publish a newspaper in Brownville, such a transformation was necessary. He observed, "The city officials of Brownsville are almost to a man Union men and discharged soldiers at that, thanks to a liberal minded community."<sup>20</sup> All fine and good, but with Texas now under military rule the editors were both unqualified to take the required "ironclad" oath to regain their citizenship, and unwilling in any case. As the 1868 presidential election neared, with the *Ranchero* supporting the Democratic candidate Horatio Seymour, Henry lashed out at what he perceived as a great injustice being done to himself and his junior editor. "Our blood boils in our veins, as we read the order issued by our military commander prohibiting us, free born white citizens of the United States from expressing our choice in the next November election for a President of our native country. Was there ever heard such tyranny outside of Mexico?"<sup>21</sup> Henry's bitter reaction is ironic considering that, only a short time earlier, he had vowed never to return to the United States.

Initially, the *Ranchero* was published in a "rickety old wooden shell, a story and a half high." Nevertheless, Henry could still boast, "We have one of the best printing establishments in the state, the job materials alone costing us four thousand hard dollars."<sup>22</sup> The first issue from Brownsville included an engraving of their impressive new state-of-the-art press, Richard Hoe's "Railway Newspaper Printing Machine," also referred to as "Hoe's Lightning Press" and "Hoe's cylindrical Bed Press." Once the *Ranchero* became fully established, it was moved to a new three-story building on Elizabeth Street, with Henry's private residence located next to it. During the *Ranchero's* earlier years, its masthead contained only its name in large letters. While the *Ranchero* was being published

in Matamoros, a drawing was added of three sailing sloops and a lighthouse, and, in 1867, this was replaced with an illustration more appropriate to its name — a *ranchero* and his homestead, with a dog, cattle, and sheep, and a vaquero rounding up cattle.

Of the five newspapers being published in Brownsville, only two — the *Ranchero* and the *Rio Grande Courier* — were in English, the *Courier* also having a section in French, *Le Courier du Rio-Grande*. The three all-Spanish language newspapers were *El Mexicana* (a pro-Imperialist newspaper), *La Bandera de Mexico*, and *La Verdad*. A sixth newspaper, in English, the *Brownsville Republican*, began publication in 1867.<sup>23</sup> It was war from the very beginning, the *Ranchero* editors lashing out at the *Brownsville Republican*'s editor, George W. Reynolds, as “a scribbling newspaper buzzard” and “a parasitical bar-room fungus.”<sup>24</sup> Henry knew Reynolds from Corpus Christi and was determined to expose him as a liar and a fraud.

A “war” of longer duration existed between Henry and the editor of the *Rio Grande Courier*, Emile P. Claudon, a Frenchman whose *Courier* was printed in English, Spanish, and French. The two rivals were not only competing for readers but also for city printing contracts. Henry accused Claudon, who had been a *New York Herald* correspondent in New Orleans during the war, of being a “Beast Butlerized Yankee” and a coward for having avoided military service. In response, Claudon condemned Maltby for having supported Maximilian, and accused him of being a hypocrite for his having avoided military service and for having a serious drinking problem as well.<sup>25</sup> Even former Texas Ranger and Confederate hero John S. “Rip” Ford became involved in the feud. After a brief spell as assistant editor for the *Ranchero*, Ford quit to take the same position with the *Courier*. While there, he turned on his former employer, accusing the *Ranchero* of “unreliability and lying.”<sup>26</sup> A clever retort by Kinney noted that the *Ranchero* had changed since the time when Ford was writing for it.

The quarrel between Maltby and Claudon finally reached the point where intercession became necessary, and, on May 4, 1868,

this came about through the efforts of intermediaries E. R. Hord and C. B. Combe. But then, surprisingly, only three months later, Claudon sold the *Courier* to Maltby. With the “war” now resolved, Henry turned the whole sordid affair into a joke. “We have tried for a long time to kill our neighbor off, but, finding it would not be killed, we resorted to the last alternative, that of buying him up. Now that we have him down, however, it would not be magnanimous to boast.” Not only had the bitterness ended, but Henry now lavished the highest praise upon his former rival...

We recognize in Mr. Claudon a superior newspaperman, prompt, energetic and sleepless; faithful, devoted and never-failing. He had battled manfully for our border interests and has merited success. In fact, he has been a success hitherto unknown in newspapering, when all the circumstances are daily considered, and, though we have measured swords with him time and again if anyone should miss the *Courier* this morning, he must charge it to our account or to the mutability of human affairs on a fretful border.<sup>27</sup>

Not long afterwards, when Somers Kinney left the *Ranchero* to publish his own newspaper in Houston, he brought Claudon with him as his assistant. Having no desire to publish two newspapers, Henry put the *Courier* press up for sale. He assumed the *Courier*'s practice of having a French language segment added to his own newspaper as *Le Ranchero de Brownville – Journal Quotidien*, beginning on August 21, 1868. This was discontinued, as of July 31, 1869, due to being financially unprofitable.

The *Ranchero* editors took a special interest in events transpiring in Mexico. The overthrow and execution of Maximilian and his generals, Mejía and Severo del Castillo, by the victorious republican leaders left them deeply disturbed. Thick black borders on the *Ranchero* signaled mourning for the three, and those responsible for their deaths were condemned as “murderers.” As for Maximilian’s

infamous "Black Decree," the editors now reversed themselves and contended that it had been intended all along to be used only on "roving bands of robbers, persistent enemies of the government," and in any case it had never actually been used. Maximilian was lauded as having been "the accepted ruler by all prominent Mexicans," and his government "was recognized and still is recognized by all other civilized governments."<sup>28</sup> (Maximilian was never recognized as a legitimate government by the United States.) The newly restored president, Benito Juárez, was denounced as "that little, dark, and deep designing Indian, drunk with blood, mescal and plunder, dreams for himself under the name of President the perpetual governing of that unfortunate country." Juárez was further vilified as a "treacherous, perfidious Indian savage" and "the most abandoned of earth's awful wretches."<sup>29</sup>

Among other Liberal leaders under attack was General Felipe Berriozábal, the newly-appointed military governor of Matamoros. The general was especially vulnerable as a result of his private life; he was brazenly taking his mistress with him to opera and theatre performances. For such conduct alone, Henry moralized, Berriozábal had "set an example black enough to damn him to all eternity." The general's followers were accused of being "steeped in crime themselves; boasting of their brutality and cruelty, treachery and perfidity; glorying over their own abasement; gamblers and debauchers, all, they propose to sit in judgment on the American press, and commence by attempting to stop the *RANCHERO*," attesting to "a state of moral depravity found in no civilized country on earth."<sup>30</sup> When Berriozábal banned the *Ranchero* from all of Mexico, Maltby defiantly shot back, "Stop our paper, stop it, we say; it will only double our circulation, and bring about fourteen tons of truth which we have pickled down for an especial occasion."<sup>31</sup>

Good news came early in 1868 when Berriozábal's successor, General Miguel Palacios, rescinded his predecessor's ban on the *Ranchero*. The highly gratified editors praised Palacios as "a man entirely above the petty feelings of revenge which were so much

the cause of the order prohibiting our circulation in that country."<sup>32</sup> They were now able to have a correspondent in Mexico City, Bradford C. Barksdale, a former correspondent of the *New York Times*.

The "fighting editor" claimed to be waging "relentless war" on the men who had executed Maximilian and now held power, comparing himself and Kinney to "the blooded hound when once upon the trail of a stag." What lay ahead for the Mexican people? "The life, liberty, happiness and hopes of millions of people are involved in the result. When we lose all hope of seeing a government established in Mexico, we shall forthwith move beyond the baleful influences of that outlawed country."<sup>33</sup> At heart, however, Henry was not optimistic about the future of Mexico, and the expression "Touch Mexico and die!" is used repeatedly in his editorials. He had actually convinced himself that the Mexican people would soon come to realize the great advantage of their country becoming part of the United States. In the spirit of "manifest destiny," he noted, "We have already shown to them that we can make what to them was an almost barren waste and make it into a garden."<sup>34</sup>

*Ranchero* editorials became increasingly strident in attacking military rule and the newly acquired rights of the freedmen. One issue alone contained several examples of Maltby-style hyperbole. These rants were written by Henry during a time when he was absent from Brownsville and were mailed to Kinney specifically for publication in the *Ranchero*. Although he may have been inebriated when he wrote them, they nevertheless reflect Henry's strongly-held views on this highly charged issue.

We are conquered, but Sir Conqueror, if you think to make more out of us by oppression than by conciliation, we say, crack your whip! Bring on your chains and load us down; for with not one jot or tittle of our honor will we part! We are not the first people who have been ground down by the tyrant's heel, if we are the first put down under the heels of

negro slaves. To accept a nigger level is infamous. We abhor the weak-kneed, milk-and-water, platter-licking reconstructionists. We have done nothing wrong unless the government founded was wrong. Go on Radicals, we defy you! Do your uttermost! We already have free tickets for the feast of death you are preparing for us! Make your acts as horrible as possible, that the end may come quickly! White men of the South, stay away from the polls! Blacken not your character by going near them.<sup>35</sup>

In September of 1867, Maltby and Kinney declared “war” on the Goliath of newspaper publishing, the *New York Herald*. The newspaper had accused the *Ranchero* editors of printing deliberate falsehoods by noting that “the notorious *RANCHERO* states that Gen. Berriozábal has issued an order to arrest Catholic priests crossing from Texas into Mexico. The *RANCHERO* has, too often, been convicted of forging documents and news to be a sufficient authority for so incredible a statement.”<sup>36</sup> The *Herald* did not have its facts correct. Berriozábal had issued the order, which Henry had taken from the general’s own official publication and had further verified from Catholic priests he interviewed.

The *Herald* had urged President Andrew Johnson to immediately suspend “that journal on the Rio Grande which is the medium of all the ultra rebel sentiments in Texas, the filibustering weapon of aggressive warfare against our neighbor, and the worst element of disturbance and misunderstanding that exists between Mexico and the United States.” Contending that its own position supported peace and harmony between the two countries, the *Herald* accused the *Ranchero* editors of encouraging the “wholesale slaughter” of Imperial prisoners. The speeches of Liberal leaders, it contended, “have been fabricated in quantities. The late blood-thirsty document attributed to [Mariano] Escobedo bears evidence of a Rio Grande authorship.”<sup>37</sup> Enraged, Maltby responded by means of a personal attack on the *Herald*’s publisher, James Gordon Bennett...

Now, that leprous old devil, James Gordon Bennett, who made his living by treachery and falsehood, who bears *honorable* scars at the hands of a bawdy woman, for descending even below the social rules of the harlot's den, arraigns us on the charge of unreliability. Never have we been hurt until now. This last is the unkindest cut of all. Even he, whom Barnum offered ten thousand dollars, to put in his museum as "the best living specimen of a liar and scoundrel," arraigns us on the charge of unreliability. We can't answer unless by invoking the spirit of the devil, and that we couldn't. Our checks are ready to be handed in. The New York Herald arraigns us, the devil is after us, and there is no Cassius to save us; we sink.<sup>38</sup>

On October 7, 1867, a major hurricane struck the coast, a catastrophe resulting in major damage to both Brownsville and Matamoros along with the loss of at least twenty-six lives. The port of Bagdad was all but wiped out. The entire third floor of the *Ranchero* building was leveled along with other serious damage.<sup>39</sup> Somers suffered a broken leg and bruises. It took five weeks to repair the building and replace equipment before publication of the *Ranchero* could resume, on November 13, and report on the damage inflicted by the hurricane. Soon afterwards, the editors faced yet another crisis, this one not caused by nature.

Trouble began brewing when a valorous no-nonsense army officer, Colonel Ranald Mackenzie, became head of the sub-district of the Rio Grande. Mackenzie became increasingly annoyed by *Ranchero* editorials, especially those containing snide comments about Northern women. In this instance the editors were responding to a *Harper's Weekly* article that had boldly stated, "There is a holy labor ahead in educating the country up to the miscegenation standard," when they asserted that had Northern women been



allowed to vote in the last election, "negro suffrage would have carried by overwhelming majorities in all the Northern states." Singled out for ridicule were the "New England spinsters": "It is said that the reason which has prompted the Messrs. Harper Brothers to try and make miscegenation respectable, is to protect New England spinsters from disgrace. We didn't suppose the thing had got so far along as that. Charity, however, should begin at home."<sup>40</sup> In Mackenzie's genteel view, these and other jibes had crossed the line of decency and violated his strict moral code. He ordered Maltby's arrest and would have had Somers arrested as well had it not been for his broken leg. Mackenzie demanded that Henry publish a retraction by the coming Sunday, one that he himself had personally written. If refused, he would have the *Ranchero* closed permanently and the editors jailed. Paroles were granted, but both were forbidden from leaving the city. Undeterred and furious, Henry returned to the *Ranchero* office where he left a sign, "died of miscegenation," bordered with black crepe before catching the next passenger steamer to New Orleans. There he made a personal appeal before the head of the Fifth Military District, General Winfield Scott Hancock. Hancock concurred that the editors' rights had been violated and ordered that the *Ranchero* be reopened and allowed to publish without further hindrance. Savoring their victory, the editors denounced Mackenzie as "one of the most thoroughly reckless and lawless tyrants that ever lived." Hancock, on the other hand, received guarded praise. "The biggest rebel of them all – General Winfield Scott Hancock; he has declared in favor of American liberty; that is enough."<sup>41</sup>

Of the several United States military officers who commanded the sub-district of the Rio Grande, only one received Maltby's unrestrained approval – Major General Alexander McDowell McCook, whose administration he praised as one "filled with honor to himself and with satisfaction to our citizens."<sup>42</sup> One high-ranking officer whom Henry especially hated was Phil Sheridan, who had preceded Hancock as head of the Fifth Military District. Henry wrote of him: "To our mind Ben Butler is a saint compared to

that ingrain tyrant Phil Sheridan. He is a revolting specimen of a low-bred Irish tyrant; and we beg pardon of every Irishman in the country for the remark made."<sup>43</sup> Henry never forgave Sheridan for the early death of his friend Philip Luckett, whom Sheridan had had imprisoned under harsh conditions at Fort Jackson after the war. In reporting Luckett's death, Henry noted: "The verdict of history must be: Died by the felonious and treacherous act of P. H. Sheridan." Another officer whom Henry loathed was Joseph J. Reynolds, whom he vilified as a "pious, double-faced, double-dealing, smiling sycophant," after Reynolds became head of the Fifth Military District, replacing Hancock. Earlier, when Sheridan had been head of the district, Reynolds had advised him to have the *Ranchero* closed on the grounds of "treason" against the United States.

In 1859, when Henry Maltby was living in Corpus Christi, he had joined a local defense company, the Walker Guards, in response to Juan Cortina's incursions across the Rio Grande into Texas. In countless editorials, Henry continued to vilify Cortina's character as one of "treachery, outlawry and assassination." But, incredibly, by 1869, Henry had reversed himself and had begun praising Cortina as the man most capable of bringing stability to the troubled region. "Perhaps in all of Texas, there is no man more capable than Cortina of dealing with, and exterminating, the bands of murdering thieves who infest this section."<sup>44</sup> Henry even published a complimentary biography of Cortina in the *Ranchero*.

Equally astonishing was Henry's changed view of Texas Unionist Edmund Davis, whom he had been referring to disparagingly since the war years as an "arch-renegade." In the election for governor of Texas in 1869, with Davis running against Andrew Jackson Hamilton, Henry indicated his distaste for both candidates. "The only choice is between a political Charlatan, who has capacity without balance, as liable to do bad as good, and that of a Corpus Christian, whose only mark is that of an unrelenting persecutor." He added, "Thank God! we can't vote for one nor the other."<sup>45</sup> But after Davis had won the election Henry began defending him, re-

futing accusations that Davis had stolen “silver ware, pianos, and other furniture in Mississippi.”<sup>44</sup> <sup>46</sup> Although Henry admitted to having political differences with Davis, he nevertheless credited him with being an honorable man, deserving of the public’s support. “Though we always have believed his political course to be wrong we cannot strip him of the jewel of consistency.” No doubt, Henry believed Davis’s assurances that he would act promptly to end military occupation and quickly restore Texas’ rightful place in the Union. It is possible, too, that he was hoping for an appointment in the in-coming administration. “We say extend to him a strong moral support, give him every opportunity to make us a good Governor. As far as we can judge, he has determined upon a liberal policy. Give him a chance!”<sup>47</sup> Since Maltby sold the *Ranchero* in October of 1870, we are left without knowing how he responded to the governor’s dictatorial measures during the four years he held office.

After eleven years of publishing the *Ranchero*, Henry was frazzled. In 1867, three years before he actually sold the *Ranchero*, he wrote a revealing editorial musing on the stress involved in editing a newspaper. This was intended, he wrote, for the benefit of “some unsophisticated people living off the road”...

Of all the vocations extant, this is exceeded by none for trouble, vexation, and wearisomeness [*vic*] of body and mind. The editor like the cook must have his bill of fare ready at the stated seasons. No matter who fails, what misses, the newspaper must come to time. Marriage may intervene, with its brimming cups of pleasure, the little stranger may invade the cradle and diffuse a joy never felt before, death with its dark mantle may cover the little household, and drape every heart in woe, yet the editor, the printer, are permitted no respite. It is toil, toil, with them. They are caterers to an insatiable appetite, bondsmen to inexorable taskmasters, who exact the last “pound of flesh.”

They must never flag. Like the fated animal in the treadmill they must tramp tramp tramp, day after day. Stationary, rooted to the spot, bound, fettered, like so many Prometheuses with the vulture of care feasting upon their vitals, they pursue the dull, unchanging way. Patient, plodding, and untiring they noiselessly toil on, but for them there is no goal but one. There is no stopping place, there is no point at which the public cry "enough"; the sands of life may wane, yet there is no relaxation. They are kept on duty, sentinels on the watchtowers, until death relieves them.<sup>48</sup>

Nevertheless, Henry felt pride in his newspaper and his role as its "fighting editor." By May of 1867, there were *Ranchero* agents in Corpus Christi, Victoria, New York City, New Orleans, Monterrey, Mexico, and "one traveling." By that year Henry was also publishing a twelve-page weekly issue. Before leaving the *Ranchero* for Houston, Kinney had become its "Traveling Editor and Correspondent."

In an editorial written following the 1867 hurricane, Henry indicated the trials and tribulations the *Ranchero*—in effect he himself—had endured...

So nearly as we can calculate, the *RANCHERO* has been suppressed, arrested and interfered with by military authority seventeen times. The federals, rebels, Mexican imperialists and liberals have all had a tilt at us. The *RANCHERO* has told more truth than any newspaper of its size and years ever published. It has survived every attack; came off victorious in all its fights, except seven or eight; has lived and died under and with more governments than a few, but was never seriously hurt until attacked by a hurricane. That gave us the severest blow we ever felt.<sup>49</sup>

But it was time to call it quits. Henry insisted that he had refused an offer to print “a radical or Republican sheet,” but then added, in a defensive tone, “but that is our business and not the business of that meddler of every other man’s business.”<sup>50</sup> Regular readers of the *Ranchero* would have been astonished to read an announcement in the issue of October 18, 1870:

We have a 2d-hand printing press with material sufficient to print a paper the size of the DAILY RANCHERO which we will sell for \$700. Terms cash down. We will sell the RANCHERO Office, including one country newspaper cylinder press, one medium liberty Jobber, and all the news and job material for \$4,000. There is also about \$1,000 in stock such as paper, ink blanks, one safe, etc., which will be sold at cost. Terms, one half cash down, balance to be paid within three years upon such terms as may be agreed. We are willing to sell because of an intention to engage in other vocations, and will here give the assurance that the first person who accepts the terms takes the shop, be he Greek, Turk, infidel, heretic, or any other man.<sup>51</sup>

Although Henry had denied the rumor that he intended to make the *Ranchero* into a Republican newspaper, that is exactly what happened, whether intended or not. The new owners, Henry Haupt and B.S. Smith, were both members of the Cameron County Republican Executive Committee, and, in 1871, the newspaper appeared as the *Daily Ranchero and Republican*, the “Official Journal for the Fifteenth Judicial District and for the City of Brownsville, Texas.” The same thing had happened to the *Nueces Valley* in Corpus Christi, in August of 1870, when it, too, had been sold to radical Republicans, thereby becoming another “official journal” of the Davis administration.

Henry briefly returned to newspaper publishing in 1874 with the *Rio Grande Democrat*, with its Spanish section, *El Democrata del Rio*

*Grande*, edited by Santiago A. Brito, a former Cameron County sheriff. The 1880 and 1900 federal censuses list Maltby as a "Retail Grocer" and "merchant," and he also did job printing at his home, as well as selling Aetna life insurance.

Unfortunately, Henry Maltby left no journals, diaries, or letters – at least none that have been located. Surprisingly, the man who had been so much in the public eye during his years as a newspaper publisher and editor was reticent about leaving a record of his life. A biographical sketch written in 1893 noted that "the career of Mr. Maltby is full of interesting incidents, but he disclaims any publication of them in their entirety."<sup>52</sup> When Henry Alonzo Maltby died of a heart attack on May 18, 1906, his obituary in the *Brownsville Daily Herald* eulogized him as "a man of staunch principles, loyal to his friends and true to what was his conception of right. His death removes from our midst one of the men who have been connected with the border history of Texas for many years, and whose demise is universally regretted."<sup>53</sup>

Del Mar College, Corpus Christi

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## Endnotes

1 Microfilm copies of the *Brownsville Rancharo* can be found at several university and public libraries in Texas. Numerous pages of the originals were badly faded at the time they were microfilmed and are either unreadable or only partially so. The author has used the microfilm copies at Corpus Christi's La Retama Central Library's Local History Room. Other known locations in Texas are: the Houston Public Library; the University of Houston at Clear Lake; Texas A&M University at College Station; Texas A&M University-Kingsville; the University of Texas at Austin (the Grace Edman Papers, 1867-1969); the University of Texas at Brownsville; the Panhandle-Plains Historical Museum at Canyon, Texas; the Texas State Library in Austin; and the Texas/Dallas Historical and Archives Division of the Dallas Public Library.

2 Corpus Christi *Rancharo*, Dec. 11, 1862.

3 Brownsville *Rancharo*, Jan. 12, 1870.

- 4 Brownsville *Ranchero*, June 5 & 7, 1867.
- 5 Ibid., Aug. 27, 1868; March 5, 1870.
- 6 Matamoros *Ranchero*, July 16, 1865.
- 7 Ibid., Apr. 18, 1866.
- 8 Brownsville *Ranchero*, Sept. 33, 1867.
- 9 Matamoros *Ranchero*, July 28, 1865.
- 10 William Maltby to sisters, Maltby Papers, Corpus Christi's La Retama Central Library.
- 11 Matamoros *Ranchero*, Nov. 5, 1865.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Brownsville *Ranchero*, Jan. 3, 1868.
- 15 Ibid., Oct. 25, 1866.
- 16 Matamoros *Ranchero*, Nov. 4, 1865.
- 17 Brownsville *Ranchero*, Sept. 25, 1866.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Ibid., June 1, 1867.
- 20 Ibid., June 16, 1867.
- 21 Ibid., Aug. 15, 1868.
- 22 Ibid., June 16, 1867.
- 23 A. A. Champion, with Mary Champion Hengglar, Consuelo Champion, and Vivian Kearney, "Papers and Personalities of Frontier Journalism (1830s to 1890s)," in Milo Kearney, ed., *More Studies in Brownsville History* (Brownsville: Pan American University at Brownsville, 1989), pp. 112-161..
- 24 Brownsville *Ranchero*, May 29, 1867.
- 25 Ibid., Apr. 24, July 12, Aug. 16, 1867.
- 26 Ibid., May 1, 1868.
- 27 Ibid., Aug. 2, 1868.
- 28 Ibid., May 24, 1867.
- 29 Ibid., July 17 & 19, 1867.
- 30 Ibid., June 16, 1867.
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 Ibid., Jan. 28, 1868.
- 33 Ibid., Mar. 2, 1867.

- 34 Ibid., Jan. 1, 1870.
- 35 Ibid., Nov. 29, 1867.
- 36 Ibid., Sept. 22, 1867.
- 37 Ibid., May 2, 1867.
- 38 Ibid., Sept. 22, 1867.
- 39 Ibid., Nov. 13, 1867.
- 40 Ibid., Dec. 8, 1867.
- 41 Ibid., Jan. 3, 1868.
- 42 Ibid., June 9, 1868.
- 43 Ibid., June 12, 1869.
- 44 Ibid., Sept. 22, 1870.
- 45 Ibid., July 24, 1869.
- 46 Ibid., July 24, 1869.
- 47 Ibid., Apr. 11, 1867.
- 48 Ibid., Apr. 5, 1870.
- 49 Ibid., Jan. 3, 1868.
- 50 Ibid., Oct. 18, 1870.
- 51 Ibid., Oct. 18, 1870.
- 52 Lieut. W. H. Chatfield, *The Twin Cities of the Border*, (New Orleans: E. P. Brandao, 1893).
- 53 *Brownsville Daily Herald*, May 18, 1906.



# Maximilian's Bed in Brownsville

by

Don Clifford

Mention an historic bed, and Valley history buffs will probably recall the massive Napoleonic four-poster, with canopy, that once belonged to Don Francisco and Felicitas Trevino Yturria, a pioneer family of Brownsville. Stories about the bed were handed down to Yturria descendants--that the bed was intended, originally, for Maximilian, Archduke of Austria and short-lived Emperor of Mexico; and that because of a trans-atlantic shipping error, the Yturrias inadvertently acquired the bed, complete with Hapsburg crest, the Archduke's family coat of arms. The stories border on legend. During the past twenty-five years at least two stories appeared in print--one in a March 1960 issue of the *Brownsville Herald*, the other in the mid-summer of 1984 edition of the *Sand Dollar*, a Harlingen based publication. Recently, Isabel Garcia Vezzetti, an Yturria descendant and member of the Brownsville Historical Association, invited *Horizon* to write an updated version of the "Maximilian" bed story. Subsequent investigation and an interview with Frank Yturria, great-grandson of Don Francisco and prominent Brownsville banker, disclosed that there are two versions of the same story. In some places, the versions don't match! In the long run, the "Maximilian" bed will probably downplay to a mere historical footnote. However, for the record, *Horizon* presented both versions of the story against a brief historical background. No judgment was made as to which version is more accurate. The resulting report is reproduced here.

In the early 1860's, Brownsville residents worried more about devastating hurricanes than blood spilled in the U. S. Civil War raging "up north." Not until Union gunboats bottled up the mouth of the Rio Grande in 1862, and the later burning of Brownsville during General H. P. Bee's evacuation and subsequent occupa-

tion by Union soldiers in 1863, did the “northern uprising” hit home. In the latter stages of the war, the Confederacy desperately depended on Texas cotton to bankroll the losing cause. Men with imagination and daring--men cut in the mold of Richard King, Miflen Kenedy, Charles Stillman, and others--devised all sorts of schemes to make sure Confederate cotton reached European ports and fabric mills. In Mexico, Benito Juarez waged a civil war of his own. He needed cotton to purchase arms and munitions. Imperial agents of France attempted to control the flow of cotton, preventing Juarez from getting it. Meanwhile, cotton bought arms and munitions for the Confederacy. France tried to keep the same weapons from spilling over to Juarez, but in effect she helped finance the revolution against her own Imperial forces. Amid the vicious circles of confusion, sharp entrepreneurs found countless opportunities to make money; and a young man of Mexico made sure the Kings and Kenedys got all the help they needed.

The published historical record of Francisco “Pancho” Yturria is very sketchy. Although aggravating to historians, this situation was not considered unusual. Most of the Zona Libre (Free Zone) merchants took great pains to keep their names “clear” of the contraband cotton trade. Created in 1857, the Zona Libre was a fourteen-mile-wide “free” trade zone that paralleled the Mexican side of the Rio Grande and stretched from Bagdad, at the mouth, to Juarez, across from El Paso. During the Civil War, Confederate merchants used the zone to their advantage. They “allowed” the Mexican government to “nationalize” all imports for subsequent reshipment to Europe. Naturally, a lot of “tax” money changed hands. Some facts about Yturria are documented. As a young man in his late twenties, he contracted with a Juan Valz to build a home at 1424 E. Washington Street, across from Fort Brown. This was in 1853, five years after the City of Brownsville incorporated. At age thirty, Yturria married Felicitas Trevino in 1860. In time, the couple adopted two children--Daniel, who was to carry onward the Yturria name; and Isabel, who later married Miguel Garcia.

The next documented record occurs in February 1862 when gunboats blockaded the Rio. In a meeting with King, Kenedy, Stillman, John "Rip" Ford, Jose San Romon, Jeremiah Galvan and the Trevizo brothers, Yturria, with the group, devised a strategy to place all the American riverboats under Mexican registry. This allowed Confederate cotton to travel the Rio Grande to the off-loading port at Bagdad, under the very noses of Union blockaders. In May 1865, the Civil War ended for Brownsville with the last shot fired on Palmito Hill. Meanwhile, Maximilian, the former unemployed Duke of Austria, completed a year's tenure as Emperor of Mexico. Juarez had fled the capitol and regrouped his rebel offensive in the mountains of Chihuahua. In October 1865, Imperialist General Tomas Mejia of Matamoros appointed Yturria the Chief of Customs of the Port of Bagdad. The appointment was in recognition of Yturria's help in organizing a small force of warrior merchants, who successfully helped defend Matamoros in an earlier clash between Imperialists and Liberals. Further recognition came when Maximilian knighted Yturria and other merchant warriors into the Military Order of Guadalupe. The Emperor's decree is dated November 30, 1865. However, the formal ceremony of knighthood did not occur until February 6, 1866. The occasion took place in Matamoros and was conducted by Maximilian's aide-de-camp, T. P. Numana, who arrived at Bagdad by ship three days earlier.

According to A. A. Champion, in May of the same year, a manifest of the steamship Sonora lists Yturria as a passenger to Vera Cruz. The purpose of the voyage is unknown. Great-grandson, Frank Yturria relates that when Maximilian's empire crumbled in 1867, Don Pancho suddenly had a price on his head. By way of Vera Cruz, he and his family fled first to Cuba and later to Paris. A couple of years later the family returned to Brownsville where Yturria resumed his mercantile and ranching interests. He became a U. S. citizen in 1877. *Horizon* did not investigate the Yturria legacy, but we know that in 1925, the Miguel Garcia family moved into the homestead on East Washington. Included in Isabel's inheritance

was the massive Napoleonic four-poster with the overhead canopy. According to Isabel Vezzetti, granddaughter of Isabel Yturria Garcia, her family history indicates the Yturrias visited Europe in 1860 (the year they were married). While in Paris they purchased furniture, and commissioned a "beautiful hand-carved bed" for shipment to Brownsville. The emperor apparently ordered a similar bed for his wife, Carlota, at about the same time.

Sometime in 1863, during the height of the Union blockade, both beds arrived on a schooner at Bagdad. Unfortunately, no ship's name or cargo manifest is known to exist. Supposedly, Maximilian's bed was off-loaded in error, and Yturria's bed continued to Vera Cruz to await transportation to the Emperor's Chapultepec Palace. (Maximilian did not arrive in Mexico to take the throne until May 1864.) The Yturrias discovered the mistake when they unpacked the ornate headboard upon which was fastened an elaborate coat of arms--the Hapsburg family crest--something to which only an Archduke of Austria was entitled. Within an unspecified period of time, Yturria dispatched a courier to Mexico City who informed the Emperor of the whereabouts of his bed. Maximilian's reply was simply, keep the bed, return the crest. Thus, the Garcia family refers to the bed as "Maximilian's" because it was intended for him originally. Frank Yturria disputes the date when the bed probably arrived in Brownsville. The dispute is a friendly one, and most likely leads to some lively discussions when the Yturria and Garcia families get together. For instance, he feels the bed was shipped to Brownsville in either 1868 or 1869, after the Yturrias returned from their flight to France. "I was never told by my grandfather (Daniel)," he said, "that it was a bed from Maximilian." Regarding the crest, Frank Yturria expressed his personal opinions and raised some interesting questions. "I'm familiar with the Hapsburg crest that I've seen in Chapultepec Palace . . .," he said. "But I don't see how you can put a crest on a carved wood bed. Was it carved into the bed? Was it a gold crest? A silver crest?" The answers are unknown.

This problem occurred to Robert and Isabel Vezzetti who speculated the crest was carved into the headboard; and that the entire

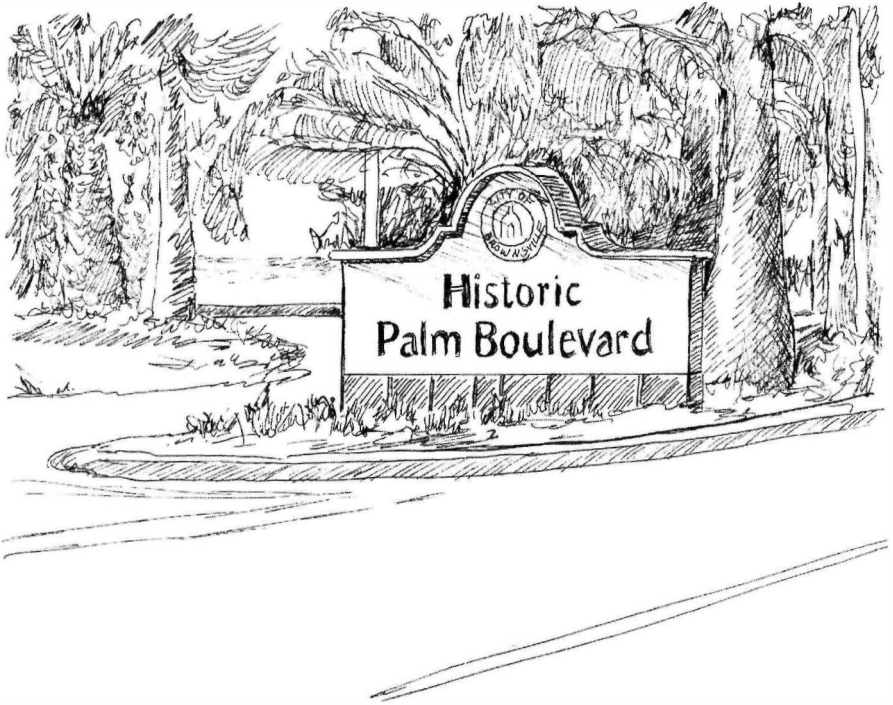
headboard, rather than just the crest, was returned to Maximilian. Presumably, the Yturrias ordered a replacement headboard. Frank Yturria suggests, also, that the term "Maximilian's bed" is a misnomer. Maximilian and Carlota had separate chambers in the palace. "Whose bed are we talking about?" he said. "His? Hers?" Yturria has seen both beds. "His" is enshrined at Chapultepec. "Hers" is in a private collection. On both viewing occasions, Yturria admits he was never consciously aware of any resemblance to the bed owned by the Garcia's. He expressed another possibility when the hand-carved four poster may have arrived in Brownsville. In the 1880's Isabel Yturria, Felicitas and her niece made a trip to France. The furniture could have been ordered then. When asked if there was any record of a Don Francisco or his family visiting Paris prior to 1864, Yturria replied, no. "I would doubt very, very seriously that they would have been in Paris before 1864," he said. "He was only 34 years old . . . four years married. He lived in an area exploding during the Civil War--a time when fortunes were made. He was one of the big entrepreneurs of the time. "I can't see him taking off and going to France, no more than you would have gone for a vacation to Switzerland in W.W.II." Yturria is researching and gathering materials for a forthcoming book about his illustrious ancestor. "The amazing thing about this man," he said, "was that he supported two losing causes. He supported the Confederacy and the reign of Maximilian. Both of them lost. Yet, he retained and increased his fortune . . . I can't find anybody equal to his ability in doing this! "Not a bad high wire act!" Yturria concluded.

Perhaps the disparities in the two bed stories can be attributed to how oral traditions are handed down. With time, some elements are embellished, some are forgotten. For various reasons, most are never documented. The answer to one question might help re-align the Garcia and Yturria bed stories a little closer. On May 4, 1866, why did Don Francisco embark on the Sonora for Vera Cruz? To inquire about a bed?

The Cameron County Historical Society



# LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY HISTORY







# The U. S. Consulate in Matamoros and Instability in Matamoros and Brownsville in 1870

by

César García

The year 1870 was a pivotal year for the United States as the Gilded Age's mixture of progress and decline was ushered in, forever transforming the fabric of the American culture. While the nation would soon encounter the catalysts that caused it to lumber under the weight of industrialization, urbanization, immigration, and catastrophic labor and race relations, the Brownsville-Matamoros region was facing a unique set of problems. To be sure, the Rio Grande Valley border region, and Brownsville in particular, encountered many of the same problems as the rest of the nation, but the primary concerns of the area were those that traditionally plague it and other border regions. Specifically, the Brownsville-Matamoros citizens had to cope with the problems arising from the Mexican political instability of the previous decade, one that would culminate in a violent clash between *Juaristas* and *Construccionalistas* at Matamoros in 1870. A study of the archives of the United States Consulate in Matamoros reveals that the social and political instability of Mexico caused the United States great concern, but ironically was also an episode of great American diplomatic inaction. The detailed correspondence between key American bureaucratic officials gives insight into the American diplomatic process of that period and the sense of concern and futility that plagued this frontier region. Before one can examine the archival record, however, a brief history into the causes of the Mexican crisis, which came to a head in 1870, is in order.

The origin of the border crisis of 1870 dates back multiple decades. For all intent and purposes, the events of 1870 in Matamoros had their roots in 1857. This year marks the emergence of the grow-

ing factionist and divisive party politics that would be the norm for the next decade and a half. During such time, a labyrinth of terms and names for various groups or people of interest would arise. The designation of terms, such as *liberal* and *conservative*, and the determination of how key figures fit into these designations is extremely difficult in that the parties, politics, and key players of this period were fragile, fluid, and subject to abrupt change.<sup>1</sup> In fact, so complicating was the constant shifting of alliances and stances that one needs to use a myriad of terms (including *puros*, *moderados*, *Juaristas*, *Lerdistas*, *Porfiristas*, and *construccionistas*) to accurately describe the events.<sup>2</sup> With this said, one returns to the year 1857 for, while many argue that Mexico existed in a state of political instability since its independence from Spain, for the purpose of this study, one only has to retrace the political instability and the divisive factions to February 12 of that year. On said day, the nation adopted the constitution it would have from 1857 until the adoption of the contemporary constitution in 1917, and in so doing, entered into an effort to end the instability that had so plagued the nation, an effort that proved unsuccessful.<sup>3</sup>

Liberal in its nature, the Constitution of 1857 was a progressive effort aimed at modernizing, secularizing, and democratizing Mexico.<sup>4</sup> Of the many espoused tenets, the freedom of speech, press, and assembly, the secularization of education, and the vast depletion of the power of the Catholic Church were among the most expansive and noteworthy.<sup>5</sup> Yet, these notions were also extremely divisive as the conservative elements of the nation resented the dismissal of the government recognition of noble titles, hereditary privileges, and the abolition of the special courts operating outside of government control – such as the Church courts for Catholic priests and the military courts for soldiers.<sup>6</sup> Regarding terminology for the clarification of figures and parties during this period, it may be said that a *liberal* was one who desired and fought for the reforms dictated in the Constitution of 1857, and a *conservative* was one who favored the traditional power of the Church and

military. Among other differences, these are the most identifiable and pertinent.

After the Constitution of 1857's ratification, Benito Juárez, in an excellent feat of political maneuvering, became Chief Justice and Vice-President of Mexico, serving under the *moderado* president Ignacio Comonfort.<sup>7</sup> This was a decisive victory for the young and ambitious Juárez, who (like many rising liberals) disliked the slow progress of the more moderate liberal camp of Comonfort. Juárez, who had designs for greater power, found himself in a ripe position.<sup>8</sup> Comonfort named Juárez to the Mexican "cabinet" to appease the conservatives, believing they feared another candidate from his faction would signify the establishment of a monopoly of power. Ironically, Comonfort's effort proved both futile and unnecessary. For, on December 17, 1857, General Félix Zuloaga issued the *Plan of Tacubaya* (which revoked the Constitution of 1857) and, in a shocking turn of events, named Comonfort the President, assigning to him tremendous executive powers.<sup>9</sup> Not surprisingly, Comonfort acquiesced to the plan, stating that, if given dictatorial powers, he could avail of them to mediate between the rival parties.<sup>10</sup>

In the resulting backlash from Juárez and the liberals, Juárez appealed to the masses under his call for a restrained federal power and a less dictatorial executive office, and rebelled against Comonfort, who, on January 21 1857, went into exile in the United States, leaving Juárez to be the President of Mexico.<sup>11</sup> Yet if Juárez sensed triumph, it was to be short lived, for almost immediately the burdens of rule over the ravaged nation became apparent. The details of the long-waged battle for supremacy between Juárez and the conservatives, known as the Reform Wars (lasting from December of 1857 to January of 1861), are not significant to this study.<sup>12</sup> Suffice it to say that the Reform Wars were a fertile field for the growth of further factional activity, as liberals and conservatives made a series of uneasy alliances, often borne out of necessity, and with the short lifespan that would prove so prevalent in later Mexican politics.<sup>13</sup> One should likewise

note that, in his efforts to secure victory, Juárez exhibited many of the same characteristics, and adhered to many policies he denounced of Comonfort, a vital point in understanding later events in Matamoros.<sup>14</sup>

Of perhaps greatest significance, during the long and financially draining Three Years War between the conservative Mexican forces of President Ignacio Comonfort and the liberal forces of Benito Juárez (then the president of the Supreme Court), the conservative Mexican government had borrowed heavily from France, Spain and Great Britain.<sup>15</sup> When the liberal forces of Juárez, headed by Jesús González Ortega, finally defeated the conservative forces of Miguel Miramón, in December of 1860, Juárez was victorious. On January 1, 1861, amid a feeling of tremendous tension, paired with a fickle congress and shackled by oppressive debt, Juárez assumed his second term as President.<sup>16</sup> It was during this second term, from 1861-1865, where the foreign presence of the French would intrude.<sup>17</sup> After ascending to power, with his nation in financial ruins, the liberal Juárez saw no other recourse than to announce the suspension of loan interest payments to the European powers on July 17, 1861.<sup>18</sup> Although this was, in fact, a temporary moratorium, with only a two-year timetable, the response it received was rapid and decisive.<sup>19</sup>

The suspension of payments led to a European outcry as the French, British and Spanish governments, of which all had economic interests in occupying Mexico, met and signed the Treaty of London on October 31, 1861 under the guise of a unified effort to collect lost revenue.<sup>20</sup> The three European powers, recognizing the United States' inability to react while preoccupied with the American Civil War, executed a joint seizure of the Veracruz customs house in December of 1861.<sup>21</sup> Thus, Juárez found himself with a crippled, divided government, a monstrous financial debt, and three European powers on the nation's soil.<sup>22</sup>

After realizing that the French strove to conquer Mexico, and wary of pressures at home, the Spanish and British withdrew

their forces on April 9, and April 24, 1862.<sup>23</sup> This positive turn of events for Mexico would prove to be short-lived, however, for, on January 15, 1863, the French mercilessly bombarded Veracruz, softening the nation for the French army to begin their siege of Puebla, on March 16 of that year.<sup>24</sup> The French troops entered Mexico City, on June 7, 1863, and Maximilian accepted the throne, which the Superior Junta, in the absence of Juárez, offered to him on October 3, 1863.<sup>25</sup> On May 28, 1864, Ferdinand Maximilian Joséph (the younger brother of the Austrian Emperor Francis Joséph) landed at Veracruz, initiating a chain of events that would forever alter the Mexican nation. This set the stage for Juárez to regain popular power and support at the expense of the conservatives.<sup>26</sup> In short, although Maximilian, as Emperor of Mexico, enjoyed the political and financial backing of NapoLeón III, he eventually succumbed to Juárez and the liberals, who executed him on June 19, 1867.<sup>27</sup>

The invasion and reign of Ferdinand Maximilian, while directly powerful in transforming the Mexican historical fabric, is only indirectly important to this study, for it was the alliances formed, the emergence of powerful players, and the decisions made by Juárez in response to invasion that would shape the eventual showdown on the Mexican border. Once again, uneasy alliances and shifting allegiances born out of necessity only foreshadowed the turmoil of the next eight years.<sup>28</sup> In essence, the French Intervention helped create and foster the eventual rifts among the Mexican elite that would reach the border town of Matamoros in 1870. At a glance, during the French Intervention, one only sees the emergence of the liberals backed by Juárez, against the conservatives who chose to back Maximilian. However, a deeper examination of the key figures and parties provides the background for understanding the events and players leading to and involved in the battle for Matamoros in 1870. Such a dissection is in order.

One of the key figures who played a role in the French Intervention and who would emerge as a powerful rival to Juárez and the Liberals was Porfirio Díaz.<sup>29</sup> Díaz had risen to power during the

war as a result of his courage and ability as a general. So noteworthy was his performance, in fact, that Maximilian even offered him the command of his forces if he would but choose his side.<sup>30</sup> Instead, Díaz, with an eye on political glory, declined the offer from the weakened monarch and eventually defeated his forces at the Battle for Puebla, on April 2, 1867.<sup>31</sup> Although Juárez was to emerge as the overall legendary leader of the republican resistance, and would ride his popularity to newfound power, Díaz emerged as a popular and capable rival.<sup>32</sup> The rift between the two men, who were technically fighting against a common enemy for a common goal, began during the war and evolved into a long-standing and desperate struggle. Publicly, Díaz and his supporters claimed that during the War of Intervention, Juárez had acquired too much centralized power, transforming himself into a virtual dictator.<sup>33</sup> The contentions went further, however, as Díaz and his *porfiristas* claimed that, apart from seeking a personal expansion of powers, Juárez was working toward a more centralized federal authority at the expense of states' rights.<sup>34</sup> Further, there was the issue of corruption, which the *porfiristas* saw as rampant and corrosive, as well as the issue of the need to improve the nation's credit among the international community, a move which *porfiristas* felt was vital to achieving legitimacy.<sup>35</sup> Troubling as these accusations were, they amounted to little more than political squabbling and petty "newspaper wars" between the warring factions. It was not until 1868, just two years before the battle for Matamoros, that the rumblings would take a more sinister and ominous tone.

The struggle between the pro-Juárez and pro-Díaz factions in the government began in earnest, in early 1868, when the Díaz factions began to accuse Juárez of disregarding the Constitution of 1857 and of creating a myriad of legislative reforms and restraints, which only served to consolidate his hold on power.<sup>36</sup> Ironically, this era in Mexican history (known as the Restored Republic years) would prove to be among the most divisive. In fact, this period echoed the events Juárez had found himself facing just ten years earlier, when he was the *puro* liberal disgusted with the slow

progress of Ignacio Comonfort and yearning for his own political power. One should note that the same justifications used by Juárez to denounce the Comonfort regime, such as the excessive centralizing of power, the strengthening of the executive, and the excessive corruption, were now leveled at him by Díaz. Supporters of Juárez, known as *Juaristas*, were the liberal reformers who had sided with Juárez throughout the war and who now sought to keep the secularizing effects of the Constitution of 1857, but without too much regard for some of its “more noble” aspects such as free speech.<sup>37</sup>

The *porfiristas*, who preferred the name *construccionistas* to avoid the appearance of favoring Díaz above the nation, were an eclectic group of discontents, consisting primarily of former Juárez liberals and old conservatives.<sup>38</sup> The *construccionistas* were in essence an alienated group seeking power.<sup>39</sup> One of their chief concerns was the manipulation of the electoral process that Juárez used so effectively to control rivals and maintain his power. So powerful was this hold over the process that, because of the indirect electorate established in the Electorate Law of 1857, between that year and 1867, only 9,000-12,000 electors out of a possible eight or nine million participated in the presidential elections.<sup>40</sup> In short, Juárez had the pie, and the *Porfiristas* wanted their piece. By February 28, 1869, the situation had so deteriorated that Brevet Major General William S. Rosecrans, the Minister Plenipotentiary to the Juárez government in Mexico City under then Secretary of State William H. Seward, informed Seward that “the [Juárez] Government had lost the confidence of Mexican and foreign capitalists” and had effectively produced a permanent spilt within the liberal party.<sup>41</sup> On June 26, 1869, with his term expired, Rosecrans left Mexico City, only to have his successor, Thomas Henry Nelson, report back to Washington, four days later, that “many persons express great apprehension that a revolution may be attempted at no distant day”.<sup>42</sup> Also included in the report was a rumor of insurrections in Tamaulipas and several other states.<sup>43</sup> Thus, the stage was set for a crisis in Matamoros.

In the Mexican state of Tamaulipas, the same internal power struggles and unstable climate existed. Just as at the national level, at the state level, the late 1860s and early 1870s saw the liberals abandon Juárez and his *Juaristas* in greater numbers, as they sought the renewed hope of Díaz's new liberalism.<sup>44</sup> State party politics of this period consisted mostly of liberal governments and a local elite which was strongly resistant to Juárez's expanding executive power and the perceived increased federalization. Tamaulipas was one of these states.<sup>45</sup> With this said, the balance of power within states was not always constant, as many state politicians (concerned with self-preservation) shifted allegiances as best suited them.<sup>46</sup> Tamaulipas was in constant turmoil from as early as 1867, as pro-Díaz, anti-Juárez, and local cadres were in a struggle for control of the state.<sup>47</sup>

The political instability of this region is best exemplified in the control for the governorship of the state. Disgusted by his belief that Juárez was seeking to become a dictator, in 1866, General Servando Canales denounced the then Governor, José Maria Carbajal, a *Juarista*, and proclaimed himself, in open defiance of Juárez, the new governor of the state.<sup>48</sup> After General Mariano Escobedo defeated Canales and reclaimed the state for Juárez, a similar rebellion broke out, in January of 1867, in Ciudad Victoria. This rebellion was quashed by Juárez, with the help of Desiderio Pavón, who was then named Governor of the state, on August 16, 1867.<sup>49</sup> Pavón quickly tried to establish a political stronghold in the state, and (in a great miscalculation) called for new elections, which he promptly lost to Juan José de la Garza – even after two successive recounts.<sup>50</sup> Threatening rebellion, and with a split legislature, all parties finally agreed to name Francisco L. Saldaña as interim governor on April 16, 1868, only to have the state finally decide to declare Juan José de la Garza the real governor on May 25, 1868.<sup>51</sup> As can be expected, this was by no means a consensus decision, and, a few days later, in the town of Croix, Servando Canales, Braulio Vargas, and others launched the *Rebelión de la Reata*, in order to seize power.<sup>52</sup> In 1869, under pres-



sure from Juárez, Juan José de la Garza renounced his power, and the once anti-Juárez but now pro-Juárez Servando Canales became Governor of Tamaulipas, in September of 1870.<sup>53</sup> Thus, from 1866 to 1870, the state had seven different “legitimate” or self-proclaimed leaders. This was the background in which the United States Consulate of Matamoros was forced to operate.

The United States Consulate in Matamoros, which first opened in 1826, is perhaps the oldest Consulate of continual service in the nation, and it was this Consulate that Washington used to gain insight into the troubled northern Mexican region and the growing instability of the nation. Coupled with the diplomatic instruments in Mexico City, the Matamoros Consulate served as an invaluable source of information and as a border sentinel for the United States. During this tumultuous period in Mexican history (after William H. Seward’s terms from 1861-1869 and the odd twelve-day term of Elihu B. Washburne), Hamilton Fish became the new Secretary of State on March 17, 1869.<sup>54</sup> Fish was the son of a wealthy and prominent social family from New York, as well as a former congressman, senator, and governor, and he would prove to be a competent diplomat in later years.<sup>55</sup> Fish was most assuredly aware of the troubles of his newly inherited border region. The American diplomatic machine had been intensely focused on the “free zone” problem of Brownsville/Matamoros in an official capacity since September 29, 1869, when Secretary Seward instructed Rosecrans to study and, if possible, remedy this problem.<sup>56</sup> The free zone, according to Seward, was a “tract of country two leagues broad.....having been declared by [Mexican] law free from import duties”, and Rosecrans was instructed to lobby for this law’s repeal and to end the massive contraband trade at Matamoros, that flourished under its protection.<sup>57</sup> When Fish took over, his eyes, too, were on this region.

The official stance of the United States was, and always had been, to support Benito Juárez and his government at all costs. During the French occupation, Seward relentlessly pressured the French to relinquish their occupation. When approached by Maximilian

to join the conquest, the United States House of Representatives, by the Resolution of April 4, 1864, stated, "It does not accord with the policy of the United States to acknowledge any monarchical Government erected on the ruins of any republican Government in America under the auspices of any European power."<sup>58</sup> During the various rebellions of the Reform Wars, the United States maintained either silent neutrality or vocal support for Juárez and his liberal regime. This would be the case for the U.S. Consulate in Matamoros, as well.

The U.S. Consul in Matamoros was Thomas J. Wilson and his Vice Consul was Lucius Avery. These men would be the key sources of information exchange from the Matamoros region back to Secretary Fish and his assistant Secretary of State, J.C. Bancroft Davis. The initial correspondence of the year 1870 from the Consulate to Washington belies a sense of business as usual for the region, with notes pertaining to domestic issues – like filed grievances against the government, requests for identification papers, and other such "ordinary" items.<sup>59</sup> As a side note, a letter of January 29, 1870, gives interesting insight into the prevailing circumstances. For instance, the letter makes reference to the winter "revolution" in Matamoros, from November 20, 1861, to February 24, 1862, by General José Maria Carbajal, during the *Guerra de los Rojos y Crinolinas*, in which many buildings (including the Consulate) were burned. Secondly, the fact that the correspondence is between the Vice Consul, Lucias Avery, and a Mr. Clements in the State Department illuminates the diplomatic protocol of the period, for the Head Consul, Thomas Wilson, in the period before Hamilton Fish's appointment, in March 17, 1869, has the Vice Consul handle affairs. As the situation escalated, it was Wilson who would correspond.

On January 28, 1870, the first news from the Consulate about a general unrest in the Mexican nation emerges. Avery wrote that "while the most important states of the Republic are in arms against the Juárez government, and disturbances are occurring throughout Mexico...the State of Tamaulipas [is] comfortably

quiet, and most of the military leaders still profess to sustain the Juárez government.”<sup>60</sup> Avery was referring to the rebellions that had occurred and, in some areas, were still occurring. Pro-Díaz factions in Nuevo León, San Luís Potosí, and Puebla were in open revolt against Juárez, in dispute over the “rigged” elections in which Juárez was able to retain the presidency over Díaz.<sup>61</sup> As the pro-Díaz forces mounted their rebellion in San Luís Potosí, they were led by General Pedro Martínez, a name that would shortly factor in Matamoros.<sup>62</sup> Avery, while grateful for the peace in Tamaulipas, understood its fragile nature, noting that the continuance of peace was highly dubious, given the “jealousies” and tense atmosphere among the generals and elites regarding the events in San Luís Potosí.<sup>63</sup> It was only the rejection of participation by Colonel Domingo Palacios, commander of the Republic’s forces along the Rio Grande, that had kept rebellion out of Matamoros. However, this was subject to change, according to Avery, if the rebels appeared capable of defeating Juárez.<sup>64</sup> Avery’s remarks regarding the fragility of loyalty and of the ease with which men’s allegiances changed state volumes about the troubled period.

During the early troubled months of 1870, the Consulate’s lines of communication with Mexico City were severed, crippling its ability to receive “reliable” information, leaving them to depend on a “man in San Luís Potosí” or news and cables via New Orleans.<sup>65</sup> Avery discussed and sent a copy to Washington of a newspaper clipping the Consulate received, from the San Luís Potosí newspaper *Alcance*, dated January 19, 1870, pertaining to the rebellions. The letter is, in effect, a piece of pro-Díaz propaganda, detailing the January 15 defeat of *Juarista* General Sóstenes Rocha by *Construccionista* General Pedro Martínez near San Luís Potosí.<sup>66</sup> The effect of the warring left Matamoros merchants in a bind, as merchandise was unable to make the perilous journey to the interior amid the growing fears of outright civil war. Before long, these same two men would meet again in the struggle for Matamoros.

At this point the Consulate communications grow strangely sparse as the volume of correspondence between Matamoros and

Washington greatly decreases, and the nature of the letters returns to more “civil” matters, such as citizen redresses and merchandise shipment figures. One may assume the reason for this to be manifold. For instance, during the early part of 1870, one must remember that the office Secretary of State under the Grant administration was undergoing an awkward period of leadership transition from Seward to Washburne (for his twelve day term) to Fish. It is neither unreasonable nor impractical to assume that either Avery or Wilson, feeling serious consideration to urgent issues was, for the moment impossible, decided it was more prudent to discuss less delicate affairs. Secondly, the rebellion itself was in a state of flux as both sides adjusted to the events and prepared for future actions.<sup>67</sup> Finally, the aforementioned unavailability of credible information from Mexico City and the central regions may have made the reliable reporting of facts too difficult.

Regardless of the reasons, discussion of the rebellion does not appear again until May, when the rebellion becomes, for the Consulate, a most tangible and unavoidable affair. On May 27, 1870, Vice Consul Avery (this time writing to J.C. Bancroft Davis), signaling the arrival of Hamilton Fish as the new Secretary of State, informed Davis that the city was under imminent threat of invasion by the *construccionista* General Pedro Martínez and his force of 1,000 men.<sup>68</sup> Avery informed Washington of the general’s “avowed intention” (arriving well armed and with cavalry units) to attack the city, which had naturally left the city’s occupants with a general sense of anxiety.<sup>69</sup> Though Martínez had taken great lengths to reassure the citizens of Matamoros and Brownsville, going so far as to take out an ad in the *Brownsville Sentinel*, the vicious conduct of his men in the villages surrounding the city bespoke of a different reality.<sup>70</sup> Taking advantage of the chaos, roving bands of thieves, outlaws, and murderers had terrorized the twin cities with confirmed accounts of hangings and rapings done within sight of the Matamoros Church towers, as no law existed to contain them.<sup>71</sup> The only bright spot for the citizens of the border region was the National Guard unit of pro-Juárez General

Palacio, stationed within the city, consisting of 1,200 men – 800 national guardsmen and 400 regular army soldiers.<sup>72</sup> Once again, communication with the interior was non-existent, and, the fickle nature of military leaders being what they were, Avery's despondency was apparent when he informed Davis that a ruthless national civil war was forthcoming, as had always been the case with "these unfortunate people".<sup>73</sup>

There would be no long lapse in correspondence between the institutions this time as, on June 9, Avery, again addressing Davis, detailed the latest developments. For the moment, according to Avery, General Martínez had "retired" from the cities limits, having mounted no real attack save for a few small-arms firefights, resulting in the deaths of a half dozen men on either side.<sup>74</sup> General Sóstenes Rocha (a long-time ally of Juárez and the general whom Rocha had defeated in San Luís Potosí) with a force of 2,000 men was reportedly marching on Matamoros to rescue the besieged city.<sup>75</sup> Bands of lawless men, robbing horses on both sides of the border and committing crimes (some violent) continued to wreak havoc on the region. Despite all this, Avery was optimistic, and attributed the turn in fortunes to the oncoming federal troops, to the National Guard, and to Martínez' inability to procure supplies.<sup>76</sup> Interestingly enough, the next day, June 10, would see another letter – this time from Thomas Wilson to Hamilton Fish, sent off to Washington. Wilson's letter is a near duplicate of Avery's letter from the day before, with only slight additions. Of interest was Wilson's revelation that Palacios had proclaimed martial law for the city on May 26, which seems to refute Avery's assertion that the city was left lawless.<sup>77</sup> The archives, indeed, hold an undated copy of the *Weekly Ranchero*, as referenced in Wilson's letter, reporting on the proclamation of Martial law. Another point of interest is the revelation that many Matamoros families fled the city at night, crossing to Brownsville, to return daily to conduct their affairs – an insight into the highly-interwoven relationship between the twin cities and the greatly perceived sense of anxiety.<sup>78</sup> A final note of substantial interest is the revelation that Martínez and the

pro-Díaz forces had control of the entire Rio Grande Valley region from Matamoros to Camargo and, according to Wilson, the capability to hold it indefinitely.<sup>79</sup>

The cause for the successive letters, two similar letters by two different Consulate representatives, stems from logistical and diplomatic miscommunications between the Consulate and the military leader of the city, Palacios. In a letter written on June 28, Wilson attempted to clear the confusion with Fish by detailing the events. The advancing General Rocha had, on June 9, met and rejected further discussions with Vice-Consul Avery, who had been acting as Consul, for undisclosed reasons.<sup>80</sup> No longer having official recognition in Mexico, Avery turned over the Consulate and all its affairs to Wilson, the act having been negotiated through Palacios.<sup>81</sup>

In any event, with the *Juarista* General Rocha's arrival, peace was restored in Matamoros, and, during the month of July, the Consulate was silent on this issue. Wilson again revived discussion with a letter, on August 17, filled with the latest information regarding the rebellion. With Martínez's threat repelled, General Rocha, in the latter part of July, returned to San Luís Potosí to aid other struggles, leaving General Palacios, once again, in charge of the city.<sup>82</sup> While the threat had subsided for Matamoros, the rest of the region was not as fortunate, with Martínez's forces occupying Reynosa, Camargo, Mier and the state capital of Ciudad Victoria, resulting in the state's *Juarista* governor fleeing.<sup>83</sup> Wilson continues that the states of Tamaulipas and Nuevo León were in "the most deplorable of conditions," with bandits and insurgents demanding ransom from trains to the interior, and stopping all goods and traffic from leaving the border.<sup>84</sup> Of an interesting note, the bands of thieves were not operating only in Mexico, as they often raided and took shelter and supplies from and in Brownsville, using it as a regrouping hub to wait out infrequent military patrols.<sup>85</sup> Enclosed with the letter was a copy of the Brownsville *Ranchero*, dated August 14, detailing some of the "despicable" behavior witnessed in Reynosa, such as the shooting of innocents and the thieving of property.

Wilson's final discussion on the state of the rebellion consists of a letter on September 30, 1870, in which he states that the revolution in the state had been "suppressed, and all its leaders have either fled to Texas or the interior of Mexico. The majority of them however are in Brownsville."<sup>86</sup> An additional point of interest is the mention of Juan Cortina's arrival to the city with 500 federal troops, on September 20, taking command of the city under the auspices of Juárez.<sup>87</sup> Wilson also announced that General Canales, who "has been at various times in arms against or in favor of the government of President Juárez," had assumed the governorship of the state.<sup>88</sup> This was a cause of great concern for Wilson, as Canales and Cortina were "implacable enemies," having fought against each other for three months over possession of Matamoros just a few years earlier.<sup>89</sup> Wilson's assessment of Canales was also less than positive, stating that, when Canales "will be once more in hostility against the Juárez Government – which is almost certain," the United States must be prepared for the outcome.<sup>90</sup> Perhaps no greater testament to the destructive nature of the political instability of party factions in Mexico is as evident as Mr. Wilson's statement. Wilson's skepticism aside, the fact remained that, by late autumn of 1870, the Consulate, the city, and the State was at peace. General Canales had begun what would become a long and stable control over the state, and, as the year found its conclusion, peace would continue. To be sure, there would be more violence and rebellion in the future, as Díaz and his *Plan de Noria* would once again incite near-civil war across the nation and the state. For the time being, however, Matamoros was at peace.

The twin cities region, and the entire Rio Grande Valley, during the late 1860s and early 1870s, presents a far different picture of the Gilded Age than does that of most of the United States. To be sure, the region faced immigration, industrialization, and urbanization issues, but the vastly different portrait, shown through the letters of the U.S. Consulate in Matamoros, speaks of more fatal issues. The citizens of the area lived under the constant threat

of conflict, thievery, and outlaws, who pillaged their properties, raped in shocking frequency, and traversed the borders with little thought. Rebellion, invasion, and political turmoil were not only possible, but also probable. The reality of living under a seemingly endless number of political leaders, from various factions and of various agendas, surely factored heavily in Matamoros and Brownsville life. Likewise, citizens daily functioned under the notion that some form of military aggression, intervention or occupation was inevitable. Instead of abstract concerns over corporate monopolies, monetary standards and woman's suffrage, the citizens of Brownsville concerned themselves with physical survival in the face of tangible foes.

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# The Lightbournes of the Point Isabel Lighthouse

by

**Antonio N. Zavaleta**

Historical scholars perform two types of research. Some historians may produce a lifetime of work without ever examining an original document. An original document is one which is written or produced during the time period being studied. Locating primary sources appropriate to the topic being studied in archives and in personal collections can be demanding and time consuming. This is tedious work, especially when the documents are handwritten and in an archaic form of English or in a foreign language. Original documents are also often-times faded to the point of being quasi-illegible.

The second type of historical research is one which is accomplished entirely or mainly by citing secondary documents. That is, by examining the published works of colleagues who initially analyzed primary sources. This type of historical research is both important and satisfying, allowing analyses of numerous and varied theoretical perspectives.

This article is based upon the unlikely appearance of a personal album maintained by a young girl who was born in and reared at the Point Isabel lighthouse during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century between the years 1884 to 1900. Additional handwritten loose-leaf papers found inside the album extend her recollections of Point Isabel and Brownsville from 1900 to the mid-1950s. These two primary documents provide us with a unique view of Point Isabel and Brownsville, Texas for approximately 75 years. It encompasses individuals from childhood to adulthood and her dealings with them.<sup>1</sup>

## The Point Isabel Lighthouse

In 1846, General Zachary Taylor marched his troops southward along the Texas coastline from Corpus Christi Bay to the Brazos Santiago Pass situated at the southern end of Padre Island. He established Fort/Camp Polk in the area known as El Frontón Santa Isabella which is the present site of Port Isabel, Texas (formerly also known as Point Isabel).

Five distinct geographical locations were significant in the historical development and settlement of the area, including Point Isabel, Brazos Santiago Pass, Boca Chica Beach, the mouth of the Rio Grande River, and South Padre Island, Texas.

Point Isabel does not have a natural port formed by a bay or other natural land feature allowing for oceangoing vessels to dock safely on the mainland. Only during a calm high tide could a shallow draft vessel make the treacherous "leap" over the sand bar and through the Brazos de Santiago Pass or "Arms of Saint James." Once across, they slipped into peaceful bay waters. At certain times of the year and depending on the depth of the tides, deeply-drafted vessels could attempt to enter the bay safely, but never with total certainty. Because of this nautical caveat, oceangoing ships would drop their anchors just beyond the breakers and the menacing sandbar to shuttle passengers and cargo the short distance to shore.

In 1850, two years after the end of the Mexican War, Congress authorized a standard brick lighthouse for Point Isabel by appropriating \$15,000 for its construction.<sup>2</sup> The lighthouse was constructed "on the highest bastion of Fort Polk, across the Laguna Madre from Brazos Island at Point Isabel." It was to be completed in two years and was topped with the conventional non-movable white light reflecting apparatus of the day.<sup>3</sup> In 1857, a Third Order Fresnel lens replaced the original reflector system. The new light system displayed a fixed white light with a flash.<sup>4</sup>

During the Civil War, both Point Isabel and the lighthouse were alternately occupied by Union and Confederate forces. The Confederates attempted to blow up the Point Isabel lighthouse, but were unsuccessful. However, they removed the light to the safety of Brownsville, a Confederate stronghold. For a few years during and after the war, the Point Isabel lighthouse was closed and in desperate need of repair after the assault. At the end of the Civil War, the lighthouse was repaired; the light was returned from Brownsville, and the lighthouse was restored to full function on February 22, 1866.

In 1887, after nearly a twenty-year run, the United States Lighthouse Board voted to close the Point Isabel lighthouse, and it was briefly closed. A plea from the Mexican government for continued safety along the Gulf coast was granted, and the lighthouse resumed operating. A few months later, in 1888, the Lighthouse Board closed it for the third time.

In 1891, Congress voted to re-open the Point Isabel lighthouse, and this was eventually accomplished in 1894.<sup>5</sup> The lighthouse began operation on July 15th, 1895 and functioned faithfully for ten years, its guiding and protective light permanently extinguished when it finally ceased operation in 1905. By then, people and produce making their way to the Lower Rio Grande Valley were transported via the newly-constructed railroad.

Throughout its storied operation, the Point Isabel lighthouse had a keeper, an assistant keeper and one or more tenders, members of the U.S. Lighthouse Service of the U.S. Government. The names of all who served at Point Isabel are recorded in the archives of the U.S. Lighthouse Service.<sup>6</sup>

In the early years after the Civil War, the lighthouse keeper was an Englishman named William Henry Lightbourne, born on Turk Island in the British West Indies.<sup>7</sup> On June 9, 1867, in Brownsville, William married Frances Gunn, also English, born in Devonshire, England, and raised in Mobile, Alabama. The couple

raised its family, including their daughter Bella, in Point Isabel, in and around the lighthouse.<sup>8</sup>

The Lightbourne surname was well known in Cameron County, Texas, for most of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, and family descendants continue to live there today. The lighthouse keeper during the last ten years of its operation (1895-1905) was William Egly.<sup>9</sup> The Egly name represents a family which is widely known and well-regarded in both Port Isabel and Brownsville.

### **The American Album Tradition**

Throughout early American history, it was customary for families, especially young girls, to maintain an album documenting visitors to their farms or homes. It was also common for young girls to keep albums as personal keepsakes and holders of memorable events. A fitting Christmas present or birthday gift in the 1880s might be to present a daughter with a fancy new album. Relatives, friends, and visitors would be asked to pen a personal inscription inside the album. These inscriptions were often poetic and always heartfelt, and the albums were considered prized personal possessions that were passed down from generation to generation.

The album of Bella Lightbourne belonged to a young girl who was born in and lived at the lighthouse at Point Isabel, Texas, from 1875 to 1895. Bella kept her album until the end of her life and probably passed it along to a family member before it was tossed into the trash in Brownsville, retrieved by a trash picker and later, fortuitously, found its way into the hands of UT-B historians.

### **The Album Reappears**

One day in the 1990s, my secretary came in to the office saying “a little man” would like to see you. Knowing that she was translating from Spanish to English in her mind, I knew immediately that her use of the term “little man” could literally refer to his small stature or a man of low social status, or both. Her statement



piqued my curiosity especially when she added, "And he says he has something for you." "Show him in," I responded.

Indeed, the "little man" (it was both) who entered my office that day, so many years ago, was what we refer to here on the border as a *callejoneiro*, an alley picker. A *callejoneiro* makes a living by going up and down the alleys of Brownsville collecting what they can from other people's junk for resale at the *pulga* or flea market in Matamoros or other outlets.

The objects collected can be either organic or inorganic, like an old bed, discarded clothes, or day-old bread. Reportedly, the discarded food from some Brownsville restaurants supports some pig farms in the area. Brownsville residents know the alley pickers and sometimes call them by name. Not seen as threats, they are depended upon to haul off junk and keep the alleyways clean. Mostly they come from Matamoros, across the river from Brownsville, in Mexico, pedaling little make-shift bicycle contraptions. These *callejoneiros* make a living performing this service and are very territorial, "adopting" certain alleys as "proprietary" and passing their routes on to their children, the next generation of junk collectors.

The "little man" who asked to see me that day was indeed a *callejoneiro* and as he humbly approached my desk, he asked, "Are you Zavaleta, the one who studies our history?" "Yes, I am," I responded, what I can do for you?" From his raggedy *mochila* or knapsack he pulled a crumpled paper bag – the kind they put beer cans in at corner mom-and-pop grocery stores. He explained, "I found this book amongst the trash in an alley downtown and I thought you should see it. It seemed a shame to throw it away. I thought it might be something important and it looks old."

As he spoke, my mind tried to comprehend what he was saying. "How could this man know of my work, who I was, what I do, and how to find me?" It was intriguing. That realization has never left me. I thought this old book has come to me for a reason. Secondly,

what could this book be? It showed me that any person of any social rank can value writing about their shared culture and history.

From the bag, I withdrew a very old and crumbling hard-cover album which measured about seven inches squared. I had seen them before and knew instantly what it was. The ones I had seen were filled with children's scribbling, but this one was different. At one time this little book would have been a treasured possession. The book had a nicely-padded red cover with a single word inscribed across it: "Album." The fifty or so sheets were of a proud durable paper with a gold trim bordering each page. In its time, this album would have been considered elegant.

Considering that there are different types of albums and notebooks, this one was meant to contain very personal and special correspondence. Most of the fifty seven inscriptions began with: "*To Bella.*" It was not that much different from an album you might purchase today in a stationary store, except that this one was over 100 years old!

As I very gingerly turned the pages of the album, the cover and spine seemed to disintegrate in my hand. Turning the pages ever so carefully, I was fascinated by the many archaic handwriting styles. Mostly written in English, I noticed they were dedicated solely to a young girl at the lighthouse in Point Isabel, Texas: *To Bella*. By happenstance, a true historical treasure (primary document) had landed in my hands, brought to me by a *callejoneiro* in Brownsville. I asked him. "How much do you want for this?" He answered, "I just want you to have it, if it's something important you will know what to do with it, if not throw it away." I thanked him and reached into my pocket, pulling out \$20. He was pleased with this "tip" for his service and by this exchange the album was now officially mine (meaning the public sector).

The album has proved to be vitally important addition to our Cameron County archives history, and, via this article, I am completing this story after it made its way into my very appreciative hands. Next, it will be donated to the Port Isabel Museum as a

permanent part of its collection. At that point, it will be in its rightful home. The following is the story of that little album, which was lost for all those years. It has survived its owner to tell the story of Isabella "Bella" Lightbourne Lambert who was actually born in the lighthouse in Point Isabel around 1875 and died in Brownsville circa 1960. Her 85 years of life in Texas and Alabama will never be forgotten now. At least some of the events of those years are chronicled for us to share.

The album itself has approximately 50 leaves for a total of 100 potentially legible pages. Only about half of them are inscribed with liquid inks of the nineteenth century. Each page had to be carefully blotted; the inscriptions, which usually did not face one another, have unmasked beautiful forms of calligraphic penmanship. In the back of the album, which is missing its cover, were 15 neatly-folded additional loose-leaf crumbling pages, each filled with beautifully handwritten notes. Each was written in a well-schooled, cursive penmanship with ink rarely seen outside of an archival setting.

This personal album belonged to an adolescent girl about 15 years of age. Each entry is uniquely inscribed and personally dedicated to Bella Lightbourne. The Lightbourne surname is recognized in Point/Port Isabel since the Lightbournes served in a variety of public capacities, including one of the original lighthouse keepers in Point Isabel. Bella's father was William Henry Lightbourne, a Point Isabel lighthouse keeper after the Civil War.

The album has approximately 57 individualized inscriptions, most of them dated and placed at the time of each inscription. The personalized handwritten inscriptions were made by visitors to the lighthouse or by Bella's friends and schoolmates in Point Isabel. The earliest Point Isabel inscription is dated 1884; Bella would have been about nine years old. They continue through 1900, some 16 years after she had married and moved to Battery Gladden lighthouse in Mobile. Bella met her future husband, Peter Lambert, in Point Isabel. He was the lighthouse keeper at

Brazos Santiago Pass. The last Point Isabel inscription found in the album is 1895, after which Bella moved with her husband to Mobile. Bella and Peter were married in 1895, and he was soon assigned the duties of head lighthouse keeper in Mobile. The majority of the album inscriptions date from 1890 to 1895 at Point Isabel, during her early teenage years.

A total of 57 personalized inscriptions are written primarily in English, with several in Spanish and one in German. Most have a dateline of Point Isabel or just Isabel, with several inscribed from Brownsville and one from Rio Grande City. The final entry in the album came approximately five years after Bella left Point Isabel for the Mobile assignment.

Because of the common practice of nineteenth-century album inscription in America, many people developed their own self-styled and poetic inscriptions. For example, consider the following inscription to Bella from steamboat Captain J. Flynn:

*"You have heard of the maxim, old but true, that a friend in need is a friend indeed. Such friends are far and few. But will be a friend to you if ever a friend you need."*

*Captain J. Flynn of the United States Steamer  
Brazos Santiago, February 18th 1890<sup>10</sup>*

Many of Bella's inscriptions were made by friends, some of whom were also lighthouse keepers and their family members. For example, an inscription from the daughter of another lighthouse keeper Hattie S. Wildman:

*To Dear Bella:*

*May your cheeks retain their dimples. May your heart be just as gay*

*When some manly voice shall whisper, "Dearest will you name the day?"*

*Ever your true friend*

*Hattie S. Wildman  
Point Isabel, Texas*

*December 6, 1891*<sup>11</sup>

The following entry was made by Bella's future husband Peter Lambert in 1891, when he took command of the Brazos Santiago lighthouse. Most likely they had just met. They would marry four years later in 1895.

*To Bella*

*Build now the Forte, wherein you can dwell*

*When sunny days are past, and I am hoping that  
Joy and Bliss will be your reward to the last*

*J.P. Lambert,*

*Brazos Light House May 27, 1891*<sup>12</sup>

Examples also include members of well-known Port Isabel and Brownsville families, such as the Egly family:

*To Bella*

*When distant lands divide us*

*And I no more thee see*

*Remember it is Willie*

*Who will always be a friend to thee*

*William Egly*

*Isabel July 26, 1890*<sup>13</sup>

A final example is this inscription by the son and patriarch of the eminent Brownsville Champion family, John G. Champion:

*To Bella*

*May your life be bright as the morning light*

*As lovely as the blooming rose*

*In after years when cares increase*

*May noble thoughts dispel your grief*

*J.G. Champion*

*Isabel June 4, 1890*<sup>14</sup>

## The 15 Loose Leaf Pages

There were 15 handwritten loose-leaf pages found in the back of the album. They are not written in a diary-style, but rather as a recollection of memories, with notes by Bella, probably penned years after these events took place. We can only guess why she was encouraged to write about these experiences; maybe because she personally knew Frank C. Pierce (died in 1918), author of "*A Brief History of the Lower Rio Grande Valley*."<sup>15</sup> For a short time, Bella operated a small kiosk in a Brownsville drug store, where she sold Pierce's book, prized by historians today. She described this enterprise as being very successful.

The loose-leaf pages from the album depict Bella's life in Point Isabel as the daughter of a lighthouse keeper, her marriage to a lighthouse keeper, and their 20 years of marriage, including the approximately 40 years she lived in Port Isabel and Brownsville after she was widowed. Remarkably, 13 of her 20 years of marriage were spent almost in complete isolation on the lighthouse island approximately two and one half miles off shore from Mobile. Today, some 52 years after her death, Bella Lightbourne's Album and the loose-leaf pages provide the researcher with an important insight into life in South Texas during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Below are just a few of her recollections, written in her own hand on the loose-leaf pages in her album:

I married a Swede in 1892. He has been on U.S. Lighthouse Vessels Brazos Santiago life-saving station. He then served as assistant lighthouse keeper at Padre Island across from Brazos Santiago and was promoted to the position of keeper of the Point Isabel lighthouse.

In January of 1899, J. Peter Lambert was appointed keeper of Battery Gladden lighthouse in Mobile. He was responsible for the lighting of the Mobile

ship channel's 27 light beacons. It was the job of the assistant keeper to travel via U.S. Government ship thirty miles up and down the channel in order to maintain the beacons which were lit by oil.

For a short time I was made temporary assistant light house keeper. Thirty two years my husband served the U.S. Government. Then he took suddenly ill. The 20 years we were married he would have a cold but get over it. For 13 years I never knew what it was to live on land, a half mile from the city. I went through lots and so did he. He would say as soon as we only have enough in bank we will go back home.

The newly-appointed lighthouse keeper, Mr. Lambert and his wife Bella Lightbourne Lambert left Point Isabel aboard the Morgan Steamer for New Orleans arriving in Mobile at 1 a. m.

The Lamberts were shown to a hotel and found the room to be in shambles and certainly not appropriate for Mrs. Lambert to stay the night. Mr. Lambert remarked to his wife, "Do not get out of your clothes in case we have to flee in the night.

For breakfast the hotel kitchen offered us fried oysters, simply asking how many we would like. After breakfast Mr. Lambert said he would go to the docks to find out how to get to the lighthouse. He located a U.S. lighthouse tender who took Mr. Lambert to meet the keeper who had resigned. I was immediately taken to the home of the former keepers mother a French woman with an Italian clerk who ran a large grocery store. The woman became a second mother to me.<sup>16</sup>

Mr. Lambert had to deal with an Irishman who insisted that he was to be the new keeper but Mr. Lambert had his proper papers and the couple were taken the 2.5 miles across the bay to the lighthouse. Bella was appalled at the condition of the lighthouse as was Mr. Lambert. Mr. Lambert told Bella not to unpack or I will take you home to Texas. However, Bella reasoned we can't do that now, we sold our home and all our possessions and we would be penniless and without work. With groceries they bought in Mobile and with one fork and one knife the couple set up the operation of lighthouse keeper.

Bella describes the hardship of the life of being lighthouse keepers. Lighthouses are located at a point most convenient to seafarers, but terribly inconvenient to everyone else. Often, lighthouses are located at some distance from the nearest town, and are usually positioned on islands. Such was the case with the Mobile lighthouse. Bella describes fierce "northers" and hurricanes, along with the solitary life as the wife of a lighthouse keeper. She never had children. Mr. Lambert reassured her, "I'm putting money in the bank and as soon as we have enough I will take you back to Texas." After 20 years of marriage, 13 of them at the Mobile lighthouse, Mr. Lambert was suddenly taken ill and died.

During her 13 years as the wife of the lighthouse keeper in Alabama, Bella had numerous adventures, which she recalls in the loose-leaves. Having no children of her own, Bella talks about the two boys the couple raised as their own, who attended college and eventually served in World War I. She reflected how sad she was that the boys never returned.

She saw many men who drowned in the ship channel around the lighthouse when squalls would emerge, violently capsizing their boats. Sometimes they were able to reach the safety of the lighthouse, but many were lost. She did not recall their names. She viv-



idly recounts a time when she "saw a huge wave approaching" and ran up the stairs of the lighthouse as fast as she could. After the water receded, what was revealed was that the entire lower platform of the lighthouse, as well as the large storage building on the island, had been washed out to sea. Over the years, Bella experienced numerous damaging hurricanes and many frigid "northers".

For a brief period, Bella was appointed assistant keeper at the Mobile lighthouse,

And one time when her husband was away, a strange man approached the lighthouse claiming that he had a letter for her. She told him, "I can't read," bade him to stay back, "if you come closer I will certainly shoot you with this shotgun." About that time, a small sailboat approached with a "darky" in it and Bella said "Here's my husband now." If he had continued toward me I would have shot him. He thought I was foolish enough to go down the stairs. I was protecting the government. I was brave but after Mr. Lambert came home I felt weak.

There were also terrible winter storms which froze the water in the cistern. Another time I was alone when the launch broke down and all night and the next day Mr. Lambert did not come home. I kept the light burning and his uniform nearby and ready to step into it with the 12-gauge by my side. I said to myself, "if I'm murdered it will be in the uniform of the U.S. Government and protecting their property."

In the years they lived there, the lighthouse only had a wood-burning stove, so they collected driftwood as it washed ashore, and wood was also brought from the mainland and stockpiled under the nine-foot high columns, 100 feet in circumference.<sup>17</sup> They would also collect coconuts and bananas that would wash up at

the lighthouse – more than likely from somewhere in Mexico. In time, they purchased furniture and enjoyed a decent life in Mobile. Bella raised flowers and had a vegetable garden, as well as keeping an assortment of pets. She writes:

We saved enough money to buy a lot and six room house, and paid cash for it. My husband rented it when we were married and had it furnished. It was a lovely home for me. We were so happy.

After we were in Mobile a few years, a relative of the Stillman family wrote to my husband about this house for sale and the amount. My husband sent the amount cash. He rented it for us during the summer. Then three years later we came home to Point Isabel to visit my mother and the little home in Point Isabel.

In 1909 my mother came to visit us. Mobile was her first home, after she came from England as a bride. She was four weeks with us when she suddenly passed away. My dear father had passed away 11 months after I left for Mobile. My sister who was Post Mistress at Point Isabel for years, passed away after my father. My youngest sister was a school teacher who married a druggist. They moved back to his home to Missouri and on their way back brought out mother to me. Only my three brothers were left in Point Isabel with their families (circa 1910).<sup>18</sup>

## **Return to Port Isabel and Brownsville**

Bella also wrote:

I have never been a mother but I have been a mother to a good many. The soldier boys called me mother. I did not know the names of any but

I called them all my boys. When Point Isabel was sold to this new company the head man sent me word to remove the old home or it would be put on the beach at Mexican town.

I said to him it is an old pitch pine white washed house. It was my dear mother's home. And it will never be put in poverty row or in Mexican town either. That corner lot I said, on Powers and Garcia Streets, I own. He looked at me and sent me word that he would give me \$100 and move me. I knew the Stillman's cousin would let me put my house on their summer home lot close by.<sup>19</sup>

By 1915, Mr. Lambert had died in service as the lighthouse keeper, and his widow, Isabella "Bella" G. Lightbourne Lambert, had returned to her home in Point Isabel. There was no pension for the widow of a lighthouse keeper. Her papers describe the trouble she experienced with the corrupt officials of the new land company in Point Isabel. Subsequently, she decided to purchase property in Brownsville. During the war years, she rented too many of the soldiers stationed at Fort Brown. The widow Lightbourne was a respected, even revered, woman. She was well connected to many of Brownsville's power brokers of that era, including bankers, lawyers, and judges, all of whom safeguarded her from shady characters and their swindling schemes. Many of the loose-leaf pages disclose her many business dealings and the attempts to steal her property. Between 1920 and 1940, Bella acquired considerable property, rental houses, and a partial interest in a grocery store.

## Conclusions

William Henry and Frances Lightbourne had six children, all of whom lived to adulthood and married. All but Bella had children themselves. Bella returned to Brownsville after the death of her husband, lighthouse keeper Peter Lambert, to live out her remaining years. *The Brownsville Herald* did not record her obituary. It is

thought that she lived to 85 years of age, dying in Brownsville around 1960.

We know from numerous *Herald* articles that her brother John lived in Port Isabel for many years, serving as a wildlife warden, as is mentioned in a May 5th, 1949, article.<sup>20</sup> Another brother, possibly Nathan, or his descendant, served as a judge in Port Isabel, and her sister Frances served as postmaster and is listed as 39 years of age in the 1940 census.<sup>21</sup> Most of Bella's brothers and sisters married into Brownsville families and, as such, many Brownsville families have Lightbourne roots in their genealogical history. While no one possessing the Lightbourne surname is believed to be living in Brownsville today, they have many descendants.

The *Herald* published a brief story, in the 1980s, about a woman from Missouri who came here searching for her ancestors named Lightbourne in the Brownsville/Port Isabel area. She was clearly the granddaughter of Bella's sister who moved with her husband, the druggist, to Missouri around 1890. She should have been able to locate her cousin, Frances Lightbourne, who would have been in her 70s then.<sup>22</sup> Another *Herald* article, dated April 21st, 1952, briefly mentions Isabel's Sister Beatrice Lightbourne.

Finally, *The Brownsville Herald* lists the obituary of Frances Lightbourne de la Peña, who died at 91 years of age in 2006. I believe I had a brief conversation with her in the early 1990s when the album first came to me. She was Bella's niece and the daughter of John and Josephine Lightbourne and had inherited the name of her grandmother, Frances.<sup>23</sup>

When the little album of Bella Lightbourne, the great aunt of Frances Lightbourne de la Peña was delivered to me, I immediately searched for the Lightbourne surname in the Brownsville telephone directory, found a single entry, and called. An elderly woman answered. I am not sure that I was speaking with the Frances Lightbourne de la Peña mentioned above, but when I said to her that I had Bella's album and would like to interview her about it she became very indignant and simply said, "You have

no right to have that.” “I responded that it was brought to me by a junk picker.” She hung up, and I did not try to contact her after that incident. There is certainly much more to this story, but that is up to you to discover if you are a member of the Lightbourne clan.

There are many references to the Lightbourne surname of Port Isabel through the genealogical services now available.

The University of Texas at Brownsville

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### Endnotes

- 1 My thanks to Dr. Philip W. Kendall for many hours of work transcribing the 15 pages of handwritten materials into a more readable form for analysis.
- 2 Wayne C. Wheeler, “The Point Isabel Lighthouse” in *Famous American Lighthouses* (Winter 2000), pp. 2-7.
- 3 Texas Parks and Wildlife, “State Historical Site: Port Isabel Lighthouse” (visitors brochure).
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 4.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 5.
- 6 *U.S. Coast Guard Aids to Navigation* bibliography, “Lighthouse Heritage.”
- 7 Ancestry.com, Leckie/Vanderlieck family page
- 8 *Ibid.*, Ancestry.com.
- 9 David L. Cipra, *Lighthouses, Lightships and the Gulf of Mexico* (Alexandria, Virginia: Cypress Comr., 1997).
- 10 “Bella Lightbourne Album,” page 1.
- 11 “Bella Lightbourne Album,” page 15.
- 12 “Bella Lightbourne Album,” page 26.
- 13 “Bella Lightbourne Album,” page 67.
- 14 “Bella Lightbourne Album,” page 75.
- 15 Franklin C. Pierce, *A Brief History of the Lower Rio Grande Valley* (1917).
- 16 Loose Leaf page C1.
- 17 Loose Leaf page A2.

18 Loose Leaf page N1.

19 Loose Leaf page K1.

20 *Brownsville Herald*, May 5, 1949.

21 Frances Lightbourne in the 1940 Census,  
<http://www.ancestry.com/1940-census/usa/Texas>.

22 *Brownsville Herald* sometime in the 1980's. "Missouri visitor searches for Lightbourne."

23 *Brownsville Herald*, obituary for Frances Lightbourne de la Peña, 2006.

# TWENTIETH CENTURY HISTORY







# Movie Theaters for Hispanics in the Rio Grande Valley: 1910-1940.

by

**Rogelio Agrasánchez, Jr.**

The Rio Grande Valley has a long and fascinating history of motion picture entertainment. Movie theaters first became important gathering places for the community in the early twentieth century. In addition to offering entertainment, they served as centers for civic meetings and patriotic celebrations. Theaters that catered to Mexicans emerged in the 1920s, picking up in popularity when sound pictures in Spanish were introduced. Every city in the Rio Grande Valley had at least one venue for the exhibition Spanish-language films. Local entrepreneurs sought to bring to audiences the best entertainment available, sometimes combining live shows and Mexican films. In this competitive market, successful exhibitors controlled more than one theater and were able to stay active for many decades.

As early as 1908, Brownsville's Imperial, Celford, and Electric Theaters were competing to catch the attention of audiences. These businesses sometimes charged only a nickel per person. A well-know entrepreneur, Adolph F. Dittmann, owned the Electric Theater. He was an accomplished showman who also ran an advertisement printing service. In September 1910, he inaugurated the Dittmann Theater, located on 1108 Washington Street. According to local historian Javier R. García, the theater had a seating capacity for 600 and was provided with a 24' by 47' stage and 27' high ceiling. "Its façade of red and cream colored bricks was a striking contrast to surrounding buildings," García noted. Every evening, audiences were entertained with the music by the duet of J.B. Viano, on violin, and Miguel A. García, on piano.<sup>1</sup>

Among the most successful attractions presented at the Dittmann Theater was "The Battle of Matamoros." In May 1913, Dittmann took a movie camera with him and crossed the Rio Grande to photograph the revolutionary army of General Lucio Blanco. The theater impresario did not travel alone; he arrived in the company of a journalist and an attorney, who "were met with gracious hospitality" by General Blanco. Author Bruce Aiken has said that the revolutionary leader took advantage of the media to promote his cause. He eagerly agreed to parade his forces before Dittmann's newsreel camera.<sup>2</sup> A few days later, Blanco ordered an attack on the Matamoros garrison and thereafter occupied the city. Dittmann was able to resume his film after several skirmishes. He and photographer Robert Runyon toured some of the city streets where they "witnessed dead bodies piled in heaps and burned."<sup>3</sup>

The Pathé News Company distributed "The Battle of Matamoros" to theaters across the U.S. Southwest. Pictures of the Revolution began to have a great demand. Therefore, Dittmann continued filming to keep the excitement high at his theater. On April 14, 1915, the *Brownsville Daily Herald* advertised a feature called "Latest War Motion Pictures of the Attack on Matamoros." Only a few days before Pancho Villa's army had threatened to enter the city, which was occupied by the Constitutionalist army of Venustiano Carranza. It is easy to imagine Mr. Dittmann hurrying across the border with his camera and recording whatever he could find of interest. The film drew a large crowd to the Dittmann, which charged 10, 15, and 20 cents admission.

Newsreels were an important part of the program at theaters. When a film about the Mexican ex-president General Victoriano Huerta was exhibited in Brownsville, in August 1915, San Antonio's newspaper *La Prensa* reported on the reaction of the audience. This movie showed the arrival of the deposed president in New York, after being exiled in England and Spain. Sympathizing with Huerta, the paper underlined: "The audience, which was quite numerous, applauded enthusiastically when the image of the ex-president appeared on the screen."<sup>4</sup> This was no exaggeration.

In fact, many Mexican expatriates turned Huerta into a hero after the U. S. government put a price on his head. Since June, he had been confined in a military prison at Fort Bliss near El Paso. As his health deteriorated, he passed away in that city at the beginning of 1916.

One of the first theaters in the Valley to show Mexican films was Brownsville's Dreamland Theater. This movie house had opened in 1915. It was located on the corner of Washington and 11<sup>th</sup> Streets, a few steps away from the Dittmann. The Dreamland's original owner was Wayne K. Sheppard, who subsequently sold it to David J. Young. Mr. Young and his family operated the theater until the 1980s, when it finally closed. In 1921, the Dreamland showed *La llaga*, an early silent drama based on Federico Gamboa's novel of the same title.

The Dreamland underwent some reforms in 1926, when the management provided a new cooling system and refurbished the lobby's ceiling. Another silent import from Mexico then came to this theater, entitled *La gran noticia*. The program was made more appealing because it included the third episode of William McDonald's *Peleando con Buffalo Bill* and the comedy *Amor del siglo XX*. Carlos Amador, known as the Mexican Charlie Chaplin, took the stage of the Dreamland in November. This witty comedian entertained the audience, demonstrating how movies were done in Hollywood. After his performance, the Dreamland showed *Un día en Tijuana*, Amador's latest film. The Teatro Dittmann exhibited all sorts of movies. For example, the following year it played the official film of the XXVIII International Eucharist Congress in Chicago. An ad in a local paper recommended: "Every Catholic must see this phenomenal picture."<sup>5</sup>

Not all movies shown locally were agreeable to Mexicans; such was the case of *Heart of the Sunset*. When the film played in Brownsville, in 1918, the Mexican consul, José Z. Garza, complained to the City Council and the Chamber of Commerce. He said that this film was offensive to Mexicans, both in the types

represented and in the explanatory titles. One of the story's characters was Longorio, a lustful "Mexican rebel chief, who aspired to be Mexico's President." Typically, he was shown stealing cattle along the Rio Grande and having no mercy on a woman and a man whom he held prisoner. The film's exhibitor answered to the consul that, unfortunately, he was not aware of the details of *Heart of the Sunset* when it played. All he knew, before booking it for his theater, was that it made a lot of money in El Paso, Texas. Still, the exhibitor offered to withdraw the movie at once. Furthermore, local authorities promised that *Heart of the Sunset* would not be exhibited at any Brownsville theater. Members of the City Council added that such films only strengthened German propaganda, which aimed at generating animosity between Mexico and the United States.<sup>6</sup>

In an effort to foster an alliance with Mexico at the time of World War I, in 1918, Texas Governor William P. Hobby gave instructions to curb the exhibition of movies that belittled Mexicans. The following year, Brownsville's Mayor, A. A. Browne, appointed a board of censors as a "result of criticism of certain films exhibited here which do not tend to promote good feelings between American and Mexican citizens." According to author Javier R. García, in June 1919, a new board of censors summoned the managers of the three principal theatres, the Dittmann, Dreamland, and Queen. Their discussion centered on the exhibition of movies with objectionable content. "Films that stirred controversy included unsavory type casts of Mexicans," wrote García, adding: "The board stressed that living in a border town, where citizens of two nations meet and amicably exist, was no place to stir up resentment."<sup>7</sup> Censors would keep an eye on films that have "Mexican characters of the knife-in-the-back type," which are "dear to the heart of sensational scenario writers, whose knowledge of the Mexican is apparently gleaned from the dime novels of their boyhood."<sup>8</sup>

The exhibition of films that denigrated Mexicans did not stop at once. In fact, in other Texas cities they seem to have been con-

stantly shown even after this. In El Paso, for example, *A Fool's Paradise* and *The Golden Gift* were considered "movies that hurt national pride." The Mexican consul protested the showing of *A Fool's Paradise*, which played at the Palace Theater, in April 1922. According to the local paper *La Patria*, this movie included "scenes of a saloon in the border area" and "the evil of gambling and drinking." The film's story was made "more attractive by the presence of several Mexican female dancers." It seems that the stereotypes prevalent in Hollywood films were taken for granted by the larger, uneducated segment of Mexicans. Newspaper editors and other prominent people, however, always decried this negative stereotyping. Still, audiences remained loyal to movie theater spectacle. For Mexicans, there was the option of patronizing a *barrio* theater with a more relaxed atmosphere and lower admission prices.

The twenties saw the opening of several amusement centers in the Rio Grande Valley. There seemed to be an urge to construct theaters for Hispanics. Providing live and filmed entertainment was certainly the main justification for these enterprises. But in a broader context, the theaters fulfilled other community needs. They functioned as centers for civic celebrations, fundraisers, and educational activities. Theaters were an integral part of daily life. Among the most important were the Teatro Concordia in Mission, the Nacional in Weslaco, the Chapultepec in East Donna, and the Juárez in San Benito. The owners of these establishments were Juan Barberá, Miguel Benítez, Candelario Muñoz, and Ramón Ruenes, respectively.

The Teatro Concordia of Mission was originally called Teatro La Paz. It was one of the first theaters catering to Hispanics in the area. Juan Bautista Barberá, a Spanish immigrant, built it between 1912 and 1916. The massive structure was inspired in the Mission Revival style of architecture and measured 105 feet long by 45 feet wide. The theater quickly became the most important entertainment spot in the city. As author David Mycue has pointed out, the Teatro La Paz provided audiences with a place "where they could relax to Spanish music, plays, dances, and comic acts." The com-

munity could also listen to lectures and poetry readings. On occasions, Mexican politicians and exiles took the stage to promote their views. Attentive to the audiences' tastes, Barberá installed modern motion picture equipment. The theater had one Edison moving picture machine and was equipped with 250 chairs. Its owner was proud of the theater's player piano, which was valued at \$600. A Douglas 12 H.P. gas engine and a seven-and-a-half kilowatt dynamo provided the electricity. Barberá rented films from the Unique Film Service, a company based in Houston.<sup>9</sup>

In 1920, Barberá intended to sell the property for \$15,000. He placed an ad in San Antonio's *La Prensa* that included a front view of the theater. The impresario also gave some interesting details: "I am forced to go back to my country and have to put on the market my real estate at a price that is truly a sacrifice. Whoever purchases this property will make an excellent deal." The theater included two frame houses adjacent to it and "a well that produces abundant potable water of the best quality."<sup>10</sup>

Ultimately, Barberá did not sell the Teatro La Paz; he decided to keep the property and only leased it to somebody else. Three months later, the theater got ready for a performance by the Areu brothers and their variety show. Prior to their debut in Mission, the popular group of artists was making a series of appearances at Houston's Teatro Amado Nervo, when suddenly a fire destroyed this theater. As a consequence, the Areu brothers and the rest of the troupe lost all their belongings.

By January 1927, the Teatro La Paz had changed its name to Teatro Concordia. M. C. Valverde had become its impresario, while Barberá continued as the landlord. Valverde's plans included the opening of the "Club Obrero Mexicano," a recreational house for the working class located next to the theater. Ten years later, in a new era of sound movies, a man called J. M. Ponce got the lease of the Concordia. During an interview, he pledged that he would work hard to attract the Spanish-speaking public to his business,

always programming good movies and “maintaining order during the shows.”

One of the pioneers of motion picture entertainment in the Valley was Miguel Benítez. He and his wife, Lupita, owned a grocery store in Weslaco at the beginning of the twenties. They became interested in the movies when some gypsy artists came to town. They had brought with them a small projector and some Charlie Chaplin films. Every night, the movies attracted a large crowd, made up primarily of kids. Fascinated by the spectacle, the Benítezes offered to purchase the projector and the films from the gypsies. Immediately, they started showing movies in their home's backyard. Soon, they established the Teatro Nacional, which included a stage for plays and vaudeville. Touring companies that came to Weslaco performed at this theater. For example, the popular comedian Don Chema debuted at the Nacional in 1929; his show created quite a stir among the populace.<sup>11</sup>

Another early theater impresario was Candelario Muñoz, who resided in the town of Donna. The young Candelario helped his father to deliver mail in East Donna and was a veteran of World War I. In the mid-1920s, he operated the Teatro Chapultepec. An important gathering place, this theater was frequently used by civic organizations for meetings and special events. In 1926, consul Treviño met there with members of the Mexican Blue Cross in order to form a new “Comisión Honorífica.” In September of 1928, the community gathered at the Chapultepec to celebrate Mexican Independence. A band from Reynosa, Tamaulipas, came to perform in the theater. The economy of Donna was growing due to the presence of a large number of “braceros.” Some local leaders organized a series of business lectures at the theater. One of these talks illustrated the relationship between “Commerce and its Consumers.”

In the town of San Benito, the Spanish-born Ramón Ruenes became a noted theater impresario after he opened the Teatro Juárez in 1921. In addition to showing movies and staging plays, this the-

ater supported civic organizations and participated in fundraisers. That year, San Antonio's newspaper *La Prensa* launched a campaign to assist in the construction of schools in Dolores Hidalgo, in the Mexican state of Guanajuato. Ruenes, who had lived in Mexico for 15 years and loved the country, lent a hand to this charity effort. He proposed exhibiting a movie in his theater, with the proceeds divided as follows: one third for the theater, another third for the film distributor, and the remainder for the Mexican schools project. With added generosity, the film distributor replied that he would donate his part to the school fund.<sup>12</sup>

With the arrival of "talkies," theaters had to adapt to the new standards. To stay in business, Valley impresarios began to install speakers and all the necessary equipment. Needless to say, the conversion to sound was costly, but it paid off in the long run. In Edinburg, for instance, Velma Montague built one of the first theaters in town that catered specifically to Hispanics. The Grande Theater was located on Harriman Street, which was the main avenue of the Mexican barrio. Mrs. Montague had planned this 350-seat theater "with the explicit intention of showing films to the many people that lack the most indispensable knowledge of English."<sup>13</sup> For the inauguration, on March 29, 1930, the Grande exhibited Hoot Gibson's *The Long Long Trail*, a Western that was double-billed with a serial. At this time, the theater showed a mixture of silent and sound movies. For example, it announced, the following month, *El indio yaqui*, a silent Mexican film that had been very successful among Hispanics since its release in California in 1926. It starred Guillermo Calles, a Tarahumara Indian, who was also the movie's director and producer.

Emulating the progress of Edinburg's Grande Theater, in May of 1930 Candelario Muñoz renovated his business. He put in new lighting in his Teatro Chapultepec and got ready to install a Vitaphone projection system to show movies with sound. A newspaper announced: "*En la próspera y bonita población de East Donna va a haber sensacionales vistas habladas*" (there will be sensational mov-



ies with dialogue in the prosperous and beautiful town of East Donna).<sup>14</sup>

The job of an exhibitor also had its difficulties. Miguel Benítez of Weslaco, for instance, became entangled with several problems connected with the Nacional Theater. A note published by the *San Juan Sentinel* erroneously said that Mexicans were being segregated at his theater. Quickly, Benítez answered that this information had been printed by mistake and gave reassurance of his courteous treatment to all patrons.<sup>15</sup> Every once in a while, selecting the right kind of spectacle for the Nacional proved too complicated. At the end of 1933, Benítez was criticized for showing movies that were denigrating to Mexicans. A newspaper warned that he ought to prohibit "the exhibition of films that ridicule the people of our race."<sup>16</sup>

Earlier that year, a hurricane hit the Valley, causing great damage to buildings in Weslaco. The roofs of the Teatro Nacional and of a garage that was also owned by Benítez were shattered. Nevertheless, Benítez came out of these hazards without much to regret. When his first daughter was born in that same year, the impresario happily offered 500 free tickets to patrons of the Nacional. A good sign of the coming of boom times was the rapid increase of the Mexican population in the area. As a result, in the 1930s, the entertainment business of the Benítez family expanded considerably.

All of a sudden, the Spanish-language "talkies" began to play everywhere. Theaters that had been catering only to the English-language public turned their attention to a growing Mexican clientele. In Mercedes, the Capitol Theater announced an exceptional midnight showing; it screened *Mano a mano*, one of the earliest Mexican productions with sound. The Teatro Anáhuac in McAllen announced an MGM short feature with English and Spanish dialogue, the musical *Mexicana*. In Brownsville, *El cuerpo del delito* played at the Dittmann. The movie was advertised as "*todo hablado en español*" (all spoken in Spanish) and featured

Antonio Moreno and María Alba. Very swiftly, the manager of the Dittmann made arrangements to exhibit *Santa*, Mexico's first sound-on-film production. The movie played for five days, from May 8 to May 12, 1932. This drama, based on the famous novel by Federico Gamboa, had only been shown in El Paso, Texas, after its debut in Mexico City in April 1932. Audiences in Brownsville could see *Santa* before it played in San Antonio and Los Angeles.

In October 1930, the Dittmann Theater became Brownsville's third movie house to be equipped for sound movies. It inaugurated a new era with Hollywood's *The Bad Man*, a movie especially remembered for its "jolly bandit" who "speaks his lines in broken English tinged with a strong flavor of Spanish." Appraising the importance of Latin American audiences, Hollywood studios accelerated the production of Spanish "talkies." One of them, *La gran jornada*, opened at the Dittmann on March 29, 1931. W.A. McDavitt, manager of the Dittmann and Dreamland Theaters, said: "We are making an effort to get the best Spanish-language films to present them to the public of this city and Matamoros, and we are satisfied by the way the public has favored us."<sup>17</sup>

Movies were not the only attraction at the Dittmann. This theater brought the famous vaudeville actress Celia Montalván to Brownsville in December 1931. The theater announced Montalván's variety show and screened one of her movies, *Sangre mexicana*. Fans of the actress also came from Matamoros. A newspaper mentioned that the Dittmann was completely full of people on the opening night. The fever for Spanish-language entertainment continued the following July, when *Amor y vida o El terror de Torreón* played on the screen of the Dittmann. This film was made in San Antonio by local artists. Its director, Count Giuseppe Lauro, arrived in Brownsville to present the movie, which starred the soprano Luisa Bononcini Lauro. A "story of Old Mexico," it included "music, singing and dancing." Upon his arrival, Giuseppe Lauro told the press that he intended "to make Spanish talking pictures and is interested in meeting local Spanish young ladies in Brownsville and Matamoros."<sup>18</sup>

The Teatro Azteca of McAllen offered a special show to raise money for the illusionist and hypnotist Justiniani. In September 1936, the unfortunate Justiniani landed in a hospital due to an accident he suffered while performing one of his tricks. Participating in this fundraiser were the popular singer Lydia Mendoza, Narciso Mendoza, and the dancer Antonio Montes. Local artists Roberto and José Cavazos also offered their support. To complement the spectacle, the Azteca screened the Mexican movie *La noche del pecado*.

Most movie theaters in the Rio Grande Valley were able to weather the Depression. When business became sluggish, exhibitors temporarily closed their theaters. Some of the venues affected by the economic crisis in 1932 were the Azteca in McAllen, the Grande in Edinburg, the Park in Harlingen, and the Chapultepec in Donna. The Teatro Mercedes also had its ups and downs. After a period of inactivity, its owners, the García brothers, reopened it in December 1932. On the screen played *Lascar of the Rio Grande*, "a tragic romance of a fiery Mexican girl," starring Leo Carrillo and Dorothy Burgess. Apparently, this theater closed again at the end of 1933. Next, Leonelo González and F. de León made a deal with the García brothers to operate the Mercedes Theater. They offered to make improvements to the building and pledged to show the best sound pictures available. Still the new management only lasted about a year. Subsequently, the Dallas-based Interstate Theaters Circuit acquired the lease of the Mercedes and changed its name to Rio Theater. Its inauguration took place on March 31, 1935, with a program featuring the Mexican movie *La sombra de Pancho Villa*. The Rio, which had 325 seats, continued showing first-run films from Mexico for many decades.

Brownsville's Dreamland Theater had a difficult time staying open during the Depression. In fact, there is no indication of its programming in newspapers of the early 1930s. More intriguing is that the name of the theater changed at a certain point during the decade. By 1937, people were calling it El Tiro. Several ads appearing in March in *The Brownsville Herald* attest to this new

name and to the fact that it was billing first-run Mexican movies. Furthermore, a 1938 city directory registered El Tiro, its proprietor, David J. Young, and its current manager, David Young, Jr. There remains the question of why the Dreamland adopted a new name. According to one story, in the early thirties “the Dreamland booked so many cowboy films that patrons nicknamed it El Tiro – The Shot.” Author Javier R. García has come up with a similar explanation:

The Spanish word ‘tiro’ denotes the sound of a shot from a gun. Jesús Abete, who worked as a projectionist at the Fiesta and Charro Drive-Ins during the 1950s, thought that the name [‘Tiro’] came from the sound of gunshots that pierced the walls of the [theater] and were heard outside while movie Westerns, at the height of their popularity, were showing. While there is no reason to doubt his theory, an alternative explanation could point to actual gunplay outside the theater that gave it its nickname.<sup>19</sup>

Whatever the origins of the new name, one thing stands out. Mexican audiences, which heavily patronized this theater, were responsible for calling it El Tiro. Accordingly, they established a more intimate connection with a place so familiar to them. Mexicans in the Rio Grande Valley created a bond around neighborhood theaters such as the Teatro Chapultepec, Teatro Juárez, Teatro Nacional, and others. These establishments played an important role in maintaining the culture and identity of a people. Suitable spectacle included films and live shows with Mexican themes. In addition, as a collective ritual, “going to the movies has always been a social activity, and part of the appeal of the spectacle has been the mingling of the attendees under the unique atmosphere of the theater.”<sup>20</sup>

With the launching of sound movies, audiences became even more enthralled by the spectacle. People could now hear the charac-

ters on the big screen talking and singing in their own tongue. At this time, the Mexican film industry began to make some of the most appealing movies in the Spanish language. *Madre querida* (1935), for instance, was a smashing hit, still remembered by local residents. A moneymaker, it played in Harlingen at one of the downtown theaters that regularly showed American movies. Miguel Benítez of Weslaco saw the need for a Mexican theater in Harlingen. Thus, he made arrangements to lease the local Salón Hidalgo, where dramatic companies often performed. This small theater was owned by the Sociedad Mutualista Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla. In April 1937, Benítez provided the theater with projection equipment and also with a new name: Teatro Royal. *Irma la mala*, a melodrama with Adriana Lamar and Ramón Pereda, was the first movie shown here.

The populace's need for a well-rounded form of entertainment gave rise to the *comedia ranchera*. One of the genre's first films was *¡Ora Ponciano!*, which premiered at El Tiro in 1937. This *comedia ranchera* "blended together a good amount of romance, humor, and songs in a comedy of ranch life." It featured popular vaudeville actors "Chato" Ortín and "Chaflán," as well as the bullfighter Jesús Solórzano and the beautiful Consuelito Frank. *¡Ora Ponciano!* drew a cheerful crowd who watched the movie attentively and came out of the 400-seat theater singing a hot song: "*Tú ya no soplas.*" Without a doubt, the spicy lyrics of this tune contributed to the film's legendary fame.

El Tiro offered a mixture of live and filmed entertainment, as some of its newspaper ads for 1939 reveal. One of them announced the popular radio singers "Las Perlititas del Bajío." Also appearing in this program were the comic duo of Solis and Garza, and the clown Tetemeco. Finally, directing the show were Chago Peña and the first actor Nacho Contla. The patriotic Hollywood movie *Juárez* played after the live performance.<sup>21</sup> When the regular Mexican and Hollywood productions became scarce, the management of El Tiro chose odd movies. In September 1929, it advertised *Assassin of Youth*, "a picture dealing with marihuana and how it circulates

among young people, and the effects of marihuana." The movie had been previewed and even recommended by a local Methodist pastor. However, the Association of Catholic Mexican Youths (ACJM) protested its exhibition. The ACJM condemned the film "as an obscene presentation, as a danger to the public morals of our city." Theater owner David Young replied that this was not a sex picture and that "the film had passed the censorship imposed on every film shown legally in the United States."<sup>22</sup>

In an effort to stay ahead of competitors, theater impresarios strove to improve their businesses. The owner of the Nacional, Miguel Benítez, installed in his theater "a modern and expensive equipment for the reproduction of sound [that] has just arrived from New York." For the release of *La madrina del Diablo*, in March 1938, he gave out free pamphlets describing the film's story. Benítez boasted that his theater, the Nacional, now seated "more than 600 spectators comfortably." He also said: "The manager intends to keep an eye over strict order and morality, preventing the disagreeable sight of people that do not have any respect for the fair sex, when they smoke in their seats and remain with their sombreros pulled on."<sup>23</sup>

That same year, the Nacional exhibited *Águila o sol*, one of the first movies featuring the popular comedian *Cantinflas*. The film's astounding beauties Marina Tamayo and Margarita Mora, danced spectacular rumbas and tangos. Naturally, the occurrences of the duo *Cantinflas* and Manuel Medel made people laugh constantly. The "Empresa Benítez" established a "concurso de aficionados", a talent show taking place every Wednesday at the Nacional. Prizes for the winners amounted to \$10, distributed in several categories, like singing, dancing, playing an instrument, recitation, etc. The Benítez circuit kept growing and by 1940 it operated three theaters: the Nacional in Weslaco, the Rio in Donna, and the Texas in Edcouch. *El cementerio de las águilas*, a patriotic film about the war between Mexico and the United States, played at the Texas on September 15 and 16 to celebrate Mexican Independence Day. That same weekend, a "Fiesta Septembrina" was organized

at the Teatro Nacional in Weslaco. A crowning ceremony of the Queen of the Fiesta, Concepción I, took place before a packed house. Attending were the Mexican consul in McAllen and prominent members of the community. In addition to these amenities, an American movie, *The Three Musketeers*, played on the screen. Tickets for this event cost 20¢ adults and 10¢ children.

Approximately twenty theaters screened Mexican films in the Rio Grande Valley at the beginning of the 1940s: the Alamo Theater, the Mexico in Brownsville, the Rio in Donna, the Azteca in Edinburg, the Colón and the Texas in Edcouch, the Balli in Elsa, the Royal and the Strand in Harlingen, the Patio in La Feria, the Azteca in McAllen, the Río in Mercedes, the Concordia, La Lomita, and the Rex in Mission, the España in Pharr, the Juárez and the Palace in San Benito, the Murillo in San Juan, the Nacional in Weslaco, etc. The families of Miguel Benítez and Ramón Ruenes achieved great success in the exhibition business. In the following decades, they controlled the most important theater circuits in the Valley. The films were provided by two companies located in San Antonio: Azteca and Clasa-Mohme, which distributed films from Mexico.

The advent of World War II and the adoption of the Bracero Program by the U. S. and Mexico, contributed significantly to the expansion of theaters catering to Mexicans. According to some records, by the mid-forties about 147 theaters in Texas exhibited Spanish-language films, complemented by a Hollywood picture. This was a time of unparalleled activity in the motion picture business, a tendency that only lessened when television entertainment became widespread. In the late 1980s, other innovations such as cable TV and video rentals impacted people's movie-going habits. Changing demographics and an embattled Mexican film industry were also factors that resulted in the closing of all Spanish-language theaters in the United States.<sup>24</sup>

Today, the majority of the theaters that were once popular among Hispanics have disappeared. In the Rio Grande Valley, a few of their buildings are still standing in Mission, McAllen, Harlingen,

and Brownsville. Local advocacy groups and film enthusiasts are engaged in the hard work of restoring these movie houses, which will be used as venues for the performing arts. In some cases, historians have found it worthwhile to safeguard the memories of an era of movie entertainment by writing articles, books, and novels. Some museums are starting to focus on the preservation of films and related memorabilia. All of this suggests that the history of the Rio Grande Valley cannot be complete without mentioning its theaters, an important feature of community life and a profitable business as well.

Curador, Archivos Cinematográficos Mexicanos, Harlingen

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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Javier R. García, "Adolph F. Dittmann and Brownsville's First Motion Picture Theaters." Unpublished manuscript (2009).
- <sup>2</sup> Bruce Aiken, *Ballots, Bullets and Barking Dogs: Brownsville Yesteryears* (Brownsville, privately printed, 1996), pp. 43-44.
- <sup>3</sup> Javier R. García, *ibid.*
- <sup>4</sup> *La Prensa* (San Antonio, Texas), August 11, 1915.
- <sup>5</sup> *El Cronista del Valle* (Brownsville, Texas), October 6, November 20, 1926 and February 16, 1927.
- <sup>6</sup> *Época* (Laredo, Texas), October 6, 1918; *La Prensa* (San Antonio, Texas), October 1, 1918.
- <sup>7</sup> Javier R. García, *ibid.*
- <sup>8</sup> *The Brownsville Herald*, June 20, 1919. See also June 15 and 19, 1919.
- <sup>9</sup> David Mycue, "Marking History" (Hidalgo County Historical Commission), nd.
- <sup>10</sup> *La Prensa* (San Antonio, Texas), May 30, 1920.
- <sup>11</sup> Héctor Benítez, interviewed by author, May 12, 2009.
- <sup>12</sup> *La Prensa* (San Antonio, Texas), November 28, 1921.
- <sup>13</sup> Rogelio Agrasánchez, Jr., *Mexican Movies in the United States. A History of the Films, Theaters and Audiences: 1920-1960* (NC: McFarland, 2006), p. 141.
- <sup>14</sup> *El Defensor* (Edinburg, Texas), May 30, 1930.



<sup>15</sup> *La Prensa* (San Antonio, Texas), November 19, 1930.

<sup>16</sup> *La Prensa*, December 19, 1933.

<sup>17</sup> *La Prensa*, March 31, 1931.

<sup>18</sup> *The Brownsville Herald*, July 24, 1932, p. 6.

<sup>19</sup> Javier R. García, *ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Rogelio Agrasánchez, Jr., *Mexican Movies*, p. 104.

<sup>21</sup> *The Brownsville Herald*, Spanish-language section, December 17, 1939.

<sup>22</sup> *Valley Sunday Star-Monitor-Herald*, September 10, 1939.

<sup>23</sup> *La Prensa* (San Antonio, Texas), May 10, 1938.

<sup>24</sup> Rogelio Agrasánchez, Jr., *Mexican Movies*, chapter 1.



# A Brownsville Boy Goes to War: Joe Coulter in the Submarine Service in World War II

by

**Bill Young**

For Joseph Benedict (“J.B” or “Joe”) Coulter, the first 6,120 days of his life pretty much fit the mold of the American youth of his day. It was the next 730 days, however, that, by his own admission, did not fit that mold and would change his life forever; he would go to war and qualify as a member of “America’s greatest generation.”

Joe Coulter was born in Brownsville, on December 10, 1925, and lived here until the early 1930s, when his father took a job in the citrus business in Mission, where Joe knew and palled around with Dallas Cowboy great Tom Landry. The family returned to Brownsville in 1936 to stay, Joe graduating from Brownsville High School in 1942. By the time he got out of high school, the Japanese had attacked Pearl Harbor, and the world was embroiled in war.

“Pearl Harbor,” recalls Joe, “was the best thing that ever happened to many young men in Brownsville; getting into the military ended our childhood and caused us to grow up in a hurry ... got us out of Brownsville.”<sup>1</sup> Joe enlisted in the Navy as soon as he could, and, in January of 1943, headed for basic training in San Diego, California. In San Diego, it was 16 weeks of basic training, followed by another 16 weeks in machinist school. It was after machinist school that he saw a notice advertising for volunteers to join the Navy’s submarine service. He promptly signed up, and, in August of 1943, he began the training for the assignment that would see him to the end of the war.

On Armistice Day, November 11, 1943, Joe sailed to Dutch Harbor, Alaska, arriving on November 20. It was there, he recalls, that he got his first real taste of what war could be like. “On December 1,

1943," he says, "I was ordered to report to the chaplain who told me my father had died in Brownsville a few days earlier. I asked if I could go home to help comfort my mother, but a Naval officer who was also in the room said 'absolutely not.' The standard saying at that time was 'don't you know there's a war on?'"<sup>2</sup>

Coulter and 64 other officers and men were assigned to the submarine USS S-42 (SS153), a tin can that had been built the same year Coulter was born.<sup>3</sup> The S-42, Coulter recalls, was "too old, too slow, under-armed, under-manned and really not combat ready."<sup>4</sup>

The S-42 was a boat of 963 tons on the surface, 225-feet long and 19.5-feet wide; it could travel at a speed of 12.5 knots on the surface and 9.5 knots submerged. S-42 had a maximum dive depth of 200 feet, compared with the 350 feet capability of newer boats.<sup>5</sup> "We were sitting ducks," says Coulter. Coulter states he wanted to come home in one piece or not at all; the thought of losing a limb or his eyesight was worse than death to him.<sup>6</sup>

Coulter and the S-42 left Dutch Harbor, Alaska, in January of 1944, sailing to Pearl Harbor, where the boat was put in dry dock for repair and maintenance. Then it returned to Dutch Harbor, in February, 1944, and in September of 1944 it was on to New Guinea and the Admiralty Islands. Coulter kept a diary which he styled "The Daily Account of a Mission Performed by the United States Submarine USS S-42 in Preparation for the Landing of United States Troops on the Islands of Halmahera and Morotai, 5 August-3 September, 1944."<sup>7</sup> He recorded in his diary the voyage, reporting sea and weather conditions, including an encounter with a Japanese boat, which was summarily dispatched:

August 8—At sea with good weather, dove three times today. Once for watering batteries, once for drills, and the last time to make an approach on a small fishing schooner of about 50 tons. Sank same. Used the 3 incher and 20mm (cannon). Saw no survivors. Later saw a lot of oil drums, one dud,

a small steel lifeboat and other debris in the water, probably from a sunken Jap ship, we expect to be in the operations area about the 10<sup>th</sup>.<sup>8</sup>

Coulter also wrote in his diary of another Japanese encounter, three days later, this time with war planes:

August 11 — At sea with good weather except for occasional rain squalls which are a God send for us. We were forced down (submerge) three times today by planes, twice they were Daves (Japanese single-engine fighter) and the third time a Nell (Japanese twin-engine bomber). Surely by now they know we are coming, I don't give a damn though if my number is up, they will get me, if it's not they won't. We are going to pull an exhaust header tomorrow on the dive.<sup>9</sup>

According to official Naval records:

S-42 arrived at Milne Bay, New Guinea on 19 March, (1944). There, through May, she provided target services to ships conducting antisubmarine warfare exercises. In June, she shifted to Seadler Harbor in the Admiralties, provided similar services until 1 August then prepared for her last war patrol. Five days later she got underway for Halmahera with a four-man Australian intelligence team embarked. On the 15<sup>th</sup>, 21<sup>st</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup>, members of the team were landed, singly, at designated points. These men were to contact and pick up other agents previously landed. On the 26<sup>th</sup>, the scout landed at Gorango Bay was recovered alone. He had been unable to contact his assigned agent. The other scouts were not recovered. On 3 September, S-42 returned to Seadler Harbor.<sup>10</sup>

Coulter's diary matches the official Naval records:

August 14—Made first landing. Everything went off as planned except we did not contact the spy landed last month by USS Bream. Will spend tomorrow and next day casing the next landing spot and return to this place on the third night to pick up the spy we left tonight. Time of landing from boat to beach was about 20 minutes.<sup>11</sup>

It is said that an army marches on its stomach, and the same is true in the submarine service, where Coulter says even the simplest amenities mean so much. In the case of the S-42, the boat's batteries and the power they provided were so dear that no electrical use of any kind was allowed except to run the boat. Coulter documented this annoyance:

August 17-- Have been eating beans and Spam for the last three days. August 18—Made all day dive. Still eating cold chow to save batteries. Started to make a landing tonight, but the weather turned bad and we couldn't pick up light signals from the beach so we didn't go in.<sup>12</sup>

Later, a close encounter of the third kind with Japanese soldiers greeted Coulter and three shipmates when they landed on Halmahera:

August 24—Made all day dive as before. Received signals from beach after we landed. We could not establish communications. We saw a fire burning (farther) up the beach and investigated. Found three Japs sitting by the fire at the mouth of a cave. Bill Vroom (a ship mate) and I wanted to capture them but the Limey (an English soldier) said no. I can see now why the English have such a hard time winning a war.<sup>13</sup>

Nearly 70 years after he made those diary entries, Coulter reflected on that combat action, commenting...

This operation contrasts radically from the actual events we see on TV and in the movies. We used a rubber life raft which comfortably held the four of us. We were issued a .45 pistol, one hand grenade and some morphine with an attached hypodermic needle. We weren't told anything before the fact so if we were captured we could be convincingly dumb."<sup>14</sup>

Years after, he learned another fact about his wartime experience. "In 1995," said Coulter, "I found out by accident that Jack Moser (a local businessman and former Brownsville City Commissioner) was in the army invasion force that secured these two islands, Halmahera and Morotai, in September of 1944. He probably stepped in my footprints."<sup>15</sup>

Still ahead, in September of 1944, was shore leave in Brisbane, Australia, for rest and recreation for the crew and overhaul on the S-42. Australia, Coulter said, was a "good time." Coulter, his shipmates, and S-42 stayed in Australia until January of 1945, returning to Manus in the Admiralties before sailing to San Diego in mid-March, 1945. Coulter spent the rest of the war in relative ease and was discharged at Hitchcock, Texas, on November 17, 1945.

Coulter didn't let any grass grow under his feet as a civilian, enrolling in 1946 in the Veterinary School at Texas A&M, and graduating in 1950. For the past 63 years, he has been a veterinarian in Brownsville. He says some timely investments in real estate "made a little money," and he used some of it to endow a veterinary scholarship at A&M. The scholarships are, he said, open to everyone. "I told them," he said, "that if someone from Japan was to apply, not to exclude them, because if had not been for World War II, I probably wouldn't be standing here now and probably wouldn't have any money to give."<sup>16</sup>

Coulter says he often reflects on his experiences in the war and sometimes ponders why he survived when so many thousands did not. "It always comes down to this," he said, "Why me? Why did I make it and so many did not?"<sup>17</sup> During World War II, the U.S. Navy commissioned 288 new submarines to be built. Of that number, 52, or 22 per cent, were lost. Of 15,000 men who volunteered for the submarine service in World War II, 20 per cent, or 3,000, never came home.<sup>18</sup> As for the S-42, she was decommissioned on October 25, 1945, struck from the Navy list on November 13, 1945, and sold for scrap the same month.<sup>19</sup>

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## Endnotes

1 Interview with Joseph Benedict Coulter by Bill Young, July 2012.

2 Interview with Joseph Benedict Coulter by Bill Young, July 2012.

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4 Interview with Joseph Benedict Coulter by Bill Young, July 2012.

5 USS S-42 (SS-153) <http://subnet.com/fleet/ss153.htm>.

6 Interview with Joseph Benedict Coulter by Bill Young, July 2012.

7 Diary of Joseph Benedict Coulter, August 5-September 3, 1944.

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# CONTEMPORARY HISTORY





# Women as Political Pioneers in the Rio Grande Valley

by

**Gabriela Sosa Zavaleta**

Texas women have always been a political force, and the historical record indicates that their husbands, Texas men, dared not exclude them from the conversation that shaped Texas during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The founding electoral process in Texas did not include or allow the participation of women as candidates or office holders. As a result, Texas women formed women-only advocacy groups and clubs as early as the 1850s, and by the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, women were elected to school boards in the larger municipalities.

The participation of women in the Texas electoral process was, and still is, largely a phenomenon of big city politics and of families, which had successfully educated their daughters in Texas' exclusive private and church-based universities. Unlike north and central Texas, the participation of women as electoral candidates was not present in Texas' Lower Rio Grande Valley until the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Adella Kelsey Turner and Ella Isabelle Tucker, for example, were elected in Dallas in 1908, along with other affluent and educated women who were appointed and elected to the school board in San Antonio.<sup>1</sup>

Texas women had always played a role in the formation of Texas' education system, and women like Annie Webb Blanton were able to form a broad support base across Texas. During Governor William P. Hobby's term in office, Texas women made inroads in a male-dominated political process that, in time, amounted to small victories. One such victory was that of Houston's Annie Webb Blanton, who, in 1918, was the first woman elected to a statewide office. Webb Blanton became the State Superintendent of Public

Instruction.<sup>2</sup> In the 1920s, Texas women were so influential at having their “social issues” legislation passed in the Texas Legislature that they became known as the “Petticoat Lobby.”<sup>3</sup>

Another major female political figure emerged when Governor James E. Ferguson was defeated in his bid for reelection. “Pa” Ferguson “ran” his wife, Miriam A. “Ma” Ferguson, in his place as a candidate for Texas Governor in 1924. Elected to continue her husband’s legacy, “Ma” Ferguson, a formidable politician in her own right, became the first female governor of Texas. “Ma” Ferguson was also defeated in her bid for reelection, but after some bolstering of her support base, she was re-elected in a subsequent election. The 1920s could be called the “Golden Age” of women’s political activity in Texas. It was during the 1920s that women were elected in the largest numbers to the Texas Legislature, up to that period.

The trend of Texas generating notable and politically active women who were destined for the Texas Legislature fell off between the 1930s through the 1960s. During that thirty-year period, very few women sought or were elected to state positions. The post-war period saw a new generation of women including working class and college-educated Latinas who had developed a sense of and healthy appetite for the political process. In the 1960s, Texas universities served as a training ground for social and political issues and prepared political operatives through campus activities.

It is critical to note the demographic pattern of women’s political development in early Texas politics, particularly since this article will show a similar trend in the candidacy and election of women to office in the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas between 1980 and 2000. A clear demographic transition may be seen in the election of women in Texas as the state evolved from rural/agricultural to urban/industrial.

The pattern of candidacy developments of women formerly seen in urban Texas in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century is now underway in those areas of the state that are urbanizing in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Most notable among these is the Lower Rio Grande Valley, especially because it introduces Latinas as political activists and public servants in contemporary Texas. Texas women's initial foray into politics was limited to socially and educationally elite white Christian women involved with issues critical to the development of the state and their families. Texas women were elected to the legislature in order to guarantee the outcome of women's social and political agendas. This agenda reflected both women's issues as well as the early women's movement in Texas.

Women's social activism began in churches and schools and initially pertained to neighborhood issues. Women then developed charitable organizations, followed by political clubs and political action committees. Grassroots activism in support of the well-being of families naturally led women to become candidates at the local level. Texas women became politically savvy at the grassroots level, but not at the functions of the affluent. Their considerable influence was exerted on the school boards of Dallas, Houston, and San Antonio, as well as in other cities around the state. This, however, did not include the Mexican-American region of Texas, particularly along the border.

White women's notable political success in Texas led African-American women to follow their example, and, by the 1950s, African-American women were exerting substantial political influence in the predominately black neighborhoods of the inner cities of Texas. School and housing segregation in Texas required that black women's activism be concentrated on black schools, just as white women were focused on white schools.

Black women in Texas helped form the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.<sup>4</sup> Through their action in 1958, Hattie Mae White became the first African-American woman elected to the Houston school board which was comprised of white and blacks. In the mid-1970s, Houston's Barbara Jordan, weaned on inner-city politics, was elected to the Texas Senate.<sup>5</sup> She was then elected to Congress and, along with Andrew Young,

was among the first blacks to serve in Congress in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For the next thirty years, black women were politically active mainly in Texas cities; an artifact of residential segregation which exists to this day.

With time, the activity of women in Texas politics and in party politics grew and extended into South Texas.<sup>6</sup> Women were elected in two of the state's largest cities south of San Antonio: Corpus Christi and Laredo. Corpus Christi's Frances "Sissy" Farenthold was elected as state representative, followed by an unsuccessful run for Texas governor, and South Texas rancher-politician Anne Armstrong rose to the position of National Republican Chairwoman. In Laredo, Judith Pappas Zaffirini, a savvy political operative, has developed a massive and effective political machine in the state. Senator Zaffirini has successively and continually defeated powerful male counterparts in the Democratic party of her region. Zaffirini's reign began in the middle of the 1980s and continues without falter to the present. Today Senator Zaffirini is the second-ranking senator in the Texas Senate, a position of considerable power and influence.

East of Laredo and south of Corpus, Kingsville's Irma Rangel became the first Latina elected to the Texas Legislature. A formidable political figure, Rangel held her South Texas seat from the 1970s until her death in 2003.<sup>7</sup> After her death, Representative Rangel's position was originally won by retired U.S. Border Patrolman and decorated U.S. Marine, Juan Escobar. Escobar served two terms, but was defeated in his bid for re-election by political newcomer Tara Rios-Ybarra. Serving only a single term, dentist Rios-Ybarra was defeated and returned to her profession. Juan Escobar was elected Kleberg County Judge and continues his service today.

The involvement of women in Texas politics clearly outlines a demographic transition led by white women. This transition was later expanded by the emergence of black women and Latinas, who also established their agendas based upon familial, social, local, and regional economic development issues. Although women

had now achieved a presence in Texas politics, minority women in Texas were not elected until their representatives were allowed to attend and graduate from colleges and universities. Shortly afterwards, their representatives began to run and to win elections at both local and regional levels.<sup>8</sup>

In a 1997 study, Polinard, Wrinkle, and Binder found that ethnicity and political participation in Cameron and Hidalgo counties continued in favor of the Hispanization of the electoral process during the decades following World War II.<sup>9</sup> With the availability of the G.I. Bill and of a college education, as well as the presence of Spanish surnames on ballots, the Hispanic/Latino electorate was burgeoning. By the 1980s, Mexican American women began participating in and winning political elections in South Texas. It would, however, take another decade for substantial numbers of women to seek elected positions and to be elected.<sup>10</sup>

Fifty years – from 1950 to 2000 – would pass before women would, in any major way, play an active role in changing the local political landscape in the Lower Rio Grande Valley. Election to political office by women was limited to Valley school boards, followed by elections to city and county commissions, the legislature, and – most recently – to judgeships. Judgeships had, in the past, been “reserved” for male attorneys, but now are routinely sought and won by young Latina attorneys. The demographic of Latina law-school graduates is one of the most recent and powerful indicators of the involvement of women in the political dynamics of today’s Valley.

In his entry on “Latinos in American Politics” in the *Handbook of Hispanic Culture in the United States: Sociology*, Maurilio E. Vigil examines the emergence of Latinos/Hispanics in the political arena nationwide.<sup>11</sup> Published in 1994, Vigil’s analysis of Latino/Hispanic political participation covers national data through the 1990 census. Therefore, his article is significant in its analysis of the evolution of Latino/Hispanic political participation during the period of 1970-1990s. Vigil states that, while Latino/Hispanics have made

great strides politically, they have not been able to develop what he calls a "Political Community."<sup>12</sup> Although this is true for Latino/Hispanic politics, the role of women in Latino/Hispanic politics is then considered as a separate, if not critical, demographic from that of Latinos.<sup>13</sup> In other words, Latinas are not yet seen as representing or speaking for their political and ethnic community as a whole.

Vigil notes that Latinas suffer from the status of "dual minority," being both women and Hispanic, a status similar to that of black women. Additionally, Latina advances at state and local levels have not established a Latina political community, as they are not taken into consideration beyond their respective limited regions. However, the development of Latinas at the next stage would advance their political power tremendously.

Historic analysis of the importance of the Latino/Hispanic vote in presidential elections indicates that, without the unity of the Hispanic/Latino vote behind a national candidate, Latinos and Hispanics are not seen as meaningful. For example, in the 1988 presidential election, Governor Michael Dukakis, won 68 percent of the Latino/Hispanic vote. However, that percentage represented only about a three percent increase from the 65 percent support which Walter Mondale received in 1984. President Carter was only able to garner 55 percent of the Hispanic vote in 1976. The 1980s saw an increase of the Latino/Hispanic votes for Democratic Presidential candidates, but not in great enough numbers to make a difference in the outcome of the races.

Comparatively, in the 1990 "off year" election, candidate Ann Richards was able to connect with Mexican Americans, 77 percent of whom voted for her. Interestingly, Texas Democrats have not been able to elect a candidate to statewide office since Richards. This is largely attributed to the so-called lack of the development of a "political community" within the Texas Hispanic population. Voting patterns of Americans of Mexican descent continue to be ambiguous. Voting behaviors vary on many social issues and



are directly related to a culturally powerful “cult of personality,” such as with La Raza Unida candidate Ramsey Muñiz in the 1972 gubernatorial election in Texas.<sup>14</sup> This means that since Ann Richards’ election in 1990, no candidate in Texas has been able to motivate the mass of Latino electorate.

Lawless and Fox, writing for the Women and Politics Institute School of Public Affairs of American University, examined the continued under-representation of women in American politics.<sup>15</sup> They found that although the opposite was predicted in the 1990s, American women continue to be under-represented in the political process as candidates. In fact, the gender gap not only increased nationwide, but also increased in Texas.<sup>16</sup> For women in Texas and particularly for Latinas, this means that they continue to be under-represented in legislation and as political candidates.

There are seven reasons why women continue to be underrepresented as candidates: (1.) Women perceive the electoral process as biased against women; (2.) The results of recent female candidates on the national stage have aggravated the perception; (3.) Women do not think they are qualified to run; (4.) Women are less competitive, less confident, and more risk-adverse than men; (5.) Women react more negatively to many aspects of modern campaigns; (6.) Women are less likely to be asked or recruited to run; and (7.) American women are still largely responsible for child-rearing and household maintenance.<sup>17</sup>

Gender disparities are evident at every level of political participation, from local to national races. Historically, women have perceived the best and most effective application of their efforts at the neighborhood and local level. This is why the highest percentage of female participation is still at the local school board level.

### **The 2012 Elections in the Valley**

Given the discussion on women as participants in the electoral process, great strides have been made in the participation of women in the electoral process in Texas’ Lower Rio Grande Valley. In

2012, women were still underrepresented nationally in the political process; only 90 women served in U.S. House of Representatives, representing less than one in five, 16.8 percent, of the 535 seats available. Women in the U.S. Senate, as a percentage, were almost identical to the House, with 17 percent of Senators being women.

Around the nation, in 2012, only 75 women held statewide elected office, or approximately 23 percent of the 320 available positions. The percentage of women in state legislatures in 2012 was remarkably similar at 23.7 percent. Texas did not rank in the top ten states with women serving in state legislatures.<sup>18</sup> In Texas, not counting federal positions, there are 27 statewide elected positions, of which women hold one third or nine. Interestingly, six of the nine are elected to serve in the judicial system.<sup>19</sup>

Women elected to public office in the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas demonstrate a pattern similar to both state and federal government in candidacy and success. The Valley consists of the four contiguous southeastern-most counties in the state: Cameron, Hidalgo, Starr and Willacy. Of these four counties, Cameron and Hidalgo are highly urban, and Starr and Willacy are very rural. In Cameron County, the 2012 general elections included a new congressional seat, as well as 18 positions for which there were both Democrat and Republican candidates. Fourteen women were candidates for elected office at all levels and in both parties. Three of the fourteen women, or 21 percent, were elected to the positions they sought. As in the state at large, women were more likely to seek judgeships.

In two of the judgeships sought, the 404<sup>th</sup> District Court and the Justice of the Peace Precinct 2, Place 2, women faced women in the electoral process. In only one of those two races, the Justice of the Peace race, the two women, Yolanda Terán Begum and Erin Hernández García, were both Democrat candidates. Their Democrat primary race resulted in a run-off election in which Erin Hernández García was elected by a slim and controversial

margin of approximately 200 votes (Hernández García's 4,316 votes to Begum's 4,164).<sup>20</sup>

In the race for the newly-established congressional district, Filemon Vela, Jr. defeated a field of five in the primary election. Those seeking election to the newly-created congressional seat included Denise Saenz Blanchard, a long-time staff member of former U.S. Congressman Solomon Ortiz. In the general election, Vela out-pollled Republican candidate Jessica Puente Bradshaw four to one. South Texas has not favored a female candidate in any of the three South Texas congressional seats.

The same is not true in the election for state representative, which has a more regional flavor. In Hidalgo County, five state representative races, two with women candidates, resulted in one female winner.<sup>21</sup> The 2012 election also featured a host of Valley school board elections. In Hidalgo County approximately 46 school board elections were held in which 16 women were candidates. Seven women were elected or 43 percent of those who ran winning a total of 15 percent of the school board elections.<sup>22</sup>

In the Brownsville Independent School District board election, four positions were up for election or re-election. A total of nine candidates, five of whom were women, sought four positions. Two candidates, Catalina Presas-García and Minerva Peña, sought re-election against male opponents, and both were re-elected. Presas-García faced two male opponents in a straight plurality election and pulled approximately 40 percent of the vote. The position 6 race saw incumbent Minerva Peña face retired educator Shirley Ann Bowman, with Peña pulling approximately 50 percent of the vote. Both female victors are well connected to local political machines. In the position 3 race, former school board member Ottis Powers faced Argelia Miller. Powers was easily elected. Once again, a well-defined political machine was at work. Position 7, an open position with no incumbent, had former school employee Jose Chirinos face retired teacher Linda Gill Martínez. Chirinos, who was aligned with a political group, won in a recount

with fewer than 10 votes separating the two. Therefore, in urban Brownsville, four positions saw nine candidates, five of which were women. Two female incumbents were re-elected, and one former school board member was re-elected. In the open seat, two retired school employees faced off in a run-off. Finally, the four seats split, with two women and two men elected.<sup>23</sup>

Starr County elections in 2012 featured 14 positions, for which there were only two women candidates. Incumbent Tax Assessor-Collector Carmen Peña had no opponent and was re-elected.<sup>24</sup> Incumbent Justice of the Peace Place 1, Judge Imelda “Pinky” Cruz, was defeated in a run-off election by newcomer Jesse Barrera.<sup>25</sup>

The Rio Grande City Commission, comprised of a mayor and four commissioners, shows a male to female pattern similar to the County with five males serving.<sup>26</sup> Of the six elected positions on the Rio Grande City Independent School Board, four positions were up for election, including four male candidates.<sup>27</sup> Three of the candidates were incumbents, and each had a female opponent. All three male incumbents were re-elected. No woman was elected to the Rio Grande City school board.<sup>28</sup>

Willacy County, arguably the most rural county in the Valley, saw a total of eighteen males and one female run for elected office in the 2012 county and state elections, all Democrats. There were no Republican candidates. The office of tax assessor collector election had the single female candidate. In South Texas, tax assessors are often women, and this office drew the only female candidate who was elected without opposition. All other positions were won by the Democratic male candidates.<sup>29</sup>

County commissioners’ and law enforcement offices, such as constables and justices of the peace, are almost always male in rural South Texas. As noted above, school boards are where women make their initial inroads into local politics. Willacy County has three independent school districts: Raymondville, Lyford, and San

Perlita. The most urban community in the county, Raymondville has an all-male school board of seven members.<sup>30</sup>

The Lyford area is a totally farming area of the county, and the Lyford school district school board is mixed, with four women and three men holding office.<sup>31</sup> The San Perlita district, by far the most rural in the county, has a six-person board, of whom five are currently women.<sup>32</sup>

## Conclusions

In the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas, the political process continues to be biased against the participation by women. Hispanic culture places low value on women's political participation. In the 2012 elections, this continues to be more evident in the two rural counties and less evident in the urban. Urban life brings educational opportunities for women and life expectations as well as opportunities beyond the limitations of the home.

In South Texas, it is not so much that women do not think that they are not qualified to run. Traditionally, Latinas have looked down upon political activity as inappropriate for a woman, a wife and a mother. Nonetheless, Latinas increasingly believe they are competent to run for public office, since they have faced Latinos in colleges and universities and have succeeded.

While studies have found that women, in general, may view themselves as less competitive than men, this is not true for Latinas. As discussed above, Latinas know that they are every bit as competitive and competent as Latinos. However, Latinas self-select out of the process, choosing to invest their time and efforts in more culturally approved activities. Latinas do not enter the political process because they fear the liability and personal exposure they face as candidates. Many women react more negatively to many aspects of modern-day campaigns. Latinas, however, are an integral component of a cultural system that fully incorporates them at an early age and does not alienate them. Therefore, when they

do decide to run for public office, they have a ready-made network and support system, waiting to be asked for help.

More and more, women, and especially Latinas, are viewed as ideal candidates for public offices. Thus, they are recruited more often now than in the past. Often, Latinas do not chose to run because their husbands or other male family members are already involved in the political process. As a percentage of candidates, Latina professionals are more apt to seek and win political elections in the Valley. While American women are still largely responsible for child rearing and household maintenance, which is largely true of Valley Latinas, in the Latino-extended family and friends network, Latinas are often the degree holding professionals in the family, making them the more desirable candidate. This demonstrates a role-reversal evident in the Valley in 2012. This role-reversal, with more Latinas seeking public office, is expected to continue into the foreseeable future.

Finally, the 2012 elections in the Lower Rio Grande Valley saw Latinas in the two urban counties, Cameron and Hidalgo, competing with an equal likelihood as males, and winning as often. Successful Latinas are almost always educated professionals, such as lawyers, from noted families, where the daughters are family legacies. Latinas in the two rural counties have not begun to make major inroads in the electoral process, but are experimenting with the development of political strength in school board elections. Latinas are well represented as members of school boards in the Valley in 2012. Additionally, they are well represented, both as candidates and as victors for judgeships. In the larger urban cities, women are successful candidates for city commissions, but are less likely to be interested in county commission positions. Valley women are also renewing their interest in state and federal representation and are running with notable noted success for state representative. All Congressional seats are held by Latinos in 2012, but this will be inevitably challenged in coming elections.

This article has sought to demonstrate how women have entered the political process in Texas and how Latinas have rightfully attained their places as the demographic transition would expect. As more and more Latinas complete a university education, it may be further expected that as a percentage of candidates, more and more Latinas will seek and win political offices. The Latino population will continue to struggle with the development of a political community, with statewide Latinos distancing themselves from Valley Latinos, unless a major charismatic leader emerges.

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# **Re-Discovering the Rio Grande Valley The Community Historical Archaeology Project with Schools Program and Life-long Education**

by

**Russell K. Skowronek, Edna Alfaro, Margaret  
Dorsey, Juan Gonzalez, Sonia Hernandez, Maria  
Lagorio, Bobbie Lovett, John R. Milford and  
Kenneth R. Summy.**

In August of 2009 the Community Historical Archaeology Project with Schools (CHAPS) Program was born at The University of Texas-Pan American (UTPA) in response to the development activities associated with the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which rapidly altered or destroyed aspects of the region's heritage while alienating the resident populace from their past. CHAPS was seen as a means of actively preserving aspects of the Rio Grande Valley's history through scholarly research and by educating the populace to the value of its cultural and natural heritage. Specifically, CHAPS was designed to discover and record the natural, cultural and historical resources of South Texas through research and develop them for education, tourism, and community pride. The CHAPS Program is achieving its goal by building partnerships and garnering support from communities, special interest groups, UTPA, four local school districts, a parochial school, and a local congressman.

CHAPS team members have created an innovative K-16 college preparation and completion program that emphasizes teacher preparation and student academic skill development by using the experience of archaeological and historical discovery and preservation. The CHAPS team believes that archaeology, anthropology, and history provide the nexus for bringing the whole panoply of the human experience together into an integrated educational

whole. When this approach is focused locally and applied in K-16 education, students are able to bring their own experiences and those of their family into understanding their place in the cultural and natural landscape through the application of the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) fields. The CIAPS Program hopes to create archaeologically and historically literate citizens who are aware of their local cultural and natural history and of its importance to the future development of the Rio Grande Valley.

### **Contextualizing the Rio Grande Valley, a land of contradictions**

The area known as the Rio Grande Valley is situated in the southern tip of Texas and is one of the fastest growing areas in the nation. Located some 250 miles south of San Antonio, Texas the Rio Grande Valley truly lies at the end of the road in the United States, yet it also serves as the gateway to Latin America. The Rio Grande was dominated by commerce, agriculture, and ranching until the 1990s. Today it is rapidly transforming into one of the main entrepôts into the United States for manufactured goods established in the wake of the passage of NAFTA. Thus, it is a land of contrasts and extremes in wealth, education, infrastructure, and housing.

The Rio Grande Valley has a multicultural history dating back to the eighteenth century with the founding of Spanish settlements. A mix of indigenous, Spanish, *mestizos*, and *mulattos* comprised the early settlers of the region that later became part of greater South Texas. With Mexican independence from Spain in 1821, this river valley was part of Mexico's northern frontier up until 1846. The brief ten year period of Texas Independence brought cultural, economic, and political changes to the region once again. Not until 1848 was the geo-political boundary set between the United States and Mexico. The Rio Grande became the border; however, the flow of culture, ideas, and peoples continues into the twenty-first century (Weber, 1992; Montejano, 1987). As a consequence of this rich history and its proximity to Mexico, the predominately

Hispanic population varies with regard to generational status such that some individuals have resided in the area for mere days while others have resided in the area for multiple generations.

This area is comprised of four counties: Cameron, Hidalgo, Starr, and Willacy, which share similar characteristic in terms of race, poverty, and income. Specifically, the population is predominately Hispanic and low-income. For example, Hidalgo County is 89.8% Hispanic and, according to the U.S. Census Bureau (2010) the median income for a household in the county was \$30,518 making it one of the poorest counties in the nation (Table). This is approximately \$20,000 below that of Texas. The economic data further reveals that the rate of persons below the poverty level is 34.8%, compared to 15.8%, statewide. In further review, the education attainment of high school graduates of persons over twenty-five years of age was only 50.5% (YEAR).

**TABLE: Hidalgo County Demographics**

	<b>Hidalgo County</b>	<b>Texas</b>
Population, 2009 estimate	741,152	24,782,302
Persons under 5 years old, percent, 2009	11.9%	8.4%
Persons under 18 years old, percent, 2009	36.5%	27.8%
Persons 65 years old and over, percent, 2009	9.5%	10.2%
Female persons, percent, 2009	51.1%	50.1%
White persons, percent, 2009 (a)	96.5%	82.1%
Black persons, percent, 2009 (a)	1.3%	12.0%
American Indian and Alaska Native persons, percent, 2009 (a)	0.7%	0.8%
Asian persons, percent, 2009 (a)	0.9%	3.6%

Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander, percent, 2009 (a)	0.1%	0.1%
Persons reporting two or more races, percent, 2009	0.6%	1.4%
Persons of Hispanic or Latino origin, percent, 2009 (b)	89.8%	36.9%
White persons not Hispanic, percent, 2009	8.6%	46.7%
Foreign born persons, percent, 2000	29.5%	13.9%
Language other than English spoken at home, pct age 5+, 2000	83.1%	31.2%
High school graduates, percent of persons age 25+, 2000	50.5%	75.7%
Bachelor's degree or higher, pct of persons age 25+, 2000	12.9%	23.2%
Persons per household, 2000	3.60	2.74
Median household income, 2008	\$30,513	\$50,049
Per capita money income, 1999	\$9,899	\$19,617
Persons below poverty level, percent, 2008	34.8%	15.8%
(b) Hispanics may be of any race, so also are included in applicable race categories		

## Importance of Culturally and Locally Relevant Curriculum

We might ask why the CHAPS Program is an appropriate means for educating the largely Hispanic population of the Rio Grande Valley. The importance of integrating culturally and locally relevant curriculum is highlighted in the cognitive science literature as it pertains to mathematical knowledge. For example, researchers have noted that an individual's ability to learn and understand new concepts is dependent on the individual's ability to "make

the connections to their existing knowledge” (Gustein, Lipman, Hernandez, & de los Reyes, 1997, p. 711). One network of knowledge that individuals can draw on are cultural and locally relevant experiences (Gustein et al., 1997; Howard, 2001). Thus, it may be beneficial for concepts to be tied to students’ cultural experiences. Indeed, at the college level, course content has been linked to ethnic minority individuals’ decision to switch from engineering/science majors to social sciences/humanities majors. As Peter Block observed “Nothing will get better in a community without a deeper sense of connectedness and social fabric in the community.” (2009) Specifically, students who strove to integrate their ethnicity and their major switched majors because course content in humanities and social sciences were perceived to allow students to explore their ethnicities (Syed, 2010). Taken together, this research suggests that it is important to include a culturally relevant context in the curriculum. Thus, an innovative approach to supporting Hispanic students’ mastery of both STEM and humanities concepts may be to include culturally and locally relevant content highlighting the fields of archeology, anthropology, biology, geology, and history.

The CHAPS Program’s multidisciplinary approach extends its influence into other academic fields. Of particular interest are the STEM academics, where the importance of preparing students cannot be overstated. The CHAPS Program approach to learning incorporates “in the field” learning skills, which are directly transferrable to STEM academic. For instance, CHAPS has a geographic information systems (GIS) component built into its curriculum. Students will be able to learn and more importantly apply the technological skills they learn in the CHAPS Program. Additionally, the mapping of excavation sites takes mathematical skills to measure, calculate, and decide where best to excavate. Thus, the CHAPS Program exposes K-16 students to STEM skills very early and keeps them engaged through college. This is one way that CHAPS will, in the long-term, help alleviate the problem of STEM degrees not being awarded in Hispanic serving

institutions, such as UTPA, and could be seen as an example for other Hispanic serving institutions.

## **Applying the CHAPS Program**

### *Preserving Oral Histories in a Middle School Classroom*

During academic years 2009-2010 and 2010-2011 thirty-one classroom visits were made to kindergarten, second, fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh, eighth, eleventh and twelfth grade classes in eight schools in Hidalgo County. The visits were to science, social studies, English and introductory classrooms and the topics discussed therein included "What is Archaeology," "Careers in Archaeology," "Indians of Texas," "Indians of North America," and "Oral History."

In the autumn of 2009, the CHAPS Program began a partnership with a new Social Studies teacher for grades five through eight at St. Joseph Catholic School, a small Catholic School in Edinburg, Texas. Hailing from the historic city of Boston, Massachusetts, the teacher was looking forward to exploring the unique history of the Rio Grande Valley. A member of the CHAPS team visited the school three times during the course of the academic year to discuss archaeology and the science to promote awareness of local history. The teacher challenged the students to find the answers to a number of questions regarding their ancestry. How and when did your ancestors arrive in Texas? How did they support themselves financially? What tools did they use that we do not use today? What foods did they eat? What languages were spoken at home? Have you ever found that while these are questions that we in the field of humanities have considered, the reality is that most middle school students have yet to ponder the answers to these questions. In doing so, we as a class community are engaging in the never-ending process of documenting history and capturing the fleeting voices of the Rio Grande Valley.

The short-term goals for CHAPS in the classroom were many. We hoped to develop historical perspective, to compare and contrast

students' and subjects' lives, to discover potential archaeological sites, to improve students' interviewing and writing skills, and to link oral histories to curriculum. In the long-term, we hoped to enhance archaeological interest, encourage the pursuit of history-related studies, spread awareness of CHAPS, and develop an in-depth archaeological knowledge of the Rio Grande Valley. Most of all, we wanted to give the students the opportunity to get to know their ancestors on a deeper level, to appreciate the sacrifices made for future generations, and to feel a personal connection to the past that may fuel an interest in an historical career in the future. To these ends, five classes of students—about ninety-five students in total—conducted interviews of older family members. They asked simple questions: Where were you born? Describe your family. What stories about your ancestors did you hear? What historical events had a strong effect on your life? Describe the history of the property you live on.

Their finished products overflowed with surprising stories that made students smile with an appreciation for the past. For example, one student discovered that her Mexican grandmother “raised nine children, learned to read, write, and speak English on her own, and was self-taught Spanish reading and writing.” Another student was astounded to learn that “[In Edinburg in the 1920s] they didn’t have stores or restaurants, so they had to grow their own food.” The same student’s “tía” (great-aunt) had to walk over an hour from Edinburg to the nearest school in San Juan. Many students could not believe how young their grandparents were when they married and procreated; these surprising numbers provide a springboard for contrasting the lifestyles, opportunities, and goals of their and our generations.

After reading the students' post-interview reflections, it became clear that we had indeed accomplished many of the goals we had outlined in the beginning of the CHAPS partnership with the school. In these reflections, the students reported an increased interest in the past, a sense of continuity throughout time despite generational differences, and an altered attitude toward the sub-

ject of their interviews. One student explained it this way: “It made me realize that my grandparents worked hard all through their lives and that hard work does pay off.” We hope that our students apply this life lesson to their history-related studies so that we may reach one of our key long-term goals: to encourage our students to devote their lives to preserving and exploring the history around them.

Most of the oral histories, with signed releases were donated to the CHAPS Program for inclusion in the permanent archives of the Program housed in the UTPA Border Archives. Our hope is to continue working with the students through high school and later at UTPA and have the interviews repeated and enhanced and through these are able to create a more nuanced longitudinal oral history for interviewees.

## **The CHAPS Program in the University**

### ***Oral History-Ethnography***

While the CHAPS Program may, at first glance, seem to focus on K-12 students it does, in-fact, have undergraduate and graduate education and research at its very core. The early exposure of students to STEM skills not only keeps them engaged through secondary school but, through contact with university faculty will bring them into the university with a level of educational sophistication often lacking in entering freshmen.

Thus, today’s middle-school student may in four to six years matriculate at UTPA and come to work with the Curator of the Border Studies Archive, one of the CHAPS faculty, who is also a professor of anthropology. The Border Studies Archive is integrated into multiple phases of the research process. Students are trained in ethical research conduct, including the use of informed consent forms. The Border Studies Archive at UTPA’s Library provides students with preservation grade digital recorders. This means that the initial recording itself will be of high quality and the format in which it is recorded can easily be digitally preserved



without compression (or degradation). A benefit of this process is that material is easily accessible to UTPA students and the general public through the Archive's website.

To emphasize the interconnectedness of locally-focused research the CHAPS Program faculty developed the first approved interdisciplinary course at UTPA in 2011. Titled, "Discovering the Rio Grande Valley: The Natural and Cultural History of South Texas" an interdisciplinary course where students will gain an understanding of the archeology, anthropology, history, geology and biology of this dynamic borderlands region. The course is taught through a combination of lectures and hands-on research focused on a plot of land and its current and previous occupants. It requires working with non-student community members bringing the rich stories of the Valley to life. The findings generated through this rapid assessment (e.g., land deeds, transactions, oral histories, genealogy, maps, GIS/mapping research, and geological research) will be compiled into a report to be given to land owners and deposited at the Border Studies Archive at the UTPA Library.

## **University Research and the CHAPS Program**

### ***Geology***

The CHAPS Program recognizes that knowledge of the recent (Pleistocene/Holocene) geological past of the Rio Grande Valley is important to understanding human-environment interactions. The Rio Grande is considered the second-largest fluvial system along the Gulf Coast and it is ranked fourth in the United States in terms of channel length, with 3,034 km, and drainage area, with 368,820 km<sup>2</sup> (Kammerer, 1990). During the Holocene, the Rio Grande has built an impressive sub-aerial delta with an area of ~7,770 km<sup>2</sup>. It spans southernmost Texas in the United States and the Mexican northeastern state of Tamaulipas. Both states almost equally share its shoreline length of about 140 km. Surprisingly, the depositional history and the chronology of delta building for the Rio Grande Delta (RGD) are largely unknown

Most of what is known about the depositional history of the RGD is the result of three studies published in the 1950s and 70s (Lohse, 1958; Cook, 1958 and Fulton, 1976). The work by Fulton focused on the subsurface stratigraphy and the depositional environments of parts of the delta and is supported by a large number of electric logs, some sediment cores and two radiocarbon dates. The other two studies briefly touched on delta features and sediments. Using fragmentary data presented by the earlier studies, Brown et al. (1980) pieced together a general reconstruction of the geologic history of the RGD. Two problems with this reconstruction are: 1- it is largely based on generic models of delta plain evolution that have been developed for the largest deltas in the world; and 2- it lacks an absolute chronological framework of delta lobe migration.

The Rio Grande fluvio-deltaic system had filled its estuary by about 7,000 years ago when sea-level rise reached its present position and was beginning to prograde gulfward in a series of delta lobes. A complex history of delta lobe switching that extends approximately the last 7,000 years is evident from the distribution of abandoned meander belts (locally known as resacas). Analysis of Google Earth imagery, existing maps and aerial photographs and a review of the available literature suggests that the deltaic plain contains at least six lobes but possibly more.

CHAPS team members propose to initiate a chronology of the Holocene RGD for the Texas side of the delta using state of the art dating methodologies and a new approach that has been successfully tested in the Rhine Meuse and the Mississippi deltas (Törnqvist, 1996; Törnqvist et al., 2006). At UTPA the goal is to start the chronology of the lobes on the Texas side of the RGD.

## *Biology*

The Lower Rio Grande Valley is characterized by a subtropical – semiarid climate and supports a diverse flora and fauna that provides the basis for a multi-million ecotourism industry. At the present time, the LRGV is considered the second most important birding area in North America, and is commonly referred to as

“America’s Butterfly Capital” by the North American Butterfly Association. The flora and fauna of the LRGV includes many rare and endangered species, and endemic organisms that occur nowhere else in the United States.

A major objective of the Biology component of the CHAPS course is to familiarize students and teachers with common animals, plants and other organisms that occur in the LRGV region. Practical experience in identifying such organisms will be attained by visiting natural preserves – e.g., the World Birding Center in Hidalgo County and/or the Resaca de las Palmas in Cameron County – and viewing representative species in their natural environment. In-field lectures will emphasize the ecological role of common endemic and/or exotic species and their impact on the environment and human population.

A second major objective of the Biology Component of the CHAPS course is to familiarize participants with technology designed to facilitate the mapping of plant communities and other natural resources, and to perform complex analyses involving geospatial data. Digital color and/or color-infrared aerial imagery is obtained for each of the natural preserves visited during the course, and the geographic locations (in terms of latitude and longitude) of features on the ground that are also locatable in aerial imagery will be recorded in situ using Global Positioning System (GPS) receivers with 3-5 m accuracy. The latter is used to geometrically correct aerial imagery and to transform raw imagery into imagery with a projected coordinate system (e.g., latitude and longitude) from which accurate measurements can be made. GPS coordinates for features of known identity on the ground (e.g., stands of a plant species of known identity) facilitates the development of “land cover” maps showing the spatial distribution of various plant species and other features such as bare ground, streams and ponds which can be measured accurately. This type of “hands-on” exercise familiarizes the student with the basic remote sensing and Geographic Information System (GIS) technology that is

used routinely by governmental and other agencies to develop and update land-use and land-cover maps.

CHAPS team member Dr. Rod Summy has conducted research which includes 1) use of aerial color infrared (CIR) imagery for mapping black mangrove (*Avicennia germinans*) on spoil islands in the Lower Laguna Madre, 2) potential use of black mangrove plantings to prevent or mitigate shoreline erosion caused by wave action on LLM spoil islands, 3) detection and mapping of aquatic invasive weeds using aerial multispectral imagery, and 4) use of GIS technology in an area wide suppression program for giant salvinia (*Salvinia molesta*) in Texas and Louisiana.

Upon completion of the CHAPS course participants will have a basic appreciation of the biological diversity of the LRGV region, how these organisms interact with humans and other organisms, and how plant communities and other natural resources are mapped and analyzed using remote sensing and GIS technology.

### **Recovering the History of *Porciones* in the College Classroom**

Before the idea of the CHAPS Program was “hatched” a research project highlighting the rich history of families and their land in the Rio Grande Valley was already underway in 2006 in Sonia Hernandez’ upper level Mexican American History class,. Student conducted land title research in the Hidalgo County Courthouse and conducted family oral interviews. They were able to trace their history back to the original land grants awarded by the King of Spain in the 18<sup>th</sup> century when this region was claimed and organized as *Nuevo Santander*. These grants, or *porciones*, now comprise part of several counties including Starr, Hidalgo, and Cameron. Given the location of UTPA, in the heart of South Texas, a student-centered project to recover the history of the *porciones* is not only practical, but is of immense value to the community.

Not unlike their younger siblings in middle school, college students are interested in discovering their family’s story as it relates to the land. They studied maps of the region showing both the

long-strip *porciones*, extending towards the river, and the large, mostly squared-shaped *porciones*, in what is now northern Hidalgo County. To supplement and support their findings, students also conducted research at the Lower Rio Grande Valley Special Collections, UTPA library, using census records and genealogical documents and used private family papers. Despite the importance of the *porciones* as key components of South Texas early life and as a reminder of the Spanish legacy in this region, the history of *porciones* and its inhabitants has been largely ignored. While there have been efforts to recover and publish this history in the past decades, a wide gap remains unfilled. Thus, these students provided the starting point for a new research methodology.

As students tracked the various transactions that took place between their parents (or themselves) and a land developer or relative, and eventually to the original land grant, they noted key transformations that took place in the region. Their essays also touched on women and land ownership, the development of *colonias* or subdivisions, ranching, and agriculture. Students also noted the incorporation of cities and the history of well-known families such the McAllens, Ballís, and Closners.

Students interviewed family members or community residents gaining a personal perspective on the relationship between individuals and land. There is a long tradition of oral history in the region: stories have been passed down from generation to generation. If some members of the community were illiterate, it certainly did not equal ignorance of history. Elders graciously shared stories of land acquisition, land loss, and migration. Coupled with courthouse research, oral histories allowed students to identify a historical memory of their respective communities. It is the recovery of these historical memories that complements and fulfills the goal and mission of CHAPS. The *porción* leg of CHAPS uses a place-based approach to learning as students conduct research in their communities to recover the history of one of the last regions to be colonized by the United States.

## The CHAPS Program in the Community

### *Archaeology*

Archaeology as part of anthropology is said to be the most scientific discipline in the humanities and most humanistic of the sciences. It is on this cusp that we engage people of all ages in the study of humans. Archaeology is about stewardship that is site preservation, laws, and ethics, because archaeological sites are non-renewable resources, which once they are destroyed are gone forever unless they have been properly recorded using archaeological techniques.

There are few areas in the continental United States that can be considered a *tabula rasa* or that are virtually unknown archaeologically. The lower Rio Grande Valley is one such place. There is evidence that the area has been occupied since the end of the Pleistocene (Malouf 1977 and Tierney 2005). Over the past thirty years, ethno-historic research has described contact-era indigenous inhabitants as a nomadic, band-level society of hunters and gatherers (Campbell 1983). Known as Coahuiltecan, they left few traces of their existence in either the archaeological or documentary records (Campbell 1983, Salinas 1990). About 260 years ago permanent occupation came to the area and soon settlers established civilian communities and ranches which flourished under Spanish and later Mexican control (Greaser 2009). For half a century after incorporation into the United States little changed in the region. As the twentieth century began, commercial agriculture came to the region. Irrigation and railroad projects brought in settlers of northern European heritage and originating from Plains and Great Lakes State and Prairie Provinces of the U.S. and Canada. Those who came began the era of citrus orchards, cotton fields, and later gas and oil production. Their cousins joined them beginning in the 1960s when the so-called "Magic Valley" became the low-cost alternative for those Midwesterners seeking relief from the winter cold. The era of agribusiness began to wane in the 1990s with the passage of the North American Free Trade

Agreement (NAFTA). Over the past fifteen years thousands have come to the valley for the opportunities associated with this economic development. It has been observed that Texas' Rio Grande Valley of 2010 is much like California's Silicon Valley in 1970. That is rapidly being transformed from the agrarian sector to suburban light industrial service sector (Skowronek 2002). Forty years ago much of the archaeology and history of Silicon Valley was lost through unchecked development and a lack of education as to the value of such resources- both tangible (artifacts and sites) and in-tangible (such as the memories of farm workers and owners) (Skowronek 2002).

With these issues in mind, we have to ask why we know so little about the archaeology of the lower Rio Grande Valley region. First, until recently there were never very many people in the area and those who were here in prehistory were highly nomadic and, in the historic period living in jacales. Their respective material culture was limited and frequently made from organic materials which did not long survive in the wet soils of the Rio Grande Delta. Also, as a low-lying delta many sites have been buried following flood episodes, or destroyed as the river meandered across the delta. For all of these biases the main reason we probably know very little is because little research has been conducted. Of particular significance to the recovery of this archeological history are area farmers and ranchers.

To obtain this information we are reaching farmers and ranchers through their children and grandchildren. Visits to area schools, university courses such as the CHAPS interdisciplinary class, and in other venues including UTPA's annual Hispanic Engineering, Science, and Technology(HESTEC) week, FESTIBA, and the Rio Grande Delta International Archaeological Fair brings the public to us. In these settings interactive hands-on activities focused on prehistoric and historic archaeology, oral history and genealogy allow people to literally "touch the past," test their skills of observation, and think about their family and the past. One of the "activities" developed by the CHAPS Program faculty was a

chronologically ordered full-scale chart of projectile points from the region. Visitors are invited to handle actual points and are challenged to “match” them against the chart to learn the antiquity of the artifact. For many, a 3,000-year-old point will be the oldest thing they have ever held. It will spark their sense of discovery and perhaps their memory of a forgotten box of artifacts from their grandparent’s property. Many ask to bring-in their artifacts and have them identified in return for locating them.

As a result of these “points of contact” a growing number of prehistoric archaeological sites have been newly identified and located in the Rio Grande Valley. The sites have been registered in the confidential Texas State Archaeological Site files; the materials have been identified and dated, and most importantly returned to the landowners to continue to share with their family. Archaeological sites on private property in the United States belong to the property owner who, through our efforts we hope now will see themselves as “stewards” of these precious non-renewable resources.

### **Beginnings, NOT Conclusions**

The CHAPS Program has just passed its second anniversary as a largely unfunded university program. During this period the dedicated participating faculty, with the approval of UTPA’s administration, has laid the groundwork for an interdisciplinary research and education program which touches not only academics but all ages of the local community. By any measure we have been successful. Our only limiting factor has been the wherewithal to support more fully K-12 teachers and the CHAPS Program faculty in their endeavors. We invite those interested in the CHAPS program to visit us on the web at [www.utpa.edu/chaps](http://www.utpa.edu/chaps) and join us on the voyage of discovery.<sup>1</sup>

The University of Texas – Pan American



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## Endnote

Many administrators and students in the UTPA community have actively supported the CHAPS Program over the past two years. We wish to acknowledge President Robert Nelsen, Provost Havidan Rodriguez, and past Provost Ana Maria Rodriguez for seeing the Program's promise. Our Deans Dahlia Guerra (College of Arts & Humanities), Interim Dean Kristin Croyle (College of Social and Behavioral Sciences) and Dr. Van Reidhead, past Dean of the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences were visionary in their creation of the CHAPS Program through an interdisciplinary, inter-college hire and support for assistantships and operations. Joined now by Dean John Trant of the College of Science and Medicine and Dean Farzaneh Razzaghi (Library) our foundation cuts through the humanities, sciences, and social sciences. Our program Chairs have also recognized the significance of the CHAPS Program. They include Dr. Mohammed Farooqui (Biology), Dr. Michael Faubion (History), Dr. Philipp Gascoigne (Psychology), Dr. Thomas Pozorski (Anthropology), Dr. Steven Tidrow (Physics & Geology), and Dr. William Turk (Public Administration). We are grateful to our recently retired colleague and friend Mr. George Gause for his support of the Program and on-going research endeavors. Roseann Bacha-Garza has served as our graduate assistant for two years. She has been the glue and memory of the Program who has maintained on-going contact with our K-12 educators. The UTPA CHAPS Program team wishes to acknowledge the support of the following educators who, over the past two years, freely gave of their time and opened their classrooms to the discovery of our Rio Grande Valley home. They include Sr. Kathleen Murray, D.C., Principal St. Joseph Catholic School, Edinburg; and

Donna ISD: Emily Anderson – participating administrator – Director of Elementary Science Donna ISD; Pablo Rojas – participating high school teacher; Rachel Quiroga - participating science teacher (grade 3-5); Reymundo (Rey) Quiroga – participating middle school teacher; La Joya ISD: Dagoberto Ramirez – participating administrator – Social Studies Coordinator La Joya ISD; Juan De La Garza – participating teacher (grades 3-5); Horacio Gomez – participating high school teacher; Vianey Moreno – participating teacher (grades K-2); Hidalgo ISD: Sandra Garza-Cavazos – participating administrator – Director of Assessment and Program Evaluation Hidalgo ISD; Beatriz Soliz – participating high school teacher; Amy Juan – participating middle school teacher (retired); Mabel Pietrzak – participating Kindergarten teacher (retired); Dora Proa – participating teacher (grades 3-5); Edinburg ISD: Irma Villarreal – participating administrator – Social Studies Specialist Edinburg ISD; Amado Balderas – participating high school teacher; Valerie Ramirez – participating community liaison for Edinburg ISD (retired teacher); Pharr-San Juan-Alamo ISD: Lisa Margot Rubio – participating teacher – high school

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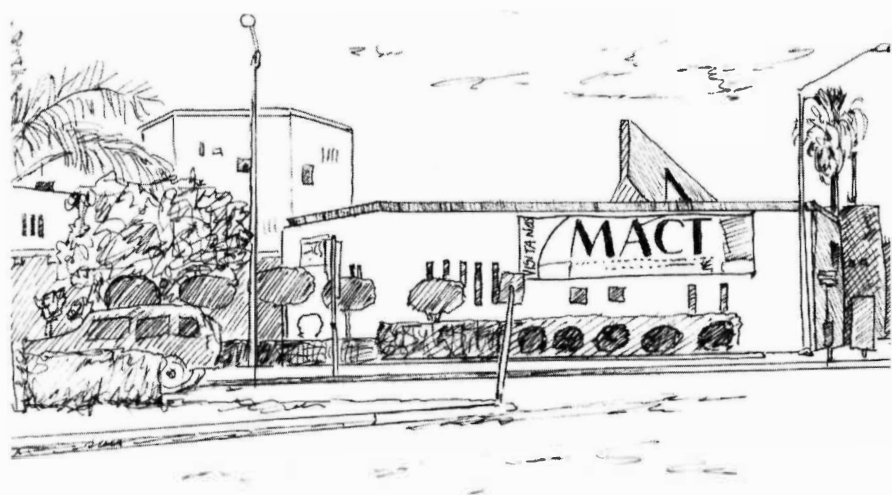
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# ETHNIC HISTORY







# French Immigration in the Lower Rio Grande Valley

by

Olivier Schouteden

A study of the immigration pattern of the French population in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Lower Rio Grande Valley compels in the first place a definition of its actors or subjects. This attempt summons the notion of “Frenchness” which bears the idea of both French nationality and a feeling and willingness to be French. In other words, “Frenchness” amalgamates the concepts of ethnicity, nationality, identity and culture, and because these political situations and individual or communitarian feelings sometimes overlap, but sometimes not, the concept of “Frenchness” is very fluid and hard to grasp. The idea of fluidity of identity is particularly important and emphasized concerning the Lower Rio Grande Valley French settlers because the ideal profile of a French population, born in France, feeling French and displaying distinctive French cultural features appears almost as a mirage in a distant American borderland. Moreover, the way each 19<sup>th</sup> century French settler related to his identity was also shaped by his particular socio-economic level and cultural background, adding even more fluidity to the notion of “Frenchness.” Gerhard Grytz, writing about the German immigration in the Lower Rio Grande Valley, mentions, on a similar note, that “a major problem in studying German immigration is how to define German. Being of German origin is a vague and imprecise concept. German immigrants were an extraordinarily heterogeneous group—they were people from a variety of provinces with linguistic, religious, political, and socio-economic distinctions.” “Moreover,” Grytz adds, “Germany as a nation state did not come into existence until 1871.”<sup>1</sup> At least, this was not the case for France, whose national unity was never an issue in the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

In an article on French immigration to Texas, François Lagarde mentions the difficulties that arise from the categories drawn by the U.S. Census Bureau, which, on the one hand, do not cover the potentiality of what being French means, but on the other hand, are the only reliable sources concerning immigration in the state of Texas for the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>2</sup> Census categories, not recognizing the different realities embraced by the concept of “Frenchness,” establish three groups which actually overlap: the French-born immigrants; the French stock — French-born, second and even third generation U.S. born —; and the francophones, that is the French and French Creole speakers. Thus, the most logical relationship, the one linking French-birth and “Frenchness,” is not always obvious. For example, the Alsatians, people born in Eastern France, possessed profound relations with their German neighbors. Does nationality equal culture, or more precisely did Alsatians, an immigrant population that came in large numbers to Texas, notably in Castroville, consider themselves French?<sup>3</sup> Historians disagree on this matter. Indeed, in his study of the German population in the Rio Grande Valley, Gerhard Grytz wrestles with the disjuncture between ethnicity and nationality and explains that the problem with the U.S. census stems from the fact that it “excludes some individuals who were ethnically German but were born outside those borders, such as Austria-Hungary, and includes some who considered themselves being of a different ethnicity but were born within Germany, such as the French of Alsace-Lorraine.”<sup>4</sup> Grytz defines Alsatians, whose ethnicity is not German and whose inclusion in the German population is therefore not justified, as “French of Alsace-Lorraine.” This idea is interestingly echoed in the June 5<sup>th</sup>, 1894 edition of *The Brownsville Herald*, which mentions the willingness of the German government to suppress the French language in Alsace and the resistance of the Alsatian population against this move.<sup>5</sup> Historian Milo Kearney diverges from Grytz’s view, replacing the idea of exclusion with double inclusion: “The Alsatians,” according to Kearney, “are so bilingual in their heritage as to be able to identify themselves as either French or Germans.”<sup>6</sup> Finally, like Grytz, Lagarde seems more one-way

oriented on that point, but as opposed to the former, he defines Alsatians as essentially German, claiming that “Alsatians are more German by language if not by culture and, after 1871, by annexation.”<sup>7</sup> The “Alsatian case” — people whose nationality was French until 1870, German until 1918, and then French again — is a good representation of the fact that identity goes beyond diplomatic relations, and that nationality is not always a relevant referent to assess people’s identity. Concerning Alsatians, Lagarde also states that “census takers seem to have always registered *Alsatiens* as *Germans*.”<sup>8</sup> This is true for the U.S. Federal censuses, but not for the Texas Population Schedules which, from 1870 onward, list them as *Alsatiens*. Besides, considering Alsatians as primarily Alsatians, before any other nationality, is probably the best and most respectful choice. This doesn’t mean Alsatians should not be taken into account in this study, only that their inclusion will be done on a case by case approach, and especially when it comes to Alsatians’ relations with French-born or French stock.

Another difficulty occurs concerning the immigration of French Canadians and Louisianans to 19<sup>th</sup> century Texas. These settlers were not French-born people, but, as French-speakers or French Creole speakers who could be quite easily understood by any French native, they shared some cultural roots with French-born immigrants. The immigration of Cajuns was already important in Texas in the 1820s, when the region was still part of Mexico, due in part to the common willingness of fleeing Anglo-American domination triggered by the inclusion of Louisiana in the United States in 1803.<sup>9</sup> However, the denomination “Cajun” is absent from the Federal censuses and the Texas Population Schedules, and Canadians are only defined as “Quebecois” in the Population Schedules starting from 1880.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the main difficulty for the 19<sup>th</sup> century is to discern who among these settlers shared some French cultural features or was of French descent, and who was not. Up to 1880, when these settlers appear exclusively on registers, the only possible method to reveal their culture is to study their last names. The approximation and deceiving character of

this approach appears in the example of a man born in Louisiana and referred to as J.L Hector in the register of internments of the City of Brownsville.<sup>11</sup> His last name, well spread in France, can lead to some suppositions about his French origins, but this expectation is refuted by the Population Schedules which shows that, despite his name and place of birth, John Hector was a black laborer whose parents were born in the U.S. The possibility of any French cultural background is therefore very low.<sup>12</sup> The case of John Hector, a free black man who was successful in making a living in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Lower Rio Grande Valley, is very interesting for the social history of the southern United States in the post Civil War period. It also exemplifies the difficulties which arise in the present study.

Moreover, recent studies on creolization, defined as a complex process of cultural transformation, prevent any amalgam between French culture and French Creole culture.<sup>13</sup> So as to avoid such an unfortunate confusion, this study only includes systematically French Louisianans and French Canadians in two particular cases: first, when Louisianans and Canadians were second generation French people, a familial situation which can be revealed through censuses from 1880 onward. While this method reduces the risks, it unavoidably excludes some Cajuns or people of French culture from this study. The second case refers to a situation in which French-born or second generation French people and settlers from Louisiana and Canada are mixed in the same household or family. Immigrants coming from regions bordering French territory, mainly the Swiss and Belgians, must also be studied in detail in the two cases mentioned above. Indeed, Switzerland was divided between three cultural areas in the 19<sup>th</sup> century: Italian, German and French. Similarly, Belgians born in Wallonia were francophones. However, it is very hard to know when Belgians or Swiss were related to French culture or identity. A last name of French consonance, like the ones the Swiss Fritz Montondon<sup>14</sup> or the Belgian Julian Reye<sup>15</sup> bear, is not reliable enough to be considered a mirror of a settler's French culture. In his study, Grytz

seems to deny the Swiss any link with French culture or identity by mixing them with Austrians in a table representing the ethnicity of the foreigners in the Valley<sup>16</sup> Such an amalgam is equally contestable. Thus, out of practicality and respect of nationalities and identities, this study focuses on population born in France. It includes Alsatians, but always refers to them as such. People from Quebec, Belgium, Switzerland and Louisiana are only included in the two cases mentioned earlier.

Finally, the problem of second-generation French immigrants—namely the sons or daughters of French parents, or simply of a French father or mother, who were born in the Lower Rio Grande Valley or in Mexico—needs to be tackled. First, the lack of data on the settlers' origin creates difficulties. Indeed, when they were living by themselves, settlers were only clearly indicated as second generation as late as 1880, when the U.S. censuses started revealing the nationality of the father and mother of each settler. This problem is not a huge handicap in this study, because French immigration started in the Lower Rio Grande Valley in the 1830s-1840s, and therefore second-generation settlers old enough to live alone were not numerous before the 1870s-1880s. The biggest difficulties when tackling the second (and third) generation of French settlers are again related to culture and identities. We can indeed wonder if these settlers kept some links with French culture, or if their country of birth turned them into Rio Grande Valley inhabitants devoid of any features pertaining to the idea of "Frenchness." The vagueness of the concept of "Frenchness" highlighted earlier is thus complicated by questioning of its resistance and permeability to foreign influences. Thus, the idea of fluid identities is an important element to consider concerning French immigration and settlement in the Lower Rio Grande Valley.

### **Patterns of French Immigration to the Lower Rio Grande Valley**

French-born came to the area as early as in the 1820s-1830s, especially in Matamoros. From 1850 to 1900, the number of French-

born settlers who emigrated to the left bank of the Lower Rio Grande Valley ranged from 35 to 126 (see table 2). During this period, they never represented more than 0.72% of the total Lower Rio Grande Valley population. However, French people were proportionally more numerous in the Valley than in the United States or in Texas in general, even after 1880, which is not the case for Irish and Germans who settled in the area. French people who came to the Valley did so individually, usually for a short period, and settled mainly in Brownsville. From 1870 to 1900, except for Starr County, the number of French-born settled in the Lower Rio Grande Valley progressively decreased, but many second-generation French people stayed in the area and outnumbered the number of French-born by 1880.

Before 1850, it is hard to know with certainty the number and proportion of French immigrants to Texas. Indeed, the first comprehensive statistical data of the population was gathered in the first Texas census in 1850, five years after the annexation of the state to the Union. Grytz says that, despite the lack of sources, "it is evident that several Germans had settled in the area during the 1830s and 1840s."<sup>17</sup> A similar statement can be made concerning the French presence. Kearney even suggests that the initial influx of people of French culture in the area can be documented in the 1820s<sup>18</sup> This early immigration is indeed confirmed by some fragmentary sources which can be found in the Matamoros archives. This city was then the biggest settlement of the Rio Grande region and was part of the state of Coahuila and Texas. French immigrants are included in reports of passenger arrivals, which list the number of passengers and their nationality, and the (incomplete) lists of applications for "Cartas de Seguridad" (letters of security) which were required for any foreigners who wanted to engage in commerce in the area.<sup>19</sup>

According to these two documents, French-born population was among the most numerically important foreign elements of Matamoros. Referring to the reports of passenger arrivals, from December 4, 1830, to April 8, 1831, 13 vessels arrived in

Matamoros, bringing 67 passengers, of which four were French. If Spaniards were at that time the most numerous European passengers, they fell far behind French population in the passenger arrivals from September 19, 1831, to June 20, 1832. At this period, out of the 85 passengers listed, eight were Frenchmen, far behind Americans but in third position after the nine Irish passengers. This data is representative of the progressive increase of the French migration in the area which reached a peak in the late 1830s. Indeed, from December 11, 1837, to April 28, 1838, eight vessels brought a total of 35 passengers of which eight were French. Among the European-born who reached Matamoros at that time, the French were the more important numerically, whether it was to settle there or simply to travel, a point which cannot be determined with certainty.<sup>20</sup> The number of Frenchmen in Matamoros is still important in the 1850s. This can be analyzed through a study of the requests for "Carta de Seguridad," letters which permitted the recipient to conduct business without too much restriction in exchange for a fee.<sup>21</sup> In 1851, out of the 94 applications for the acquisition of a "Carta de Seguridad," 39 were made by Frenchmen, i.e. 41% of all the requests.<sup>22</sup>

The nature of the French presence in Matamoros cannot be determined through these documents. It is possible that some, if not most of the French-born, could have been simply passing visitors with commercial purposes. Moreover, whatever their strong proportion among other foreigners, the French constituted a numerical minority of the people in the region. Indeed, as Leroy P. Graf says: "Foreigners constituted only a small percentage of the entire population, the bulk of the people being Mexicans — a few of them Creoles, but most of them *mestizos* or Indians."<sup>23</sup> Eventually, in the early 1850s, the French presence in the Valley, still proportionally important in Matamoros, was not concentrated in the Mexican city any more. The integration of Texas in the U.S. led to the creation or development of settlements north of the Rio Grande where French people or settlers of French culture immigrated. As opposed to the French immigration in Northern Mexico, this

flow of French immigrants who settled on American soil can be accurately measured. Thus, Gerhard Grytz's statement that "no conclusive statistical data can be gathered for German immigrants in Texas, and for this matter the Lower Rio Grande region, before 1850" is also true for the French immigrants.<sup>24</sup>

The integration of Texas in the United States in 1845 led to the first real compilation of names, sex, handicaps, occupations and educational framings of the people settled in the region. This was made under the form of the 1850 U.S. Federal Census which for the first time included Texas. Subsequent Texas censuses, carried out at the beginning of every new decade, are useful tools to assess the French presence in the state in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, the information contained in these primary sources raises many problems. In the 1850 U.S. Federal Census, French origin is attributed to settlers bearing "French surnames," a vague and unreliable criterion.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, at the county level, the 1850 and 1860 U.S. Federal censuses only give the number of people listed and the number of foreigners, but not their country of birth. However, this problem can be overcome through the U.S. Censuses' Population Schedules. These primary sources are "the manuscript schedules of the census, the original form on which the enumerators recorded the census information."<sup>26</sup> These sources give detailed information on each settler recorded in a given area, and as such are more accurate and reliable than the U.S. Federal Censuses. The 1890 Lower Rio Grande Valley Population Schedules are, however, lacking. In fact, the 1890 U.S. Population Schedules were entirely destroyed in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: in 1921, an accidental fire burnt down 25% of the 1890 schedules, and in 1933, the remaining 75% were declared useless for historical research and subsequently destroyed.<sup>27</sup>

The U.S. Federal Censuses confirm the general statement that the French, as opposed to other Europeans, have never emigrated in mass to the United States.<sup>28</sup> From 1821 to 1870, the number of French-born settlers increased, creating "a small but constant flow of immigration" (see table 1).<sup>29</sup> One of the main particularities of



the French immigration in the United States is its precocity. From 1821 to 1830, French-born population in the United States reached 8,407 elements and ranked third for European immigrants, after Irish and English but before the German population, an impressive position which did not last long. During the following decade, French immigration increased by more than five times, reaching a total of 45,575 French immigrants landing on the U.S. shores from 1831 to 1840. In 1851, 20,120 French people immigrated to the United States, seemingly the biggest annual figure for the 19<sup>th</sup> century French immigration.<sup>30</sup> French population reached a peak for the century in 1870 and started decreasing in absolute numbers thereafter. The decrease of the French representation among other foreigners and the U.S. population as a whole had, however, already started during the 1860s (see table 3).

When the immigration of French-born population in the United States is compared with the immigration of the French-born population in Texas, some similarities appear (see table 2). Indeed, as François Lagarde states, "French immigration in Texas has always been very small."<sup>31</sup> The fact that the French population in Texas ranges from 0.07 to 0.3% of the state population for the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century makes it easily comparable to the French population in the United States at the same period, which ranged from 0.14 to 0.35%. The slight difference between the United States and the Texas French-born immigration can be explained by the absence of large urban areas in Texas in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, these latter being magnets for French people bound for the United States during that period. Indeed, the U.S. Federal Censuses mention that in 1880, 38.29% of the French immigrants were concentrated in the U.S. largest cities. The biggest French community on American soil was to be found in New York. This was not an idiosyncratic situation; 38.78% of German-born also settled in the largest cities, and Irish and Spanish people, with respectively 45.26% and 52.49%, formed an even more urban type of immigrants.<sup>32</sup> Thus, French immigration in Texas seems

to make no particular exception to the big picture, but the details reveal some interesting facts.

First, French immigrants were more durably attracted by Texas than by the United States as a whole. Absolute numbers stress a steady French-born immigration up to 1890 for Texas, and only 1870 for the United States. On a similar note, the proportion of French-born reached its peak in 1870 for Texas, but in 1860 for the United States. Second, the fact that the proportion of French-born was only more important in Texas than in the United States in 1850 proves that French immigration followed very quickly the expansion of the U.S. territory. Third, the proportion of French-born among other foreigners was higher in Texas than in the United States. This might be due in part to the fact that French settlers, more than any other Europeans, attempted to organize colonies on Texas soil. This gave birth to Champ d'Asile, founded in 1818,<sup>33</sup> Castroville in 1844,<sup>34</sup> Icarie in 1848,<sup>35</sup> and La Réunion in 1855.<sup>36</sup> Except for Castroville, these settlements were short-lived, and few of the settlers remained in Texas after the failure of each endeavor. However, they attracted settlers, most of whom were French and/or Alsatians, who had a significant impact on the global foreign immigration in the state. Among these immigrants are the 1,800 Alsatians who followed Henry Castro to Texas between 1843 and 1869<sup>37</sup> and the 150 French, Swiss and Belgian who joined La Réunion in the winter of 1855.<sup>38</sup> The Frenchmen and women who settled in these places constituted a very particular type of immigrants, they were all indoctrinated by capitalist, socialist or Catholic ideology," and had therefore an unusual faith in their immigration.<sup>39</sup>

As opposed to these organized settlements, the French immigration in the Lower Rio Grande Valley was based on "an individual enterprise," the usual pattern for the French immigration all over the United States.<sup>40</sup> Despite this fact, an exceptional proportion of French settled there during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (see table 2). Indeed, the proportion of French people in the Valley was globally double that of the French-born in Texas from 1850

to 1900 (see table 2). The pattern of French-born immigration in the Lower Rio Grande Valley seems at first glance more similar to the Texan one than to the U.S. one. Indeed, French immigration in the Valley reached a peak both in absolute and relative numbers in 1870 with 126 settlers, not in 1860. Soon after the annexation of Texas to the United States, 647 French-born were already settled in the state, a good proportion of which could be found living in the Lower Rio Grande Valley. Indeed, with 61 French-born in 1850, the Lower Rio Grande Valley, a frontier region devoid of any consistent urban centers in the mid-nineteenth century, accounted for 9.32% of the whole French-born population in Texas.

The unusual proportion of French immigrants in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Lower Rio Grande Valley appears even more vivid when compared to other foreigners whose presence in this area was noticeable. However, this conclusion does not appear at first glance. Indeed, French people were proportionally less numerous among foreigners in the Valley than in Texas or in the United States as a whole (see table 3). This misperception arises from the fact that Mexican people, who constituted the overwhelming majority of the Valley population throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, were considered foreigners in the censuses, even if most of them were already settled in the area when the territory was under Mexican sovereignty.<sup>41</sup> The shifting boundaries blur the perspectives. Indeed, 80% of the population was Mexican at the frontier and as late as in 1870, more than 61% of the Lower Rio Grande Valley population was still Mexican-born, an impressive figure considering that most of the remaining settlers were second or third-generation Mexicans (see table 4).<sup>42</sup> The predominance of the Mexican population in both figures and historiography has overshadowed the French idiosyncratic situation in the area. Thus, the scale of comparisons needs to be changed to really assess the phenomenon. To do so, this study focuses on the one hand on the proportion of each foreign country's immigrants among the Texas population as a whole, and, on the other hand, on the proportion of the same foreign country's immigrants among the Lower Rio Grande Valley population

(see table 4). This method illuminates important features. First, Germans and Irish from 1880 onwards were much less important in the Valley than in Texas as a whole. French people, on the contrary, were always more numerous proportionally in the region than in Texas or in the United States. Actually, the French are the only foreign population along with the Spanish (and obviously the Mexicans) to be proportionally more important in the Lower Rio Grande Valley than in the state up to 1900. Moreover, the general decrease in European population which can be assessed for 1880 was smaller for the French population, and this phenomenon kept extending up to 1900. Thus, from 9.78% of the non-Mexican population of the Valley in 1880, the French-born population reached 14.55% in 1890 and 17.07% in 1900 (see table 3). In 1900, the proportion of French born was almost the same as Germans and even surpassed the Irish, a remarkable phenomenon considering that Germany and Ireland are immigration countries, but not France.

Until the last two decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, French-born who settled in the Lower Rio Grande Valley concentrated in Cameron County, and more especially in Brownsville where their presence was remarkable. Population Schedules can be used independently to assess the repartition of the French immigrants in the Lower Rio Grande Valley. Indeed, these sources list the French-born population for each precinct and notable settlements. An analysis of these elements shows the high concentration of French-born in Cameron County among the total of French population in the Rio Grande Valley from 1860 to 1880 (see table 5). Furthermore, 81 to 88% of the French Cameron County settlers were living in Brownsville from 1860 to 1900, confirming the urban character of French-born immigration. Starr County saw the settlement of almost all the other French settlers of the Rio Grande Valley, due in part to the existence of Rio Grande City where half of the French population of the county was living between 1860 and 1880. Hidalgo, a rural area, was almost completely avoided by French-born for all the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, studying the French immigration in the Lower Rio Grande Valley is almost equivalent

to studying the French implantation in Brownsville, Rio Grande City, and to a lesser extent Roma (for 1860), and the military settlements of Fort Brown and Fort Ringgold. The unusual proportion of French settlers in the two biggest towns of the area had a strong influence on the general atmosphere of these settlements. Indeed, according to Jovita Gonzales, if Roma remained essentially a Mexican settlement,<sup>43</sup> the Americans and foreigners who came to Rio Grande City as early as in the 1850s turned it into "a cosmopolitan little town."<sup>44</sup> Similarly, Brownsville shared this multicultural flavor that Milo Kearney associates with the French presence, when he states that, in addition to English, Spanish, and German, the sound of French was commonly heard in the city.<sup>45</sup> In the two last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the statistics concerning the repartition of the French population in the Rio Grande region highlight a turn in French choice for settlement. Indeed, although in 1880 the French population was still primarily settled in Cameron County, things had changed in 1900 in favor of Starr County. Considering the urban character of the French immigration, this remarkable turn is doubtlessly a reflection of either the loss of opportunities offered by Brownsville or of the new attraction of Rio Grande City where French-born were by then as numerous as in the biggest settlement of the left bank of the Lower Rio Grande Valley.

Generally, French people immigrated to the Lower Rio Grande Valley for a short length of time. Providing settler's names, the Population Schedules show that the evolution of French immigration was mainly based on a constant renewing of settlers, not on a strong base of French people that was expanded by newcomers up to 1870, and then progressively reduced. Population Schedules, especially regarding names, are not devoid of any flaws. In addition to inconsistencies in the spelling of names, which for example turns Egley to Egly or Mallet to Malley from one census to another, it is sometimes very hard to decipher the handwriting of those who contributed to the production of these documents. To that extent, the data concerning the length of residence for each

immigrant are just estimations. Furthermore, the French population could have left the left bank of the Rio Grande to settle on the right one and were, therefore, still living in the area but not captured by the U.S. censuses.

Thus, out of the 61 French-born who were living in the Valley in 1850, only nine—that is, 14.8%—were still settled in the area in 1860, and two—3.3%—in 1870, including one, John Decker, a baker who was still living in Rio Grande City in 1880. Decker, Victor Egly and Father Vignolles were the only Frenchmen to stay 30 years on the left bank of the Rio Grande.<sup>46</sup> The only French settlers who were listed four times in the Population Schedules are Sister Stanislava and Sister St Pierre. However, the case of French nuns and priests has to be handled with care. Indeed, their coming into the area did not stem from a choice but from a superior assignment. In other words, they were sent to the Valley in the name of god to fulfill an evangelizing mission. To this extent, their inclusion in the big picture is inflating the average length of residence of the French population in the area and is somewhat misleading. Despite this fact, the proportion of French people who stayed in the area remains low; only 17.5% of the French-born who were settled in the Valley in 1860 were still here in 1870, and only 19% of the French-born present in the area in 1870 had not left for another place in 1880. Thus, the French population of the lower Rio Grande Valley for most of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century was almost entirely renewed every ten years. That most of the French people settled for a short period of time in the Rio Grande Valley should not seem surprising. François Lagarde implies that this phenomenon was common in Texas, suggesting that although the permanent French settlers are those who usually attract the gaze of the historian, the “others [who] moved on or returned to France” should not be forgotten.<sup>47</sup> A comparison with the German immigration in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Lower Rio Grande Valley proves that a short period of residence is not specific to French-born. In the words of Grytz, “very few Germans resided in the Valley for a longer period of time and a considerable impermanence in this population is

observable. The majority of nineteenth-century Germans left the Valley again after a very short period of residence."<sup>48</sup> Due mainly to the decrease of the French immigration in the Rio Grande region in the two last decades of the century, the proportion of settlers who remained in the area is inflated. Indeed, out of the 80 French-born present on the left bank of the Rio Grande Valley in 1880, nine were still here in 1900, representing only 11.25% of the total of French people settled in the area in 1880, but composing 25% of the French population 20 years later.

The lack of newcomers and the decrease of the French population after 1870 can be both tempered and illustrated through an analysis of the second-generation French people living in the Rio Grande Valley in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Indeed, when the French immigration slowed down in the area, many Rio Grande natives of French mother and/or father were old enough to found a family, prolonging the influence their parents had in the area and giving a long-lasting impact to the French immigration process in the Valley. This second generation can be measured with accuracy only from 1880 with the addition of the place of birth of the father and mother of each person listed in the Population Schedules. From 1880 onwards, these sources reveal the extensions of the French settlers' families via their sons and daughters. In 1880, 62 French-born and 95 second-generation French were settled in Cameron County, and 18 French-born and 24 second-generation French people were living in Starr County (see table 1). In the next twenty years, many second-generation French people previously settled in Cameron County left the area, and their numbers were reduced to 44 settlers in 1900. This, however, is almost three times the number of French-born in the area, showing that second-generation French people were more inclined to stay in the Valley than French natives. In 1900, the second-generation French settlers were also of a different type than in 1880, at least for Cameron County. Indeed, in this county in 1880, 75.9% of them were living with their parents for only 36.4% in 1900. Moreover, Cameron County in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century

saw an accretion in the number of third-generation French people. They probably became at this time more numerous than the second generation, but this hypothesis cannot be confirmed with the primary sources available.<sup>49</sup> Starr County did not experience the same phenomenon, mainly because an important wave of new French immigrants came there between 1880 and 1900.<sup>50</sup> Thus, French people of the second generation living at their parents' house still numbered 68.7% in 1900 in Starr County; moreover, these same settlers numbered only 16, that is less than the number of French-born settled there at this time (see table 5). Studied in relationship with the number of French-born, the number of second-generation French people shows on the one hand the dynamism of the French immigration in Starr County at the turn of the century. On the other hand, the progressive outnumbering of the French-born by the second generation, and of the second generation by the third in Cameron County is an indicator of the scaling down of French immigration there and in Brownsville specifically.

The rise of the second-generation French people and the decline of the French-born in Cameron County since 1870, like the new attraction, even if relative, of Starr County in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century deserve to be questioned. Before that, explanations needs to be found for the precocity of the French immigration in the Lower Rio Grande Valley and its unusual proportions for Texas and the U.S., two facts that combined to create an idiosyncratic situation. More generally, the different waves of French immigration in the area since the 1820s have to be examined. In other words, the causes—internal and external, local and international—which can illuminate the patterns of immigration of the French population in the Rio Grande Region need to be discussed. Thus, the next section examines the reasons why French emigrated to the Valley, or left it, throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century.



## Coming to the Valley and Leaving it: Causes of Attraction and Factors of Repulsion.

French immigration in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Rio Grande Valley followed principally the economic opportunities of the area. Thus, French immigrants concentrated in the commercial centers of the Valley. From 1820 to 1848, French-born came essentially to Matamoros, benefiting from favorable immigration laws enacted by the Mexican government. From 1848 to 1900, French settlers were mostly concentrated in Matamoros and Brownsville—many of them leaving regularly one city for the other according to the economic health and security guarantees of each area—and to a lesser extent in Rio Grande City. Moreover, these urban centers offered a cosmopolitan atmosphere French people generally looked for in their new settlement, but were not safe havens. Violence and insecurity were indeed part of the frontier life, but the adventurous French people who settled in the Valley were willing to take the risk. However, the lure of a better life, promised by the creation of Brownsville in 1848 but especially by the development of commercial activities during the Civil War, did not last until the end of the century. After 1870, the economic decline of the area caused the decrease in number of French immigrants, especially in Cameron County.

The French presence in the Valley was noticeable as early as in the 1830s. In part, this was caused by the benevolent attitude of the Government of Mexico toward immigrants. Indeed, the article 1 of the Colonization Laws of the state of Coahuila and Texas, passed on March 24, 1825, stipulated the willingness of the Mexican nation to “protect the liberty, property, and civil rights of all foreigners, who profess the Roman Catholic religion, the established religion of the empire.”<sup>51</sup> The requirement was particularly favorable for Catholic French settlers. Article 4 of the same law also provided generous offers of lands for foreign settlers who had the “liberty to designate any vacant land” like any other “native of the country.”<sup>52</sup> In addition, the French, along with other Europeans, did not suffer, as opposed to Anglo-Americans, from

the federal Law of April 6, 1830, which prohibited further immigration into Mexico from the United States.<sup>53</sup> Doubtlessly, the Matamoros area was directly concerned by the 1825 state Law, for, as Graf says, "the importance of increasing the relatively thin population of the Rio Grande Region was early recognized."<sup>54</sup> Moreover, these general laws were accompanied by some acts which encouraged settlers to immigrate to the Lower Rio Grande Valley. A good example is an act dated October 19, 1833, which offered to some landless inhabitants of the Valley the opportunity to buy "as much as five leagues from the state at \$10 a league" with no possible land alienation for twenty years.<sup>55</sup> The Lower Rio Grande Valley was not, however, a particular case, and these laws are not sufficient to explain the early attraction to French people to relocate into the region.

The colonization laws contemplated broader colonizing projects, however, as far as the French immigration in the Rio Grande region is concerned, such projects were never fulfilled. Under colonization laws, "foreigners were to be admitted to colonize if they would register as domiciled in the state and bring in one hundred families, or, if on the northern frontier, fifty families."<sup>56</sup> If, thanks to an 1833 act, it became quite easy for a foreigner to radicate himself and subsequently get the status of denizen required to participate in a colonization endeavor, this type of enterprise always resulted in failure in the Lower Rio Grande Valley.<sup>57</sup> This doesn't mean that attempts to establish Europeans, and even specifically French people in the area were not made. Indeed, so as to establish buffer colonies of foreigners in the Rio Grande Valley, the Independent Republic of Texas set up colonization projects with French and Belgian companies. A contract made with Alexandre Bourgeois and Armand Ducos envisioned the settlement of five hundred families along the Rio Grande, from its mouth to a point opposite Reynosa.<sup>58</sup> However, like other colonization projects in the area, it was never fulfilled. The latest organized colonizing effort involving French settlers occurred in October 1865, during the French Imperial venture in Mexico.<sup>59</sup> The Frenchman M.F.

Maury, as Imperial Commissioner of Colonization, procured a contract to establish French and Spanish immigrants from the Basque county in the area of the Laguna Madre, near Matamoros. This colonizing enterprise had a clear geopolitical goal, the establishment of a sheltered harbor which would decrease the settler's commercial dependence to the United States. The advantages of such a settlement were again numerous for the contractor, Numa Dousdebés, and the French settlers. Among other benefits, the colony was granted free three leagues by the government, and the settlers were exempted from military service for five years; the project was, however, never carried out.<sup>60</sup> Thus, French immigration in the Valley in the 19<sup>th</sup> century remained based on individual initiatives. This situation made them inclined to look for advantages provided by the colonization laws, but considering the random character of individual settlements and the unusual number of French people in the area, it seems logical to assume that their coming into the Valley was motivated by more obvious and specific reasons.

Milo Kearney suggests two specific factors explaining the proportionally large immigration of French people in the Lower Rio Grande Valley. Kearney states that "it was natural that the French would feel more at home" in the Lower Rio Grande Valley, because it was "a Spanish-speaking area."<sup>61</sup> The common Latin roots of the French and Spanish languages could have indeed facilitated the integration of French population in the local life, and, therefore, their willingness to settle there. This argument makes even more sense considering that the only other Europeans who were proportionally more numerous in the Valley than in Texas for all the 19<sup>th</sup> century were Spaniards (see table 4). Kearney then adds that French settlers or merchants must have been attracted there because they had good relations with the Hispanic population, due to some extent to the general diplomatic cooperation between the Spanish and the French Empire since the late 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>62</sup> However, when the first French settlers arrived in the Rio Grande region, that is to say in the 1820s-1830s, they had to deal with

the Mexican Republic and its population, not the Spanish Empire and its colonists. This amalgam makes Kearney's statement debatable to the extent that the benevolent attitude of a new and still very unstable government toward French settlers was far from being guaranteed. In the same vein, it is doubtful that Mexicans, who just gained their independence, would be inclined toward amicable relations with the French population who were trying to dominate, along with other foreigners, the commercial life of the area. An event most historians refer to today as the "Pastry War" supports this objection. This conflict between the French and the Mexican government was indeed triggered by the sack of a French pastry cook's store by Mexican officers during the military insurrection of 1828. The French who had lost property during this conflict asked the Mexican government for reimbursements, but their demands were never met. Strained relations degenerated into conflict between Mexico and France in 1838.<sup>63</sup> In November 1838, in retaliation against Mexico, the French government sent Rear Admiral Charles Baudin to capture the port of Vera Cruz. Eugène Maissin, Baudin's auxiliary during the Vera Cruz siege, wrote about the Pastry War, attributing its causes to the willingness of the Mexican government to get in conflict with a foreign country so as to unite the Mexican nation against a common enemy. Moreover, the French officer mentions that this diplomatic crisis was fueled by the Spanish Clerical Party of Mexico because it forced France to intervene and therefore created the possibility of having a Bourbon faithful to the Catholic cause on the Mexican throne.<sup>64</sup> If these factors are not to be blindly accepted as true causes, it reveals the vision French officials, along, probably, with the rest of the French population, had of Mexico at the time, in other words an unstable, unreliable nation.

The instability of the Mexican government and the lack of guarantee of an easy integration were not the only problems French immigrants had to face in the Lower Rio Grande Valley. Indeed, during most of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a series of local revolts and rebellions plunged the area into a quasi-permanent state of violence.

General Antonio Canales' revolt of 1840, leading to the short-lived republic of the Rio Grande, and José Mariá Carbajal's rebellion of 1851, aimed at the openness of trade between Mexico and its northern neighbor, were local uprisings with unfortunate material consequences for the area's inhabitants.<sup>65</sup> With the raids led by Juan N. Cortina between 1859 and 1873, insecurity in the Valley reached a peak, even if threats focused on Anglo-American properties and lives and foreigners were not directly concerned. Jovita Gonzales argues that only with the Porfirio Díaz presidency in Mexico, that is to say in the 1870s, were international raids brought to a close in the frontier region;<sup>66</sup> nevertheless, Gonzales continues, "the period from 1865 to 1910 is [still] characterized on the border as an age of bandit raids and cattle thief raids."<sup>67</sup> Graf notes that "these robbers were usually army deserters who roamed the country in gangs of ten to one hundred men attacking all parties which seemed to provide profitable plunder."<sup>68</sup> Since French settlers were concentrated in large proportion in the cities, few would suffer from cattle rustling. However, violence was not confined to the countryside or highways. Town streets were often the theaters of assassination.<sup>69</sup> The register of internments in the Brownsville City Cemetery shows that the use of private violence, commonplace in 19<sup>th</sup> century American western states, did not spare French settlers. For example, Vidal Lohoilla, a French barber, was gunned down on March, 23, 1874, at age 48.<sup>70</sup>

If French immigrants were aware of these risks before settling in the area, a situation that seems conceivable considering the importance of such a migration, it is hard to imagine that they could have been devoid of any sense of adventure or, for some of them, of any experience of the life in a distant and wild area. This statement can hardly be submitted to a global analysis; however, some examples of French settlers who, before coming to the Valley, had experienced a settlement in distant, if not wild areas, can be found in the U.S. censuses. Their background confirms that some French settlers of the Valley sought adventure on the frontier. A good example is the Laroche family who were living in Cameron

County in 1880.<sup>71</sup> The head of the family, 67-year-old French-born Constant Laroche, was a sailor established in the Commissioner Precinct n° 1 of Cameron County, that is outside of Brownsville city, with his German wife Elisabeth, 65-years-old, his two sons, his daughter-in-law, and his two grandsons. His first son Armand, 37 years old, was born in New York and his second son, Constant, 24 years old, in Louisiana. These places of birth reveal the itinerary of the head of the family from the East Coast to the mouth of the Mississippi. Equally interesting is the situation of his two sons, for both were sailors, reproducing their father's adventuresome and cosmopolitan character. Indeed, Constant, the youngest, was married to Catherine, 22 years old, who was born in Louisiana of Spanish and Irish origins. This adventurous spirit was even transmitted to the grandsons who can be found in the 1900 Cameron Census.<sup>72</sup> Out of the two sons of Constant (junior) present in the family household in 1880, one named Constant settled down on his own in the same area as his grandfather with a Texan woman named Lizzi, of a Spanish father and a Louisianan mother, and established himself as fly pilot. He settled next to his father who had in the meanwhile two new sons with his wife Catherine: Frank, 9 years old, and William, 18 years old. William was born in Texas and was a sailor like his father and grandfather. Equally interesting, Joseph was born in Louisiana, a fact which testifies to the migrations of the family between the Rio Grande Valley and Louisiana.

If few French immigrants who settled in the Rio Grande area traveled as much as the Larochees or reproduced such a cosmopolitan familial pattern on several generations, this fascinating family's experience exemplifies the attractive potential of the area for French-born immigrants. The fact that Constant Laroche Senior had first settled in New York, then came to Louisiana and finally to the Lower Rio Grande Valley reveals an important element. Indeed, this migration underlines what the 1880 Federal Census shows concerning the concentration of French people in New York and New Orleans. In other words, French settlers were inclined to

settle in places where the French presence was quite remarkable and were primarily attracted to urban areas. Matamoros, founded in the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century<sup>73</sup> and reaching 7,000 inhabitants—10,000 with the surrounding country subject to its government—in 1829 was therefore a possible option of settlement for French immigrants as early as in the 1820s.<sup>74</sup>

French immigration to cities is also explained by the economic advantage provided by urban areas. As François Lagarde points out, it is legitimate to think that “immigration was always economic.”<sup>75</sup> The real reason for the boom of French immigration in the 1820s seems to be the economic opportunity offered by the openness of the Matamoros port, and subsequently of the whole area, to foreign commerce. Indeed, according to Graf, the advantages of direct trade this zone offered could be exploited as early as 1822, turning the mouth of the Rio Grande River into an economically attractive place: “The economic significance of Matamoros lies in the legal opening of the Rio Grande region to foreign waterborne traffic. This event changed the region from a grazing country on the periphery of Mexican economic life into a commercial artery of national importance.”<sup>76</sup> Of course, some Frenchmen had already ventured into this zone for commercial purposes prior to Mexican independence, but they had done so in the shadow of illegality. The most famous of them was the French pirate Jean Laffite, who established himself around Port Isabel or Laguna Vista in 1821.<sup>77</sup> However, the direct and legal trade changed everything, opening a large potential market for New Orleans, and thus for merchants of French culture based in the Louisianan area.<sup>78</sup> The connection between the Laroche’s family story and the whole picture of French immigration in the area appears again clearly. As mentioned above, New Orleans was the second biggest settlement for the French population who emigrated in the United States; it is also known that as late as 1803, 80% of the population of the formerly French colony could still speak French and thus shared some French cultural roots.<sup>79</sup> The link with New Orleans is an important factor, explaining in part why Frenchmen like Constant

Laroche Senior decided to establish themselves in the Lower Rio Grande Valley. As noted earlier on, it is hard to know when people coming from Louisiana had French cultural roots. It can just be assumed that a reasonable portion of the numerous Louisianans who settled in the Lower Rio Grande Region throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century—representing indeed the second largest group of settlers of American birth behind inhabitants of the East coast—were of French culture.<sup>80</sup>

The cosmopolitan flavor of the Laroche family reflects another factor that led French people to settle in the Lower Rio Grande Valley. Indeed, French immigrants were doubtlessly looking for a cultural mosaic in which they would feel welcome. Their concentration in the biggest settlements of the area contributed to the cosmopolitan tone of Matamoros, Brownsville, and to a lesser extent Rio Grande City, but was probably also motivated by the multicultural potential of these places. The mix between Anglo and Mexican culture might have been a guarantee of cultural openness. This could probably also explain why, out of the “many Louisiana Frenchmen [who] had moved to Texas in order to avoid living under Anglo domination after the 1803 purchase,” some came to the Lower Rio Grande region.<sup>81</sup> The censuses provide glimpse of the proportion of Frenchmen settled in the Lower Rio Grande who were previously based in Louisiana. Because previous residence can be assessed with certainty only through the place of birth of the children, single Frenchmen and women are excluded from the sample. Based on the Population Schedules for Cameron County in 1870, a year which represents a peak for French immigration in the area, it can be assessed that out of 17 French-born men settled with at least one of their children in the county, eight had at least one child born in Louisiana. In other words, at least 47.06% of the Frenchmen living with their child or children in Cameron County in 1870 had been living (or at least travelling) in Louisiana before.<sup>82</sup>

The example of the Laroche family, who emigrated to Cameron County sometime between 1871 and 1880, demonstrates the



displacement of the center of gravity of the French population from the right bank to the left bank of the Rio Grande after the Mexican-American War.<sup>83</sup> As early as 1850, two years after the end of the war and the creation of Brownsville in Cameron County, 61 Frenchmen lived on the U.S. side. This phenomenon, inextricably linked with the creation of Brownsville in 1848, resulted in at least two inter-related factors. The first one is the shifting of the economic potential from the Mexican to the U.S. side. Indeed, the commercial advantages provided by the Mexican-American War in Matamoros obviously waned when the war ended, therefore, "the American merchant houses closed down and the commercial advantage shifted to the left bank."<sup>84</sup> To benefit from similar economic advantages, French people followed the Anglo-Americans north of the river. This explains why Frenchmen were among the new Brownsville settlers who already numbered 3,000 in 1850.<sup>85</sup> Frenchmen had also, and this is the second important factor of their immigration to the southern state of Texas, the guarantee of a more secure life on the left bank of the Rio Grande. The previously mentioned Pastry War resulted in a short-lived decree of expulsion of all French nationals from Mexican soil on November 27, 1838, and greatly contributed to fueling the tensions between the French locals and the Mexican government.<sup>86</sup> Moreover, as Graf suggests, at this time "trade in Mexico ... was especially subject to unpredictable and harmful interference from the Mexican government."<sup>87</sup> Even if the American state of Texas did not provide as many advantages for French people as the Republic of Texas did, it is doubtless that they perceived the United States as safer than Mexico for both their personal and commercial safety.<sup>88</sup> Choices of settlement in the Valley were therefore guided by pragmatic reasons and influenced primarily by the economic health of the area, secondarily by the secure atmosphere it provided (all relative considering the conditions along the border).

As late as in 1870, at least four out of the 17 Frenchmen married and established with their children in the Brownsville area had been living in Mexico before.<sup>89</sup> However, in the meanwhile,

the northern bank of the Rio Grande had experienced a decrease in French immigrants in absolute numbers during the 1850s, and a considerable increase during the 1860s, (see table 2). The decrease of the 1850s seems, at first glance, hard to explain, especially because the number of German-born on the northern bank of the river increased from 100 in 1850 to 130 in 1860.<sup>90</sup> Indeed, the increase in German-born population proves that the usually short period of residence of French-born settlers in the Valley, which is indicated by the variety of French last names from one census to another, is not enough to explain this decrease, for the majority of 19<sup>th</sup> century Germans left the area rather quickly as well.<sup>91</sup> The general increase of the French population in both the United States and Texas between 1850 and 1860 implies that the loss of four French-born people in the Valley during this decade might have been due to a local event (see table 1 and 2). Cortina's raid on Brownsville on September 28, 1859, is the most important conflict of the period; however, Frenchmen were not directly touched by the conflict, or at least were less affected than Anglo-American settlers and no more than other European foreigners.<sup>92</sup> Thus, the best explanation seems to lie again in the economic situation of the area. Indeed, in 1858, a decree was signed by the governor of Tamaulipas authorizing the establishment of a free-trade zone in Matamoros.<sup>93</sup> Subsequently, "money and business opportunities shifted back to the right bank," and while Matamoros began a new period of expansion, its population growing from 12,000 in 1844 to 40,000 in the late 1850s, Brownsville's economy suffered a huge blow.<sup>94</sup> Among the Brownsville merchants who transferred their businesses to Matamoros, it is highly possible that some were French. The fact that German population, as opposed to the French, kept on growing in Brownsville in the same period might be explained by the deep attachment French had with Matamoros, where they had been living in numbers since the 1820s, and with the commercial activity on the border.

The 1870 peak of French population in the Lower Rio Grande Valley seems, however, hardly understandable in economic terms

at first glance. Indeed, in the five years following the end of the Civil War, the Matamoros free trade zone “continued to exert a negative influence” on the right bank and Brownsville whose population and commerce was steadily declining, and Matamoros, after the boom of the Civil war, was starting a phase of regression.<sup>95</sup> In these conditions, it is hard to conceive why French population rose by more than 121% between 1860 and 1870. A first explanation can be found in the failure of the French Imperialist endeavor in Mexico. Indeed, as François Lagarde notes, “a few French emigrated in from Mexico after Maximilian’s venture,”<sup>96</sup> and considering the proximity of Brownsville and Rio Grande City to Mexico, it is quite certain that some of them settled in the Valley in 1867.<sup>97</sup> French population was however not the only foreign population to reach a peak in the Rio Grande area in 1870 (see table 6). Considering the commercial revival on the northern side of the Rio Grande bank during the Civil War, it is highly probable that merchants of different nationalities settled in the Brownsville and Rio Grande areas to achieve commercial success within the Confederacy and stayed there after the end of the war.<sup>98</sup> Some explanations are also provided by the general increase of the number of French immigrants in Texas which rose by more than 61% between 1860 and 1870 (see table 2). In *Come to Texas: Attracting immigrants 1865-1915*, Barbara J. Rozeck explains the effort dedicated to solving the “state’s perceived labor problem” caused by the end of the Civil War through the attraction of new immigrants, mainly whites.<sup>99</sup> Subsequently, a Bureau of Immigration was created by state on May 23, 1871, to diffuse Texas advertisements principally in Europe and to try to reduce the costs of services for the newcomers, among whom some were French.<sup>100</sup>

However, the above effort, which was constant throughout the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, did not prevent the steady decrease of French-born people in the area and in Texas in general in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (see table 2).<sup>101</sup> For Lagarde, this decrease can be explained in part by the negative impact of the U.S. legislation which started imposing immigration quotas and ceilings dur-

ing Reconstruction.<sup>102</sup> However, the decrease of French settlers is much more important for the Lower Rio Grande Valley than for Texas, and explanations of the phenomenon have to be found again in the health of the local economy. Indeed, in the 1870s, the economy of the area lost its attractive potential due mainly to “the excessively expensive and inadequate transportation.”<sup>103</sup> In addition to the poor state of the transportation infrastructure, which was hampering progress, some attempts to connect the region with the national railroad network resulted in failures.<sup>104</sup> The Rio Grande Valley also suffered from the completion of a railroad connecting central Texas and Corpus Christi to Monterey via Laredo in 1882.<sup>105</sup> This fact might also explain why the few French-born settlers present in the area in 1900 were, for the first time, more numerous in Starr County than in Cameron County, the former area being closer to Laredo and therefore to new opportunities (see table 5). Recurring hurricanes and epidemic outbreaks, like the yellow fever which ravaged Brownsville in July and August 1882, also contributed to the lack of attraction of the Rio Grande Valley.<sup>106</sup> In *Boom and Bust: The Historical Cycles of Matamoros and Brownsville*, Milo Kearney and Anthony Knopp sum up the general situation of the area at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century: “The delta had grown accustomed to the isolated, backward and neglected role that the surrounding regions were quite ready to ascribe to it.”<sup>107</sup> In that case, it is not hard to guess why few French newcomers settled in the Lower Rio Grande Valley after 1880, and why so many left the area.

Thus, the economic situation of the Lower Rio Grande Valley seems to have influenced primarily French settlers and subsequently shaped each French immigration wave, much more than any question of common culture, identity and diplomatic situation. This situation implies that most of the French-born who settled in the area were engaged in some commercial activity, and similarly, that economic success was the primary goal. As Lagarde argues, “migrants came to Texas to work the land, to trade, to practice their professions, to make a fortune or just a good living.”<sup>108</sup> The

constant renewing of the French population, and the decrease in absolute numbers of the French-born in the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, might be explained simply by the fact that "there were, however, more middle-class, lower-middle-class, and poor French immigrants in Texas than there were French with fortunes."<sup>109</sup> Grytz corroborates this idea when he explains that the majority of Germans who chose the Lower Rio Grande as their destination of immigration failed and left the region again. They were, however, not alone in this fate. Most other Euro-American immigrants in the nineteenth century went through a similar process in the Lower Rio Grande Valley. What initially promised a bright future after the early settlement of the region in the aftermath of the Mexican-American War soon turned out to be a land of very limited opportunities for German residents and newcomers alike.<sup>110</sup>

The reasons why the French population remained, in proportion, more important in the Rio Grande Valley than in the rest of Texas suggests that their fate was slightly better than other foreigners'. This idea needs to be confirmed through a deeper and more global study of the French people's life in the area. Indeed, if there is a French idiosyncratic situation, it might be more properly observed through the analysis of the occupation, family life and choices of integration of the French people settled in the Valley. Thus far, the impact the French immigrants had on the area had been observed only from a quantitative perspective and needs to be complemented by a socio-economic and cultural approach. Similarly, the idea that pragmatic choices based on economic factors were the essential determinants of the French immigration remains a supposition which does not take into account the relationship among French identity, integration and assimilation. If most of the French settlers in Texas, as in the Lower Rio Grande Valley, "remain forever faceless,"<sup>111</sup> they are not nameless, and, therefore, especially through the Population Schedules, their integration in the local society, their choices of settlement and relationship to identity can be revealed.

**Table 1. French-Born in the United States, 1850-1900**

Year	U.S. population	Foreign population	French-born population	French-born percent of total
1850	23,191,876	2,244,602	54,069	0.23
1860	31,443,321	4,138,697	109,870	0.35
1870	38,558,371	5,567,229	116,402	0.30
1880	50,155,783	6,679,943	106,971	0.21
1890	61,908,906	9,249,547	113,174	0.18
1900	76,808,887	10,460,085	104,534	0.14

Sources: Data from Superintendent of the United States Census, *The Seventh Census of the United States: 1850* (Washington, D.C.: Robert Armstrong, 1853). Microfilm, table I, table XIII; Superintendent of Census, *Population of the United States in 1860. Compiled from the Original Returns of the Eighth Census* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1864). Microfilm, Recapitulation of the Tables of Population, Nativity, and Occupation; Superintendent of Census, *Ninth Census- Volume I: The Statistics of the Population of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1872). Microfilm, table I; Department of the Interior, Census Office, *Statistics of the Population of the United States at the Tenth Census 1880* (Washington, D.C.:

Government Printing Office, 1883), Microfilm, Statistics of Place of Birth; Department of the Interior, Census Office, *Report on Population of the United States at the Eleventh Census: 1890. Part I* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1895). Microfilm, table XX, table XXXII; United States Census Office, *Census Reports, Volume I. Twelfth Census of the United States, Taken in the Year 1900. Population, Part I* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1901). Microfilm, table I, table XXIII.

Notes: Almost each source commenting on the U.S. population in general gives a different result. It can be, for example, noted that the 1900 U.S. Federal Census gives 62,622,250 for the number of people in the U.S. in 1890; I kept here the result given by the 1890 U.S. federal census, Table 1.

Concerning the nativity of the population from 1850 to 1880, I used the Statistics of place of birth condensed in the 1880 U.S. federal census. For the nativity in 1890, I relied on the 1890 U.S. Federal Census, table 32; for nativity in 1900, on the 1900 U.S. Federal Census, table 33.

**Table 2. French-Born in Texas and Lower Rio Grande Valley (Cameron, Hidalgo and Starr Counties), 1850-1900**

Year	Texas population	French-born in Texas N° / %	Lower Rio Grande Valley population*	French-born in Lower Rio Grande Valley** N° / %
1850	212,592	647 / 0.30	8,541	61 / 0.71
1860	604,215	1,383 / 0.23	10,226	57 / 0.56
1870	818,579	2,232 / 0.27	17,540	126 / 0.72
1880	1,591,749	2,653 / 0.17	27,610	80 / 0.29
1890	2,235,523	2,730 / 0.12	31,707	64 / 0.20
1900	3,048,710	2,025 / 0.07	34,401	35 / 0.10

Sources: Data from Superintendent of the United States Census, *The Seventh Census of the United States: 1850* (Washington, D.C.: Robert Armstrong, 1853). Microfilm, table I, table XV; Superintendent of Census, *Population of the United States in 1860. Compiled from the Original Returns of the Eighth Census* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1864). Microfilm, Recapitulation of the Tables of Population, Nativity, and Occupation, table II, table V; Superintendent of Census, *Ninth Census- Volume I: The Statistics of the Population of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1872). Microfilm, table VI, table VII; Department of the Interior, Census Office, *Statistics of the Population of the United States at the Tenth Census 1880* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1883), Microfilm, table I, table II, table XIII; Department of the Interior, Census Office, *Report on Population of the United States at the Eleventh Census: 1890. Part I* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1895). Microfilm, Table I, table IV, table XXXII; United States Census Office, *Census Reports, Volume I. Twelfth Census of the United States, Taken in the Year 1900. Population, Part I* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1901). Microfilm, Table I, table IV, table XXXIII. Bureau of the Census, *Population Schedules of the Seventh Census of the United States, 1850: Texas*. Microfilm; Bureau of the Census, *Population Schedules of the Eighth Census of the United States, 1860: Texas*. Microfilm; Bureau of the Census, *Population Schedules of the Ninth Census of the United States, 1870: Texas*. Microfilm; Bureau of the Census, *Population Schedules of the Tenth Census of the United States, 1880: Texas*. Microfilm; Bureau of the Census, *Population Schedules of the Twelfth Census of the United States, 1900: Texas*. Microfilm.

\* Cameron, Hidalgo and Starr combined

Notes: For 1850 and 1860, it is possible to find the number of French-born in the Lower Rio Grande Valley only through a complete analysis of the Texas Population Schedule for Cameron, Starr and Hidalgo counties. The Federal censuses do not

give information about the accurate nativity of the population for each county. Even if from 1870 onwards, the federal censuses give the native country of the population for each U.S. county, I have chosen here to refer to the Population Schedules for more accuracy. Thus, the figures I give of the French population present in the Rio Grande Valley are based on my own research and can conflict with the results found in the federal censuses. More precisely, the 1870 Federal Census gives 99 French people for Cameron County instead of the 107 I found in an analysis of the Population Schedules. Thus, according to the federal census, the number of French people in 1870 would be 118. One explanation could be that the Federal Census does not take into account the eight French Catholic priests who were there in Cameron County in 1870. According to the federal censuses, there were 78 French people in the Lower Rio Grande Valley in 1880 and 37 in 1900. For the 1890 figures, I refer to the 1890 U.S. Federal Census, because the Texas' Population Schedules are not available for this year.

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## Endnotes

- 1 Gerhard Grytz, "German Immigrants in the Lower Rio Grande Valley, 1850-1920: A Demographic Overview." In *Further Studies in Rio Grande Valley History*, ed. Milo Kearney, Anthony K. Knopp, and Antonio Zavatela, 145-65. Brownsville: University of Texas at Brownsville and Texas Southmost College, 2006, p.146.
- 2 François Lagarde, "Birth, Stock and Work: French Immigration in Texas." In *The French in Texas: History, Migration, Culture*, ed. François Lagarde, 157-77. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003, p. 157.
- 3 Castroville was established in 1844 by the French entrepreneur Henri Castro. It attracted around 1,120 Alsatian-born immigrants from 1843 to 1869. The colony has preserved an idiosyncratic Alsatian culture up to today. See Wayne M. Ahr, "Henri Castro and Castroville: Alsatian History and Heritage" in *The French in Texas: History, Migration, Culture*, ed. François Lagarde (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003), pp. 128-141.
- 4 Grytz, "German Immigrants," p. 146.
- 5 The Brownsville Herald, June 5, 1894.
- 6 Milo Kearney, "A Historical Sketch of Brownsville's Franco-Americans." In *Still More Studies in Brownsville History*, ed. Milo Kearney, 85-102. Brownsville: The University of Texas at Brownsville, 1991, p. 90.
- 7 Lagarde, "Birth, Stock and Work," p. 158.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 158.
- 9 *The French Texans*, University of Texas Institute of Texan Cultures at San Antonio (San Antonio: The Institute, 1973), p. 1.



- 10 Bureau of the Census, Population Schedules of the Tenth Census of the United States, 1880: Texas. Microfilm.
- 11 Chula T. Griffin and Sam S. Griffin, *Records of Interments in the City Cemetery ... And a Brief History of Brownsville, Texas* (Brownsville: The Griffins, 1987), p. 19.
- 12 Bureau of the Census, Population Schedules of the Tenth Census of the United States, 1880: Texas, Cameron County, 221. Microfilm.
- 13 As shown by scholars like Richard Price and Sidney Mintz, *The Birth of African-American Culture: An Anthropological Perspective* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992).
- 14 Bureau of the Census, Population Schedules of the Ninth Census of the United States, 1870: Texas, Cameron County, 281. Microfilm.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 79.
- 16 Grytz, "German Immigrants," Table 10, p. 160.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 146.
- 18 Kearney, "Historical Sketch," p. 85.
- 19 Leroy P. Graf, "The Economic History of the Lower Rio Grande Valley: 1820-1875" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 1942) p. 46.
- 20 *Ibid.*, Table IV.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 48.
- 22 *Ibid.*, Table V.
- 23 *Ibid.*, p. 49.
- 24 Grytz, "German Immigrants," p. 146.
- 25 Terry G. Jordan, "Population Origins in Texas, 1850," *Geographical Review* 59, no. 1 (Jan. 1969): 83-103, p. 85.
- 26 *Ibid.*, p. 84.
- 27 **Kellee Blake**, "First in the Path of the Firemen: The Fate of the 1890 Population Census," in *Prologue: Quarterly of the National Archives and Records Administration* 28, no. 1 (Spring 1996), pp. 64-81.
- 28 Kearney, "Historical Sketch," p. 85.
- 29 Lagarde "Birth, Stock and Work," p. 160.
- 30 Department of the Interior, Census Office, *Statistics of Place of Birth of the Population of the United States at the Tenth Census, 1880* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1883). Microfilm.
- 31 Lagarde, "Birth, Stock and Work," 158.
- 32 Department of the Interior, Census Office, *Statistics of Place of Birth of the Population of the United States at the Tenth Census, 1880*.

- 33 Betje Black Klier, "Champ D'Asile, Texas," in *The French in Texas: History, Migration, Culture*, ed. François Lagarde (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003), p. 79. Champ d'Asile was founded in March 1818 in southeastern Texas, on the Lower Trinity River, by former General Charles Lallemand to welcome members of Napoleon Bonaparte's defeated army. In August 1818, the colony was disbanded and in October of the same year, its fortifications were destroyed. Thus, nine months after the creation of Champ d'Asile, every single imperial veteran had left Texas.
- 34 Lorenzo Castro, *Immigration from Alsace and Lorraine: A Brief Sketch of the History of Castro's Colony in Western Texas* (New York: G.W. Wheat, Printers, 1970), p. 2. In 1844, with a colonization contract from the Republic of Texas, Henri Castro established the colony of Castroville on the Medina River, about twenty-five miles west of San Antonio. Although Henri Castro was French-born, the colony he founded is better defined as specifically Alsatian, at least concerning the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Indeed, he brought 1,120 emigrants from Alsace to Texas. Castroville survived Henri Castro's death. Since the 1970s, Castroville's inhabitants are engaged in various efforts to revive the settlement's Alsatian heritage.
- 35 Jonathan Beecher, "Building Utopia in the Promised Land: Icarians and Fourierists in Texas," in *The French in Texas: History, Migration, Culture*, ed. François Lagarde (Austin, University of Texas Press, 2003), 197. In 1848, Etienne Cabet, accompanied by 69 members of the Icarian Society of France, founded the colony of Icarie about ten miles southwest of present Denton. These settlers, mostly writers and journalists, planned on establishing a socialist state which would respect the ideals of perfect democracy and universal suffrage. The Icarians faced famine and disease and eventually relocated to Illinois in 1849.
- 36 Ibid., p. 210. La Réunion was founded in 1855 by the French socialist Victor Considerant. Located west of Dallas, this colony was organized along the utopian ideas developed by the French intellectual Charles Fourier. By mid-July 1855, La Réunion reached 130 people, all French, Belgians and Swiss. The settlers however suffered from the dry weather, and experienced shortage of water and food. By spring 1856, Considerant had given up on La Réunion but some settlers remained in the area. By 1860, half the original colonists had made their way back to Europe, the other half being established around Dallas.
- 37 Wayne M. Ahr, "Henri Castro and Castroville: Alsatian History and Heritage," in *The French in Texas: History, Migration, Culture*, ed. François Lagarde, pp. 128-41 (Austin: University of Texas Press), 2003. p. 128.
- 38 Jonathan Beecher, "Building Utopia in the Promised Land: Icarians and Fourierists in Texas," In *The French in Texas: History, Migration, Culture*, ed. François Lagarde, 197-225 (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003), p. 208.
- 39 Lagarde, "Birth, Stock and Work," p. 164.
- 40 Ibid., p. 164.
- 41 Jovita Gonzales and Maria Eugenia Cotera. *Life Along the Border: A Landmark Tejana Thesis* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2006), p. 109. Actually, from

González's perspective, the census categories completely invert the social reality of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Lower Rio Grande Valley for "the counties in which these people lived were run by Mexicans, and everywhere, with the exception of Brownville, the Americans were considered foreigners."

42 Jordan, "Population Origins in Texas," p. 86; and Grytz, "German Immigrants," p. 145.

43 Gonzales, *Life Along the Border*, p. 61.

44 *Ibid.*, p. 62.

45 Kearney, "Historical Sketch," p. 88.

46 Bureau of the Census, *Population Schedules of the Seventh Census of the United States, 1850: Texas*. Microfilm; Bureau of the Census, *Population Schedules of the Eighth Census of the United States, 1860: Texas, Cameron County and Starr County*. Microfilm; 1870 Census: Texas, Cameron County. Microfilm; 1880 Census: Texas, Starr County. Microfilm; Bureau of the Census, *Population Schedules of the Twelfth Census of the United States, 1900: Texas*. Microfilm.

47 Lagarde, "Birth, Stock and Work," p. 165.

48 Grytz, "German Immigrants," p. 148.

49 *1900 Census: Texas, Cameron County*. Microfilm. For the third generation, we cannot rely on origins any longer but only on names; this method is thus less accurate and reliable.

50 1900 Census: Texas, Starr 1900. Microfilm.

51 Mexico, and John Dominguez, *The Constitution of the Republic of Mexico and of the State of Coahuila & Texas: Containing Also an Abridgement of the Laws of the General and State Governments . . . Documents Relating to the Galveston Bay and Texas Land Company, the Grants to Messrs. Wilson and Exter and to Col. John Dominguez* (New York: Ludwig and Tolefree, 1832), p. 11.

52 *Ibid.*, p. 11.

53 Ernest Wallace, *Documents of Texas History* (Austin: Steck Co., 1963), p.

54 Graf, "Economic History," p. 95.

55 *Ibid.*, p. 99.

56 *Ibid.*, p. 95.

57 *Ibid.*, p. 99.

58 *Ibid.*, p. 106.

59 The French Intervention in Mexico lasted from January 1862 to March 1867. It was carried out by Napoleon III who, under the pretext of guaranteeing the stability of the Mexican government, established Maximilian of Austria as Emperor of Mexico. This involvement in North America failed. Maximilian was assassinated in 1867, and the French troops withdrew. For a more detailed account of the event,

- see Percy F. Martin, *Maximilian in Mexico, the Story of the French Intervention: 1861-1867* (Ithaca: Cornell University Library, 1914).
- 60 Graf, "Economic History," p. 109.
- 61 Kearney, "Historical Sketch," p. 86.
- 62 *Ibid.*, p. 86.
- 63 Louis E. Brister, "Johann von Racknitz: German Empresario and Soldier of Fortune in Texas and Mexico, 1832-1848," in *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 99, no. 1 (July 1995), under "Pastry War," <http://www.tshaonline.org/shqonline/apager.php?vol=099&pag=073> (accessed September 18, 2010), 70-71.
- 64 Eugène Maissin, *The French in Mexico and Texas, 1858-1859* (Salado, Texas: A. Jones Press, 1961), pp. 27-28.
- 65 Gonzales, *Life Along the Border*, pp. 53-55.
- 66 W.H. Chatfield, *The Twin Cities, Brownsville Texas, Matamoros Mexico, of the Border and the Country of the Lower Rio Grande Valley* (Brownsville: Herbert Davenport Memorial Fund, Brownsville Historical Association, 1959), p. 1.
- 67 Gonzales, *Life Along the Border*, p. 66.
- 68 Graf, "Economic History," p. 123.
- 69 *Ibid.*, p. 123.
- 70 Griffin and Griffin, *Records of Interments*, p. 23.
- 71 Bureau of the Census, *Population Schedules of the Tenth Census of the United States, 1880: Texas, Cameron County*. Microfilm.
- 72 Bureau of the Census, *Population Schedules of the Twelfth Census of the United States, 1900: Texas, Cameron County*. Microfilm.
- 73 Gonzales, *Life Along the Border*, pp. 62-63.
- 74 Graf, "Economic History," p. 46.
- 75 Lagarde, "Birth, Stock and Work," p. 164.
- 76 Graf, "Economic History," p. 2.
- 77 Kearney, "Historical Sketch," p. 85.
- 78 Graf, "Economic History," p. 23.
- 79 Réginald Hamel, *La Louisiane Créole Littéraire, Politique et Sociale, 1762-1900* (Montreal: Lemeac, 1984), p. 85.
- 80 James Heaven Thompson, "A Nineteenth Century History of Cameron County, Texas" (Master's thesis, The University of Texas at Austin, 1965), p. 71.
- 81 Kearney, "Historical Sketch," p. 86. In 1800, Spain, who had ruled over Louisiana since 1762, ceded the territory to the French government. Three years later, Napoleon I sold it to the United States for \$15,000,000.

- 82 1870 Census: Texas, Cameron County. Microfilm.
- 83 The Mexican-American War occurred between 1846 and 1848, partly as a result of the annexation of Texas to the United States in 1845 and disagreements about the common frontier. As a result, the United States invaded Mexico and obtained, in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo of 1848, the western territories of the present-day United States and the confirmation of the Rio Grande as the permanent international boundary between the U.S. territory and Mexico. For a more accurate account of the American-Mexican War, see for example Ron Field, *Mexican-American War: 1846-1848* (Herndon, VA: Brassey's, 1997).
- 84 Milo Kearney and Anthony Knopp, *Boom and Bust: The Historical Cycles of Matamoros and Brownsville* (Austin: Eakin Press, 1991), p. 67.
- 85 *Ibid.*, p. 69.
- 86 Eugène Maissin, *The French in Mexico and Texas, 1858-1859*, Salado, TX: A. Jones Press, 1961, p. xx.
- 87 Graf, "Economic History," p. 76.
- 88 Wallace, Documents of Texas History, p. 132.
- 89 Bureau of the Census, Population Schedules of the Ninth Census of the United States, 1870: Texas. Microfilm.
- 90 Grytz, "German Immigrants," Table 2, p. 154.
- 91 *Ibid.*, p. 148.
- 92 Gonzales, *Life Along the Border*, p. 55; Kearney and Knopp, *Boom and Bust*, p. 112.
- 93 *Ibid.*, p. 105.
- 94 *Ibid.*, pp. 105-107.
- 95 *Ibid.*, pp. 149-150.
- 96 Lagarde, "Birth, Stock and Work," p. 160.
- 97 Gonzales, *Life Along the Border*, p. 65.
- 98 Kearney and Knopp, *Boom and Bust*, p. 134.
- 99 Barbara J. Rozek, *Come to Texas: Attracting Immigrants, 1865-1915* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2003), pp. 3-4.
- 100 *Ibid.*, p. 128.
- 101 Rozek, *Come to Texas*, p. 157. Some railroad publications dated in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century advertised lands in Brownsville area; considering the general decrease of the foreign population in the Valley at the time, the call was not heard.
- 102 Lagarde, "Birth, Stock and Work," p. 160.
- 103 Kearney and Knopp, *Boom and Bust*, p. 157.
- 104 Grytz, "German Immigrants," p. 150.

- 105 Graf "Economic History," p. 3.
- 106 Kearney and Knopp, *Boom and Bust*, p. 175.
- 107 Ibid., p. 186.
- 108 Lagarde, "Birth, Stock and Work," p. 164.
- 109 Ibid., p. 167.
- 110 Grytz, "German Immigrants," p. 150.
- 111 Lagarde "Birth, Stock and Work," p. 158.

# Jewish Families of Old Brownsville

by

**Norman Rozeff**

Brownsville is a young city as far as settlement and age are concerned. That means that the heritage of its citizens finds roots in other places. While the majority of its citizens have always been of Hispanic heritage, it has had its share of Northern fortune seekers and, surprisingly, Jews of European origin. They settled here early and integrated well into the community even though their foreign customs and non-Christian religion made them a very small minority. This article will touch upon early Jewish members of the Brownsville community who made a special place for themselves in a developing society.

## **The Earliest Brownsville Jews**

One of the first Jews to be connected with the area, Simon Mussina, came here before Brownsville even had a name. Mussina, who was born in Philadelphia, in 1805, of Dutch Jewish parents, had a strange odyssey to the South. In 1821, he and his father Zachariah journeyed to Alabama on mercantile business. His father accidentally drowned while crossing a swollen creek, and the family fortune in gold coins was lost in the incident. Simon became the family breadwinner and created a very large mercantile business in Mobile. However, a fire, in 1836, once again left the family destitute. Simon moved on to Matagorda, Texas, and later to Galveston, where he edited newspapers and used them primarily to advertise land he owned in West Texas. He also owned a large drug store in Galveston.

With the onset of the Mexican War, in 1845, Mussina arrived in Matamoros, Mexico, and purchased the Matamoros newspaper the **American Flag**, which moved to Brownsville in 1848. In 1846, as the Mexican-American War broke out, Mussina purchased for-

merly Mexican-owned land, which after the war was declared part of the United States. His property was at Point Isabel and also in the area that would become the city of Brownsville. Working with Charles Stillman, he helped to survey the prospective township, and thus is considered one of the city's founders.

Mussina would go on to become an astute lawyer and a developer of land around East Waco from 1870 to 1873, to serve as president of the Austin State Hospital, Texas School for the Blind, and to become, in 1871, alderman for the city of Austin. While he never married and left no descendants, he did rear his father's family.

During this same period, John Melvin Hirsch was another Jewish resident of Brownsville. A friend of General Zachary Taylor, he was forced to move across the border during the conflict, while General Taylor used the Hirsch family home as a military headquarters.

Jacob Schlanger, a lumber merchant, was a member of the County Commissioners Court when Brownsville was selected as the seat for Cameron County in 1848. However, Schlanger soon moved away from Brownsville.

The first Jew to be buried in Brownsville was Joseph Moses, a New York-born merchant, who died in the Yellow Fever epidemic of 1858. His brother Benjamin had been in Brownsville in 1846, shipping cargo for General Taylor's army.

The Goldring-Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life relates:

Between the Mexican-American War and the Civil War, most Jews who moved to the area resided in Matamoros. During the Civil War, a handful of Jewish merchants from Galveston moved to Matamoros to get around the Union blockade of Confederate ports. However, with the end of the war and the decline in the cotton economy, most of



these families moved either to Brownsville or elsewhere. Among those who settled in Brownsville were Arthur S. Wolff, later a city physician and quarantine officer, and Louis Wise, former Union Army surgeon and soldier.

## The Bollacks

One of the more interesting stories of Jewish families in Brownsville involves the Bollacks, who had a long-standing relationship with the city. Adolph Bollack (1841-1927) came from France to Louisiana with his parents Joseph and Rose on the ship *Manchester*. Adolph was born in Germany (possibly Alsace-Lorraine, which changed hands between France and Germany several times), as recorded in the 1910 census. Another source would indicate that he came to the United States in 1856 by himself at age 16. He was naturalized in 1872, as is indicated in the 1910 US Census that shows him living on 13<sup>th</sup> Street in Brownsville, working as a dry goods merchant. In 1871, he was married to Hettie Fellman, who was born in 1840. She came to America in 1867 from Germany. They had three children by the 1880 Census when Adolph was listed as 40 years of age and his wife as 33. That year, his Louisiana-born daughter Selena was 8, his son Isaac, born on November 7, 1874, in New Orleans, was 5, and Louisiana-born Joseph, was 3. Hettie would die the same year as her husband, in 1927.

During the Civil War, Adolph joined a Louisiana regiment and fought in the battle of Palmito Hill in 1865. He was buried in his Confederate uniform in Brownsville's Hebrew Cemetery, although his headstone does not indicate that he was a Confederate soldier. He likely went back to New Orleans before he returned to town, in 1869, bringing the Torah his family had brought from France. Perhaps it is the same scroll which was reportedly kept in Matamoros, in 1876, and which was, in 1882, the focus of a humorous incident in which Mexican border guards refused to touch the Torah as it was moved across the border for a Friday night service in Brownsville out of fear of touching the "Jewish god."

During the period of the 1870s and until the early 1920s, there was no organized Jewish worship in Brownsville. This Torah was in use until 1933. Before any temple was erected, High Holy Day Services were held at the Bollack home in Brownsville for members of the local Jewish Community.

In 1878, Henry Bollack, together with his brother Adolph, opened Bollack's Dry Goods Store in Brownsville. The Bollacks were also active as merchants in Matamoros. Henry Bollack, noted by the 1880 Census to be 36, was born in 1844 in Weisenberg (spelled Wissembourg in French), Alsace-Lorraine, to French parents. He lists both his mother and father as having been born in France. The town is on the west side of the Rhine River, north of Strasbourg. He was married to Pauline B. Wormster (Wermser), whose burial records show her birth date as February 10, 1849 and her death date as April 26, 1934. She was born in Landau, Bavaria, Germany. They had departed for America from the port at Hamburg on the Elbe River. Their children at this time are noted to be Juliette E. (later Julia), born, July 1878, in Texas, and Joseph F., age 20, born March 19, 1880, in Texas. Henry listed his occupation as dry goods merchant.

*The New York Times* on September 4, 1882 carried an article datelined the day before. It is headlined RAVAGES OF THE YELLOW FEVER THE DISEASE ON THE INCREASE AT BROWNSVILLE—ITS PROGRESS LAST WEEK. It goes on to state:

The fever continues to increase in this city. For the 24 hours ending at 10 o'clock this morning there were about 70 new cases and four deaths reported.

F. Henry Bollack, a prominent merchant, died.

Bollack's widow carried on the business. An advertisement for Bollack's mercantile store, listing Mrs. H. Bollack as owner, is found on the inside front cover of Chatfield's 1893 book, *Twin Cities of the Border*. It reads:

Mrs. H. Bollack ----DEALER IN--- Dry Goods, Notions, Boots, Shoes, Hats, Trunks, Slickers, Saddlery, Clothing and Millinery --AGENT FOR THE -- New Home Sewing Machine, also keeps a full line of Sewing Machine Needles. Twelfth Street, Opposite City Market

In return for purchasing the ad, Chatfield also ran a short promotion within the publication. It read:

MRS. H. BOLLACK. On Twelfth Street, directly opposite the Market Place, is a large dry goods store, filled with stock of everything in that line, and also a full assortment of hats, caps, boots, shoes, and notions. Mrs. H. Bollack, the proprietress of the establishment, came from Bavaria, Germany, in 1875, first residing in Louisiana for three years and then locating in this city. [Here Chatfield confuses Hettie with her sister-in-law.] The business, which has been increased to twice its original extent, is personally managed by Mrs. Bollack, with the assistance of her son and a number of clerks. Good bargains and prompt attention always await her customers.

Brownsville sports historian Rene Torres reported, in the *Valley Morning Star's* October 12, 2008 edition, that "Flag pole at ballpark had a French connection," He told of a story in the *Brownsville Herald* that Mrs. H. Bollack donated a flagpole, on April 12, 1911, to the Brownsville Baseball Association. The story in the *Brownsville Herald* at that time reported that the 35-foot flagpole had stood in front of the Bollack Building on 12<sup>th</sup> Street (the former store of Celestin Jagou) after it became the French Consulate. The pole had next been moved to the Bollack's new (around 1910) building on Elizabeth Street before being relocated to the ballpark. A photograph of the Bollack Building, taken in November 1912 by

Robert Runyon, shows a shorter flagpole on the front roof of the structure.

In the 1880 census, Pauline volunteers that she is in the dry goods business, while Joseph F. is a salesman in the same field. Pauline continued to work in association with Joseph in the dry goods business at least until 1920, when she was 70.

In 1896, with business booming, the Bollacks moved their store location to the corner of 12th and Elizabeth. With its 100-foot frontage, the outlet prospered, with goods imported from both the north and Europe. This encouraged the family, in 1910, to erect a beautiful large three-story structure at 1223 Elizabeth Street. It dominated the area for decades, and was to be THE store for upscale merchandise until large chain stores offered stiff competition by 1927. The quality of the goods attracted, not only local residents, but also military personnel and their wives from nearby Fort Brown. The latter were enticed by "the ladies apparels, sewing necessities, and hats" that were readily available.

After his mother Pauline died in 1934, Joseph F. owned and operated The Bollack Store at 1223 East Elizabeth Street until his death in Brownsville on January 14, 1949. His residence was at 405 E. Elizabeth. The store was listed under the Bollack name in the telephone directories until 1959. It was later occupied by the Delrey Shops, followed by the Three Sisters Inc. and then by a succession of retail businesses.

The Bollack Building at 1223 Elizabeth still stands. Originally, it was a handsome three-story brick-and-stone building with beautiful arched windows carrying a theme from the second to the top story. A cornice roof overhang lent, and still lends, strength to the structure's appearance. Over the middle arch, engraved in stone, is the name "Bollack". A *Brownsville Herald* article, dated January 28, 1934, noted that "The Bollack Department Store recently completed a new skylight, improving the appearance of the interior generally." By the 1960s, in an effort to provide the building with a more modern appearance, a simplified façade was placed over

the second-story windows. In 2011, the building was brought to its original façade, with its attractive arches once more revealed.

Joseph F. visited his ancestral home in mid-1921, departing for Cherburg from New York City. Joe F's cousin, Joseph Bollack, son of Adolph and Hettie, had a sad history. By the year 1900, he was noted to be insane. By 1910, he had been committed to the Southwestern Insane Asylum near San Antonio. At age 53, in 1930, he was still in this institution, and apparently remained there for the remainder of his life.

One of Adolph's sons-in-law, Isidore Moritz, was a lifelong newsman. Moritz worked for the original owner of the *Brownsville Daily Herald* in 1907, established the *Mercedes Enterprise* in 1909, was involved with the *Edinburg Advance*, was later the owner of the *McAllen Monitor*, and worked for the *San Benito Light* and the *Harlingen Star*. He married Julia Bollack, on June 23, 1909, at the Bollack family home on the corner of 13<sup>th</sup> and Washington. Moritz was a Mason, and a founder of Temple Emmanuel in McAllen. There may be a historical plaque in the temple with his name on it.

### The Ashheim Family

Lieutenant Chatfield, in his 1893 publication, *The Twin Cities of the Border and the Country of the Lower Rio Grande*, introduces us to Solomon Ashheim. He writes:

Mr. Ashheim came to this country from Germany, in 1862, and located in Victoria Texas where he was clerk in a clothing house. In 1865 he came to this city [Brownsville] and established the Star Clothing Store, which has become one of the most reliable "one-price" houses in this section. In addition to a full line of ready-made men's and boy's suits, he carries a complete stock of men's furnishings, dry goods and notions, hats and caps, boots and shoes. Mr. Ashheim was at one time treasurer

of Cameron County, but holds no public office at the present time.

The issue also carried in its inside cover a small ad for Ashheim's store. It reads:

Solomon Ashheim Star \* Store --- DEALER IN  
— Dry Goods, Clothing, Boots, Shoes — AND  
— FURNISHING GOODS. *Washington Street,  
Brownsville, Texas*

From the September 15, 1870 US Census of Brownsville, we learn that Solomon, by then age 38, was already a retail dry goods dealer. He and his wife, Pauline, 34, have three children: Matilde, 10, who had been born in New York, Emilia, 4, and Adolf, who had been born in September 1869. Solomon notes his real estate to be valued at \$300 and his personal wealth at \$1000.

Brownsville celebrated July 4, 1876 with a parade including cavalry, two floats, a band, and Protection Hook and Ladder Company No.1, ending with political opponents of the Blue and Red Clubs (who had earlier been greeted by a 13 gun salute). This mention was noted in a newspaper:

Among the pubescent beauties braving the summer sun, there were many sisters including the three Dalzell girls, Irene, Lula and Julia, the Scanlan twins Laura and Annie, Mathilda and Emilia Ashheim, Anita and Una Cowen, and Concepcion and Emilia Angelina.

From the 1880 US census, we learn that both Solomon and Pauline were born in Prussia and that only the two youngest of their children were now at home and attending school. Emilia was listed as Mexican-born, coming to the US in 1866.

By the 1900 Census, Solomon had died. He was born on February 2, 1832 and died on November 28, 1894. Pauline, born on June

17, 1833, would live to November 26, 1917. By this year, 30 year-old son Adolf was at home, with no occupation listed. His sister (either Emilia or Amelia) was at home with her husband, Aaron Turk, who had taken over the operation of the dry goods store.

By the census of April 15, 1910, Adolf had married Celina Bollack, and had two children, Vivian, 9, and Julian, 8. A son named Adolph had been born on February 2, 1909, but lived only to April 28, 1909. Adolf was working as a cashier in a bank, and, by the next decade, the census could list himself as a banker. Julian is pictured in the 1921 *Pedagog*, the yearbook of Southwest Texas Normal College in San Marcos, Texas, when he was a freshman. By 1930, Adolf was a bank vice president. Vivian, at age 28, was still unwed and residing at their Washington Street residence.

There is a humorous story told of Adolf and the founder of Harlingen, Lon C. Hill. In an anecdotal article, we learn how tight cash flow was as Hill, in 1907, expanded his horizons and before he secured sufficient financial backing. As with many other developers in the Valley he was "land rich and cash poor." On a Saturday, Hill was reported to have shown up at the First National Bank in Brownsville. He asked the cashier, Adolph Ashheim, for \$800 in fifty cent pieces, so he could pay his canal work crew its weekly wages. Even as he volunteered to sign a note for this amount, Ashheim reminded him that he was already borrowed to the limit. When Hill remarked that his friend Sam Robertson would sign the note, Ashheim replied that Robertson owed the bank even more than Hill. When Hill was asked if he would repay the note the following Saturday, he answered that he would. The following Saturday, after the bank had closed for business and drawn its shades, Hill's persistent knocking on the door was finally responded to as Ashheim peeked through the blinds, saw who it was, and, anticipating repayment, pulled Hill's note from his wallet as he unlocked the door. It is said that:

Mr. Hill, covered with dust from a long trek on unpaved roads, removed his hat and revealed streams

of perspiration rolling down his face and said 'My God man, what a hot and miserable trip I've had getting here. You know it's Saturday and I need another \$800 for a payroll for the canal gang.

It is unknown when Adolf died, but Celina, who had been born in Louisiana in 1873, lived to September 15, 1960.

The Solomon Ashheim's papers, a gift of Vivian C. Wooten in 1966 April, are in the Library of the Daughters of the Republic of Texas at the Alamo in San Antonio. The collection contains legal documents, certificates, and printed material. It includes Solomon Ashheim's certificate of citizenship, militia appointment, certificates of his election as Cameron County Treasurer, funeral notice, and estate record. Also included is a partnership agreement between Ashheim's widow, Pauline Ashheim, and son-in-law, Aaron Turk, for the operation of his Brownsville mercantile business. The brief biographical note states that:

Solomon Ashheim was born in Wongrowitz, Posen, Germany, on 1832 February 2, and married Pauline Hollander, born circa 1836. The couple immigrated to the United States, in 1860. First working as a clerk in a clothing house in Victoria, Texas, Ashheim relocated to Brownsville, Texas, in 1865, and established the Star Clothing Store, which sold dry goods, clothing, boots and shoes, and furnishing goods. Ashheim served in the Texas Militia in 1871 and was elected treasurer of Cameron County in 1874 and 1876. Solomon and Pauline had three children: Mathilda, born in 1860 in New York; Amelia (or Emilie), born in 1866 in Mexico; and Adolph, born 1869, in Texas. Solomon Ashheim died in Brownsville, on 1894 November 28.



The collection contains legal documents, certificates, and printed material. It includes Solomon Ashheim's certificate of citizenship, militia appointment, certificates of his election as Cameron County Treasurer, funeral notice, and estate record. Also included is a partnership agreement between Ashheim's widow, Pauline Ashheim, and son-in-law, Aaron Turk, for the operation of his Brownsville mercantile business.

### **The Kowalski Family**

The name Kowalski in Polish means blacksmith. *A History of Texas and Texans, Volume 4* (1914) by Francis White Johnson tells us that:

Bernard Kowalski, a native of Poland, was born, in 1821, in Inowrazlaw, where he received excellent educational advantages. Immigrating to the United States in 1841, he located in New Orleans, Louisiana, where he became highly successful as a business man and where, in 1847, he was naturalized as an American citizen. He joined the Washington Artillery, a famous military organization of New Orleans, in which he was much interested. He subsequently enlisted for service in the Mexican War, and went with General Taylor's army into Mexico, on the way passing through Brownsville, Texas. He served with gallantry throughout the war, taking part in many engagements. In 1849 he went with the gold seekers to California, making an overland journey, but not meeting with the success he anticipated in that country he returned to New Orleans in 1850, and resumed business in that city. In 1861, being burned out, he came to Cameron County, Texas, and embarked in mercantile pursuits in Brownsville. On the breaking out of the Civil war he enlisted in the Confederate army, and having been commissioned major of artillery under

General Bee took an active part in the defense of Fort Brown (Brownsville) and when the fort was captured in 1864 by General Herron, Bernard Kowalski was taken prisoner and carried to New Orleans where he was kept a prisoner until the close of the conflict. Returning then to Brownsville, he resumed his business operations in this city, and was here an honored resident until his death, June 24, 1889. While in California Mr. Kowalski was a member of Terry Vigilantes of that state and helped drive bad characters out of the state. He was intensely patriotic to the cause of the south, and was never "reconstructed." As a husband, a father, and a citizen, he was a man of the finest type, charitable and unselfish to an unusual degree, oftentimes taking greater interest in the troubles and discouragements of others than he did of his own. Beloved by all who knew him, his death was a cause of general regret. The maiden name of his wife was Sophia Bernstein. She was born at Posen, Poland, and survived him but eleven months, dying in May, 1890.

Another source reports that the family arrived by ship at Brazos de Santiago and first settled in Matamoros before coming to Brownsville. Bernard and Sophia are noted in the Brownsville, Cameron County, US Census of September 15, 1870. Both were then 49 years of age. Bernard listed his occupation as merchant-tailor. His real estate was worth \$20,000 while his personal worth was put down as \$5,000. His son Louis, age 20, was still living with them and was a clerk in a counting room, while his brother Benjamin, age 16, attended school. By June 1880, they were residing at 589 Elizabeth Street. Bernard noted that he was a dry goods merchant, while 25-year-old Ben was a bookkeeper. Son Louis, by then age 30, had left the nest, married Emilia, now 27. They were blessed by three children: Rosario, 3, Joseph, 2, and Sarah, 5 months.

When the US Census in Brownsville was taken, on June 11, 1900, Ben, now 44, listed his occupation as commercial merchant. Living at their Elizabeth Street address were Gustave (born on Oct. 12, 1886); David (born on Dec, 10, 1889); Paul O. (born on July 8, 1891); Alexander (born on Nov. 1892; and Bernard (born on March 1886).

At that time, a large number of children was more the norm than not. Brother Louis not only matched Ben, but outdid him in family size. When the census taker arrived at his domicile, on June 7, 1900, he discovered commercial merchant Louis and wife Emilia (born on June 1854 and incorrectly listed as Annalee) with the following children at home: Emilio—born in August 1882; Freddie — born in June 1883; Anita — born in July 1886; Etta — born in July 1888; James — born in May 1889; Bernard — born in February 1891; Julius — born in April 1895; and Francis J. — born in March 1898. It is not know what had become of their three older siblings.

A decade later (in 1910), some of the Ben Kowalski family were still residing in their childhood home. Bernard, age 24, was now a civil engineer; Gustaval (as the census taker puts down his given name), age 22, was a lawyer; David, age 21, was a stenographer, as was bother Alexander, age 18; Paul, age 20, was a bank cashier; and young brother Clarence, age 12, was still a school boy.

In brother Louis' family, sons Frederick L., age 26, James W., age 21, and Bernard L., age 19, are all grocery salesman, likely in their father's firm. Sisters Anita and Etta are not yet married. Louis would serve for almost 40 years as clerk in the District Court of Cameron County, Twenty-Eight Judicial District (State). In the time of the yellow fever epidemic he served as secretary of the "Committee to Prevent Yellow Fever."

Again from *A History of Texas and Texans*, we learn:

BENJAMIN KOWALSKI. Conspicuous in business circles and prominent in the public affairs of

Brownsville, Benjamin Kowalski, an ex-mayor of the city, is a true type of the energetic and enterprising citizens who have been influential in advancing the best interests of this part of Cameron county, his enthusiastic zeal, unquestioned ability and strong personality making him a leader among men. A son of Bernard Kowalski, he was born, in 1854, in New Orleans, Louisiana, of thrifty ancestry.

Acquiring his rudimentary education in New Orleans, Benjamin Kowalski subsequently attended Soula Business College and the Brothers' College in Brownsville. At the early age of fourteen years he began his business life, becoming a clerk in his father's store, and later was engaged in mercantile pursuits on his own account. Taking an interest in local affairs from early manhood, he was for many years prominently connected with various branches of the public service in Brownsville, from 1869 until 1877 serving as assistant postmaster under Edward Downey. Nine years later, upon the death of Postmaster Hopkins, Mr. Kowalski was appointed as his successor, his commission bearing date of November 27, 1886. That was under President Cleveland's first administration, and Mr. Kowalski has the distinction of having been the first Democratic postmaster that ever Brownsville had. He served in that capacity for four years with conspicuous efficiency, and to the satisfaction of the public.

When Mr. Kowalski left the post office the first time, in 1877, he accepted a position at Fort Brown, first as army quartermaster's clerk, and later as paymaster's clerk. Subsequently he was employed as clerk to General Sutton, United States Consul at Matamoros, Mexico. He is quite talented and

accomplished, and an excellent linguist, having conversational knowledge of Spanish, French and German, as well as of English. It was almost entirely due to Mr. Kowalski that Brownsville obtained its Federal Building, his preliminary efforts in that direction having been begun through a letter to Congressman Crane in 1888, and continued until successful. He has likewise served most acceptably as United States Commissioner, and as deputy district clerk for the Southern District of Texas.

Mr. Kowalski was elected mayor of Brownsville, and served the regular term of two years with credit to himself, and to the honor of his constituents, rendering the city service of inestimable value, his achievements having been noteworthy in every respect. Among those of especial value to the community are the following named: The granting of franchise and building of spur line by the Saint Louis, Brownsville and Mexico Railway from West Brownsville, extending around the northeastern part of the city, to the Little Indiana Canal Company's property; the extension, improvement and enlargement of the Municipal Water and Light System, putting in entirely new machinery with double units for all motive power, including new and larger water mains, fire hydrants and street lights, also new buildings and sheds for water and light plants and boiler sheds; the building of an up-to-date Filtering Plant, water ninety-eight percent pure; the building of a new market and city hall, with sheds to Fire Department Building; the extension of water and hydrants to the City Cemetery; the building of over twenty-five blocks of street paving, and the levy of a tax of one-third on the first paving district on all streets paved, to continue the street

paving; the building of more than fifteen miles of concrete sidewalks; the granting of a franchise, and the building of the Robertson Street Railway; the granting of a franchise, and building a new street railway on Twelfth street, from the International Bridge to the Rio Grande Railroad Depot; the granting of a franchise, and building a spur line of the Saint Louis, Brownsville and Mexico Railway on Fronton street for the business houses; the building of a drainage pipe line for surface and overflow water; the purchase of a fire wagon, and three thousand feet of fire hose; and there is still on the docket, and to be voted on, a measure for three thousand dollars for the erection of a slaughter pen. During the two years, from May, 1910, until May, 1912, that Mr. Kowalski was at the head of the municipal government, there were more buildings erected in Brownsville, both for business and residence purposes, than at any other equal length of time in its history. The sewerage plant was also completed under his regime.

Kowalski married Miss Corinne Wilson, a daughter of Dr. A. H. Wilson, who came to Brownsville from Georgia, where she was born. A woman of culture and refinement, whose purposes are in harmony with his, Mrs. Kowalski has proved herself a worthy helpmate in every sense implied by the term, cheering him in his hours of discouragement, and aiding him by kindly words and acts in the many struggles that inevitably come to every enterprising, progressive and conscientious public servant. Six sons have blessed the union of Mr. and Mrs. Kowalski, namely: M. B., a graduate of the N. M. College, is a civil engineer in Dallas, Texas; G. L., county attorney of Kleberg county, is a university

graduate; Dave, in the abstract business; Paul O., teller in the First National Bank of Brownsville, is a college graduate; Alexander, with Cooper Grocer Company of Waco, is a college graduate, and Clarence, a student.

Fraternally Mr. Kowalski is a member, and past master of Rio Grande Lodge, No. 81, Ancient Free and Accepted Order of Masons; a member, and past patron of Hope Chapter, No. 124, Order of the Eastern Star; a member of Texas Consistory, No. 1, Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite, of Galveston; of El Mina Temple, Ancient Arabic Order of the Nobles of the Mystic Shrine, of Galveston; a member, past chancellor and commander, of Brownsville Lodge, No. 339, Knights of Pythias; and a member, past consul, and commander of Acacia Camp, No. 690, Woodmen of the World. Mr. Kowalski is prominent and active in each of the orders to which he belongs, being especially active in Masonry, in which he has taken the thirty-second degree. All the sons are members of the Masonic Order with the exception of the youngest.

Lt. W.H. Chatfield, in his 1893 *The Twin Cities of the Border and the Country of the Lower Rio Grande*, had already compiled some of the information from which the above was obviously used as a source. He wrote:

Benjamin Kowalski who had direct charge of the office during the illness of Mr. Hopkins, was acting postmaster for a year, and in recognition of his able management, the community petitioned the President for his appointment as postmaster. He was commissioned, to date from November 27, 1886.

Mr. Kowalski had a thorough knowledge of postal affairs, which he had acquired from his long service under Mr. Downey from 1869 to 1877. He then became clerk for an army quartermaster at Fort Brown, and was later a paymaster's clerk. He also served as clerk for Consul General Sutton, in Matamoros. His abilities as a linguist, comprising perfect command of German, French and Spanish, as well as of the English language, made his services highly valuable in all positions named, especially so in the post office, where the Spanish language is used to a great extent. The affairs of the post office were placed upon an excellent basis, and several changes were made which increased the convenience and the facilities for transacting business. He continued the office at the old stand on Elizabeth Street between Twelfth and Thirteen, which had been used for that purpose for twenty-five years, when he relinquished the keys in 1890.

From the same publication we learn that "The same year 1865 brought us the third fire. Mr. Kowalski's clothing emporium was entirely destroyed."

In December 1893, Louis placed a front page ad in the *Brownville Herald*. It indicated that he was trying to promote a local enterprise, that of the sugar mill of George Brulay. The factory, south of Brownsville, was the only sizeable sugar producer at the time. The ad read:

Sugar! Sugar! of the Rio Grande Plantation For sale at from 3 7/8 cents to 4 1/8 cents a pound for first grade. Other grades as low as 2 1/2 cents per pound. Terms each, U.S. currency or its equivalent in Mexican money. Prices may change without advice. Samples will be sent by mail to interested parties. Louis Kowalski, Agent Brownsville, Tex.



In the autumn of 1911, Dr. S.K. Hallam helped to organize the Brownsville Waterways Association. Its goal was to provide the Valley the advantages of water transportation. This objective brought many of the area's leading citizens into the fold. On its board of directors was Louis Cobolini, William Kelly, S. L. Dworman, James B. Wells, R. B. Creager, W. N. Pearson, D. E. Hawkins, Jose Celaya, J. G. Fernandez, J. B. Scott, K. H. McDavitt, and Dr. Hallam. That they had a singularity of purpose was amazing, since some were political enemies. Dr. Hallam became the association's president, Benjamin Kowalski 1st vice president, and C. P. Barreta 2<sup>nd</sup> vice president.

An October 10, 1893 ad in the *Brownsville Herald* read as follows:

Benj. Kowalski MANUFACTURERS' AGENT  
and Merchandise Broker [Established 1879]  
Representing some of the leading Coffee and  
Sugar-houses, Rice Mills, Flour Mills, Soap,  
Candle, Starch and Leaf tobacco factories in the  
U.S. Consignments Solicited

Ben was mayor of Brownsville, Texas, 1910-1912. He was elected running on the Independent Party ticket. This consisted of individuals opposed to the James Wells Democratic machine. This election marked the first local defeat for the Wells machine since its inception in the mid-1880s. Kowalski was soon being attacked in all manners by the opposition Democrats, who would gradually regain power back from the Independents. Still, as historian Evan Anders writes in his book *Boss Rule in South Texas*:

Mayor Kowalski and his colleagues compiled an impressive record: the enlargement and overhaul of the municipal water and light systems, the completion of a sewerage plant, the construction of a new city hall and public market, the establishment of a streetcar system, the paving of twenty-five blocks of streets, the laying of fifteen miles of concrete

sidewalks, the installation of a drainage pipeline for overflow water, and the purchase of new equipment for the fire department.

Unfortunately, Kowalski broke with the Independent Party and its leader Rentfro B. Creager, who had become convinced that Kowalski was an unpopular figure. A.B. Cole, the U.S. commissioner for Brownsville, was nominated in Kowalski's place and won the election. Without organized support, Kowalski was able to garner only 59 out of 1,400 votes cast.

Benjamin provided some interesting history, noting that the first Jewish congregation in the Rio Grande Valley was a joint Brownsville-Matamoros community. In 1876, according to a letter by Mayor Benjamin Kowalski of Brownsville, a Hebrew Benevolent Association was formed, and "feast and fast days" were celebrated in Matamoros.

By 1920, at age 65, Ben had retired and moved with Corinne to Houston, where three of their children had taken jobs. David B. was a bookkeeper with an oil company, Alexander A. a private secretary, and Clarence a stenographer in an automotive factory. During the next decade, Ben was to die but Corinne continued to live in Houston with her three sons.

Louis' son, Bernard Louis Kowalski, born, on August 2, 1929, in Brownsville, and died, on October 26, 2007, at age 78, in Los Angeles, California, rose to gain recognition in the field of television as a director, producer, second unit director, and assistant director. A Wikipedia Mini Biography reads:

Bernard Kowalski is an important figure in television with a long and impressive list of credits. To mention a select few, he directed the pilots for "Richard Diamond, Private Detective" (1957), "N.Y.P.D." (1967) and "The Monroes" (1966); executive-produced "Baretta" (1975); and was co-owner of "Mission: Impossible" (1966). Kowalski

got his first job in the movie business at the age of five as an extra in several Dead End Kids pictures at Warner Brothers, as well as such Errol Flynn vehicles as Dodge City (1939) and Virginia City (1940). His experience behind the camera began at age 17 when he worked as a clerk for his father, who was an assistant director and production manager. TV provided Kowalski with his first opportunity to direct on such Western series as "Frontier" (1955) and "Boots and Saddles" (1957); he then made the transition to feature-film directing in 1958 when he was hired by Gene Corman (brother of Roger Corman) to helm the teen exploitation feature Hot Car Girl (1958).

An August 2011 online blurb relates this about the old Ben Kowalski homestead:

The year is 1897. The house on 319 E. Elizabeth is booming with life as the Kowalski family prepares for one of its lavish parties. The smell of freshly squeezed grapefruit juice fills the evening air as Corinne Kowalski laces the surrounding trees with Japanese Lanterns. Benjamin Kowalski drives the family stagecoach down the street. He pulls into his home and disappears inside the carriage house. This would have been a typical scenario at one of Brownsville 's oldest homes, the Kowalski-Fernandez estate.

According to David Zimmerman, local historian and part owner of the Kowalski estate, the date shown on the historical home's deed is 1890. However, it is possible the house was built before then. Zimmerman reports that Benjamin Kowalski built the home and became its first owner. His family used the carriage house as both a storage room for their carriage and as a stable for horses and other animals. The Kowalski's were well known

for their extravagant parties, Zimmerman added. In 1918, they sold their property to Corinne's niece, Rosalie, and her husband Miguel Fernandez. The Fernandez family, which owned a hide yard, continued the tradition of throwing lavish parties. Neighbors were often invited for plentiful dinners prepared by the Fernandez's chef, a Chinese cook. Over the years, passers by became accustomed to the sounds of music from Rosalie giving piano lessons to her 18 children. The property remained within the family until the last Kowalski-Fernandez family member died in 1997. Around 2002, Zimmerman and Sandy Stillman bought the property in an effort to preserve the valuable buildings. Today, the carriage house has been transformed into an oasis for relaxation. On a recent Friday afternoon, the sound of laughter could be heard from inside the Carriage House Day Spa.

### **Bloomberg & Raphael**

The 1870 Brownsville census has G.M. Raphael, age 30, living in a rooming house. He was a store bookkeeper whose personal value was listed at \$1,000. He listed his birthplace as Prussia. His wife to be, Eugenie Salamon, was born in Edinburgh, Scotland, in 1856, to Henry and Clare. She was the third of six children.

An advertisement in the *Brownsville Herald* of August 6, 1892 reads:

Bloomberg and Raphael. A. J. Bloomberg, 54 Worth Street, New York City, G. M. Raphael, Brownsville. Wholesale dealers in dry goods, staple goods, boots, shoes and groceries. All European goods kept in our Matamoros House. All kinds of hats, caps, shirts, and drawers. Notions and family groceries. Mail orders promptly attended to.

According to Lt. W. H. Chatfield in his 1893 *The Twin Cities of the Border Brownsville and Matamoros*:

In 1892 [Celestin] Jagou and Captain J.G. Tucker of Santa Maria raised a small crop of sea island cotton. "It was shipped to Liverpool by Bloomberg & Raphael, as a sample of cotton from the Lower Rio Grande Country. The English manufacturers were afraid to handle it at first as they had never heard of "Texas Sea Island Cotton", and the lot was too small to manufacture and test separately, as the consignors had requested should be done. It was bought, however, and as soon as the quality was thoroughly known, it was quoted at 22 cents per pound in the dull season, with a subsequent offer of 30 cents per pound and an intimation that there would be a market for all that could be raised. In consequence of that offer, and induced by the prospects of a prosperous year, over a thousand acres will be planted in sea island cotton this season, and Bloomberg & Raphael have had more demands for seed than they have been able to supply. It is a wise policy to vary crops in this manner and plant less corn, as cotton is of sufficient value to stand freight charges, whereas if too much corn is raised, it becomes a drug on the market.

In his publication Chatfield also offers a more in-depth commentary on Bloomberg and Raphael. It reads:

The extensive business of this firm places it well in the lead of commercial houses in the Lower Rio Grande country. The business was begun in 1865 by A.J. Bloomberg. In 1868 the firm was changed to Alexander & Co., composed of J. Alexander, A.J. Bloomberg and G.M. Raphael and business was conducted under that name until 1872, when, upon the death of Mr. Alexander (who was murdered [about 22 miles north of Brownsville on his way to Rio Grande City] by one of [Juan] Cortina's sub-

lieutenants) while traveling through the country in his ambulance, the remaining partners associated as Bloomberg and Raphael.

Mr. Bloomberg is a permanent resident of New York where he buys goods for the house and makes seasonal shipments to meet the requirements of its numerous foreign and domestic customers, and supply the wants of local retail trade; while Mr. Raphael and Mr. Louis Cowen, who is also a member of the firm, reside in Brownsville, and personally conduct the various branches of the business. The establishment in Brownsville, which confines its operations to the sale of American products and manufactures, occupies half a block of brick buildings on Elizabeth street. Three buildings are filled from cellar to the top floors with groceries and dry goods for wholesale trade, and two adjoining buildings contain retail stores for the goods, which are stocked and managed by the firm.

A branch wholesale house in Matamoros deals only in European goods. This house was closed upon the death of Mr. Alexander, in 1872. [In 1868, Charles Stillman, the (non-Jewish) founder of Brownsville, deeded a plot for a Jewish cemetery to the newly formed Hebrew Benevolent Society. One of the first people buried in the cemetery was Joseph Alexander, a prominent dry goods merchant and leader of the local Jewish community who was shot and killed by a bandit.], but was reopened in 1882. In addition to the finest fabrics from the looms of the Old World, there are stored in the capacious warehouses large quantities of notions, carpets,, etc. for the Mexican trade. Mr. Raphael spends a portion of each day in Matamoros, superintending the affairs of this branch. Bloomberg & Raphael

own between 80,000 and 90,000 acres of land in Hidalgo county, where they have several ranches well stocked with cattle and horses. An artesian well was bored in their land and a small supply of good water was obtained at a depth of 740 feet. The boring was discontinued to utilize the water during a drouth. The project to deepen the well has never been carried out, Although a good flow of water would probably result.

Mr. G. M. Raphael is of Russian [Prussian?] nativity, but came to this country so early in his life that he remembers but little of his residence in any other. He attended the public schools of New York until he was fifteen years of age, when he was employed as clerk for various firms in and near that city for a number of years, and then took a course at a business college to perfect himself in book keeping. In 1866 he accepted a position in Brownsville as book keeper for A.J. Bloomberg, and remained with him until the firm of Alexander & Co. was formed, when he was admitted as a full partner and placed in charge of the Brownsville house, Mr. Alexander being manager of the Matamoros branch.

In 1868, Mr. Raphael was elected president of the Tamaulipas Mining Company, operating silver and lead mines in the state of Tamaulipas, Mexico, to which position he has been re-elected at each subsequent annual meeting of the Company, and when the First National Bank of Brownsville was organized, he was elected as one of the Board of Directors, and also the first president of the first national bank established on this border.

Mr. Raphael is a sound financier, a practical and thorough business manager, and a resolute but con-

servative advocate of development of this section. He moves on to a high social plane, where his many talents are appreciated at their true value.

Mr. Louis Cowen [of the Jewish faith] is an old soldier, bearing the scars of Texas Indian warfare of the early fifties, for which he was discharged with a pension. He came to the United State from Warsaw, Poland, when he was quite a young man. Upon entering the Regular Army, he was assigned to Company G, First Mounted Rifles, serving in Texas. In 1853, after two year and two months of frontier service, which had its attractions as well as its hardships, Mr. Cowen was wounded in a skirmish with Indians, and soon afterward discharged for disability. He then settled in Brownsville, and has been identified with the highest social, commercial and political circles ever since. He was deputy collector of customs at the port of Brazos Santiago in 1858-59. Upon occupation of the frontier by State forces in the Cortina war, he was appointed a sutler, and supplied the troops to a large extent with all necessary articles of clothing, subsistence, etc. From 1861 to 1867 he was assessor and collector for the county and city, after which he was in business for three years, on his own account. Close confinement indoors having impaired his health, he gave up his business in 1870, and took a position on steamboats of King, Kenedy and Co. for one year; then he entered the house of Alexander & Co. as book-keeper; remaining with the succeeding firm of Bloomberg & Raphael, he became business manager of the Brownsville house, and in a few years was admitted to the firm. In addition to his present business interests, Mr. Cowen is a member of the School Board.



Out of 62 properties assessed at over \$5,000 on the Brownsville property tax rolls of 1893, Bloomberg and Raphael ranked second at \$53,150.

Mary Margaret McAllen Amberson in her book *I'd Rather Sleep in Texas* goes into detail on the subject of Bloomberg and Raphael's ranching operations. She writes:

On October 21, 1886, Kenedy sued John McAllen over discrepancies with the title of Las Mestenas. One year earlier, Tom Kenedy, who claimed he was given the property by his father Mifflin on September 3, 1885, sold his share in Las Mesteñas to the firm of A.J. Bloomberg and Gilbert (Gabriel?) Matthews Raphael, merchants and livestock traders in Brownsville. Bloomberg, a resident of New York, partnered with Raphael and Louis Cowen, in a mercantile business and as cattle raisers and agents. They operated during the Civil War in Matamoros and John McAllen had done business with the firm as well.

With the undivided interest still in dispute, John McAllen fenced most of the 36,998 acres. Bloomberg and Raphael had an agreement with Kenedy to place twenty-five hundred head of cattle on the land along with McAllen, but proceeded to place six thousand head instead, overtaxing the pasture and causing most of the cattle to die. John McAllen lost twenty-five hundred head, which he attributed to Bloomberg and Raphael's negligence. McAllen complained to Gilbert M. Raphael that the remaining stock had scattered for lack of water and the situation had created a great deal of work for Jose Angel de la Vega, the ranch administrator, to gather and brand the cattle. He presented Raphael with a bill of expenses.

The complicated matter became a Hidalgo County lawsuit initiated by McAllen in July 1890. It then moved through several jurisdictions -- Cameron County, San Antonio, and even Galveston -- as it dragged on for over a decade. After a 14-year court battle, ending in 1908, over the land grant called Las Mesteñas, Pititas y la Abra, A.J. Bloomberg and Eugenie R. Raphael were awarded 62,022 acres. On February 8, 1908, however, they "conceded to McAllen and Young all interest in over two leagues of land, or half of 13,568 acres of the Las Mesteñas grant."

For reasons that are unclear, Eugenie R. Raphael, along with Mrs. Henrietta Chamberlain King and the wife of James Wells, Mrs. Pauline Wells, were noted to be land owners of a parcel of land at the south end of Padre Island, a parcel whose ownership over time would become a contentious issue. The title for the 6,000 acre parcel had passed, by chains of transfer, from María Concepción Ballí to the above individuals. Mrs. H.M. King paid two hundred dollars for the 6,000 acres.

**The *Handbook of Texas Online* carries the following item:**

**RAPHAEL COLLECTION.** The Raphael Collection in Brownsville was composed of family pieces, furniture, and artifacts from France and Scotland collected by Gabriel Matthews Raphael during his years in the import business, beginning in 1866, in Brownsville and Matamoros, Tamaulipas. The collection arrived in Brownsville in April 1960 from New York, where it had been housed, and was donated by Mrs. Gabriel Matthews Raphael and her children Alice, Angus, and Claire. The Raphael Collection is on permanent display at the Stillman House Museum, owned by the Brownsville Historical Association: Vertical Files, Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin. Grace Edman

A brief biography with information from *The New Grove Dictionary of American Music* and *Who's Who of American Women* provides details on Mrs. Claire Raphael Reis, the daughter of G. M. Raphael:

**Claire Raphael Reis** (August 4, 1888 – April 11, 1978) was a music promoter and the founder of the People's Music League in New York City. The League was intended to provide free concerts for immigrants and public schools.

Born Claire Raphael in Brownsville, Texas, Claire married businessman Arthur M. Reis in 1915. She was educated in Europe and New York City. She received a teaching credential and began teaching music in New York schools, using the Montessori method. In 1914, she helped to found the Walden School.

In 1923, Claire Reis was one of the founders of the League of Composers, and served as the league's president for twenty-five years. During this time she promoted many concerts and commissioned many works. One of her protégés was Aaron Copland.

Reis was a prolific author of many articles on music, two catalogs for the International Society for Contemporary Music, and the books *Composers, Conductors and Critics* and *Composers in America: Biographical Sketches* in 1938, a valuable reference work which appeared in a second, enlarged edition in 1947 and was republished in 1977).

Reis served on the board of directors of the New York City Center of Music and Drama. She also helped to found the Women's City Club and was a member of the board of the Work Projects

Administration. She was on the advisory board for music of the 1939 World's Fair.

In 1969, Reis was awarded the Handel Medallion by the City of New York for her contributions to the city's cultural life.

Mrs. Reis helped found the Women's City Club and was a member of the advisory board for New York City of the Work Projects Administration. She served on the advisory committee of music for the 1939 New York World's Fair, and she was appointed by President Franklin Roosevelt to the New York Committee on the Use of Leisure Time. Among the awards she received were the National Association of American Composers and Conductors award for outstanding service (1945–46); the Laurel Leaf award of the American Composers Alliance (1963); a scroll from Mayor John V. Lindsay acknowledging her assistance in founding the City Center (1968); the New York City Handel Medallion for "her outstanding contributions and dedicated efforts for cultural achievement" (1969). Mrs. Reis died in New York on April 11, 1978.

## **The Stein Family**

Jacob Morris Stein is a hard man to trace, namely because he traveled far afield over the years. He was born in Jamestown, Tennessee, on January 14, 1889. His parents were Lewis and Anise Stein. Both, according to the 1920 census information offered by Morris, were born in Kovno, Lithuania, then part of Russia. Lewis was born in 1856 and came to the United States in 1876, while Anise was born in 1867 and came to America in 1888. Because of their origin, Jewish people then would characterize them with the Yiddish term "litvaks."

By the year 1900, Morris, the oldest child in the family, would have two siblings. They were Solomon, born in Texas in December 1894 and then age five, and Bessie, born in Alabama on April 2, 1898, and age two when the census was collected. Lewis was listed as a produce dealer, which may explain why he and his family moved around.

Javier R. Garcia in his article "Adolph Dittman and Brownsville's First Motion Picture Theaters," in *Ongoing Studies in Rio Grande Valley History*, touches on Morris Stein. Garcia recounts an exciting and daring adventure undertaken by Adolph Dittman and Stein, then an Associated Press reporter. It was in May 1913, as the Mexican Revolution edged its way to the Texas border south of Brownsville. The two men, accompanied by local attorney Frank C. Pierce, crossed the Rio Grande into Mexico and, with considerable *chutzpa*, shot a motion picture film of Constitutionalist General Blanco's army about to march on Matamoros. The general himself wineed and dined the unusual intruders. The unique footage was later released by Pathe News as "The Battle of Matamoros" and was exhibited in theaters across the southwest.<sup>1</sup>

In 1920, J.M. Stein was a single man living as a roomer at 920 Charles Street in Brownsville. He was employed as the editor of the *Brownsville Herald* and was residing with 23-year old newspaper printer Bishop Clements and his family.

By the 1930 census, Stein, as newspapermen often do, had moved on. He was in Columbus, Muscogee County, Georgia, near the Alabama border. He and his wife, Mae R., age 39, had a five-year-old son, Lewis A., who had been born in Texas. Louisiana-born Mae's parents were immigrants from France and Germany. Morris was either working as publisher of the morning *Columbus Enquirer* or the evening *Columbus Ledger*. They would jointly publish the Sunday edition and, in later years, merge into the *Columbus Ledger-Enquirer*. Both papers had a long history reaching back into the early 1800s. The *Enquirer* was established in 1828 by none other than Mirabeau Bonaparte Lamar, who would be elected the third

president of the Republic of Texas. In 1926, the *Enquirer-Sun* was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Public Service. Its commendation reads:

For the service which it rendered in its brave and energetic fight against the Ku Klux Klan; against the enactment of a law barring the teaching of evolution; against dishonest and incompetent public officials and for justice to the Negro and against lynching.

The Stein family had strong love for the Brownsville community, as is attested by the following excerpt from a chapter in Ruben Edlestein's self-published book *Ruben Edelstein: A Life and History*, copies of which are located in the Brownsville Historical Association, the University of Texas at Brownsville/Texas Southmost College Library, and the Brownsville public library. Chapter Six on Temple Beth-El mentions Morris' widow:

Temple Beth-El was constructed in West Brownsville on a corner residential lot donated by Mr. Ben Freudenstein. The present Temple Beth-El building at 24 Coveway Drive, was dedicated in 1989. The principal funding for this project came from a legacy from Mrs. Mae Rose Stein, a charter member of Temple Beth-El Sisterhood, in whose will she left a substantial sum of money to Temple Beth-El for the construction of a Sunday School building in honor and memory of her only son, Lewis Albert Stein, a former pupil and teacher of the Sunday School, mentioned above who was killed in action during World War II. Above the door to the school wing is a plaque that reads: A Legacy of Mae Rose and J. Morris Stein, in Remembrance of their son, Lewis Albert Stein - The Lewis Albert Stein, Memorial Religious School, 'Thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children' - Deuteronomy VI, 7.

There were sufficient funds in this legacy to also cover other aspects of the new building, including the kitchen and a part of the sanctuary.

A further example of the Stein's generosity is provided in an article by Emma Perez Treviño, entitled "Putegnat, of Pioneer Family, Dies at 94," which appeared in *The Brownsville Herald* on January 7, 2011:

Barry B. Putegnat Sr. was a man who kept his dear family and his good friends as close to his heart as he kept his faith in God. "It gave meaning to his life," his wife, Alicia, said. Putegnat, the descendant of a Brownsville pioneer family, passed away Thursday, Jan. 6, at his residence surrounded by his loved ones — just days after his 94th birthday.

"I thank God every day for my wonderful husband," Alicia Putegnat said. Putegnat's childhood was not easy. He lost both his parents to influenza when he was just 2½ years old. His grandmother raised him in San Antonio, but he soon returned to Brownsville where he graduated from high school and junior college. His wife recalled the story of a \$20,000 loan that Morris Stein, then owner of Brownsville's local newspaper, provided to her husband and his twin brother, Bill, enabling them to take over a laundry business and hardware store that their father had left them.

It was after the Depression and Stein's kind and generous act enabled the Putegnats to ultimately expand the laundry business into a successful enterprise here, in Corpus Christi, then in San Antonio, followed by New Mexico and Denver. "I will always be grateful to Mr. Stein and his wife for help-

ing my wonderful husband and for the confidence that they had in him," Mrs. Putegnatz said.

She described her husband as a gentleman and a good citizen who was an avid reader, loved to travel, and liked to go fishing with his friends. He also loved the cooking of his caretaker, Carlota Banda. "We have been so blessed," Mrs. Putegnatz said.<sup>2</sup>

## **The Edelstein Family**

The Edelstein family is not documented here because several older members of the family, namely Ben and Ruben, have written memoirs that cover this family's history. Norman Rozeff, utilizing material compiled by Ben Edelstein, has also written an article titled "A Jewish Immigrant and Spanish Proverbs of South Texas" that touches on Morris Edelstein, the family patriarch and a native of Kalvar'y'a, Lithuania, who came to the Lower Rio Grande Valley in 1906.

## **Conclusion**

The Goldring-Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life concludes its Encyclopedia of Southern Communities article on Brownsville with these remarks:

In his 1876 letter to the editor of *The American Israelite*, future Brownsville mayor and then-acting-postmaster Benjamin Kowalski reported on the progress of the small Jewish community on the edge of the south Texas frontier. He concluded his letter with the hope that he had "shown the outside world that there is a small spot in Texas called Brownsville where Jews and Judaism still wave." Through the vicissitudes of almost 170 years of history, Kowalski's words still ring true today.

Secretary and Marker Committee Chairman, Cameron County  
Historical Commission



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## Endnotes

- 1 Javier R. Garcia, "Adolf F. Dittman and Brownsville's First Motion Picture Theaters," in Milo Kearney, Anthony Knopp, and Antonio Zavaleta (Eds.), *Ongoing Studies in Rio Grande Valley History* (Brownsville: The University of Texas at Brownsville and Texas Southmost College, 2011), pp. 87-113.
- 2 <http://www.brownsvilleherald.com/news/kept-121348-family-putegnat.html?pic=1>



# John Samuel Cross: Race and Opportunity on the Border

by

Anthony Keith Knopp

Research on John Samuel Cross has been a long, evolutionary process. Years ago, when the *New Handbook of Texas* was in process of development, Professor Alwyn Barr of Texas Tech University wrote to me concerning his efforts to assemble information on blacks (African-Americans) in Texas history. Specifically, he referred to a source on southern black property owners which included the name of John Cross of Brownsville. Professor Barr requested that I prepare a brief biographical entry on Cross for the *New Handbook of Texas*.

Brownsville sources on Cross were few in number, sketchy, and sometimes inaccurate. The sources did not even definitively establish Cross' race, so that ambiguity was reflected in the entry I produced for the *Handbook*. Years later I obtained information from Matamoros sources that established Cross' race as white and greatly enhanced the story of his life and family.

I am optimistic that I have been able to resolve most of the ambiguities concerning the life and career of John S. Cross, but some issues concerning his family remain. For example, some sources refer to Cross as "Juan S. Cross," but one of his grandsons was named "Juan Samuel," so the reference is often unclear. I leave the resolution of such questions to the genealogists of the Cross family, from whom I have (politely) heard when I have erred in print. And I am especially grateful to Dr. Elsa Cross, a descendent of Cross' first marriage, and Vivian Lehman, a descendant of the second marriage, for information graciously provided.

The story of John Samuel Cross and his family during the 19<sup>th</sup> century is of historical significance because the Cross family was

bi-racial in the era when such a condition was unacceptable in an established white society. This may well explain why Cross moved with his family to Brownsville on the newly established border with Mexico. Brownsville in the 1850's was an unsettled but cosmopolitan frontier community that attracted many seeking a refuge from past indiscretions or a fresh start economically. Such a community could prove more tolerant of Cross and his family.

John Samuel Cross was born on August 16, 1816, in Charleston, South Carolina. He was the son of John Cross and his first wife, Elizabeth Joiner. The elder Cross was the owner of a plantation and apparently relocated to Mississippi and probably Louisiana. When John S. was about 20 years old, he became seriously ill and was sent to a small cabin to be nursed by a slave, according to family legend. The emotional relationship that developed between nurse and patient resulted in a pregnancy and Cross' desire to marry the slave woman. Lydia Foy, the erstwhile nurse, was a native of Martinique, a French possession in the Caribbean.

Not surprisingly, Cross' parents were dismayed by the son's proposed marriage to a slave. Such a marriage would not only be socially unacceptable, but also illegal under prevailing law. In addition, any children born to such a union would carry the status of the mother as slaves themselves. Urged on by his parents, Cross decided to leave the region, and possibly the United States. The parents provided a gun and a horse (although some sources claim a bible and a powder horn) and required him to sign an "IOU" for the \$2,020.54 loaned to him on July 10, 1845. Cross would be virtually excluded from his father's will.

By 1845, John Samuel Cross and his wife had already given birth to two children, Johnson and Madora. The young family appears to have relocated to New Orleans and, later, Galveston during the next few years. The Cross descendents are in possession of a studio portrait photograph made in New Orleans with "Lydia Foy Cross" written on the back. The photograph shows a young black woman, holding a white doll. There is also a daguerreotype

of Lydia and John Samuel together. Eventually the couple had several more children, but sources disagree on the total (six or seven) and even some of the names.

The war between the United States and Mexico (1846-48) concluded with the establishment of the border at the Rio Grande and the creation of Brownsville opposite the Mexican city of Matamoros. John Samuel Cross perceived opportunity, both economic and social, in the border community environment.

Cross and his family definitely arrived in Brownsville by 1850, as the parents and four children appeared in the Cameron County census data for that year. The records show that Cross arrived with the \$2,000 borrowed from his father intact. Although coming from a southern planter background, Cross recognized the necessity of developing a new occupation, suitable to the environment. He soon established himself in the cattle-raising business, in which he was involved, off-and-on, for decades. At least once Cross and a young son drove cattle to Kentucky for sale.

In 1857, Cross moved his family across the river to Matamoros. Sources provided no motivation for this decision, although rising sectional tensions over the slavery issue in the U.S. suggest an explanation: Cross may well have decided to remove his bi-racial family from that environment. He continued his ranching efforts until 1859, when it became "wholly unprofitable by the constant losses from raids and thefts, [and] he was forced to abandon it." The problems on the north side of the Rio Grande culminated in the Cortina raid in 1859; the city had to be rescued from Juan Cortina's attack and occupation by authorities from Matamoros. Cortina was also involved in the cattle rustling occurring on both sides of the border. These were the ultimate challenges that compelled Cross to give up the cattle business at that time.

The American Civil War provided an economic bonanza to Matamoros as Confederate cotton crossed the border at Brownsville to avoid the Union blockade of Confederate ports. John S. Cross saw entrepreneurial opportunity in this situation

and opened a small dry goods and general merchandise store on Abasolo Street in 1862. In 1867 the twenty-one-year-old Meliton (Middleton) Cross joined his father as a partner in the firm J.S. & M.H. Cross. This was the beginning of a firm that would outlive its founding member.

The Cross enterprise in Matamoros prospered during the cotton boom of the Civil War years and eventually grew to occupy half of a block on Abasolo. Diligent application of sound business principles enabled the partnership to grow despite the general economic decline in succeeding decades. Like other border businessmen, the Crosses established an operation on the other side of the Rio Grande to take advantage of shifting national regulations and opportunities. In 1879, the Crosses formed a partnership with Joseph Vivier of Brownsville, operating a general merchandise house on Elizabeth Street. In 1884, the Vivier partnership terminated, as the Crosses opted to proceed on their own. The wealth accumulated by the partnership enabled Meliton Cross to build a Victorian mansion in Matamoros at the corner of Calle Siete and Bustamante, on the mule-drawn street car line to the river. The mansion incorporated many high-quality materials brought from Europe and New Orleans. It remains a unique attraction in Matamoros today.

Research in Brownsville and Matamoros history during the later nineteenth century has been greatly facilitated by the work of a Fort Brown army officer, Lt. W.H. Chatfield. During 1892 Chatfield compiled an amazing amount of data and information and produced an oversized promotional pamphlet entitled *The Twin Cities of the Border and the Country of the Lower Rio Grande*. Chatfield included an entry describing the operations of the Cross family business.

According to Lt. Chatfield, Cross operations, in common with other local businesses, had suffered a decline during the previous two decades. The main establishment remained the store on Abasolo in Matamoros. Large warehouses in the rear contained

goods for shipment by carts to the Mexican cities of Linares, San Fernando, and Victoria. Chatfield claimed that Cross' Matamoros bakery was a major supplier of bread for the city, but Dr. Elsa Cross asserts that the bakery was located in Brownsville. The Brownsville business provided goods to several retail houses and shipped merchandise by steamboat up river as far as Roma.

An advertisement by the Cross partnership also appeared in the Chatfield pamphlet. Announcing their business as wholesale merchandise, the Crosses listed dry goods, groceries, boots, shoes, hats, and notions among their inventory. The ad also prompted the sale of Winchester arms and ammunition, an enduringly profitable border business.

Apparently more settled conditions in the borderlands had induced the Crosses to again invest in ranching operations. By 1892, they owned three or four tracts of land totaling over 9,000 acres in Cameron County, stocked with cattle, horses, and mules to the number of 3,000. The city of Brownsville assessed the property of the Brownville operation at over \$56,000, the highest in the city in 1892. One of the land tracts contained a significant portion of Palo Alto, where the first battle of the U.S.–Mexico War occurred. Apparently John S. built a house on another tract, near what is now the water tower on Alton Gloor Road, although the structure no longer exists. The Cross family was supposedly pressured to sell the house and land to the King Ranch.

As the Cross partnership prospered, so did its social status in Matamoros. Meliton Cross had married into the Lamarque family, and his son, Juan S. Cross, married the daughter of Miguel Tomás Barragán Flores D., *alcalde* (mayor) of Matamoros. Thus, the Cross family and the partnership were well-connected to the elite establishment in Matamoros during the authoritarian Porfirio Díaz regime in Mexico (1876-1911). Descendants speculated that the partnership received concessions from the Díaz government (as did other foreign investors) and that the Crosses wholeheartedly supported the regime.

Lydia Foy Cross, the slave who became the wife of John S., died in 1886, and was recorded as buried in the Brownsville City Cemetery. Three years later, John S. married (María) Jesus(a) Santellana, believed by descendents to have been “a woman of property.” In the mid-1890s, a photograph of John S. appeared in a newly-published book about Texas pioneers. The photograph portrays an elderly man with the visage and beard of a biblical prophet.

In the latter years of his life, John S. Cross and his son continued to expand their operations in Brownsville. At some point, John S. Cross purchased property at Madison and 15<sup>th</sup> Street. The complex of buildings constructed there, probably warehouses, was known as El Globo. After his father’s death, Meliton built the enduring brick structure later known as the Casa Blanca Hotel. The partnership also built an impressive brick store for the lumber yard on the corner of Monroe and 11<sup>th</sup> Street, behind the 1912 Cameron County Courthouse. The Crosses also expanded their line of “merchandise” by becoming the agents (distributors) for San Antonio’s Pearl Beer in the 1890’s.

John Samuel Cross died, at 84 years of age, in 1900. He was buried in the elegant family tomb in the Matamoros cemetery. His will, however, was filed in Cameron County. The will revealed the great wealth of the long-time border merchant and entrepreneur. Cross bequeathed his estate in trust to his son, partner, and executor, Meliton (Middleton) but provided numerous specific bequests. His widow received \$15,000 plus the El Globo properties in Brownsville and some personal items. There were also specific bequests of \$500 to over \$2,000 to siblings and grandchildren. At the end of three years, the residential bulk of the estate was to be distributed equally among his children. Many members of the family would remain wealthy until the stock market crash of 1929.

The life and career of John S. Cross exemplifies the scope of accomplishment possible for a strong-willed, determined individual. Critical to his success, however, was the border environment to



which he brought his bi-racial family. While the border communities of Matamoros and Brownsville did not provide “equality of opportunity” to the diverse national, ethnic, and racial elements arriving in the communities, the frontier nature of the border proved far more hospitable than the well-established, homogeneous communities to the north or south. There are numerous examples of social outcasts and refugees from legal problems migrating to the border after the U.S.-Mexico War, just as happened in Texas during the years preceding the revolution against Mexico. Arriving during the nascent era of Brownsville with the “seed” money necessary to begin a new life, Cross seized the opportunity provided by the less-structured social conditions on the border. His diligence and perseverance secured prosperity and an unusual degree of social acceptance for the Cross family.

University of Texas at Brownsville

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# SOCIAL HISTORY





# Los tamales y la migración en Matamoros, Tamaulipas

por

**Arturo Zárate Ruiz**

No hace mucho tiempo les hacía notar a unos amigos que en Matamoros, Tamaulipas, el tamal de aparentemente mayor venta en la calle no era el local sino el veracruzano. Les señalaba que en muchos lugares, no sólo públicos sino además prominentes por su centralidad e importancia histórica, sólo era posible encontrar ahora los grandotes en hoja de plátano, publicitados con orgullo como “veracruzanos”. De hecho, así ocurre en la plaza más popular de todas, la Allende, o del Guayín,<sup>1</sup> o de la Capilla, también llamada del Tamal por los puestos en donde allí lo venden. Se observa también en el “Mercadito” Treviño Zapata y zona aledaña, que aunque pequeño desempeña justo “extramuros”<sup>2</sup> el rol de mercado popular desde mediados del siglo XX. Se aprecia en los puestos de comida que se instalan, en días festivos, en la plaza Principal o de Armas o Hidalgo. Se reconoce en el comercio informal y ambulante fuera de las grandes plazas comerciales, como los Sorianas y Chedrauis. Y ocurre, por dar otro ejemplo, en la zona del Puente Nuevo, la más cercana al centro de Brownsville.

Nora, mi amiga, explicó la prominencia del tamal veracruzano así:

Es que llegaron los veracruzanos—, refiriéndose entonces a los inmigrantes del estado sureño.

Metiendo cuchara, su esposo Javier me cuestionó, como sorprendido de mis comentarios:

¿Acaso no los has probado? —, refiriéndose ahora a los tamales y sugiriendo así el mejor sabor de los veracruzanos, aun cuando a su esposa, allí presente,

se le reconoce ampliamente como una de las mejores cocineras de tamales locales.

No hace poco sino hace mucho tiempo mamá, una chihuahuense, decidió no cocinar tamales nunca más. Las dos veces que los preparó en casa tardó horas en lograrlo y se embarró de masa y de guiso hasta las orejas. Sus hijos, que éramos chicos, apenas nos comimos uno cada cual. Los tamales de su tierra, aunque no tan grandes como los veracruzanos, no son diminutos como los locales, y el guiso suele ser de res y en trozos. Prefirió desde entonces instruir para que se los preparase a otra inmigrante, ésta de San Luis Potosí, de llegada más reciente y con gran necesidad de encontrar algún trabajo, el que fuese. Además le pediría sólo los que se consumiesen.

Este recuerdo materno y aquel intercambio de observaciones con mis amigos parecerían ofrecerme algunas respuestas sobre la creciente presencia pública del tamal veracruzano en Matamoros. Tanto la experiencia de mis amigos como la de mi mamá apuntarían hacia la influencia de la migración en el cambio. La experiencia de mi amigo Javier añadiría el sabor como respuesta tentativa, con la cual no estaría yo muy de acuerdo, pues las diferencias de sabor entre tamales, creo, dependen menos del estilo que de la buena mano de la cocinera. Finalmente, la experiencia de mamá sugeriría que hay ciertas tareas tan laboriosas y no muy gratificantes como cocinar tamales que aun la mejor tamalera, de poder encargárselas a otra persona, por ejemplo un inmigrante con urgencia laboral, lo haría.

En fin, estas experiencias de mamá y mis amigos, y el cambio que he percibido en la venta de tamales en Matamoros, Tamaulipas, me animaron a explorar un poco más el asunto. Realicé, para este propósito, un pequeño estudio que incluyó mi experiencia de la gastronomía local, una revisión bibliográfica y diez encuestas a cocineros, vendedores o dueños de expendios de tamales. Mis hallazgos parecen confirmar lo de "llegaron los veracruzanos," dicho por mi amiga Nora, y lo de "que se embarren otros de manteca las

orejas”, de mi mamá. Sin embargo, el asunto, creo, es un poquillo más complejo. Por ejemplo, debemos preguntarnos antes no sólo qué es el tamal tamaulipeco sino inclusive qué es el tamal.

### **Los tamales tamaulipecos y los tamales en general**

Parecería que no hubiese duda sobre lo que es un tamal tamaulipeco y, en especial, el matamorenses. W. H. Chatfield reportaba ya en 1893 cómo se acercaban nuestros vecinos norteamericanos a las tamaleras matamorenses para comprarles su producto:

Los americanos escogen a la vendedora que vende los tamales más pequeños y más picosos... y los compran por docena. Cuando la hoja de mazorca, donde se cuece el tamal a vapor, se remueve, un rollo de masa cocida aparece, la cual se come como un plátano. Dentro contiene pollo o res finamente deshebrados, muy sazonados con chile rojo, por supuesto. Pero se deben comer así: picosos.<sup>3</sup>

Prácticamente mis encuestados coincidieron con la descripción. Remarcarían la mayoría que el relleno va limpio de hueso o de pellejos y no en trozos sino desmenuzado o deshebrado. Precisarían además que aun chiquititos la masa es mínima, para que predomine el relleno. A éste lo identificarían, sin embargo, con pollo o puerco, no con la res, aunque como bien sé los hay de vaca, como también los hay de dulce muy variados, de rajas, sin chile, de venado, de jabalí, de camarón seco y de elote. Nora, mi amiga, aclararía que hay diferencias en la textura de la masa: si lleva menos manteca, es quebradiza y porosa; si lleva más manteca, es suave y jugosa. Los mejores tamales locales que recuerde son los de mi madrina Olivia: casi tan chiquitos como un raviol, con mucho relleno, con apenas una capa de masa suavísima, casi tan delgada como el papel, y de una gran variedad, pues los hacía verdes (la masa tenía tomatillo), rojos (con chile de color), de masa sin chile, de puerco, de pollo, de rajas, de queso y de dulce de varias clases. De niño me comía hasta ocho de una sentada.

Cirila Quintero, compañera de trabajo originaria de Morelos, confesó su ignorancia inicial respecto al tamaño de estos tamales. Cuando llegó a Matamoros, dijo, creyó que serían grandes como los de muchos otros lugares en la república, por lo cual se sintió perpleja cuando le preguntaron cuántos quería, como si no bastara uno. Por atención a los anfitriones pidió dos y, ¡oh, sorpresa!, debió haber pedido más. Otra sorpresa fue, añadió— como si hubiese contemplado una herejía contra la ortodoxia tamalera nacional—, que se los sirvieran acompañados con frijoles refritos, salsa y una ensalada de lechuga picadita, esto último jamás antes visto por ella. De hecho, la ortodoxia tamalera local ha impuesto que así se sirva aquí el platillo, si me refiero al menos al período entre mis recuerdos infantiles y el día de hoy.

Con todo, revisando algunos platillos muy de la región y algunos documentos históricos, me encuentro con descripciones del tamal matamorenses que desafían la ortodoxia tamalera tanto nacional como la local.

Por ejemplo, existe todavía en la región el tamal guisado, también llamado masa guisada. Aunque no muy conocido, lo preparan algunos rancheros cuyas familias han vivido en el área desde hace muchas generaciones. Consiste en diluir en una olla con caldo la masa y la manteca, junto con la sazón, hasta que cuajen. Este platillo se parece a la polenta italiana, pero bien cuajado como cualquier otro tamal. Lo que quiero remarcar es que no se cuece la masa al vapor ni se le envuelve en ninguna hoja. Aun así, contra toda ortodoxia, se le llama tamal. Y no veo por qué no, pues sabe a tamal.

Ahora bien, existió además alguna vez en la región el mezquitamal. De él y de los indios caníbales que aquí lo comían con relleno de carne humana nos reportó Alonso de León, El Mozo.<sup>4</sup> W. H. Chatfield, un brownsvillense en el siglo XIX, da también testimonio indirecto del mezquitamal, al referir cómo los indios carrizos preparaban atole de mezquite:



Los indios carrizos, que en algún tiempo vivieron en esta zona, algunos de cuyos descendientes aún se hallan entre nosotros, acostumbraban a recolectar sus vainas anualmente en grandes cantidades, las cuales ya reunidas las escaldaban en agua hirviendo. Luego hacían unas bolas de masa de aproximadamente una libra cada una, las cuales conservaban indefinidamente, hasta que tomaban una de ellas y las disolvían en leche hirviendo, una bebida, dulce, agradable y nutritiva...<sup>5</sup>

Estas bolas de masa de mezquite debieron ser las que, según el testimonio de Alonso de León, El Mozo, les servirían también para preparar el mezquitamal. Sobre éste cabe subrayar que no era de maíz, sino de masa de mezquite; es más, contra toda ortodoxia tamalera, su sabor debió ser distinto al del maíz.

Pero revisemos otros tamales a nivel nacional que rompen con cualesquier ortodoxias ya mencionadas. Fray Toribio de Benavente, por ejemplo, resume toda ciencia del tamal prehispánico a bollos de masa que se cocían en agua.<sup>6</sup> Ni los describe envueltos en una hoja ni cocidos al vapor. Bernardino de Sahagún tiene una lista más extensa de tamales, muchos de los cuales cuadran con la descripción ortodoxa de masa con relleno. Este franciscano sería tan preciso que hasta notaría la marca del relleno, en forma de caracol, por ser contenido por una cubierta de masa que ha sido enrollada. Parecería que nos habla más bien de los tacos si no detallara la forma casi de pelota del tamal (nos habla de “pellas” y de “bambas”).<sup>7</sup> Pero nos habla, además, de los tamales de pescado,<sup>8</sup> los cuales me recuerdan, aun cuando no hayan sido los mismos que él vio, unos de Cholula en que en hoja de maíz se coció al vapor un pescado entero, pero sin masa. En Matamoros ya conocía yo el pescado envuelto en hoja de tamal, pero porque se asa al carbón, como todo, aun la ensalada de pepino, parece prepararse en mi rancho, no me atrevía yo a llamarlo “tamal”. No he sido sino un timorato respecto al término “tamal”. En Mineral del Chico, Hidalgo, no se muerden la lengua al llamar así a las truchas asadas y envueltas en hoja

santa, con un rebanadita de chipotle. Contra cualquier ortodoxia que me quedase, hay varias recetas en la red virtual que indican hacer el “tamal de pescado” sin masa, al horno y envuelto inclusive en papel estaño.<sup>9</sup> Que se use el horno y no el vapor no debería sorprender a nadie porque el tamal huasteco, y por tanto, también tamaulipeco es el zacahuil, el tamal más grande del mundo, el cual se cocina en una canasta enorme y se hornea como barbacoa en un pozo. En fin, Jeffrey Pilcher, uno de los mejores estudiosos del tamal,<sup>10</sup> nos informa que hay tales cosas llamadas tamales de arroz:

En el caso de los tamales también hubo versiones dulces y, en ocasiones, elaboradas con harina de arroz en lugar del obligado nixtamal, versiones que fueron las primeras en ser incluidas en los libros de cocina del siglo XIX.<sup>11</sup>

Baste para cuestionar cualquier ortodoxia tamalera el notar que el tamal precolombino debió de prepararse sin manteca de puerco, pues el puerco no nos llegó a América sino hasta que llegaron aquí los españoles. Y atendiendo a los encuestados para este estudio, la tamalera Mary usa papel estaño para proteger sus tamales veracruzanos, ya envueltos en hoja de plátano, y evitar que al cocinarlos se les escurra la manteca; y la tamalera Nora usa con frecuencia la olla de presión para ahorrarse la mitad de tiempo en tenerlos listos. Varios de los vendedores conservan sus tamales, a la hora de venderlos, no en las ollas donde se cocinaron sino en grandes hieleras de plástico, como las usadas por los pescadores en la playa para guardar cervezas o las piezas atrapadas.

El lector quizá en este momento se pregunte por qué esta discusión mía sobre las visiones ortodoxas y heterodoxas del tamal. Vienen a cuento porque:

1. Si se atiende a una visión heterodoxa del tamal, son muchísimas más las variedades de tamal, distintas al chiquitito en hoja de maíz, que podría uno encontrar en Matamoros, Tamaulipas, gracias a sus inmigrantes. Se encuentran el ya citado zacahuil

y el “veracruzano” cuya prominente presencia en Matamoros me ha movido a este estudio; también están —y he allí la heterodoxia extrema— los rollitos de parra rellenos de arroz y borrego, cocidos al vapor, que nos han traído algunos coahuilenses de la zona vitivinícola, los cuales a su vez provienen de la zona oriente del Mediterráneo (no son otra cosa que los dolmas turcos o griegos); tenemos, aunque rarísimos y precocinados, los dim sum o tamalitos chinos (no son los rollos fritos, sino los mini raviolles de pasta china rellena con guisos exquisitos y jugosos y cocidos al vapor en pequeñas parrillas de madera); y abundan, por supuesto, los raviolles “italianos” precocinados y en venta en las grandes tiendas.

2. Vienen además a cuento estas consideraciones heterodoxas porque, cabe uno preguntarse por qué, si hay en Matamoros tanta variedad de tamales fuereños, sólo, el estilo veracruzano es el que ha adquirido la mayor prominencia en los lugares más públicos y populares. Por decirlo de otra manera, si el cambio cultural y culinario es resultado de la inmigración, del “llegaron los veracruzanos,” ¿no debería ser este cambio parejo y reflejar, como es el caso de Matamoros, todos los grupos de gente que aquí han llegado, en vez de reflejar casi solamente a un único grupo, el de los veracruzanos? ¿Por qué, con tan variada inmigración, no ha prosperado aquí la diversificación tamalera, sino más bien una estandarización?

### **Algunas respuestas a estas preguntas**

Una revisión de las encuestas realizadas muestra que nueve de los diez entrevistados eran de fuera de Matamoros. Aun con la ínfima muestra, parecería que el hacer o el vender tamales es después

de todo trabajo de migrantes. Con todo, si añadimos a la muestra el personal adicional que trabaja en los expendios, la proporción entre migrantes y matamorenses es menor, siete de tres. Es más, el origen del vendedor o del trabajador no tiene necesariamente que ver con el tipo de tamal vendido. Por ejemplo, los cocineros de la fonda de tamales “veracruzanos” aledaña al Puente Nuevo son matamorenses. Por ejemplo, doña Rita, una de las vendedoras de tamales tamaulipecos con más tiempo y éxito en su negocio, es de Jalisco. Ella es quien, en temporada, prepara tamales de venado y de jabalí, tan propios de las más rancias tradiciones locales.

La encuesta menos que ayudar a precisar qué es el tamal veracruzano ayudó a poner en duda que fuese uno, lo que no me sorprendió en absoluto.<sup>12</sup> Ciertamente en Matamoros hay una tendencia a identificar todo tamal grande envuelto en hoja de plátano con el tamal veracruzano. A esto ayuda que así se publiciten. Algunos precisarían que el relleno además va en trozo, y con todo y hueso y pellejos. Con todo, la tamalera Ildelfonsa, quien se considera orgullosamente veracruzana y vende “verdaderos” tamales veracruzanos, confiesa que sus tamales no llevan el relleno en trozo o con todo y hueso y pellejos, sino que la carne va desmenuza como lo demanda el consumidor local. Respecto a la masa, algunos cocineros la precuecen en una olla antes de verterla en la hoja de plátano, cuando otros la embarran inmediatamente después de amasarla con el resultado de alargar considerablemente y tal vez de manera contraproducente su cocimiento al vapor. Algunos dicen que la masa del veracruzano es de maíz triturado con más manteca mientras que la del tamaulipeco es de maíz de molido fino y con menos manteca. Otros dicen que las masas de ambos son iguales. Hay, en fin, tamaleras como Guadalupe que venden en su expendio tamales grandotes, unos envueltos en hoja de plátano y otros envueltos en hoja de mazorca, pero prácticamente con la misma masa y el mismo relleno. ¿Hace la hoja de plátano, por mucho sabor que le dé al tamal, que sea veracruzano? ¿Hace la de mazorca, por mucho que evite el sabor de plátano, que así grandote pueda aceptársele como tamaulipeco? En fin, el tamalero Donato y la tamal-

era Toñita admiten, cada uno por su lado, que mucha gente identifique a sus tamales como “veracruzanos” porque son enormes y envueltos en hoja de plátano. Sin embargo, uno aclara que sus tamales son potosinos porque él es de San Luis Potosí, y la otra aclara que sus tamales son chiapanecos porque ella es de Chiapas. Si alguien lo duda, añade, que note que la salsa con que amasa sus tamales es de tomate no de chile.

Hay, aún así, algunas diferencias relevantes entre los tamales, identifíqueseles como se les identifique. Quiero destacar las de la preparación, del tamaño, de los ingredientes, de la manera de servirlos, todo lo cual redundando en el precio para el consumidor y tal vez también para el vendedor. Fue prácticamente una respuesta unánime el que es más difícil embarrar la hoja de mazorca que la de plátano. Esta dificultad exige más tiempo para prepararlos, sobre todo cuando se decide que el tamal “tamaulipeco” sea de veras diminuto. Se invierte también mucho más tiempo en cocer los tamales “tamaulipecos” que los “veracruzanos”, en caso de que estos últimos apuren su preparación con masa precocida en olla. Ahora bien, por ser grandes los tamales “veracruzanos”, muchos consumidores se llenan con uno, mientras que ocho “tamaulipecos” dejarían con hambre a un tragón: por ello “se venden por docena”, repitieron los entrevistados como si se hubieran aprendido un estribillo. La proporción de ingredientes también difiere. Los grandotes llevan mucha masa y menos relleno, y los chiquitos, al revés. Además, según señala la tamalera Nora, los tamales “tamaulipecos” de servirse en un plato en el mismo expendio, incluyen rigurosamente sus frijoles refritos, su salsa y su ensalada de lechuga picadita al lado.

¿Qué consecuencias tiene todo esto en el precio? Casi de manera unánime los tamaleros negaron que la ganancia para ellos fuera mayor con un tamal que con el otro. Doña Rita explicó: “Aquí la gente es muy llorona, no quieren pagar por el trabajo.” Aun así, el costo de producción debe ser menor en los tamales que se cocinan más pronto y fácilmente; en los de mayor proporción de la masa, por ser ésta más barata que el relleno; en los que por su tamaño

quitan el hambre más fácilmente al consumidor, y en los que no llevan rigurosamente la guarnición de frijoles, salsa y ensalada al servirse, lo cual implica un costo adicional. En pocas palabras, el costo de producción debe ser menor en el tamal que se identifica con Veracruz. Este costo de producción se refleja finalmente en lo que necesita invertir, para comer, un consumidor. A muchos comensales les basta un tamal “veracruzano” de \$12.<sup>00</sup> pesos, que es su precio actual, como notó la tamalera Mary. La docena de tamales “tamaulipecos” llega a costar \$55.<sup>00</sup> pesos, como sucede con los tamales de doña Rita. En breve, para el consumidor que le preocupa su dinero le resulta más barato comer tamales “veracruzanos”. Esta baratura explicaría, en parte, la creciente demanda suya.

Por supuesto, el sabor también importa, como lo sugeriría mi amigo Javier, y como lo expresaron varios de mis entrevistados. La preferencia podría en algún momento reflejar meros gustos, por ejemplo, el de los cocineros entrevistados: se inclinaron sin ningún bochorno por describir los suyos como los más sabrosos. La preferencia podría también referirse a las costumbres del consumidor según su lugar de origen: en algunos expendios de tamales veracruzanos, ya los consumidores, a la hora de la entrevista, eran veracruzanos, ya eran identificados por los encuestados como frecuentemente veracruzanos. Y así los consumidores de tamales tamaulipecos fueron algunas veces identificados como tamaulipecos. La tamalera veracruzana Ildelfonsa remarcó que los veracruzanos están acostumbrados a la hoja de plátano mientras que los tamaulipecos a la hoja de maíz y además al relleno deshebrado limpio de huesos y pellejos. Por ello, explicó, para conquistar a los tamaulipecos hace sus tamales veracruzanos con carne deshebrada limpia.

La calidad importa. La tamalera veracruzana Ildelfonsa aclaró que finalmente sus consumidores más frecuentes no son necesariamente veracruzanos, sino recomendados de origen muy diverso que vienen preguntando por sus tamales. La tamalera Mary defendió su tamal no por veracruzano, sino por bueno. Lamentó que

había otros expendios de tamales en que el producto veracruzano era muy feo, porque sus cocineros no lo sabían hacer. “Eso es mala publicidad”, se quejó. Doña Rita, quien destaca por la antigüedad de su negocio, se regocijó porque se le reconozca la calidad de sus tamales, es más, que se los sigan comprando aun consumidores del extremo opuesto de la ciudad, aunque sus docenas sean \$10 pesos más caras que en otros expendios (no hablemos de sus tamales de venado, de jabalí o con doble o triple relleno según lo solicitan algunos clientes, por lo cual deben pagar mucho más).

Con todo, el precio sigue siendo relevante sobre todo para muchos consumidores de bajo ingreso. Al menos dos de los encuestados, quienes vendían tamales veracruzanos, señalaron que sus clientes eran “obreros” o “trabajadores”. En cierto modo, que se compre a veces el tamal tamaulipeco tiene también que ver también con el precio. Los hacen muchas mamás para llevarlos a las escuelas, dijo la tamalera Toñita. No compran el tamal grandote veracruzano porque los niños comen más poco, alrededor de dos tamalitos tamaulipecos, que amontarían alrededor de \$8.<sup>00</sup> pesos por cabeza.

Ahora bien, la preeminencia del precio en un público popular parece favorecer no tanto a la veracruzación del tamal, sino a su estandarización. No es que sea de Veracruz lo que, tras el análisis, parece importar sino que sea de \$12.<sup>00</sup> pesos y llene la panza, por grandote y masudo. La tamalera Guadalupe, en el Puente Nuevo, vende así su mismo tamal envuelto a veces en hoja de plátano, envuelto en otras en hoja de mazorca: lo que importa es el precio y el que algunos por costumbre los prefieran con una envoltura en lugar de la otra. La estandarización no implica que el tamal de Veracruz, por grandote, sea el que se imponga. Se impone además una fusión de estilos que responde a los gustos. Ya mencioné que la tamalera Ildelfonsa rellena sus tamales veracruzanos con carne limpia y deshebrada.

Por supuesto, este análisis no niega de ningún modo el “pues llegaron los veracruzanos” de mi amiga Nora. De no haber llegado ellos u otros sureños, como los potosinos don Donato y doña Mayo,

y la chiapaneca doña Toñita, no conoceríamos tan bien, ahora, el tamal grandote y envuelto en hoja de plátano. Doña Ildefonsa y doña Mary además señalan que preparan tamales veracruzanos y no tamaulipecos porque, como veracruzanas, los propios son los que mejor saben preparar. Los veracruzanos se han preocupado además por publicitar orgullosamente su producto y es por ello que han ocupado, añade Doña Rita, lugares públicos muy prominentes e históricos como la Plaza del Tamal o de la Capilla, el Mercadito, y muchos otros sitios populares. Así se les ha facilitado el darlos a conocer, explica.

Cabe agregar en esta explicación sobre la creciente popularidad del tamal veracruzano el factor laboral. El “aquí la gente no quiere pagar por el trabajo”, según se quejó doña Rita, y el “que otros se embarren de masa las orejas”, según decidió hace años mi mamá, tienen consecuencias laborales. No cualquier gente se va a dedicar, como negocio, a preparar tamales si se le paga muy poco por hacerlo y si cuesta muchísimo tiempo y esfuerzo el lograrlo. Sin contar las horas de atención de ventas, se invierten hasta ocho horas diarias en preparar tamales si se incluye el ir a comprar y conseguir los ingredientes cada día. En forma unánime todos los encuestados respondieron que ahora muchas amas de casa tamaulipecas prefieren comprar tamales a prepararlos ellas mismas por el tiempo y esfuerzo que se invierte en conseguirlos. Es más, aunque varios de los encuestados afirmaron que seguirían preparando ellos mismos sus tamales de tener mucho dinero o mucho mejor empleo, en vez de comprarlos, porque son los suyos los que les gustan, porque la opción laboral no responde a más dinero sino a mayor cercanía con los hijos, y porque una persona debe seguir trabajando o se vuelve inútil, otros encuestados sin ningún bochorno reconocieron que de tener mejores oportunidades económicas se olvidarían de preparar sus tamales y los comprarían a quienes se los vendiesen. Mi amiga Nora puntualizó:

Que hayan llegado los veracruzanos es una influencia. Pero también lo es que quienes llegan de Veracruz no tienen empleo fijo y venden tamales



para salir adelante. Eso hace que ellos sean quienes los vendan más.

### **Algunas observaciones finales**

Abrazando una visión heterodoxa de los tamales, quizá mis preferidos sean, después de los de mi madrina Olivia o de los rollitos de parra de la suegra de mi hermano, los dim sum que comí en el barrio chino de Chicago. Se sirven calientes, aún humeando, en la misma parrillita de madera donde se cocieron al vapor. Son diminutos y su masa es suave y delicada, a punto de ser transparente. Por chiquitos se explica que uno deba tomarlos con palillos chinos y no con un tosco tenedor. Sus rellenos son variadísimos y sorprendidos: la gelatina de la pata de pato, los camarones con castaña de agua, los de verduras bien cocidas pero crujientes con salsa de jengibre, las setas xiang gu con tallos de bambú, los de hongos shiitake en salsa de ostión. Todos se deshacen jugosos en la boca. Los meseros van ofreciéndolos de mesa en mesa y uno escoge entre su gran diversidad. Al final del banquete uno debe pagar bien caro.

Pero aun estas delicadezas sucumben por las tendencias de estandarización. En la región matamorenses, los dim sum que se consiguen son los de supermercado, algo así como los tacos "Senorita" en los estantes norteamericanos de comida "étnica". Pero al parecer eso aun ocurre en Hong Kong. De allí escriben Leire y David:

La masa la compramos directamente hecha, cortada en trozos redonditos y planos. En teoría la puede hacer también uno mismo, pero eso ya sí que es un trabajo... La gente prefiere comprarla ya hecha... por otros chinos... con más paciencia que se dedican exclusivamente a preparar la "piel"... y venderla.<sup>15</sup>

Sospecho que les ocurre a los chinos lo que desde hace años a nosotros con las tortillas de maíz. Ya nadie en Matamoros sigue el proceso completo de prepararlas en nixtamal, en el metate y en el

comal. Uno va a comprarlas a la tortillería y de maseca, porque es una lata hacerlas. ¿Nos ocurrirá lo mismo con los tamales?

Aunque la migración puede contribuir a la diversificación cultural, y hemos de reconocerlo de enumerar la gran variedad heterodoxa de tamales en Matamoros, esa diversificación no se garantiza si los productos propios de la diversificación son difíciles de elaborar y si se paga poco el esfuerzo de hacerlo. Al final lo que se volverá popular no son las muchas variedades del producto sino tal vez un híbrido de bajo costo y fácil de comercializar, donde las influencias de muchos grupos se amalgamen para dar gusto a todos, pero también donde el menor costo y menor esfuerzo imperen para sobrevivir donde apenas los consumidores pagan el trabajo de cocinarlos.

Aunque sabroso, lo que se vende más ahora es un tamal grandote y masudo, llámesele veracruzano o tamaulipeco. De hecho, ya no encuentro por ninguna parte en Matamoros tamales tan exquisitos y pequeños como los que preparaba mi madrina Olivia. Aun los tamales tamaulipecos actuales son del tamaño doble y con menos relleno. Para el tamal gourmet, necesitaríamos artistas dispuestos a producirlos y sibaritas dispuestos a pagarles. Entonces el tamal grandote veracruzano sería como una Capilla Sixtina de Miguel Ángel, y el tamal tamaulipeco como un mini panel de madera de Vermeer, donde los colores y la luz aun deleitan en el menor milímetro.<sup>14</sup>

El Colegio de la Frontera Norte (Oficina de Matamoros)

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#### Notas

- 1 Se llama así la plaza tanto por los "guayines" o carretas que en el siglo XIX se usaron para transportar el algodón al puerto, como por el platillo del mismo nombre que se servía allí desde entonces: una tortilla de huevo rellena de frijoles y bañada en salsa de chile.

- 2 Durante el siglo XIX y parte del XX, el centro antiguo de Matamoros se encontraba cercado por una serie de fuertes y trincheras, no necesariamente muros, que servían de defensa militar. Estas fortificaciones, salvo la Casa Mata, ya han desaparecido.
- 3 W. H. Chatfield, *The Twin Cities Brownsville, Texas, Matamoros, Mexico, of the Border, and the Country or the Lower Río Grande* (Nueva Orleans: E. P. Brandao, 1893), p. 30.
- 4 Citado por Oscar Rivera Saldaña, *Frontera Heroica, I. Colonización del Noreste de México (1748-1821)*, (Matamoros: 1994), p. 8.
- 5 W. H. Chatfield, *The Twin Cities Brownsville, Texas, Matamoros, Mexico, of the Border, and the Country or the Lower Río Grande* (Nueva Orleans: E. P. Brandao, 1893), p. 44.
- 6 Ver Fray Toribio de Benavente, *Historia de los indios de la Nueva España*, (México: Editorial Porrúa, 2001) I, ii., pp. 25.
- 7 Ver Bernardino de Sahagún, *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España*, (México: Editorial Porrúa, 1992) VIII, p. xiii.
- 8 Ver Bernardino de Sahagún, *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España*, (México: Editorial Porrúa, 1992) x, p. xix.
- 9 Ver, por ejemplo, <http://www.tortilladigital.com/receta.php?id=228>. Consultado el 10 de noviembre de 2011.
- 10 Ver, por ejemplo, Jeffrey M. Pilcher, ¡Que vivan los tamales! La comida y la construcción de la identidad mexicana (México: Ciesas/Reyna Roja/Conaculta, 2001).
- 11 Jeffrey Pilcher, “¡Tacos, joven! Cosmopolitismo proletario y la cocina nacional mexicana”. *Dimensión Antropológica*, Año 13, Vol. 37, mayo-agosto, 2006. 115, quien cita *El Cocinero Mexicano o colección de los mejores recetas para guisar al estilo americano y de las más selectas según el método de las cocinas Española, Italiana, Francesa e Inglesa*, 3 vols., (México, Imprenta de Galván a cargo de Mariano Arévalo, 1831) vol. 1, pp. 307-309; *Novísimo arte de cocina, o Excelente colección de las mejores recetas para que al menor costo posible, y con la mayor comodidad, pueda guisarse á la española, francesa, italiano é inglesa; sin omitirse cosa alguna de lo hasta aquí publicado, para sazonar al estilo de nuestro país*, (México, Impreso en la oficina del C. Alejandro Valdés, 1831), pp. 47, 50.
- 12 Vamos, Veracruz es uno de los estados con mayor diversidad culinaria y cultural en la república.
- 13 “Leire y David en China, Receta de dumplings”, <http://leirey david.com/index.php/2010/12/receta-de-dumplings/>. Consultado en 20/08/2011.
- 14 Personas entrevistadas (Entre octubre y noviembre del 2011):
1. María, vendedora ambulante.
  2. Mayo, dueña del Café Mayo en la Colonia Obrera.
  3. Juana, dueña del expendio El Bocadito en la Av. Internacional.
  4. Toñita, dueña de un expendio en la 12ª y Bustamante.
  5. Nora, ama de casa, y su esposo Javier. Cocinan para su propia familia. Sólo han vendido tamales cuando los piden en la escuela de sus hijas.

6. Donato. Vende en un triciclo sus tamales, especialmente cerca del Chedraui de la calle 6<sup>a</sup>.
7. Guadalupe. Vende tamales en un puesto dentro de una casa de cambio, cerca del Puente Nuevo Internacional.
8. Doña Rita. Dueña del expendio Doña Rita de la Colonia San Francisco.
9. Ildelfonsa. Dueña del expendio Tamales Veracruzanos en la Colonia Buenavista.
10. Mary. Dueña del expendio Doña Lita en el Mercadito Treviño Zapata.

# The Life and Times of Raúl E. “Don Barbacoa” and Consuelo Cisneros and their Barrio Store in Raymondville

by

Ruby Cisneros Casteel

Often little noticed by the historian, the lives of the vast majority of Valley residents have been one of a daily struggle to survive. The recounting of one such family and their little *barrio* store serves as a reminder of just what life in the Valley has meant for the masses. “*Un ratito se hace un raton,*” was one of Raul Cisneros’ favorite sayings, meaning “Get moving and get busy with your goals; don’t sit and wait for something to happen.”

Raúl was one of nine children (eight of whom grew to adulthood) born to Manuel Maria Cisneros Treviño and María Hilaria Calvillo Munguía. In 1907, Manuel María and Hilaria purchased and paid for eight lots in what is now downtown Raymondville and established a red-framed shingle grocery store. Although the family was by no means affluent, they were financially stable, owning as many as thirty lots in Willacy County by 1910.<sup>1</sup> Six months after their youngest child, Carmen, was born, Manuel succumbed to the influenza epidemic of 1918. A widow with eight young children, Hilaria continued to operate the store. She married Eutiquio Pérez about 1922, and they jointly operated the store changing its name to Pérez Store. Two additional children were born to María Hilaria and Eutiquio Pérez in Raymondville.

Only fourteen-years-old when his step-father Eutiquio died in 1926, Raúl began working to help his mother after the end of eighth grade. Hilaria advertised five mules for sale and sold four lots, and newspaper clippings announced that the family was delinquent for \$0.34 for State Taxes and \$0.31 for County Taxes.<sup>2</sup> The store closed about 1928, and Raúl’s mother began to take in washing

and ironing to help feed her children. The Great Depression took its toll on the family. Millions of Americans were left homeless and penniless, and many became dependent on the government to feed them. Raúl and his brothers who were old enough swept the post office and did menial jobs for people in town. About 1929, Oscar Ruben Cisneros, sixteen years old, convinced his mother to falsify documents on his birth date so that he could enlist in the Navy. The same year, Raúl and his next oldest brother, Israel, went to work for Mr. E. W. Bauer, who owned a grocery store next to the MoPac Depot. They worked as clerks from seven to seven on week days and from seven to nine on Saturdays. Sometimes his brother also worked as a chauffeur for the Bauers. Raúl's salary was \$9.00 a week.<sup>3</sup> Around 1930, Hilaria learned that she was terminally ill, and made arrangements for the local 45-year-old Methodist pastor to marry her fifteen-year-old daughter, Leonor. Presumably, Hilaria hoped her young married daughter and her husband would take care of the younger children. In 1931, her eldest son, Francisco, who had a family and worked as a deputy constable, was shot and killed while on duty. Circumstances for the family worsened when Hilaria died in 1932. With the high sense of honor and responsibility instilled by their mother, the older siblings' menial jobs helped them to stay together, sheltered and fed. Dolores Anzaldúa Cisneros said that her husband, Ralph Cisneros, would tell how his older brothers Raúl and Israel, who were working, shared their meal tickets with the younger siblings. "Those that worked (making reference to the older siblings) and had money were able to buy a meal ticket and purchase a meal at a restaurant. They still continued living in their home, but they had nothing," she stated.<sup>4</sup>

Consuelo Rios Ayala, the girl with whom Raúl fell in love, had enjoyed a more prosperous upbringing. She was the fourteenth of eighteen children born to Aurelio Rios Anzaldúa and Maria Salomé Ayala Chavez, and one of thirteen that either grew to be at least a teenager, to marry, and to have children. Born in 1912, Consuelo had grown up in affluence. Her parents, Aurelio Rios

Anzaldúa and Maria Salomé Ayala Chavez, should probably be described as aristocrats. They lived in the small agricultural town of General Terán, Nuevo León, Mexico, known for its beautiful orchards and large haciendas. Her father was a boot maker, saddle maker, and proprietor of a tannery who had acquired wealth during the Mexican Revolution by supplying soldiers with saddles, horse bridles, boots, and other leather items. Additionally, the means of transportation at the time were horse and buggy, and Aurelio was able to supply the community need for items used in the horse-and-buggy transportation of that time. Aurelio also owned the town's electric company, a concrete brick factory, and a dairy farm, as well as farm animals and agricultural fields.<sup>5</sup>

Aurelio was born in Reynosa, grew up in Galeana, and later returned to his birthplace, where, as a teenager, he helped his father, Miguel Rios Medellín, sell leather goods.<sup>6</sup> Along the Mexican border, under the influence of Anglos who had migrated from northern states, he learned to speak English and converted to Methodism—an important event that influenced many relatives and descendants. He reportedly was a dedicated Christian, and with his personal funds helped establish the first Methodist Church and parsonage in the town of General Terán (where, reportedly, thirty-eight police officers resigned due to drug cartel violence in February 2011). Aurelio continuously whistled and sang hymns as he worked the leather. One of his favorite hymns was “*Trabajar, Trabajar.*” He loathed laziness, and his love for his vocation was evident in his financial success. He especially deemed himself a servant of God, a theme of his favorite hymn. His children were expected to be serious, act properly, and read the Bible daily.<sup>7</sup> The family traveled to Monterrey yearly to have a family portrait made, and attend political functions.

Aurelio was a close friend to several Mexican presidents. His friendship was closest with President Elías Plutarco Calles, his partner in the utility company and fellow resident of General Terán. Both men were Freemasons, and Calles and Don Anibal Davila preceded Aurelio as *alcalde* (mayor)<sup>8</sup>. Consuelo loved to attend po-

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litical functions with her father, and accompanied him whenever possible. She remembered the functions as major events, well attended with music and festive. Two of their five homes had names (Casa Blanca and Casa Verde), and, even though they moved from one house to another, previous homes were not sold when a new one was occupied. These homes were lavishly furnished, and Maria Salomé had the finest linen, silverware, and household accessories. Many of the children, both male and female, attended *el Colegio Roberts* in Saltillo. One of the eldest, Israel Rios attended the Texas Mexican Industrial Institute in Kingsville,<sup>9</sup> led by President Dr. James William Skinner, who had been the pastor of the First Presbyterian Church, the first Protestant church in Brownsville.<sup>10</sup> All of them were expected to get an education, and all of the sons were expected to craft leather. Although Consuelo didn't graduate from *Colegio Roberts*, she was expected, like her sisters, to learn fine arts, including oil painting and piano playing.

A parting of the young Raúl from Consuelo prompted a letter exchange between them. From Raymondville, on February 10, 1933, Raúl wrote, in Spanish, to Consuelo that it was sad for him to be unable to say goodbye in person, but that his job prohibited him from doing so. He wrote that she would surely not be surprised to receive his letter, as his heart was full of love and sentiments for her. He regretted that he was now unable to explain to her how he felt about her, but he had to be satisfied with expressing himself via his writings and anxiously await a response from her.<sup>11</sup> She had been to Raymondville to visit her eldest brother, Abraham Rios Ayala. Abraham, in 1925, had established the Rios Boot Company in Raymondville<sup>12</sup> and, in 1927, had married Elvira Garcia of San Benito. An older sister, Ofelia Rios, had married Rosendo Rodriguez about 1931 and had opened a grocery store on 5<sup>th</sup> and Yturria Street in Raymondville. Reportedly, Raúl had been spell-bound when the 21-year-old brown-eyed Consuelo who was visiting from Mexico her brother and sister had run an errand and made a purchase at *la bodega* – Mr. Bauer's grocery store. However, Raúl had been unable to get off work, and she

had left, returning home to the town of General Terán. Raúl wrote again, on February 20, 1933, and the third letter is dated June 13, 1933, addressing the long-awaited letter from her that arrived on June 7. Raúl was firm about his affection for her and asked if she shared any affection for him.

They wrote several more letters to each other, and she was impressed with his eloquence. She loved his expressions and his poetry, but – even though she never expressed it verbally – she was doubtful of forming a relationship with this store clerk or manager. Consuelo had business skills and a mind equal to a college graduate. She was a forward thinker, a self-made business woman who thought things well out well before taking action. She shared Raúl's love for Christianity and his love and concern for his family, especially his younger siblings and grandmother, Filomena Munguia Calvillo.

*"Gato que se duerme no caza raton"* ("The sleeping cat doesn't hunt the mouse.") The couple courted for two more years via letters and occasional visits from Consuelo when she visited her brother and sister. During the courtship, Consuelo encouraged Raúl to seek a better job, and he began saving money. On February 16, 1935, Raúl wrote that he was tired of working for others and had terminated his job at *la bodega*. He planned to earn more money and would keep her posted. On March 6, 1935, he wrote again that he was working at *la bodega chiquita*, and longed for her to be beside him to help him. *La bodega chiquita* was the original store that his father and mother had owned and operated, and he and his brother Israel José had reopened it with their savings and with money loaned to Raúl by *"una señorita hermana de la novia de Oscar."*<sup>13</sup> The lady that made him the loan was Tomasa "Tommie" Villarreal's sister Sally. Tommie later married Oscar Ruben Cisneros. His excitement over the prospect of bringing his fiancée to where he was getting by on "scraps" had changed, and he was sure that they had a bright future. All of the children, with the exception of Francisco and Manuel – the two eldest – lived in the family homestead adjacent to the old family store. A newspaper clipping

reports that Raúl and Israel had, since 1930 (an error), operated one of the best Spanish-American grocery stores in Raymondville until it closed in 1936. The article states that the store, located on Sixth and Main Street, was later re-opened by Manuel Maria Cisneros (Raúl's oldest brother who had the same name as their father), and it states that between the years 1936-1940, it had been a café.<sup>14</sup>

Raúl wrote a letter acknowledging that he was glad that Consuelo had agreed to live in the family homestead along with his siblings. With high hopes and expectations, he reassured her that their time in the homestead would be temporary. It was – but not of their free will.

Filomena Munguia Calvillo, Raúl's grandmother, worried about the orphaned children and made trips from Edinburg to visit with them whenever possible. Weak and ill, she traveled in August, 1935, to visit them, against the wishes of other relatives in Edinburg, and she died in their home, on September 2, 1935.<sup>15</sup> Filomena was still mourning the loss of her daughter Hilaria and wanted to die in the same surroundings as her daughter; her wish was granted when she died in Raymondville. The night before, all the children had gathered around their grandmother and listened to her tell stories of their parents' courtship.<sup>16</sup> Their grandmother told them of how their mother had been reluctant, but how their father had never felt totally rejected. Filomena was happy for her grandson's impending marriage, and asked him to wear a black (Fidora) hat and black tie for his wedding. With a joint ownership of the business between the brothers, Raúl and Israel, and the anticipation of a bright future, Raúl and Consuelo were married on October 27, 1935, in General Terán by the Rev. Daniel de la Garza, pastor of the Bethel Methodist Church in Raymondville and his ex-brother-in-law. Shortly after the marriage, *la bodega chiquita* failed again, and the entire Cisneros family, including Consuelo, was forced to move because they were facing foreclosure due to delinquent taxes.<sup>17</sup> Raúl and Consuelo moved to a two-room frame home owned and offered "rent free" by her eldest brother, Abraham. Consuelo

often said that if it had not been for her brother, they would have been homeless. The younger children went to Brownsville to live with Leonor, the older sister who had married and was now divorced from the pastor.

Again, Raúl was forced to do many odd, menial jobs, including working for Carmen Garza, a rancher friend in Raymondville. On August 5, 1937, Consuelo was visiting her parents again, and Raúl wrote to inform her that he was working for a car dealer, had sold a car, and had the prospect of another sale. A week later, on August 13, 1937, he apparently sold the cars and earned \$50.00. He encouraged his wife to stay with her parents as long as she wanted, as he was fine. He wrote that he missed her, and was eating at his will and on his own schedule. The young family continued to live a pauper lifestyle. Raúl had no transportation and depended on his brother-in-law Abraham to take him to Reynosa to either take his wife to, or pick her up, at the train station in Reynosa.

After weeks of correspondence, the mood of the letters changed. Raúl described the anxiety and sadness that overcame him when Abraham and Elvira drove him to the Reynosa train station to pick up Consuelo, and she was not there. He wrote again and insisted that she come home. "This time, I will have to borrow someone else's car as Abraham is going to the Methodist Church convention in San Antonio," he explained.<sup>18</sup>

In 1938, when their first-born child, Raúl Ruben Cisneros ("Coy") was born, Carmen Garza "gifted" the young couple a cow so that they would have milk for the baby. Consuelo had gone with their infant child to visit her parents where life was much better, and she wrote to Raúl that since they now had a child, he had to find the means to improve their lives. She also reminded him to pay the \$3.00 that they owed the Rodriguez family.<sup>19</sup>

Shortly thereafter, Consuelo sold the cow. With the profit, along with other small savings, she and Raúl purchased Lot three (3), Block sixteen (16) in Raymondville for ten dollars and "other considerations admitted to be valuable to be paid lots on the cor-

ner of 2<sup>nd</sup> and Raymond Street in 1944 from Manuel and Adela Quintanilla" (*sic*). The total purchase price was \$60.00.<sup>20</sup> Again with the help of one of her siblings, Ofelia provided a small building, and Consuelo opened her own small grocery store on that corner while Raúl had finally landed a stable job in the early 1940s, working as the store manager at the Rodriguez Grocery Store owned by his sister-in-law.

World War II caused tremendous shortages in commodities. At the beginning of the war, a rationing system was implemented in the United States. The rationing system was to ensure equal amount of foods and items that were scarce to all citizens regardless of economic status. If an item was on the ration list, wealthy individuals were subjected to the same rationing system. Individuals could not simply walk into a store and purchase as much as they wanted. Tires were the first to be rationed, in 1942, because production of rubber had been interrupted. The Japanese had invaded the Dutch East Indies, which produced ninety percent of America's raw rubber. Coffee, sugar, gasoline, fuel oil, meat, lard, cheese, processed foods such as canned, bottled or frozen, dried fruits, shoes, stoves, butter, and margarine were among some of the items that were rationed in 1943.<sup>21</sup>

Dolores Cisneros recalled rationing. People had to have coupons to buy sugar and coffee. People paid with their money for the coupons, but the coupons allowed each family only a portion of coffee and sugar or other commodities that were rationed. Dolores remembered the coupons as a booklet with little stamps.<sup>22</sup> War ration books were issued to each American family, restricting the commodities and the amounts that each family was allowed to buy. Ration coins were also introduced as tokens for merchants to give back as change. Even children and babies received a ration book. To get the ration books, individuals had to appear before a local rationing board, and the ration books were valid only for specific dates, in order to prevent individuals from hoarding. Colored coded stickers were issued to drivers, restricting the amount of fuel that could be purchased per week. Ration books were also

provided for cars (to the owners), and, depending on the function or purpose of the vehicle, a color-coded stamp was given to ration the amount of gas. Cars with "A" stickers were allowed four gallons a week. The driver gave the sticker and the money to an attendant, who was most likely a woman, as so many men were at war. Cars with "B" stickers were deemed as essential to the war effort or as involved in industrial production; they were allowed eight gallons per week. Physicians, ministers, railroad workers, and post office employees were given Red "C" stickers. Truckers, VIP's, and members of Congress were given "T" stickers, indicating that there was no limit.<sup>23</sup>

In September 1940, with a large part of the world already engaged in war, Congress passed the first conscription law ever enacted in America during peace time. On December 13, 1941, five days after Pearl Harbor and the United States' entry into the war, the Act of 1940 was changed to broaden its scope and include more men. Features of the system included registration, selection by lottery, reservation of industrial manpower, and the right of those inducted to return to their job. The system was administered by 6,443 local boards and 505 appeal boards. All males between the ages of 18 and 65 were required to register for the draft. Many referred to the registration as "old man draft."<sup>24</sup>

Oscar, at the age of 16, asked his mother Hilaria to falsify his birth date; he was the first of Raúl's brothers to enlist in 1929, followed by other brothers, Israel, Rafael, Eutiquio, and Ricardo, and also by his younger sister, Carmen. All served in the Navy, with the exception of Israel. At 29, even though married and with a young child, Raúl was also required to register for the draft.

The following letter was found in the personal belongings of Raúl Cisneros family, addressed to the "Honorable Members of Local Board No 1-Willacy County." The letter states:

"We the undersigned business men and farmers of Willacy County, having knowledge of registrant's ability for deferment as a necessary man in the

community and one who, we consider that he is performing an essential job in helping the war effort, submit this affidavit to affirm and to give you a detailed statement of the duties he is now performing. At present he is manager of the Rodriguez Store located in the north 5<sup>th</sup> Yturria St. of this city, a concern with a stock value of \$5,000.

We are proud to say that due to ability of Registrant to manage store always looking far ahead in stocking up merchandise, which later on has become scarce in all principal stores, we have not suffered in the least in getting our needed supplies from this store, at the same time preventing us from going in search of them, saving us unnecessary trips, gas, tires and time.

Besides all of this, registrant is always serving us in the explanation, translation, and execution of the many problems and restrictions confronting us required by the laws arising by the present war conditions, he does all of this without any charge or remuneration expected.

Besides managing the Rodriguez Store, Registrant opened a grocery store of his own one year ago with the sole purpose of investing the profits derived from this store in the buying of war bonds to help shorten the war, and, to date, he has invested or holds six \$100.00 war bonds, and expects to continue investing. Registrant has five brothers and one sister in service and feels that he should be in there pitching with them, but, to us, we believe he is doing a mighty fine job here in helping us and the war effort as a whole so in view of the above, we ask you to reconsider Registrant because we feel sure that it is difficult to find a man to replace him



in his job as well as to serve the agricultural industry as he has been serving us.”<sup>25</sup>

Still working for the Rodriguez Store, without a car, with a young child and an entrepreneurial wife who did not speak English, and in spite of the economy, their life was finally changing as their small store prospered. Consuelo started maintaining a small ledger with entries showing her daily account deposits and balances which always showed profits. Finally, Raúl left the Rodriguez Store and joined his wife full time at their own small grocery store.

On each occasion, every six months, that he had to make an appearance to the appeal board, Raúl was granted a 2-A deferment. II-A classification was “Men necessary in their civilian activity.” Consuelo would often proclaim how her life had changed. She never had to work a day in her life when she was young. Her parents had housekeepers who did all of the work. However, she was creative and innovative. With many food items being rationed, she listened to her customers and learned their needs, and, much like her father, started supplying the neighborhood with commodities that were hard to find at other stores. She made drinks which she bottled and sold as “red cokes.” She had a chicken coop built in the back yard, raised chickens, beheaded them, plucked them, cleaned them and sold them as well as fresh eggs. She ordered rose bushes from a catalog, and clipped, multiplied, and sold re-potted rose bushes in coffee containers. She made fresh homemade chorizo; she enhanced foods with substitutions. She wasted nothing; she believed in recycling and finding a useful purpose for everything.

During those years, the small store on the corner of Raymond Street and Second Street in Raymondville prospered, and a carpenter named Trinidad “Trini” Rodriguez made the store building bigger. Eventually, the store was a combination of several additions. In 1959, it was a good-sized *barrio* store in the northwest section of Raymondville, in comparison to any other neighborhood store, with the exception of such downtown stores as Cisneros

Grocery Store on 5<sup>th</sup> and Main (the original store owned by Raúl's parents), the HEB store on the corner of Hidalgo and 5<sup>th</sup> Street, Scurlocks, Piggly Wiggly, and Buddy's Supermarket. By all accounts, Raymondville was vibrant. The small grocery store had grown and prospered and expanded into a mercantile store.

Much of the growth was attributed to the *braceros*. The *bracero* (which is literally an arm-man, i.e., a manual laborer) program began in 1942. On August 4, 1942, the United States signed the Mexican Farm Labor Program Agreement with Mexico. The program was managed by several government agencies, and its aim was to legalize and control Mexican migrant workers along the border. The Mexican Farm Labor Program Agreement was to allow for needed workers temporarily, due to the shortage of men during the war. However, the program continued until 1964, and more than 4.5 million *braceros* entered the United States. The southernmost cities in the Rio Grande Valley saw a big influx of *braceros*.<sup>26</sup> The *bracero* program brought prosperity to the store and financial security to Raúl and Consuelo. Antonia Barron and her husband Magdaleno Barron of Raymondville worked for Gorman Fox, who owned over 500 acres of land in Willacy County. Antonia recalls the days of the *braceros*, when she and Magdaleno lived at Gorman Fox's *La Estrellita* Ranch northeast of Raymondville. "There were many '*campos de braceros*' (bracero camps)." recalled Antonia. Mr. Fox provided housing for them; there were three barracks where they slept. Most farms probably housed forty to fifty *braceros*.<sup>27</sup> Ramiro Reyes of McAllen recalled that his father Manuel Reyes worked for Ralph Hutchins, and one of his father's duties was to feed the cattle. His father was not a foreman. The farms had foremen who were responsible for the *braceros*.<sup>28</sup> Antonia says that the foremen drove the *braceros* from the barracks to the fields and to town like *becerritos* (calves). Saturday, payday, was when the foremen transported the *braceros* to the grocery stores in town. Fox and Hutchins were among two of the farmers who brought *braceros* to Raúl's store. Ramiro's family also lived on Hutchins' farm, and Ramiro was just a youngster when the brace-

ros were working the Hutchins' cotton fields. He recalls the metal cots lined up in the barn where the *braceros* slept. Both Antonia and Ramiro recalled the days when the foremen took the *braceros* to Raúl Cisneros' grocery store. Antonia stated, "The *braceros* worked Monday through Saturday; they were paid at the end of the week. They were hard-working people, and I never heard that one got into a scuffle or had to be imprisoned. They got up early in the morning, way before sun-up, and had their breakfast, which usually consisted of refried beans and eggs. They then made their lunch to take along and loaded up in the trucks while it was still dark. They worked in the fields until sundown for six days a week. The barns or barracks had two kerosene-burning stoves. The living quarters lacked electricity and plumbing. They used kerosene lanterns, a community shower, and outhouses that were a distance from their sleeping quarters."<sup>29</sup>

Each *bracero* made his purchase, and either Raúl or Consuelo wrote the individual's name on each slip. The slips were totaled and given to either the foreman or the farmer. The farmer then paid the total sum to Raúl. Antonia remembers that Raúl had the groceries sacked and stapled, and he would write the *bracero's* name on each sack. Each *bracero* carried his sack under his arm and climbed back on the truck.

Don Juan Chávez and his wife Francisca, "Pancha," lived across the street from the store. Don Juan and his son-in-law, Carlos Hernández, both worked for Gorman Fox. Paula Hernández Kinser, daughter of Carlos Hernández and granddaughter of Don Juan Chávez, said that Mr. Fox had several camps of *braceros*. "I remember that the camp where my father was a foreman took the *braceros* shopping at the Rodríguez Store on Main Street; it was next to the Rey Theatre and directly behind Rios Boot Company. Mr. Fox gave my father the money to pay the *braceros'* grocery bill at the Rodríguez Store. My father, in turn, gave me the money, and I literally ran errands for my father. In those days, I didn't have a car; I didn't drive. I walked everywhere to do my errands." Paula laughed as she found it hard to believe that she walked such

a distance with a large sum of money without fear of being assaulted and with the trust of her father. Paula added, "You just trusted people and you took people for their word. I walked with all the money back to the store and paid the bill for the farmer. The monies were deducted from the weekly salary for each *bracero*." <sup>30</sup>

José Carmen Gonzales, originally from the state of Jalisco, came to the Valley, in 1948, as a *bracero*, along with his *Papá* and *hermanos*. He entered the United States as a *bracero*, in 1955, and came to Raymondville when he was seventeen-years-old. He says that he came as a contract worker for a gin in Raymondville and worked for 10 cents an hour. "When a *patrón* (boss) ran out of work, another *patrón* would pick you up; the *patrones* all worked together and helped each other out."<sup>31</sup> Since he was working at a gin, his boss took him to meet Don Raúl where he rented a room from him for a few months. Raúl and Consuelo had built nine small rooms with one outlet, one light fixture, and gas availability to offer affordable housing for people. The structure was next to the store; the rooms were all connected. Raúl hired Trinidad Rodríguez to build the long row of rooms that stretched almost the length of the lot. Initially, the rooms rented for \$4.00 a week with a monthly net of \$144.00 monthly. There was a community shower with two toilet facilities, much like a public park. Raúl had operated a boxing area with wood bleachers, and when the wrestling arena closed, the wood from the bleachers was used to build the multiple living quarters.

Wanting to make more contributions, and antsy with projects, Raúl got involved with wrestling and organized both the Raymondville Boys Boxing Club and the Amateur Athletic Union in Raymondville. He attended meetings Valley wide to discuss rules and guidelines. He held professional wrestling matches in a building owned by Dr. Carl Conley. An ad ran in the paper announcing the opening of the Sports Center Wrestling Arena on Friday, January 9, on North Highway 77, across from the Raymondville Ice Plant. Opening night featured two bouts—two falls out of three with Big Ike Eakins (who died, in 1968, of a heart

attack after wrestling) vs. Gory Guerrero, with sixty-minute limit, and Chief Kit Fox vs. Jackie Nichols, three falls out of three, also with a sixty-minute limit.<sup>52</sup> He purchased a microphone, and built bleachers and an arena. However, wrestling never caught on in Raymondville, and by 1954, he closed down the arena, tore down the bleachers and built the lodging.

*“Al mal paso dale prisa.”* (“Pick up speed going through a bad situation.”) Consuelo, who had never worked as a young lady, was working thirteen-hour days alongside her husband. Sometimes a knock at midnight would awaken them, and they would quickly get dressed, and open the store to truckload(s) of *braceros*. This was the height of their business. The store was enlarged, and the carpenter Trini Rodriguez began working full time at the store, enhancing small details. The store was on pier and beam, a frame building with wooden floors and pull-string lighting. It included a meat market with a large walk-in freezer. It had the main staples of vegetables, including tomatoes, lettuce, cabbage, carrots, potatoes, onions, sweet potatoes, avocados, and corn, and such fruits as bananas and apples. It had milk, butter, and a freezer of ice cream, delivered and stocked daily. Fifty-pound bags of White Wing Flour came in cloth sacks, which – once they were emptied – were used to make girls’ dresses or pillow cases. Big containers of lard were used primarily to make flour tortillas. Beans were sold by the pound and displayed in large aluminum wash tubs. Mayonnaise, mustard, canned pickles, olives, pork and beans, canned Vienna sausage, and canned corn were readily available. Holsom and Rainbow Bread, along with the fresh Mexican pastries *molletes*, *maranitos*, and *enpanadas* were delivered by Espinoza Bakery of Raymondville daily.

The *braceros*, as well as the customers, could easily find other staples like the *sacas de pisca*, which were usually hung on the front porch of the store, *rodilleras* knee pads (which had straps with buckles), and *sombreros* that offered protection from the scorching sun. The front porch was eventually made of concrete and had four benches for the neighbors to sit and chat. The front

screen doors were adorned with tin Rainbow Bread advertisements, which were eventually removed to leave only the two front wooden doors propped open to let the air circulate. There were two vending machines, one for Coca-Cola only and one for Royal Crown Cola products. Customers could buy soft drinks even if the store was closed; all the drinks were bottled in glass containers and transported in wooden crates. Kerosene stoves and lamps, along with the kerosene, were also available. These products were much in demand by the *braceros* for their living quarters. A whole area of the store was dedicated to such hardware as nails, hammers, tools, buckets, brooms, mops, clothes pins, tacks, chains, and rope.

A large section of the store was dedicated to selling *yerbitas* (herbal medicines). The drug section of the store, which was separate from the *yerbitas*, sold aspirins, band-aids, alcohol, merthiolate, mineral oil, pepto bismuth, alka seltzer, eye drops, and even salt pills, to guard the *braceros* from de-hydration. Another section was dedicated to cosmetics, including bobby pins, plastic and metal rollers, and hair spray. The *braceros* and many of the locals depended on local remedies to cure ailments. Both Raúl and Consuelo knew each *yerba* and its use. It was common for people to come in with an ailment, and both Raúl and Consuelo were well-versed about which *yerbita* should be taken and how to prepare it. They even had a couple of *yerbita* reference books, which they occasionally used for verification. They sold spices by the bulk and even packaged the spices with labels carrying the name of the store. They also sold shoes, overalls, jeans, shirts, and western straw hats, as well as chicken feed, and corn to make *masa* and *bojas para tamales*.

Groceries were delivered free anywhere in Willacy County. Customers came from La Sara, San Perlita, Lyford, and various ranches, including the Armstrong and Norias Ranches north of Raymondville. The store sold money orders for a fee of \$.35 cents. "*La tienda estaba bien surtida,*" recalls Rebecca Gutierrez, a patron who still lives across the street from where the store was located. It was so convenient to cross the street and make our purchases.

*"También daban crédito a la gente. Al fin de la semana cuando les caía el cheque, iban y pagaban"* added Rebecca.<sup>33</sup> Rebecca's brother, Ramiro Ramírez, who drove one-ton trucks and delivered materials like caliche locally, was also a loyal patron. He said, *"Raúl era muy curioso y inteligente, y era muy ayudador; les daba crédito a la gente."* This praise of Raúl as smart and helpful is common both from patrons who are still living and from children of patrons who recall Raúl and Consuelo and that *barrio* store.

Credit cards didn't exist, but if someone was hungry or needed groceries and didn't have money, they knew that Raúl and Consuelo had a reputation of trusting people to make a purchase and pay later. The customers with credit had two ledgers: one kept at the store in a drawer behind the customer check-out, and the other kept by the customer. The customer carried the ledger to the store, and made the purchase, and then the purchase amount and the date were entered into both ledgers. The customers with ledgers were those that paid weekly as Rebecca Gutierrez recalls.

*"Dime con quien andas y te dire quien eres."* ("Tell me who your friends are and I'll tell you who you are.") In 1963, Raúl became a member of The *Viva Johnson* Club, paid the \$1.00 membership dues, and pledged to support the Democratic Nominee for President of the United States. In 1972 (or maybe even earlier), Tax Assessor Collector Emma Ross deputized Raúl as a duly qualified voter registrar for Willacy County. Prior to that, Raúl registered to vote every year, paid the poll tax, and kept his receipts. Several years he paid \$1.75 for the poll tax, and, in 1964, the year it was changed, he paid \$1.50. Just after the Civil War, the 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment was added to the Constitution in 1870; the right of a male citizen of the United States to vote was not to be denied. However, some state governments passed laws to circumvent the newly-passed Amendment, making it almost impossible for black males to exercise their newly-won right by enacting the Poll Tax, which required citizens to pay a tax before they could vote. Most blacks were former slaves and very poor, and so they could not afford to

pay the tax. The 24<sup>th</sup> Amendment, passed in 1964, abolished poll taxes as a prerequisite for voting.<sup>34</sup>

Raúl was influential in politics. He registered many voters in the area and advised them how to vote. He always had an ample supply of sample ballots to demonstrate to the locals as to where they should place their "X". They would memorize the look of the ballot and vote the way Don Raúl instructed them. The store was his stage to educate his customers, most of whom were poor and uneducated. Many of them couldn't even write their names, and would sign a small "x" in place of their signature. Making that small "x" was not an easy task; many trembled at holding a pencil or pen to inscribe the two wavy lines to form the "x." Raúl tried to ease each one with a smile, a silly joke, or a comment of care or concern for their problems. Although Consuelo was not a U.S. citizen at the time, she supported his concerns, and while he was attending meetings or registering or educating people, she attended to other tasks at the store. Raúl solicited and encouraged people to take the initiative to vote. He took the role of Voter Registrar seriously and set out to register every qualified person that walked into his store. Politicians recognized Raúl's key role in politics. On many occasions, politicians like Lloyd Bentsen, Jr., Kika de la Garza, and other local candidates would come by and have a political rally at the Raúl Cisneros Grocery Store. Prior to an election, Raúl would get into his vehicle and slowly cruise the streets of Raymondville – especially in the barrios – and, through a loud speaker, urge people to get out and vote. He also took advantage of the occasions to plug his candidate.

Sometime in the late 1950s or early 1960s, Raúl also tried unsuccessfully to organize a union to support agriculture. He wanted everyone to receive a guarantee of protection and prosperity. He believed that this movement required immediate action, and announced that everyone – men, women and children – needed to attend a meeting that he was planning. He pointed out that, without agricultural products, society would suffer tremendously.<sup>35</sup> His movement was never formulated, but he became a good



contact for U.S. Congressman Kika de la Garza. Three letters from Congressman Kika de la Garza to Raúl have survived: one thanking him for the meal at his home, one acknowledging Raúl's support for his campaign, and one speaking about their shared concern for improving the welfare of the underprivileged in the Valley. Raúl also received a letter, in 1962, from candidate John Connally for Governor, expressing his appreciation to Raúl for agreeing to serve on the Willacy County Committee to help him get elected.

Mexican beef caldo was Raúl's favorite meal, and Consuelo made a large pot of caldo for him every Sunday. He even wrote a poem,

*Satisfecho del caldazo que comió  
Me puse bien lleno o mas bien panzón  
Me subió al carro y arreando vi  
A Mr. Peak, abajo de un arbol comiendo salchichón.*

That is...

Satisfied with the soup that I ate,  
I got up very full, or, better said, stuffed,  
I got into the car, and, turning the corner, I saw  
Mr. Peak under a tree eating sausage.

Although Consuelo was not a U.S. citizen at the time, she supported her husband's concerns, and, while he was attending meetings, registering people, or educating them, she attended to other tasks at the store. She trusted his political endeavors, and she was always ready to make a hot home-cooked meal for any guest. She made the largest fresh-flour tortillas, perfectly round and thin, and while they were on the *comal* (griddle), *se esponjaban* (they fluffed up), which she considered a trademark of a good tortilla.

When the politicians came to the store, they usually gathered close to where the store's barbeque pit was smoking with fresh meats of all kinds, fajitas, chicken, steaks, ribs, tripas, and sausage. Saturdays around the barbeque pits were a form of social gathering

for some of the neighbors. Some would gather in groups and sing. This was similar to “An American Idol.” One particular lady was Evila “Vila” de Luna. Soon after, all the Spanish-speakers knew him not only as Don Raúl, but as *el Rey de la Barbacoa* (“the barbecue king”). Business people like Johnny Hess would come almost every Saturday to purchase fresh barbecue meats. Additionally, Raúl prepared at least ten to twenty beef heads every Friday and Saturday, and you could be assured that if you weren’t there before noon, they would be sold out. Also in the back yard, he had a big black cast-iron kettle boiling with grease, where he prepared *carnitas* (“barbecued pork”) or *chicharrones* (“pork rinds”). Some of the *chicharrones* were bigger than a flour tortilla; they were light and airy and, of course, crunchy.

Soon afterwards, the demand for the *chicharrones* became another business for Raúl and Consuelo: they purchased the old Piggly Wiggly Building and transformed it into a pork skin factory. Raúl proudly named the business Cuchi-Cuchi Go Go. It was around the time that Charro, a blond movie star was popular. Raúl, however, said that Cu stood for *cueritos* (“little pieces of leather”); chi for *chicharrones*, and Go Go was the *apellido* (“last name”). They purchased an extended van and started selling Cuchi-Cuchi’s Valley-wide, and hired several people to help with the production and distribution.

Raúl made his own weekly announcements on KSOX, a local radio station on Francisco Grajales’ “Mr. Pineapple Spanish Hour”. In his weekly announcements, Raúl reached out to Hispanics, offering home delivery service to people who lacked transportation or could not carry their groceries. He tried all means to accommodate his customers and to meet their needs.

Hispanic preachers in Raymondville knew that they could count on Raúl and Consuelo for donations. Every Christmas, the couple ordered extra boxes of apples and gave churches donations along with small #2 brown paper sacks to hand out to the children with

an apple and candies for each child. They tried to support all churches that needed a donation with goods.

In all outward appearances, their customers were like family to Raúl and Consuelo. Don Juan Chávez and a group of men would often gather in the afternoons at the front of the store on the bench on the porch and recapitulate the days' activities and the town's news, or relate "old man corny jokes." Don Juan, born in the early 1880s, lived across the street. He had a dark complexion, wore kakai pants, and drove a pick-up. He and his wife, Pancha, had a well-manicured yard full of flowers and many home-grown herbs like *yerba buena* ("mint") and *cilantro* ("coriander"). When he was at home, Juan often worked in the yard without a shirt, exposing a scar that stretched his entire spine. When children asked him how he got that scar, he would answer, "When I was a kid, I was bad, and the devil scratched me." That visible scar was a constant reminder to neighborhood kids that being good was better than having a confrontation with the devil. Paula says that her grandfather used to ride with Pancho Villa during the revolution, and in a gunfight while riding on a horse a bullet grazed him on the back. Another version of Don Juan's scar was that he got a whip-lashing while riding with Pancho Villa. Both Pancha and Don Juan were loyal and dear friends to Raúl and Consuelo.

Another man who gathered on the bench was Don Juan Longoria. He was a diabetic who had had one arm amputated. Victor Ramírez was a single parent of two young girls and a son, and he lived in one of nine small rooms of his dwelling. When Victor's children were in school, Victor helped around the store. Jaime Rodríguez, a youngster in Raymondville, remembered in a letter to the *Chronicle and Willacy County News* that Raúl Cisneros had one of the first televisions in town, and that his family would watch TV at his place.

Raúl and Consuelo's home was adjacent to the store, and both worked long hours. They took turns giving each other breaks. While Raúl did errands, Consuelo stayed at the store. When

Consuelo prepared lunch or supper, Raúl stayed at the store. When she prepared lunch for them, it always included a daily meal for Victor as well. Victor would eat his meal at a corner at the back of the store, and he was always gracious. After finishing his meal, he would take his plate and rinse it under a faucet in the backyard of the house before returning the plate to Consuelo.

Sofia, an elderly widowed woman, also lived in one of the small rooms. In 1968, hearing news of an impending hurricane, Sofia came to sleep in Raúl and Consuelo's cramped home. With fear that Hurricane Beulah was going to be more powerful than their very modest home could sustain, Raúl loaded up his family and Sofia and headed for San Antonio. They returned in a three-car caravan from San Antonio to find a disaster at the store and at their home adjacent to the store. The electricity had been out for several days, so all the meats, dairy products, and vegetables were spoiled. Nonetheless, they never displayed an attitude of doom and gloom. They felt that the quicker they faced the clean-up, the quicker they could re-open the store for the many people who depended on them for groceries.

In the early part of 1974, an electrical short in the drying machine in their home caught fire, and their home burned to the ground. For the next two to three years, the couple lived in what used to be an old TV Repair Shop. The old TV Repair Shop was part of the store's structure, but it had its own door. The TV Repair Shop had been closed for some time, and Raúl and Consuelo brought in a table, chairs, a bed, a television, a sofa, a stove and a refrigerator, living content until they purchased a small two bedroom rock house across town on Harris Street.

The couple retired from the store in 1977. They dedicated their spare time to church activities, and made a couple of day trips. God-loving Christians, they dreamed of traveling to Israel. Consuelo believed in the power of prayer. When one of her children got sick, she would rub the child's body with an egg and

recite the Lord's Prayer repeatedly to remove any possibility of a spell from *el mal del ojo* ("the evil eye").

In the forty-five years that they were married, the couple thus had many financial struggles, exacerbated by their trust and hope that all their customers would eventually pay. Both of them had many friends and they valued friendships. Both of them shared a great nobility, living less for personal gain than for doing what was right. The grocery store closed temporarily for a couple of years. After Raúl died in 1980, Consuelo re-opened it briefly for the sole purpose of selling it. She walked several blocks rain or shine every day from her home to the store and was there from morning to dusk. Sometimes, customers would see her walking and give her a ride. At 68, she was still fearless, determined, and confident to be at the store by herself from morning to dusk. She never learned to drive or speak English, but, as in the early days of when she started this little grocery store on her own in 1944, she managed to have sales of \$18,000 in 1980 and sold the store for \$35,000. She died in 2003 in McAllen.

The story of Raúl and Consuelo's little *barrio* store is now closed, but the humble and caring Christian spirit that radiated from it can still be seen in many of the Valley's *barrio* dwellers. *Al que madruga, Dios lo ayuda*. ("God helps him who gets up early.")

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## Endnotes

- 1 Ruby Casteel's collection of family documents, Cameron County Tax Record dated January 20, 1911 signed by Damaso Lerma, Tax Collector Cameron County, Texas
- 2 Ruby Casteel collection of newspaper clippings.
- 3 Ralph Cisneros, unedited typed story submitted to Rio Grande Round-Up
- 4 Dolores Anzaldua Cisneros, telephone interview, October 6, 2009.
- 5 Ruby Casteel, collection of family documents.
- 6 Guillermo Rios, phone interview March 2005.
- 7 Ofelia Rios Rodriguez, interview.

- 8 Ruby Casteel, collection of family documents.
- 9 "Israel Rios," Ancestry.com. U. S. Department of Labor Immigration Service.
- 10 *Texas Online Handbook*, "Texas Mexican Institute," February 4, 2011.
- 11 Ruby Casteel, collection of love letters written by her parents.
- 12 Ruby Casteel, newspaper collection.
- 13 Ruby Casteel, collection of family documents.
- 14 Ruby Casteel, collection of family documents.
- 15 Ruby Casteel, collection of family documents and death certificate.
- 16 Ruby Casteel, collection of family documents.
- 17 Dolores Cisneros, telephone interview.
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# **Transgenerational Language Loss at The University of Texas at Brownsville and Texas Southmost College**

by

**Therese Gallegos**

Critics of bilingual education cite a variety of perceived problems. Some parents fear segregation or a compromised education.<sup>1</sup> Some legislators and their constituents rail against the tax burden.<sup>2</sup> Some members of the monolingual majority claim that bilingualism threatens the cohesiveness of the nation.<sup>3</sup> This article addresses this third concern: the “threat” of bilingualism. Even in Brownsville, Texas – a city where 86 percent of the population is Hispanic (the largest concentration of Latinos in the nation<sup>4</sup>) bilingualism is just the beginning of a slide into monolingualism.

## **Data Collection**

An investigation, funded by an Institutional Research Enhancement Grant, was carried out during the 1997-1998 academic year at the University of Texas at Brownsville and Texas Southmost College to describe incoming freshmen, primarily for the purpose of identifying differences between students placed initially into developmental courses and those placed initially into college-level English.<sup>5</sup> Information was gathered from enrollment data of all entering freshmen registered in any of these courses during the 1996 fall semester and from the high school transcripts of a randomly-selected subset of the same cohort. Data was also collected during the first summer session of 1998, when students in all sections of developmental writing and Composition I were asked to fill out a survey. (See Appendix A for a copy.) Responses were received from all but one section of Composition I, yielding a total of 216 students in ten sections (two of Writing Skills I, four

of Writing Skills II, and four of Composition I). The date used for this article came from this survey.

The part of the questionnaire relevant to this discussion asked that students describe language preference (i.e. Spanish only, mostly Spanish with some English, or English only) when speaking with certain people (i.e. grandparents, parents, siblings, friends, spouse, and children) or in specific environments (work and church).

## Findings and Discussion

As can be seen in the table below, preference for Spanish declined with each progressively younger generation: 71% of the students responding to this question spoke only Spanish with their grandparents, 41% spoke only Spanish with their parents, and 6% spoke only Spanish with their children. This extraordinary decline across four generations indicates a major erosion in the primacy of the minority language, Spanish.

**Table of Language Use**

	<b>Spanish Only</b> # %	<b>Mostly panish</b> # %	<b>Mostly English</b> # %	<b>English Only</b> # %	<b>Total #</b>
Grandparents	130 <b>71%</b>	28 15%	13 7%	12 7%	183
Parents*	184 <b>41%</b>	106 24%	92 20%	66 15%	448
Mother	95 <b>45%</b>	47 22%	46 22%	22 10%	210
Father	71 <b>38%</b>	54 29%	37 20%	27 14%	189
Stepmother	9 <b>43%</b>	3 14%	2 10%	7 33%	21
Stepfather	9 32%	2 7%	7 25%	10 <b>36%</b>	28
Siblings	22 11%	56 29%	75 <b>39%</b>	42 22%	195
Spouse	10 15%	13 20%	28 <b>42%</b>	15 23%	66



Children	4 6%	12 18%	29 <b>43%</b>	22 33%	67
Boy/girlfriend	16 14%	22 20%	49 <b>44%</b>	24 22%	111
Best Friend	26 13%	41 21%	78 <b>40%</b>	50 26%	195
Friends	20 10%	44 22%	98 <b>49%</b>	40 20%	202
Work	13 8%	35 22%	67 <b>42%</b>	44 28%	159
Church	35 22%	55 <b>34%</b>	43 27%	28 17%	161

\* Based on total number of parental relationships listed

The greatest row percentage is put in bold print.

The flip side of this trend emerges when comparisons are made for the use of mostly English across generations:

- 7% speak mostly English to their grandparents.
- 21% speak mostly English to their parents.
- 39% speak mostly English to their siblings.
- 43% speak mostly English to their children.

The trend is obvious. Spanish is losing ground to English in what Hakuta calls the “hydraulic principle.”<sup>6</sup> As English moves in, Spanish appears to be displaced. The one hopeful trend in this data for those who value bilingualism is that the percentage of people speaking mostly English with their spouses and children is almost identical, allowing for the possibility that bilingualism (however minimal) has stabilized in the family, although what “some Spanish” means could be very different from spouse to child.

While this data does indicate that bilingualism decreases dramatically over generations, the numbers do not explain why. A more in-depth study exploring students’ attitudes toward maintaining Spanish, as well as their literacy and their years of education in Spanish, would probably provide interesting and helpful insight. It may also be useful to create more levels (rather than the four in Table One, ranging from Spanish only to English only) to dis-

tinguish those who consider simple commands and endearments as “some Spanish” from those who converse in Spanish with their children. (Simply asking to what extent children are able to respond in Spanish might be an easy way to meaningfully subdivide this group.) Finally, the ages of those in the study might be worth including.

## Conclusions

This data suggests that minority language use declines over time, with each generation speaking it less frequently than the previous one. That this occurs in Brownsville, where such strong support for the maintenance of Spanish exists (e.g. from Spanish-language radio and TV stations, proximity to Mexico, family ties across the river, and the influx of Mexican tourists and immigrants) does not bode well for the survival of Spanish-English bilingualism elsewhere. And if any language has a chance to hold its own against English, it is Spanish. Monolingualism seems to be the inevitable destiny of most children living in the United States of America. Thus, predictions about the deterioration of national unity in the face of encroaching bilingualism may be unwarranted.

The University of Texas at Brownsville

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## Endnotes

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# LITERARY HISTORY





# The Comic Mode of Oscar Casares's *Amigoland*

by

Mimosa Stephenson

Set in Brownsville, Texas, Oscar Casares's *Amigoland* provides a classic example of humor and comedy. Though the name of the novel is taken from the former mall (now the International Technology, Education, and Commerce Center of the University of Texas at Brownsville) on the border near the Brownsville and Matamoros Bridge, Casares gives the name to a nursing home for aged men and women no longer able to care for themselves. Fidencio Rosales, the novel's protagonist, is a feisty ex-mailman of ninety-one, bent upon escaping from the prison to which his daughter Amalia has committed him. He was the oldest of eleven children and is the only surviving member of the family except the youngest, Celestino, twenty years Fidencio's junior and now a diabetic retired from barbering. With the help of Celestino and Socorro De La Peña, his brother's weekly cleaning woman and lover, Don Fidencio manages to sneak out of the old-folks home and return to the *ranchito* in Nuevo Leon near Linares, from which their grandfather was abducted in the middle of the nineteenth century by Indians. Once having escaped, he determines to remain in Mexico with the long-lost relatives. Perhaps his days will be fewer without the medical attention readily available in the nursing home, but he can hope to live out his days in relative freedom and dignity, far from his daughter, who had penned him up in an institution so as not to be bothered with him. The novel has an extremely serious topic but is written as a hilarious spoof on the American way of dying at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

The novel's wry humor is serious business on a sad aspect of American life, where adult children do not want to be bothered by their aged parents but feel an obligation to take responsibility

for them when the parents cannot care for themselves. Though we tend to think of humor as gay and charming, it has another side. Edward L. Galligan writes,

Comic art, like all other kinds of art, speaks to and for all of us in every recess of our lives, and the comic vision is possessed by ordinary, uncelebrated men and women as well as great artists. . . . Comedy is often funny, but it is never merely funny: it is *about* something. Comedy concerns those life and death matters that all of us must cope with through most of our lives—sex and dying, aggression and injustice, love and vanity, rationality and sense” (p. xi).

Though *Amigoland* possesses laugh-aloud scenes, it is about folly and loss, sex and dying, freedom and dignity.

Casares makes humorous the realistic pettiness of people’s dealings with one another. George Meredith says, “And to love comedy you must know the real world, and know men and women well enough not to expect too much of them, though you may still hope for good” (p. 24). Don Fidencio and Don Celestino have not spoken to each other for ten years because of a foolish argument about whose hair will be cut first. As a barber, Don Celestino cut his eldest brother’s hair once a month. One Saturday morning Don Celestino arrived to open his barbership with a friend to whom he had promised the first haircut of the morning. Don Fidencio arrived before them and waited, expecting to be given the first haircut because he got there first. The ensuing argument between the brothers is ridiculous to the reader, but it caused a rift that lasts ten years. The ridiculous anger runs so deep that Don Celestino did not attend the funeral of Don Fidencio’s wife, telling himself that his brother’s wife had left her husband long before her death. Offended, Don Fidencio did not attend the funeral when Don Celestino’s wife died a year later either. Don Celestino, in his aggravation, argues to himself that Don Fidencio should have been at the funeral because after all Don Celestino had still lived



with his wife after fifty-four years. Thus Don Celestino measures his grievance against Don Fidencio's and finds Don Fidencio wanting. Such grievances are all too common in families, and produce laughter in the unaffected spectator. Meredith argues that the comic writer speaks to "men's intellects, with reference to the operation of the social world upon their characters" (p. 46). Watching the brothers' quarrel from an intellectual distance, the society sees the ludicrousness of the all too human behavior.

Casares's novel deals with social interactions in which the comic is seen on a daily basis if the reader maintains emotional distance. Henri Bergson says of laughter, "we must put it back into its natural environment, which is society, and above all must we determine the utility of its function, which is a social one. . . . Laughter must answer to certain requirements of life in common. It must have a *social* signification" (p. 65). Bergson adds that "What life and society require of each of us is a constantly alert attention that discerns the outlines of the present situation, together with a certain elasticity of mind and body to enable us to adapt ourselves in consequence" (p. 72). It is the rigidity of the entrenched positions of the two brothers that sets them at odds so humorously for ten years. Comedy is often produced by exaggeration, but realistically people can fall out for issues no more serious than that of Don Fidencio and Don Celestino.

When Don Fidencio refuses to fit into and conform to the rules of the nursing home, the reader grins in amusement. According to Bergson, "Any individual is comic who automatically goes his own way without troubling himself about getting into touch with the rest of his fellow-beings" (p. 147). Don Fidencio remains alienated from the other residents. He suspects them of stealing his chocolate and cheese crackers though the reader is convinced the forgetful old man has eaten his snacks himself. There is always a give and take in social situations where the individual must compromise some of his/her desires to belong to the group. Each individual must allow other individuals some space and freedom without demanding total autonomy if he is to belong. We laugh

at those who do not fit into the society. The behavior is especially obvious among children who mock the biggest child in the group and also the smallest as well as the thinnest and the fattest. Any deviation from the norm of the group can be seen as laughable.

The humor in the nursing home comes mostly from the inflexibility of the staff that Don Fidencio battles against on a daily basis. The novel's first conflict arises when Don Fidencio refuses to wear the mandatory bib to eat his supper. He insists that his paper napkin will protect his clothes, but *The One With The Big Ones* insists that "We have rules and procedures here, sir. And the rules and procedures state that every resident must wear a bib during mealtime" (p. 17). The old folks in the facility must submit as if they are children. When Don Fidencio resists, the attendant calls him "belligerent," saying, "Belligerent means to be hostile, to be insulting. . . . Don't you want to follow the rules and procedures?" (p. 18). The man's question is not meant to be answered but is a put down to an inferior. The staff in the facility attempts to make puppets of the individuals living there. Bergson proposes that "rigidity is the comic, and laughter is its corrective" (p. 74), arguing that comic characters represent the general, the type, that "Rigidity, automatism, absentmindedness and unsociability are all inextricably entwined; and all serve as ingredients to the making up of the comic in character" (pp. 156-57). The inflexible manager talks down to Don Fidencio as if he is a child: "Why do you want to cause such problems?" (p. 19). Then the staff withholds the old man's supper because he refuses to conform. The situation is indeed comic as the elderly man struggles to maintain his personhood in the impersonal environment. The reader takes the side of the recalcitrant old man who refuses to give in. Part of this rigidity is seen in the repetition. Bergson says that anything becomes funny if it is repeated often enough (pp. 107 and 119). In his hunger Don Fidencio thinks of breakfast: "Every day the same thing, oatmeal and raisins. Monday, oatmeal and raisins. Tuesday, oatmeal and raisins. Wednesday, oatmeal and raisins" (p. 25). Don Fidencio becomes the reader's hero, and the staff becomes

comic in its insistence on making the residents cogs in the machine rather than real people. Real people are unpredictable. When a person behaves like a machine, he is laughable.

Comedy refers to the body, the material side of life, the life of things rather than the life of the spirit. At ninety-one Don Fidencio has trouble remembering people's names, so he gives each person in the nursing home a name based on the dominant characteristic of that person. Don Fidencio focuses on the material aspects of the persons he sees. The novel begins, "The One With the Flat Face was taking her time coming around with the cart" (p. 4). This name denies the woman either personality or humanity. Comedy neglects the spiritual and concentrates on objects. Bergson says that to keep from making them humorous figures "the tragic poet [avoids] anything calculated to attract attention to the material side of his heroes" (p. 94). Casares spoofs outrageously in the material names he allows Don Fidencio to use in his own mind in regard to both staff and other old people. Don Fidencio refers to the many women in this nursing home as the Old Turtles: "The Friendly Turtle," "The Turtle With the Fedora," "The Turtle Who Never Bends Her Legs," "The Turtle With the Orange Gloves" (p. 11). The old men fare even worse: "The One With A Beak For A Nose," "The Gringo With The Ugly Finger," "The One With The Worried Face," "The One Who Always Looks Constipated," "The One Who Likes To Eat Other People's Food," "The One Who Cries Like A Dying Calf" (p. 10-11). Though his daughter Amalia is given a name, his son-in-law remains the Son Of A Bitch throughout the novel. Don Fidencio even has names for himself: "The One Who Loses Everything" and "The One Already Halfway Dead." These names for himself reveal that he does have understanding of where he is and what is happening to him. One of Don Fidencio's most humorous retorts clearly reveals this awareness. In response to his youngest brother's suggesting that Amalia, Don Fidencio's daughter and his legal guardian, will relent and allow him to leave the nursing home, he responds, "You mean when I get a little older?" (p. 194). Comedy has much affin-

ity with tragedy. The situation in the nursing home, where persons have been deprived of their freedom, dignity, and personhood and required to conform like machines, does seem tragic even as the names are hilarious.

Some of the metaphorical comparisons, by their very nature concrete objects, are equally funny. When Don Fidencio is exercising by squeezing a large yellow ball between his legs, he feels “as if he were a chicken laying an enormous yellow egg” (p. 111). Responding to the harassment of her mother and aunt when she takes up with Don Celestino, Socorro thinks about what happened when her sixty-year-old uncle married a girl half his age: “No, they congratulated him like he’d won a color television in a raffle at the church” (p. 175). As the forgetful Don Fidencio tries to remember Socorro’s name, he “shut his eyes and concentrated, concentrated, concentrated, the whole time hissing the first letter of her name until it sounded like he was releasing the air from a tire” (p. 182). At one point he admits to Socorro that his mind had “turned to cheese” (p. 185). These images concentrate the humor in the material, not the spiritual.

To laugh is to be human, and humankind relishes humor about bodily functions. The dirty joke is universal. Don Fidencio has an enlarged prostate and must go to the lavatory several times a day. The urologist’s description of the prostate is hilarious, not only because it deals with bodily functions but also because of the comparisons used to describe the size, normally “about the size of a pecan,” but Don Fidencio’s is “closer to the size of a small avocado seed. He drew the seed next to the pecan. Clearly there was a problem: a pecan was not an avocado seed. . . . He drew the urethra on the pad, placing it between the pecan and the avocado seed. . . . The doctor was good at drawing the nut and the seed and the little tube” (p. 272). The simplifying pictures, comparisons, and detail suggest the human body is a machine, not a soul and a spirit. Of such is comedy made. Casares even gives a description of Don Fidencio’s positioning himself. He “eased himself down, down, down, down, until finally touching the pot. Never would

he have imagined it would come to this, urinating like a woman” (p. 28). Bergson notes that “Exaggeration is always comic when prolonged, and especially when systematic” (p. 140). The four “downs” exaggerate the difficulty of sitting down. Wylie Sypher posits that “the comic artist can accept absurdities as the open premises of his account of life and not be troubled by them. The comedian practices an art of exaggeration or overstatement” (p. 239). Also the process is humiliating. A great deal of humor comes from humiliation as people enjoy feeling superior as they see others belittled.

A major source of humor is incongruity. In Neil Schaeffer’s definition, “laughter results from an incongruity presented in a ludicrous context” (p. 17). As Don Fidencio sits on the toilet, he reads the obituaries; however, his pleasure at realizing he is alive while others younger than he have died is interrupted by The One With The Flat Face who comes to the door demanding the front section of the newspaper, which Don Fidencio has borrowed from his roommate, The One With The Hole In His Back:

“Mr. Cavazos pressed the emergency-call button because he said someone had stolen the front section.”

“Do you mean the part with people who have died?”

“If the obituaries are in the front section, yes,” she said. “Do you have it, Mr. Rosales?”

“This is the only part I want to read,” he answered. “The rest of the news I have read too many times—nothing new happens anymore.”

“Yes, but the obituaries is the part that Mr. Cavazos wants to read this morning.”

“Does he think his name is in there?” . . .

“Mr. Cavazos said to tell you that your name would come out long before his.”

“I checked, but it wasn’t there,” Don Fidencio said.  
“Maybe tomorrow.” (pp. 31-32)

The childish bickering over the newspaper as the old man sits in the bathroom is funny, but it is incongruous that the two old men should taunt each other about who will die first.

Equally incongruous is Don Fidencio’s objection to the female attendant’s entering the bathroom while he is occupied. The attendant demands admittance:

“Wait.”

“Wait for what?”

“So I can be decent.”

“Mr. Rosales, I saw you in the shower yesterday morning, remember?”

“The shower is different.”

“How can it be different if you don’t have any clothes on?”

“For God’s sake, I’m sitting down in here.”

“You sit down over there, too,” she said. “Remember, in the plastic chair, when we wash you?”

“Here I do different things when I sit down.” (p. 32)

The entire episode is hilarious, but it reveals the dehumanization of life that comedy exploits. It is ridiculous, as Bergson says, for human beings to be made machines; it is “[t]he rigid, the ready-made, the mechanical, in contrast with the supple, the every-changing and the living . . . automatism in contrast with free activity . . . that laughter singles out and would fain correct” (p. 145). Earl Rovit

claims that literary humor generally exploits a situation of radical disproportion — some grotesque discrepancy from an established norm or ideal state of affairs which has been tacitly or explicitly embodied in the philosophic and ethical perspectives of one's time. Conditioned to expect a certain predictably reasonable pattern of behavior, the reader is subjected instead to an abrupt disturbance in rhythm — a sudden deviation from his legitimate anticipations. (p. 239)

John Morreall argues that all laughter “results from a pleasant psychological shift” (p. 133). The reader sees an incongruity or something different from what he/she expects. A civilized man should be allowed some privacy in the bathroom and should be able to take a bath by himself. The expected privacy is denied in the institutional setting. Casares turns the episode into black humor but in so doing suggests that the way old and infirm Americans are treated is inhuman. Bergson argues, “In laughter we always find an unavowed intention to humiliate, and consequently to correct our neighbor, if not in his will, at least in his deed. This is the reason a comedy is far more like real life than a drama is” (p. 148). Casares uses humor to suggest that the way American society treats the elderly needs overhauling, that the old still need to be allowed their dignity.

Part of the humiliation Don Fidencio feels in Amigoland comes from the language the staff uses in talking with him. The attendants especially enjoy asking Don Fidencio unanswerable tag questions that in themselves are putdowns, showing the superiority of the speaker. The attendants say such things as “You don't want to have an accident, do you, Mr. Rosales?” (p. 34) and “Now we don't want to have an accident, do we?” (p. 37). He thinks, “And how was he supposed to answer a stupid question like that?” (p. 34). When Don Fidencio tries walking with a dust mop because his canes have been hidden from him as the staff attempts to force him to use the walker considered safer, The One With The Big Ones calls out, “You're doing an excellent job there, Mr. Rosales. . . . Keep up the good work” (p. 38). Don Fidencio realizes the staff

is laughing at him and thinks, "Wait until they saw the work he had done, then we'd see who was laughing" (p. 38). The staff calls Don Fidencio by his surname, but the use has an ironic twist to it as the name is clearly not used in respect.

It is easy to laugh at Don Fidencio as he is put down because he is so rebellious, refusing to lose his identity and his sense of himself. The reader cheers him on as he insists on regaining his freedom, his dignity, and his humanity. Sigmund Freud argues that "Humor is not resigned; it is rebellious. It signifies the triumph not only of the ego, but also of the pleasure principle, which is strong enough to assert itself here in the face of the adverse real circumstances"; "humor possesses a dignity" (p. 113). At the end of the novel the reader no longer wishes to laugh at Don Fidencio but instead finds him a most unusual comic hero who has triumphed over great odds to reach his goal. Usually in a comedy the goal is the hand of the beautiful girl the hero hopes to marry. Part of the incongruity of the end of *Amigoland* is that Don Fidencio triumphs by escaping from a nursing home where he was ostensibly imprisoned for his own good. The victory and happy end expected of a comedy is still very real to the reader.

Socorro, Don Celestino's maid who lives with her mother and aunt across the river in Matamoros, with whom he has sex in the afternoons after she has cleaned his house, and who is thirty years his junior, feels insecure about their relationship and argues with Don Celestino when she finds out he has a brother whom he has never mentioned. Don Celestino does not know how to respond when she foolishly chastises him for keeping secrets from her, feeling that he is ashamed of her and therefore insisting that he take her to Amigoland to introduce her to Don Fidencio. Don Celestino has not tried to keep anything from her but has not considered that he has any family to introduce her to as he has not spoken to his brother in ten years. Their argument is laughable when seen from the outside:



“Even if you didn’t tell him, you could have told me you had a brother. What would it hurt to tell me that one little thing? Why keep it from me?”

“You say it like I did it to deceive you. But there was nothing to tell you. What could I say? . . .”

“I never said anything about telling him.”

“Then?”

“Just why you kept it from me, Celestino, like it was a part of your life that didn’t concern me.” . . .

“Why would you care about some old man you have never seen?”

“Your brother.”

“Yes, all right, my brother, so now you know.”

“Yes, now I know.” (pp. 74-75)

The reader observes the folly of this couple, each of whom cares about the other, in their silly argument. Meredith says, “For Folly is the natural prey of the Comic, known to it in all her transformations, in every disguise; and it is with the springing delight of hawk over heron, hound after fox, that it gives her chase, never fretting, never tiring, sure of having her, allowing her no rest” (p. 33). Bergson makes clear that we don’t recognize our own folly: “a comic character is generally comic in proportion to his ignorance of himself” (p. 71), but Don Celestino does have an inkling that the two of them are missing each other as he thinks to himself at chapter’s end, “somehow he had the feeling they weren’t talking about the same thing” (p. 75).

Bergson finds in humor a corrective for society: “A humorist is a moralist disguised as a scientist, something like an anatomist who practices dissection with the sole object of filling us with disgust; so that humour . . . is really a transposition from the moral to

the scientific" (p. 143). Don Fidencio remembers when his wife left him over his philandering. On one occasion he abraded both knees on the carpet during a chance encounter. When his suspicious wife questions why his knees are scraped but his pants are not torn, he defends himself:

"Then tell me how you could fall and not get hurt."

"Turn the light off and come on to bed."

"And not just one knee."

"You try walking around all day carrying the bag, see if you don't fall down sometimes. . . ."

"You never fell before."

"And how do you know?"

"You never said anything."

"Y qué, I have to report this to you? 'Petra, today I fell because a big dog was chasing me and I couldn't run with the bag.' 'Petra, today I fell because they sent out the Sears catalogs.'" (p. 114)

The conversation is humorous in context, but Petra soon left her husband to live with their daughter and never returned. He saw her the next time many years later when he looked into her coffin.

One theory about comedy is that the reader or spectator feels he himself would not be guilty of the folly of the character he is observing. Sypher suggests that humor comes from our sense that we are superior to others, "arising from our feeling of superiority whenever we see ourselves triumphantly secure while others stumble" (p. 203). Throughout the novel Don Fidencio looks into his numbered shoe boxes for the only belongings he has left, and when he finds something missing, concludes that others are stealing from him. When the yardman discovers Don Fidencio's cigarette lighter under the bench on the patio where he smokes and

his pocketknife is found in the dishwasher, Don Fidencio feels his own innocence: "Always some excuse. Always some reason to blame him and make it seem like he didn't know where he left things." Even when he himself sees one of his pens under his bed, he is sure "some careless aide" has tossed it there. (p. 178). Don Fidencio exaggerates his own abilities. In his mind the ninety-one-year-old man is gaining strength every day from his exercises and soon will be able to walk on his own. He imagines, "In the evenings he was still sweeping the floors with the dust mop, but now once he was out of sight of the nurses' station, he would lean the mop against the wall and continue on his own, staying close to the wooden railing, just in case. They probably thought he would never get anywhere without the walker. But that showed how much they knew Fidencio Rosales" (p. 179). Don Fidencio's self-assertion helps to show his humanity; he is still alive and kicking, but the passage is funny to the knowing reader. Alluding to Sigmund Freud and Arthur Koestler, Galligan says "that there is always an element of aggression or self-assertion involved in situations that provoke laughter" (p. 5). The reader knows that Don Fidencio is deluding himself and feels superior as he/she understands the situation far better than Don Fidencio does. Bergson claims that the comic requires "something like a momentary anesthesia of the heart. Its appeal is to intelligence, pure and simple" (p. 64). At this point in the novel, the reader stands off to look at Don Fidencio from a distance without much concern for his welfare.

Though the reader sees the sadness of Don Fidencio's situation in this often black comedy, he/she gains a great deal of pleasure from reading the novel. Neil Schaeffer refers to comedy's great themes as "pleasure transmuted out of pain, order out of chaos, harmony out of conflict" (p. 121). Galligan claims that there is always the element of play in the comic: "Play is usually artificial and always pointless in that it admits to no purpose larger than itself" (p. 186). Bergson points out that "laughter [is] always a pleasure, and mankind [pounces] upon the slightest excuse for indulging in it" (p. 127). Paradoxically readers laugh at Don Fidencio at the

same time as they identify with him as their lives will also be short. Sypher argues “that comedy is a process of safe-guarding pleasure against the denials of reason, which is wary of pleasure. Man cannot live by reason alone or forever under the rod of moral obligation, the admonition of the superego” (p. 241). Readers laugh at the same time that they know that Don Fidencio’s dilemma is also theirs. And the laughter gives pleasure.

People laugh because they are human beings who revel in their freedom. Bergson connects the humorous with lack of freedom: “All that is serious in life comes from our freedom. The feelings we have matured, the passions we have brooded over, the actions we have weighed, decided upon and carried through, in short, all that comes from us and is our very own, these are the things that give life its oftentimes dramatic and generally grave aspect.” All a writer needs to do to make a scene comic is to reveal that the character is a puppet without freedom of action, that someone else is pulling the strings to make him dance (pp. 111-112). Throughout *Amigoland* the characters surrounding Don Fidencio attempt to control him, and he insists on his freedom. Only Socorro treats him with respect and humanity until he at last achieves his quest and reaches the ranchito near Linares, the place his grandfather had been stolen from in 1850. There, where he has returned to his roots, he finds kinfolk who grant him the freedom to choose his destiny. The end of the novel is no longer humorous, but it does achieve high comedy, the individual restored to the group, to the society, belonging once again, no longer a machine performing like a robot to the commands of others.

Despite his old age and feebleness, Don Fidencio is very much a human being and his situation, though comic, has a tragic side to it. Meredith writes, “The stroke of the great humorist is world-wide, with lights of tragedy in his laughter” (p. 45). While in Mexico, Don Fidencio gives a poor beggar woman some coins; she responds, “May God bless you with a long life” (p. 217). The remark is humorous but in its incongruity calls up the brevity of human life. Sypher writes that “We see the flaws in things, but we

do not always need to concede the victory, even if we live in a human world. If we can laugh wisely enough at ourselves and others, the sense of guilt, dismay, anxiety, or fear can be lifted" (p. 245). He argues that "The fragmentary lives we live are an existential comedy" (p. 196), even suggesting that because tragedy needs a noble hero "The comic now is more relevant, or at least more accessible, than the tragic" (p. 201) and concluding, "There is a comic road to wisdom, as well as a tragic road. There is a comic as well as a tragic control of life. And the comic control may be more usable, more relevant to the human condition in all its normalcy and confusion, its many unreconciled directions. Comedy as well as tragedy can tell us that the vanity of the world is foolishness before the gods" (p. 254).

*Amigoland* turns serious in the final chapters as Don Fidencio decides to remain in Mexico. He has regained his ability to make choices for himself, and thus his freedom and his dignity. He no longer dances puppet-like on a string at the whim of his daughter or the staff at Amigoland. The novel has ceased to be humorous at the end because Don Fidencio has regained status as a fully realized human being. The novel remains a comedy in that the ending is happy for readers, who have come to identify with the protagonist and do not themselves want to give up their identity and become less than human. *Amigoland* functions on several levels: as a comedy of manners, as an exposé of the American treatment of the aged, as a reminder that most citizens of American communities along the Mexican border have roots in Mexico that determine their names and much of their identities and customs, and as a warning that to be human is to require freedom and dignity. The humor of the novel functions brilliantly to underline the bittersweet nature of human life, which is all too short and though comic from a distance, has tragedy built in from the beginning.

The University of Texas at Brownsville

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# Three Interlinked Generations of Native Brownsville Chicano Writers

by

Lyon Rathbun

With 36% of its population living below federal poverty standards, Brownsville, Texas, is the poorest mid-sized city in the United States.<sup>1</sup> Yet, despite chronic poverty, Brownsville has produced three generations of remarkable writers, from Américo Paredes, born in 1915, to Manuel Medrano and Tony Zavaleta, born in the nineteen-forties, to Cecilia Balli and Oscar Casares, both born in the 1970's. Each of these authors explore, and celebrate, the Mexican heritage that is integral to their personal experience as natives of Brownsville. Implicitly, their readers include Americans of Mexican heritage who seek connection with their personal cultural inheritance. Yet what is most notable about their writings, considered collectively, is the way these Brownsville writers have sought to convey their personal cultural experience to a broad national audience. Each has acted as a cultural intermediary, bringing salient features of South Texas Border culture to the attention of a broad national readership; each has helped to establish the interweaving of cultures in the lower Rio Grande Valley as a noteworthy form of the broader cultural fusion that *is* American culture.<sup>2</sup>

Playing the role of cultural intermediary comes naturally to many Brownsville natives. Since its beginnings, the city has been continually populated by a steady stream of new arrivals from the interiors of both Mexico and the United States. Brownsville has consistently ranked high in surveys of poverty because the town is situated directly across the Río Grande River from Matamoras, Mexico, and has a perennially large population of recently arrived immigrants, mostly from Mexico. Yet even as the city is replenished with a steady stream of new arrivals, Brownsville also

has numerous Hispanic families – the Zavaletas, the Garzas, the Paredes, the Ballis, the Trevinos – that have branches on both sides of the river and roots stretching back to colonial times. And some Anglo families, like the Stillmans, have been in Brownsville since the late 1840's. The city has been shaped by the historical development of both Mexico and the United States and has been distinguished by a significant degree of accommodation between the landed Hispanic families and newly arriving Anglos.<sup>3</sup> In 1936, cities across Texas celebrated the state's Centennial with collective expressions of state pride that included disparaging depictions of Mexicans as the racially stunted counterpoint to Anglo-Texan progress.<sup>4</sup> In contrast, the city fathers of Brownsville inaugurated the Charro Days festival (in 1937) which celebrates the Hispanic culture that Brownsville and Matamoros have in common. The idea had first been pitched to the Brownsville Chamber of Commerce by a Brownsville developer and attorney, Kenneth Faxon, who argued, "Here are two nations represented by Brownsville and Matamoros; a mingling of two cultures. Let's have a fiesta and tell others what we have to offer."<sup>5</sup> Other Texan cities found collective identity through contrasting themselves to the alien Mexican "Other." In Brownsville, citizens established a public identity through commemorating the Hispanic heritage that Brownsville shares with its sister-city, Matamoros.

Each writer in this study has, in his own distinctive way, sought to "tell others" how they have experienced Brownsville as a "mingling of two cultures." Beginning with Américo Paredes, who participated in the first Charro Days Celebration in 1937, Brownsville writers have helped to forge a collective identity that honors the cultural heritages of both Mexico and the United States. Over three generations, from the 1930's into the second decade of the twenty-first century, they have conveyed to the nation at large how the blended culture of the South Rio Grande Valley is a vibrant piece of the broader mosaic of American culture. Within the circumstances of their own historical moment, each writer has contributed to the dialogue of mutual understanding that has oc-



curred, despite countervailing forces, over the last seventy years of American cultural history.

## **The Legacy and Achievement of Américo Paredes**

Anybody seeking to understand Américo Paredes must first penetrate the halo of greatness that has accrued around him over the decades. A reverential, but playful, portrait of the great man hangs in the stairwell of Cárdenas Hall South, on the University of Texas at Brownsville campus, where most of the Humanities courses are taught. Bold, impressionistic strokes of blue and yellow and brown evoke Paredes as an elderly man, as he appeared in the last decade of his life, when he visited the campus to deliver a last honorary address. His craggy face -- lean cheekbones thrust slightly forward -- fills the canvas. Large eyes, slightly askew, reflecting both pain and wisdom, look out through thick horn-rimmed glasses onto the passing parade of students, instructors, and visitors.

Some of the UTB students who pass under this portrait have attended the Brownsville elementary school named in his honor, and Paredes continues to be revered by the UTB-TSC community and by citizens from Brownsville at large. He graduated from Texas Southmost College in 1936 and delivered several addresses at his alma mater after achieving fame as a professor at UT Austin. By the time Américo Paredes made his last visit to UTB in 1998, as a distinguished alumnus, one year before his death, he had been recognized as a scholar, writer, and teacher by the major institutions of learning in the country. He had been elected to the North American Academy of the Spanish Languages and had been named the Dickson, Allen, Anderson Centennial Professor in Southwest Folklore, History and Literature. In 1983, he was made an Honorary Member of The Western Literature Association, and, in 1987, he was recognized with the Américo Paredes Distinguished Lecture Series established at UT Austin. In 1989, he was awarded the Charles Frankel Prize by the National Endowment for the Humanities for a lifetime devoted to scholarship in the humanities.

His awards and renown are commensurate with his achievement: He has been a model for younger Chicano scholars who read his pioneering books and who took his classes at UT Austin. More broadly, his scholarship helped established the experience of Mexican-Texans as a subject worthy of study by all students of human culture. As a whole, his writings show how the “contact zone” of South Texas is a microcosm of the broader clash, and mixing, of cultures that characterizes the interconnected modern world.<sup>6</sup> Américo Paredes is still an icon for Hispanic students of all ages – and a scholar of immense importance to educators and students of all ethnic backgrounds intent on learning to navigate across cultural divides – and who seek to teach others to do likewise. Could any twentieth century scholar be more worthy of respect and reverence than Brownsville’s own Américo Paredes?

Although his achievement now seems larger than life, it rested not only on his intellectual powers, which were considerable, but on a more visceral quality: his sustained effort to understand, honor, and integrate the pieces of his own lived experience. His private and scholarly life – his academic writing along with his poetry and fiction: it all formed a seamless whole that unfolded along the arch of his long, productive life. Again and again, the tributes to him attest to a quality of wholeness that seem to form the essence of his power as a person and a scholar. Paredes’ son remembers his father as being the same person at home that he was on campus. “My father was a teacher first, then scholar,” Vince Paredes remembers. “He might not have separated those in his mind because he was teaching people to be scholars. Those things weren’t separated. He presented his whole self to everybody and his family. He was the same person to me and his colleagues.”<sup>7</sup> José Limon, who completed his dissertation under Paredes, and currently directs the Center for Mexican Studies at Austin, was touched, most deeply, by Paredes’ integrity. “He was more than a teacher and dissertation supervisor,” Limón remembers. “For me, he was something else; a kind of living symbol of rectitude; of what is correct; of consummate integrity. He was an example

for the way that men and women ought to conduct themselves in public and even in private.”<sup>8</sup> In his introduction to a collection of Américo Paredes’ major essays, *Folklore and Culture on the Texas-Mexican Border*, Richard Bauman captures how the seamlessness of Paredes’ life was essential to his achievement as a scholar. Bauman explains:

...there is a deep and resonant unity in Américo Paredes’ life, his subject, and his writing, but it is a unity of diversity, a conjunction of the borders. And when you can balance the ambiguities, survive the conflict, and command the resources and repertoires of both sides of the border and the contact culture itself, as Américo Paredes has done, the result is inspired and inspiring writing.”<sup>9</sup>

Existential integrity, no less than intellectual talent, formed the foundation of Américo Paredes’ achievement as a man, a writer and an educator.

Fiction writers often follow the dictum, “write what you know,” but academic writers seldom do. Paredes began his literary career writing “what he knew” in the form of narrative and lyrical fiction. And, after earning his PhD and becoming an academic writer, he remained faithful to his first impulses and to his primary subject. Paredes read widely, mastered five languages, and was deeply learned in a range of disciplines. Yet as a teacher and writer he focused on *one* subject – the Border culture of the American Southwest. He wrote with enormous personal authority about that subject, because he had been born into it; he did not stumble onto his PhD dissertation topic, the ballad of Gregorio Cortez, by skimming books in the UT Austin library. The song was part of the lore that Paredes had absorbed as a boy growing up in Brownsville.

Late in life, Paredes recalled that Brownsville itself, in the twenties and thirties, “was like a little Mexican town.” The population was less than 25,000. Young men and women would walk in groups up

and down the main street, Elizabeth Street, in the *paseo* tradition of courtship in Mexico.<sup>10</sup> Every summer, until he was fourteen, Américo and his twin brothers, Amador and Eleazar, spent their summers on their Uncle Vicente's ranch near Matamoros. "We would immediately head across the river the back way," Paredes recalled. "Everyone had little boats hidden in the reeds. We would stay there three months, living like Mexicans, listening to the old people tell their stories...there I was living in another world." A niece remembers Américo "helping with other boys and men gather mesquite wood for the evening's campfire. At night when the fire was lit, the old people sat, told stories, and sang ballads about the Mexican Revolution or folk heroes such as Jacinto Trevino or Gregorio Cortez."<sup>11</sup>

Paredes became acculturated through the ritual of familial storytelling – and through rude encounters with prejudice and discrimination. In the 1930's over 70% of Brownsville's population was of Mexican heritage, but less than 10% attended Brownsville's community college. When asked, as a student at Texas Southmost College, what he would do after graduation, Paredes answered that he aspired to earn a PhD in English at UT Austin. For the rest of his life, he remembered the sting of the teacher's dismissive response: "Why don't you try to get a job at the local newspaper?"<sup>12</sup> In 1940, while working at Pan American Airways, Paredes became indignant after discovering that he was earning \$65 a week, while an Anglo co-worker, with the same education and experience, was making \$100. When confronted, his supervisor explained, "of course he makes more than you....He just couldn't live on \$65 a month. You can." Recalling the incident late in his life, Paredes explained, "As you can see, my boss did believe the young Anglo and I were *physically* different. He must have thought my stomach was constructed differently, so I could thrive on cheap food, which the Anglo couldn't, much like goats, who are said to thrive on poor pasturage, or even tin cans, while other animals, say thoroughbred horses – required finer food."<sup>13</sup> Paredes could recall the incident with humor, which softened – even as it revealed – the

knot of anger that still tightened when he recalled having grown up in a world that had relegated Mexican-Texans to the status of second-class citizens.

Américo Paredes never forgot that he had been born into a subordinated and exploited community, and he never extinguished the ire that burned in the depths of his psyche. At the end of his life, feeling the approach of death, Paredes wrote a poem to his wife which reveals the slow-burning furor that he had carried through his whole life:

The dead past does not bury its own dead,  
They tag along until the final-present.  
And then when that final-present comes, I ask  
You should not fear of giving me to fire,  
My dearest love, my friend.  
In doing so  
You simply will be adding from without  
To what has been inside these many years,  
A burning so intense that it has scorched  
Those who have touched me.  
Special you – too candid, too straightforward  
To suspect the fire inside, till you  
Were also burned and hardened to withstand  
The demons in me.  
Let me burn!  
Let me burn!  
Till the volcano in my guts explodes  
Like a Bengal light...<sup>14</sup>

As his career unfolded, Paredes infused his anger into poems, fictions, and scholarly essays that consistently sought to bring the historical and cultural experience of his community to the attention of an incrementally expanding audience.

During the first phase of his career, Paredes' writing expressed both anger and despair – that his community's afflictions could ever be remedied. Some of his early poems and stories tenderly

evoke the pathos of being young, or in love. However, his most powerful early writings evoke the indignity of being Mexican American in a western corner of the Jim Crow South. Moreover, his more politically-charged fictions suggest that young men such as himself had only two choices in life: the self-defeating glory of blood-letting or the quiet ignominy of capitulation and accommodation. In 1935, shortly after being hired as a reporter for the *Brownsville Herald*, he published "The Mexico-Texan." A few representative verses suggest the sense of hopelessness that Paredes felt in the mid-thirties:

...For the Mexico-Texan he no gotta lan',  
He stomped on the neck on both sides of the gran',  
The dam gringo lingo he no cannot spik,  
It twisters the tong and it make you fill sick.  
A cit'zen of Texas they say that he ees,  
But then, why they call him the Mexican Grease?  
Soft talk and hard action, he can't understan',  
The Mexico-Texan he no gotta lan".  
If he cross the reever, eet ees just as bad,  
On high poleeshed Spanish he break up his had,  
American customs those people no like,  
They hate that Miguel they should call him El Mike,  
And Mexican-born, why they jeer and they hoot,  
'G back to the gringo! Go lick at hees boot!'  
In Texas he's Johnny, in Mexico Juan,  
But the Mexico-Texan he no gotta lan'.<sup>15</sup>

Here, Paredes does not depict the bi-cultural heritage of the "Mexico-Texan" as an empowering resource, or source of pride, but as a paralyzing liability.

The most conspicuous example of Paredes' inability, as a young writer, to envision a way of redeeming the wrongs suffered by his community was the authorial choices he make in concluding his novel, *George Washington Gomez*, which he wrote in the mid-thirties, but did not publish until 1990, long after achieving fame as

an academic writer. The protagonist, Gualinto, grows up obsessed with fantasies of killing the Texas Rangers who had murdered his politically active father, Gumercindo. Humiliated in school and in the workplace, he becomes, in the final section, a *vendido*, a sell-out, when he returns to Jonesville (Brownsville) as a military officer representing the oppressive might of the “colossus from the north.” The glory of murderous retribution no longer a viable option, young Mexican-Americans, represented by Gualinto, can only pursue cultural self-mutilation, mute assimilation into the dominant culture. Emphatically, Paredes was using his early literary efforts to evoke his felt sense of outraged futility.

Yet at the same time, Paredes was beginning to create a social role for himself as a cultural intermediary. Even as he was experiencing the cultural prejudice, restricted social opportunities, and economic exploitation of the Mexican-Texan community at large, Paredes was beginning to communicate this experience to an audience beyond his immediate community. After all, Paredes did publish “The Mexican-Texan” in the *Brownsville Herald*, the town paper, read by the whole literate population of Brownsville. Despite being part of the Jim Crow South, the sister-city of Matamoros could not deny its own bi-cultural heritage. In 1937, Brownsville, in league with Matamoros, inaugurated the Charro Days Festival, a period when Paredes was regularly publishing articles highlighting the Mexican American experience in the *Herald* as well as in other near-by papers.

Brownsville had always been a town where some reciprocity across ethnic and class lines occurred regularly. It was a place, for example, where Anglos of good will were capable of encouraging Mexican-Texans of talent to pursue their education. Américo Paredes never forgot the teacher who balked at his aspiration to attend UT Austin, nor did he ever forget the Anglo dean of Brownsville Junior College, J.W. “Red” Irvine, who helped him begin his college education. In an interview, Paredes recalled:

Well, school ends and I get my high school diploma. That was it; nowhere to go. I was standing on a street in Brownsville with other kids, not looking for trouble, just standing around waiting for it to come around, I guess. But the dean and the principal drove by in a little Chevy with a rumble seat. And he saw me, stopped and backed up. It was late June and he called, and I went up and he said, "are you going to college? I said no I don't have the money,. And he said, did you apply for a student assistantship? I told him, what's that?"<sup>16</sup>

Mr. Irvine instructed Paredes to submit a letter of application and arranged a campus job for Paredes that paid his \$150 semester tuition. Paredes excelled as a community college student, developing the writing skills he would use as a reporter, fiction writer, and essayist. Paredes credited Mr. Irvine, and his two years at Brownsville Community College, with not only helping him begin his writing career, but also with developing the confidence to begin his graduate studies at UT Austin at the age of 35. Paredes admitted, "I would not have had the guts, if I may say, if I had not had those two years of junior college, courtesy of Red Irvine."<sup>17</sup>

One cannot imagine a Mexican-Texan publishing articles in a Waco, Texas, newspaper in the mid-nineteen-thirties – any more than one could imagine a young black man of that era writing for a city newspaper in Mobile, Alabama.<sup>18</sup> Yet nothing seems out of joint envisioning Américo Paredes reporting for The Brownsville Herald, where he wrote articles about border folklore and traditions that prefigured his later scholarship. During the same years that he was writing *George Washington Gomez*, Paredes was also singing *corridos* and original compositions on a weekly program at a local radio station, KWWG.<sup>19</sup> In 1938, Paredes wrote about the First Charro Days celebration, in which he participated, as well as articles about bullfighting and Mexican-style rodeos, *Charreadas*, that displayed the exquisite horsemanship and roping skills of the Mexican *vaquero*. He also wrote about Border traditions in the



daily newspaper *La Prensa*, of another South Texas town that had a tradition of accommodation, San Antonio.<sup>20</sup>

In an interview late in his life, Paredes recalled the first published writing he completed for the *Herald*, saying,

...I was very much aware, that what we were taught in school at that time and what we knew in our hearts and what our elders told us was different. That our heritage was not being given the respect that it deserved so what I did in the *Herald* was milder, showing them, for example, that Juvention Rosas wrote "Sobre las olas" ...but more important to me was to show what had been done, the injustices that had been done to our people and the value to our heritage. *Much of that fell on deaf ears until I finally was able to come here* [UT Austin] [italics added]<sup>21</sup>

Paredes' lasting achievement was the scholarship he produced as a professor of folklore at the University of Texas at Austin. But that accomplishment rested on the precedent of having reached a real audience, however tentatively, as a reporter and *raconteur* in Brownsville during the 1930's.

Paredes found both his voice and his subject as a budding writer and bohemian hipster, singing in local watering holes with his talented first wife, Chelo Silva, who would go on, after divorcing Paredes, to have a successful career as a popular singer, touring extensively, and also recording for Falcon Records, Columbia, and Sony.<sup>22</sup> But Paredes had never been outside the Rio Grande Valley, and he was still constrained by the parochialism of deep South Texas. It was only when he left Brownsville to join the army, spending five years in Asia, that he gained the breadth of experience that enabled him, finally, to find a platform from which he could express his cultural experience to a broad national and international audience.

Américo Paredes joined the army in 1944, at the very end of the war, and was stationed in Japan, writing and editing articles for a military newsletter, *The G-Eye Opener*. Later, he served as political editor for the Tokyo-based *Pacific Stars and Stripes*, the daily newspaper for the whole armed forces. After being discharged in 1946, Paredes stayed in Asia for four more years, working as a public relations officer for the International Branch of the American Red Cross. As a military reporter and as an administrator for an international relief agency, Paredes held a social rank that he had never known in Brownsville. For five years he interacted with other professionals from across the United States, and from around the world, as a man with social standing and authority, not as a Mexican-Texan, a disparaged member of a subordinated community. From his new social position, he was able to see his own cultural experience from a broad international perspective. In a 1945 poem, "Pro Patria," he wrote,

In the mud huts of China/The tile-roofed paper  
houses of Japan,/ In the straw-thatched jacales  
of old Mexico/ The rain-blackened shacks of  
Arkansas/ Here is my fatherland, these are my  
people/my beloved/black, yellow, brown/ and  
even if their eyes are blue/ These are my people/  
The bleeding wounds upon the feet and hands/  
of humankind...<sup>23</sup>

Another poem, "Song of the Gigolo," written in 1946, suggests how Paredes learned to use his own personal history as a means of making emotional connections to others who did not share his cultural background. In some of the lines, Paredes intones:

Listen!  
Words to the ballad in a Tokyo bar  
With my guitar.  
With my guitar I sing to you, bring to you  
Songs about dreams misplaced and of distant  
Sadnesses;

...Listen!

You are blonde and beautiful

Like the sun when it shines through ice,

Striking a thousand colors at once,

Firing them, painting them, setting them all aflame

Till the cold has become iridescence,

So shall I be to your northern eyes

with my guitar.

... Listen!

I will tell you the joys and the pain

And the warm, soft secrets of my swarthy race,

I shall paint you the thousand colors of a *sarape*  
shawl...<sup>24</sup>

While playing the role of seducer, and using his cultural heritage as sexual allurements, Paredes is dramatizing how his sense of self was stretched living in Japan, where he was not merely reinforcing bonds of solidarity with members of his own insular community, but using his cultural experience to find rapport with others shaped by different histories. Working in the devastated countries of Asia enabled Paredes to see that those who lived “in the mud huts of China” shared a common humanity with those originating from “the straw-thatched *jacales* of old Mexico.”

When Paredes returned to the United States, he had outgrown Brownsville. Visiting his family in 1950, he wrote,

returned in January to the becalmed anchorage.  
The old harbor resented the new shape of my sails.  
Klahn as well called me a snob and a pretender  
because I told him I had found beauties not only  
in free verse but in symphonic music and modern  
art. What a fool I was until I cast anchor....That I  
can see plainly now...My past was mirrored in the  
present of my old ex-friends.<sup>25</sup>

Paredes no longer fit comfortably in the hometown he had left five years earlier. No longer a small-town newspaper reporter and

poet, he had become cosmopolitan and was ready to make his way at the University of Texas at Austin.

As a worldly thirty-five-year-old, buoyed by the assistance of the GI Bill and the status of being a World War II vet, Paredes began working on his bachelor of arts degree, in 1950, and completed his PhD in 1956. His doctoral dissertation, *With a Pistol in his Hand*, was a virtuoso work of scholarship that established the historical actuality and cultural significance of the "Ballad of Gregorio Cortez." Meticulously researched, and written in lucid prose, the work revealed how the story of Gregorio Cortez expressed the lived experience of the Mexican-American community during the dark decades of exploitation that stretched from the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo through the Great Depression of the 1930's. Paredes had not chosen a safe topic for a doctoral dissertation. His subject was a Mexican folk hero, eulogized in a ballad written in Spanish, who challenged the normative assumptions of Texan nationalism and Manifest Destiny. Yet the work had compelling scholarly importance that was obvious even to readers who might have rejected the work on ideological grounds.

One important reader who championed Paredes' dissertation was Dr. Stith Thompson, head of the folklore program at Indiana University, and perhaps the preeminent folklorist of the world. Thomson had begun his teaching career at UT-Austin and had returned in 1955 as a visiting professor. Paredes remembered Dr. Thompson as "Mr. Folklore" in both the United States and Europe, whose endorsement "was almost like *un dedazo* [a divine appointment], so the press accepted it."<sup>26</sup> Even more remarkably, the manuscript, which displays the Mexican-American distain for the Texas Rangers, was championed by Walter Prescott Webb. More than any other writer, Webb was responsible for the hagiographic legend of the Texas Rangers.<sup>27</sup>

Frank Wardlaw, the director of the UT Press, explained in a letter to Paredes that his "penetrating analysis of the border country and its people," along with his analysis of the role that the Texas

Rangers had played in subjugating the Mexican people, “would be of great value and interest to the general reader.” Wardlaw went on to explain that Dr. Walter Prescott Webb, then chairman of the faculty advisory board, had endorsed the book, “despite finding himself the villain of the piece at several points.” Webb, Wardlaw explained, “has always considered it a weakness of his book on the Texas Rangers that he was unable to give the Mexican attitude toward the Rangers, and their side of the border conflict, with any degree of thoroughness.” Although Paredes’ “presentation of the Mexican side of the border conflict will undoubtedly be heartily resented by many old-time Texans,” Webb had concluded that “*it is a story which should be told* [italics added].”<sup>28</sup> If *With a Pistol in his Hands* could win a sympathetic reading from Walter Prescott Webb, then the book was capable of winning a place for the Mexican-American experience in the historical imagination of the nation at large.

In writing *With a Pistol in his Hands*, Américo Paredes was acutely aware that his key rhetorical challenge was to win the assent of socially established Anglo readers who were inclined to identify with the nationalistic version of American history. In a candid interview, Paredes explained:

The thing was that most of what our people knew was in *corridos* and in legends and oral history. And I wanted to bring those things to the majority because I felt there were enough people of good will among the Anglos, which if they saw our side, they would really react. And in a talk I gave at Sacramento State....I said that the people who had awakened to a new era were the Anglos. Because it was about that time that Anglos of good will began to see our side, and we needed their help to be able to make ourselves heard.<sup>29</sup>

As Paredes’ most widely read work, *With a Pistol in his Hands* did enable many “Anglos of good will” to “see our side.” The book

was a quintessential example of cultural mediation, bringing the experience of the Mexican-Texan community to the attention of the nation at large.

In all of the articles and books that Paredes wrote after the publication of *With a Pistol in his Hand*, he continued to focus on the culture of the Southwest Border and continued to act as a cultural intermediary. Again and again in his scholarly essays, Paredes places the study of the folklore of the Lower Río Grande Border into a broader national, and even international, context, showing how the inner working of conflict that has germinated Mexican-American folklore can, by analogy, shed light on other cultural contact zones where global interdependence has made cultural conflict endemic. Concluding his "The Problem of Identity in a Changing Culture," Paredes comments that the *pocho*, "living between two cultures... in a state of permanent crisis" can serve as a prototype for young people across the globe who grow up within diverse, contested cultural norms. The Pocho's "search for identity" is a "state shared by all Mexicans, and perhaps by all the world."<sup>30</sup>

In generalizing from the experience of "Mexican-Texans," Paredes developed one particularly important insight: He recognized the role of cultural conflict in the genesis of folklore of all border regions. In his introduction to *Folklore and Culture on the Texas-Mexican Border*, Richard Bauman explains,

...The generating force of which such folklore merges is conflict, struggle, and resistance, and the folklore operates as an instrument of this conflict, not in the service of systems maintenance. This is a bold challenge to traditionalist understandings, and to the extent that it has gained ground among folklorists in recent decades, Paredes' acknowledged influence as teacher, colleague, and author has been clear and significant.<sup>31</sup>

As an anthropologist and folklorist, Paredes did more than convey the cultural experience of deep South Texas to a broad national audience. He also contributed to anthropological theory and his scholarship remains seminal for any reader seeking deeper understanding of how new cultural identities emerge from the friction of cultural conflict and dissonance. Yet, as a public intellectual, Paredes devoted himself, above all else, to promoting mutual understanding across the cultural divide between Mexican and Anglo Americans.

Again and again, Paredes' essays seek to facilitate understanding and appreciation of the Border Culture of South Texas. In "The Mexican Contribution to Our Culture," written for a non-academic audience, Paredes uses the pronouns "we" and "our" to create an inclusive national perspective, arguing that English-speaking writers – as well as average Mexican Americans – are ignorant of the Mexican contribution to the American Southwest. In his conclusion, the pronouns "we" and "us" and "our" refer to Americans at large. He writes, "We can justly call the Southwest our own; we can look back with pride at the part our Mexican forebears played in its evolution. It is part of us, made up as it is of so many different peoples and with so many points of view that have here met and mingled into something worthy of being valued, something that is our own."<sup>32</sup> Paredes is not only making an emphatic historical claim – that the culture of the Southwest, so deeply influenced by Mexico, has made an important contribution to the whole nation. He is also making an ethical appeal – that the very effort to understanding the Border's place in the fabric of whole nation is a step towards mutual understanding, the ultimate goal to which Paredes had dedicated himself.

As an angry young man of the 1930's, Paredes had not found a constructive response to the Mexican American predicament. But as a college professor and scholar, he had forged a resolution through becoming a cultural intermediary, translating his personal experience, embedded within the broader experience of the Southwest Border, for a broad national audience. Though Paredes

was too cosmopolitan to put it this way, his scholarship was an act of profound patriotism.

### **The Impact of Américo Paredes on Anthony Zavaleta and Manuel Medrano**

Paredes inspired dozens of his former students and colleagues, none more profoundly than Antonio Zavaleta and Manuel Medrano, both born in Brownsville approximately one generation after Paredes. Both grew up in the Brownsville of the 1950's and came of age during the 1960's, at the height of Paredes' influence as a teacher and scholar. Both modeled their own careers on the example of their great mentor and friend.

Like Paredes, Dr. Tony Zavaleta was born to a family with roots in the region that stretch back to the colonial era. A graduate of Texas Southmost College, and UT-Austin, where he studied under Paredes, Zavaleta has made a significant contribution to the University of Texas at Brownsville, and to the surrounding community, that has been largely inspired by Américo Paredes. Summing up how Paredes influenced him, Zavaleta explains, "the influence that Paredes has had on me continued throughout my career, and continues until this day. It never ends. My other professor was good to me, we had a mutually beneficial relationship, but with Paredes, it was a spiritual thing."<sup>33</sup> In effect, Zavaleta found the essence of his identity confirmed and legitimated in the example of Américo Paredes.

At Austin, Zavaleta, who had become an activist in the Chicano Movement, felt the exclusionary impulse that animated some of the movement's leaders. He remembered that he had been a faithful foot soldier in the movement, "boycotting, picketing, marching ... from the very beginning," but that he had not been able to rise into a leadership position because, with a Mexican-American father and Anglo-American mother, he was an *incartado*, someone who could not be trusted. Zavaleta recalls that, in their zeal, some movement leaders "had to wear this mantel of them or no one. They alienated an awful lot of people." Paredes, who had inspired



the whole Chicano Movement along with many of its leaders, “was not like that.” Zavaleta recalls that: “Over the years that I worked with him, I watched him embrace students of other races and ethnicities. He treated everyone equally. His love was for the lore, the folklore, and not so much for a race or an ethnic group.”<sup>34</sup>

Over the years that he spent as an undergraduate, and then a graduate student, at UT-Austin, Paredes continued to act as teacher, and mentor. When Zavaleta left UT-Austin and returned to Brownsville, where he dedicated himself to building the new university of Texas at Brownsville, Paredes continued to inspire Zavaleta. By the time of Paredes’ death, in 1996, Zavaleta and a few other close friends were inspired to create a public emblem that could suggest the transmission of knowledge – of wisdom – of *Being* – that they had received from Paredes. At the memorial service held for him at the Austin Campus, Zavaleta recalls that “we made a poster in honor of him in which you just see the bottom portion of a body wearing *guaraches*, walking through a field, *sembrando* (“putting out seeds”). And so he was called *El Sembrador* (“the planter of seeds”). And you see, that’s what I am. I’m the seed that grew and created other seeds.”<sup>35</sup>

In part, Zavaleta was able to establish a rapport with Paredes because he had been shaped by similar experiences. Like Paredes, Zavaleta had developed an early love for folklore by mingling with *campesinos* and listening to their stories and songs. He recalls:

I became interested in Folklore because of all my cousins, I was the only one who was out there on the ranch, a cotton farm, during the *bracero* program. I was a natural: While they were three to four hundred *braceros* picking cotton by hand, and the fields were distant from the ranch house and the *braceros* would make their camps about a mile away from the house, my grandmother entrusted me to one of the women and said this is my grandson. He’s going to live with you out there; he’s going to learn

how to pick cotton; make sure you take care of him. So I would spend the summers, weeks and weeks, around these *bracero* camps and this is where I developed my love, my passion, for folklore.<sup>36</sup>

After two years of college at Texas Southmost College, Zavaleta transferred to UT-Austin, and when he landed in a folklore class taught by Paredes, the professor knew that his new student was from his own Brownsville neighborhood. "So When I went to Austin [after 2 yrs at TSC] I signed up for a folklore class," Zavaleta recalls, explaining:

This was in the early sixties. So I'm in his class, not knowing who he was, he just seemed like a very dear man, he was probably in his fifties in those days. but we developed an affinity; I probably came home, and told my parents I was taking a class with Américo Paredes and they said, well he grew up right on the next block from us. My uncles and he and his brothers grew up within two blocks of east of each other, in East Brownsville, on E. Jefferson. So I did very well in his class, He knew exactly who I was, from the name.<sup>37</sup>

Going on to eventually earn a PhD in Medical and Biological Anthropology, Zavaleta continued to take courses from Paredes and remained in regular contact with him. "I never lost touch with Américo. And that's why, when it came time for Manny (Manuel Medrano) to meet Américo, I set the meeting up in the early 90's, after the partnership; I took many courses with Américo, who was the professor of record, and I did papers that had to do with folk medicine and folk healing."<sup>38</sup>

Zavaleta returned to Brownsville, becoming an integral part of the UT-B community as a teacher, a scholar, and as an administrator. He has mentored dozens of students – including Oscar Casares – who acknowledges Zavaleta in his most recent novel, *Amigoland*. Zavaleta has also managed the publication of a multi-volume se-

ries of anthologies of local history that remains ongoing, along with many articles on the folklore surrounding the indigenous healing practices that have continued to be practiced in South Texas. In 2009, Zavaleta published a full-length book, *Curandero Conversations*, on the tradition of *curanderismo* in the Lower Río Grande Valley. The book, like Zavaleta's whole career, suggests how Zavaleta functions, like his mentor, as a cultural intermediary, a messenger who mines insights from the lore of Border Culture and transmits that knowledge to a distant audience.

In talking about Paredes, Zavaleta shared one anecdote that suggests how he learned the role of cultural intermediary directly from his mentor. Readers attuned to the political dimension of *With a Pistol in his Hand* focus, naturally, on the asymmetrical power relations between Cortez and the lawmen who pursue him. Zavaleta, in contrast, focuses on what he sees as Paredes' core reason for writing the book, to show the misunderstanding, rooted in language, that caused the first shootout that resulted in the death of Cortez's brother. Zavaleta explains,

The classic teaching metaphor in *With a Pistol in his Hand*, where the sheriff comes up to the *jacal*, the shack, and calls out for the person who's living there and asks in English, which had to be translated into Spanish, if he had the horse. And the fellow responds, No I don't have the horse. The problem is that its gender. If the sheriff had asked him if he had the female horse, he probably would have said, yes, I have the female horse. But they asked for the male horse. So there was a miscommunication, which resulted in the imprisonment of Gregorio Cortez. The shootout was over the gender of a horse. There's a message; there's a lesson to be learned. *And that was the beauty of Paredes, I believe* [italics added].<sup>39</sup>

For Zavaleta, *With a Pistol in his Hands* seeks to clarify the Sheriff's original misunderstanding through retrospective reconstruction of the actual circumstances that had first given rise to the legend of Gregorio Cortez. In seeking to interpret and translate misunderstood linguistic terms, and misperceived cultural norms, Paredes was acting, essentially, as a cultural intermediary. From his mentor, Zavaleta learned to play the same role.

The very structure of Zavaleta's one of most recent works, *Curandero Conversations: El Niño Fidencio, Shamanism and Healing Traditions of the Borderlands* places Zavaleta in the role of cultural intermediary. The book is made up of queries, and answers, originally in the form of emails, sent to Alberto Salinas Jr., a revered *curandero* from the Lower Río Grande, known as a *Fidencista*, a *devoté* of the great Mexican healer Niño Fidencio. Each exchange between Salinas and his questioner is followed by a commentary, written by Zavaleta, that translates the exchange for readers not acculturated into the tradition of Curanderismo. For example, in one query, a young Latino asks Don Salinas Jr. if the spirit of Niño Fidencio might be invoked on behalf of his father, who been told by his doctors that no further treatment was available for his diabetic neuropathy. Along with deep empathy and condolences, Don Salinas answers that "it could be that because of your faith and that of your father, through the Niño's mediation, God will grant your father a miracle. It has happened before." He also prescribes a cocktail of herbs, including mezqujite, salvia, and lemon grass, to be mixed together in equal quantities and taken with water twice a day. In his commentary, Zavaleta points out that the health care system has, essentially, forsaken the father, leaving him and his son without comfort, or answers of any kind. "Feelings of desperation and isolation," Zavaleta explains, "provokes persons to seek alternative health care modalities....At the point that this family finds itself, faith and church and *curanderismo* are the only health-care alternatives available to them."<sup>40</sup>

Without Zavaleta's explications, uninitiated readers could easily perceive the questions as inspired by ignorance -- and the answers

as clouded by superstition. Without attempting to convince the reader of the efficacy of the cure, Zavaleta clarifies the questioner's motivations, along with the underlying cultural meanings that are conveyed in the *curandero's* response. In effect, Zavaleta acts as an intermediary between uninitiated reader and the interlocutors, who have a natural affinity for the healing tradition into which they were born, with its cultural roots stretching back to the medicinal lore of Northern Mexico's indigenous peoples.

Américo Paredes exerted a profound influence on Tony Zavaleta's whole life and career. The same is true of Manuel Medrano.

### Manuel Medrano

Like Anthony Zavaleta, Manuel Medrano was born and raised in Brownsville, has devoted his career to teaching and writing at UT-B, and has been deeply inspired by Américo Paredes. Long involved in producing oral history profiles of persons from the Río Grande Valley, Medrano first interviewed Américo Paredes in 1993 (with Anthony Zavaleta), and has been a family friend ever since. Like Paredes, Medrano writes in multiple genres: He has published three bilingual works of poetry about the South Texas Border, and has co-authored *Medieval Culture and the Mexican American Borderlands* with Milo Kearney and *Charro Days in Brownsville* with Tony Knopp and Priscilla Rodriguez. Medrano has also produced and directed a documentary featuring Río Grande Valley people titled *Los del Valle*. His most recent work is a biography of his mentor, *Américo Paredes: In his Own Words, An Authorized Biography*. The book draws heavily on the interviews that Medrano conducted with Paredes and members of Paredes' family. For Zavaleta, Paredes was a *sembrador*, a sower of seeds; For Medrano, he was a hero. In the last pages of his biography, summing up the man's essence, Medrano writes,

I know Américo would be the last person to accept the label of hero because he told me so, but when I first sat face-to-face with him in his Austin home, I thought differently. I realized that he had sung

and written for my mother's generation and that his literary courage had inspired my generation. As he spoke to me he did so with the fire of a young poet in his eyes. What he had done for many of us for so many years was nothing less than heroic.<sup>41</sup>

Medrano's esteem for Paredes, which equals Zavaleta's, suggests how profoundly important Paredes was to the generation of Mexican Americans born during the 1940's who extended the civic and educational endeavors that Paredes had pioneered.

After Américo Paredes' death, his oldest son, Vince Paredes, asked Manuel Medrano to lead the family in spreading Paredes' ashes at the mouth of the Río Grande River. The request was itself a tribute to Medrano's reverence for Paredes and to the trust that Paredes' family had placed in Medrano. After Vince had read one of the poems his father had written as a young man, "El Río Grande," Medrano read a poem that he had composed shortly after Paredes' death. In English, the poem reads:

Américo Paredes  
Righteous man whose roots are in your very heart  
I remember you  
Educated and honored man of two countries and  
two eras  
I value you

Man who crossed the lines of time  
And the river of destiny  
Rescuing souls without heroes  
I respect you

Balladeer who sang me my songs  
Poet who wrote about my pain  
Professor who taught me about my culture  
Friend who gave me my pride

I will always celebrate you and

## I will never forget you

Like Zavaleta, Medrano pays tribute to his mentor in deeds more than words. What so many have remarked about Paredes can be said about Medrano – and of Zavaleta: their work as scholars is an extension of their personhood, their being. As teachers and writers they have dedicated themselves to exploring the border culture of the lower Rio Grande Valley because this is the region into which they were born and because doing so is an act of self-discovery – for themselves as well as for their students and readers.

Among the many students whom Manuel Medrano and Tony Zavaleta have inspired, and mentored, are Cecilia Balli and Oscar Casares, who represent a third generation of writers from Brownsville.

### **Cecilia Balli**

Cecilia Balli was born in 1974, four years after Paredes founded the Center for Mexican American Studies at UT-Austin. She came of age as women were establishing a new presence in higher education, in public life, and in the labor force at large. Still in the opening phase of her career, Balli has already published a string of compelling articles for *Texas Monthly* and *Harper's Magazine* that have illuminated recent developments on the Mexican border for a broad regional and national audience. Like Américo Paredes and Anthony Zavaleta before her, Cecilia Balli has stepped, quite naturally, into the role of cultural intermediary for a new generation of readers.

Long before becoming acquainted with Américo Paredes, or pursuing a PhD in anthropology, Balli learned to understand herself and her heritage from different perspectives. At bottom, her writings about the border are profoundly illuminating because of her ability to empathetically evoke the social realities of persons who live in the different worlds that have been shaped by the history and social dynamics of the US-Mexico Border.

As an eighth grader, enrolled in the TIP Program (Talent Identification Program) Balli took a special summer course at the University of Texas at Brownsville, taught by Manuel Medrano, which introduced her to the Mexican-American experience in South Texas. Several years later, as a high school student, she drew on what she had learned from Medrano to write a paper on Juan Cortina, a renowned (or infamous) border bandit from the Brownsville-Matamoros region. Writing this paper, she recalled in an interview, "was the first time I discovered how there could be multiple perspectives and multiple ways of telling a story."<sup>42</sup> In the opening of one of her *Texas Monthly* articles, "Return to Padre," Cecilia explains how understanding Cortina as a high school student had been a seminal moment in her intellectual development. Against the disparaging view of Cortina as a menacing threat to social order, Balli had discovered,

...a different image, one that had lived on in Mexican border ballads, that rendered Cortina a man outraged by the plight of his people. And so, on a cheap slice of cardboard, I drew a balance with all the ugly descriptions on one side and all the pretty ones on the other. The moral of the story was simply that history had more than one telling. To me, this most basic idea was the most profound revelation. I did not fully realize it at the time, but Juan Cortina's story was, in a way, my story too. For my family had been in South Texas at the time of the Cortina uprising and for more than a hundred years before, and in time they also would fight for the land they had lost, though with law books and lawyers instead of guns.<sup>43</sup>

In the clash of perspectives, in the intersection between her experience as a Mexican American, and the way that experience had been appropriated by others, Balli found the subject that has animated her as a writer throughout her career.



It was as a freshman at Stanford University that Balli began expanding her exploration of border culture. She was able to do so only because two generations of scholars had been publishing works about the border over the previous forty years. Upon entering Stanford, Balli was already accomplished: she was the valedictorian of her class; she had worked full time as a reporter for the *Brownsville Herald*; one of the best high school clarinetists in South Texas, she had been selected to play in the All-State high school band in the All-State Convention in San Antonio during her sophomore, junior, and senior Years – a remarkable achievement. Yet, despite her accomplishments, Cecilia was knocked off balance during her first semester at Stanford, receiving the first “B’s” and “C’s” of her life. Many of her classmates, who had read far more widely in the literatures of Russia, England and the United States, were better prepared for Stanford classes.

During that first trying year, she comforted herself by studying in a cozy wing-backed chair located near the book stacks in the main library. Browsing one day among the books shelved next to her seat of comfort, she picked up *Boom and Bust: The Historical Cycles of Matamoros and Brownsville*, by UT-B historians Milo Kearney and Anthony Knopp. Next to that title were other works about the South Texas Border, and the Mexican American Experience, that have found their way into university libraries since the publication of *With a Pistol in his Hand* in 1958. Recalling her discovery, Balli remembers: “I was really shocked that a university could value this region and knowledge about this region. And that you could be a scholar around these themes and issues.”<sup>44</sup>

When Balli began engaging with her own cultural experience, late in her freshman year, she found her footing as a student. In the last paper she wrote for her freshman humanities course, she compared African-American jazz with the Mexican-American *corrido*. The paper earned the first “A” she had received all year. That same semester, she earned her second “A,” for a history paper that explored social relations between Anglos and Mexican citizens of Brownsville, Texas, in the wake of the Mexican American War.

“After those two experiences, Cecelia recalls “I felt fully empowered to study what I wanted to study and write about what mattered to me.”<sup>45</sup>

Cecilia completed her undergraduate education at Stanford, writing an honors thesis on the Texan music scene, where Texan Americans have actively defined and performed their identity through the medium of music. After graduating, she worked as a reporter for the *San Antonio Express News*, and then moved to Houston where she began working on her Ph.D. in anthropology at Rice University. As a graduate student, Balli began writing regularly for the *Texas Monthly*, while making occasional contributions to *Harpers Magazine*. Her articles are deeply felt personal narratives that have brought contemporary border issues to the attention of readers from across Texas and across the country. In all of these articles, Balli deftly evokes, and clarifies, divergent perspectives rooted in opposing cultural experiences.

Let one article exemplify what distinguishes all of Balli’s work about the border. In “The Second Battle of Goliad,” one of the first pieces she wrote for the *Texas Monthly*, Balli explores the ongoing controversy over how to define, and how to remember, “the Massacre at Goliad,” second only to the “Battle of the Alamo” as an icon of Texan bravery (and Mexican perfidy) during the Texan War of Independence against Mexico. Old pride and old hatreds are stirred every March when “The Crossroads of Texas Living History Association” assembles a small army of volunteers who reenact the 1836 massacre of 342 American soldiers who had surrendered to a Mexican Army in Goliad during the opening phase of the Texan War for Independence.

Balli opens the article by presenting Estella Zermeño, a Mexican-American genealogist and civic activist whose family has been in Goliad for nine generations and whose ancestors fought on both sides of the war. Through letters and public presentations, Zermeño argues for the events at Goliad to be remembered as “an execution,” rather than “a massacre,” and calls for public recog-

dition of the many *Tejanos* who fought for Texan independence. Referring to the yearly historical reenactment, Zermeño exclaims, "I feel like they come here and they go back with renewed hatred against us." Her husband, grabbing his body in simulation, interrupts: "It's like a thorn we haven't been able to take out of our side."<sup>46</sup>

Letting Zermeño's own words describe her perspective, Balli is equally generous to Newton M. Warzecha, a financial consultant, who directs The Presidio at Goliad, the civic organization which organizes the annual commemoration of "the Goliad Massacre." Warzecha explains, "How am I to change or stop the use of the word 'massacre' if there is no new evidence to indicate that there was something other than a massacre here?" Becoming misty-eyed, he exclaims, "I take these things personally because of what I have put into this place...It grieves me very much."<sup>47</sup>

Without taking sides, Balli sympathetically uses the antagonist's own words to evoke the palpable immediacy of the dispute and then places the controversy in a broader historical context. She quotes Richard Flores, a cultural anthropologist and the director of the Américo Paredes Center for Cultural Studies at the University of Texas, who points out that public spectacles like the yearly reenactment of the Goliad massacre reduce history to a morality tale that ignores the ambiguities, and ironies, that complicate history. The original goal of the Texan Revolution, for example, was not independence from Mexico, but the restoration of Mexico's 1824 constitution, which Santa Anna had abused. "The narrative of the past is very complex," Flores explains, "and to reduce it to a story of good and evil, or Texans and Mexicans—which was not the case—really turns it into a myth."<sup>48</sup> Balli quotes another historian, Andres Tijerina, a fellow of the Texas State Historical Association, who points out that the Goliad reenactment offers a distorted version of Texan history that telegraphs a polarizing ideological message. "That message has nothing to do with history," Tijerina points out. "It is done to reinforce a racially divided modern Texas society, to reinforce this black-and-white

image of Anglos and Mexicans where the Anglo is a hero and the Mexican is a debased tyrant. Why don't you depict the Mexican Americans who were cheated out of their land and killed in Goliad and Victoria for the next twenty, thirty years by law enforcement officials?"<sup>49</sup>

The local controversy over Goliad, pursued by local activists, is contrasted to the broader dispute over how to envision Texan – and American – history. The perspectives of Richard Flores and Andres Tijerina, contemporaries of Medrano and Zavaleta – who had also studied with Américo Paredes – refute the hagiographic view of Texan history that still animates Texan nationalism and inspires events like the yearly historical reenactment at Goliad. Incorporating the views of Mexican American historians deepens the context within which the reader can view the controversy over how to remember the events at Goliad. An ideologically-oriented writer would have taken sides and accentuated the polarization. Balli, who remains sensitive to the depth of feeling on both sides, is aiming at public reconciliation achieved through mutual understanding.

To underscore the possibility of reconciliation, Balli points out that mutual acceptance and tolerance characterize Goliad, despite the vestiges of a Jim Crow past and the simmering tensions over reenactment. "Goliad," Cecilia writes, "was, and to a great extent still is, a town where people were decent with each other, where elected officials resolved conflicts with heart-to-hearts, and where its most ardent public relations agents were the town's residents themselves." About half of the town's population is Anglo, of German descent, and the other mostly Mexican American, with a small number of African Americans. The editor of the town's weekly newspaper, Martha Mullenix, says the different races "just blend in."<sup>50</sup>

Against this background of broad communal acceptance, the article closes with a parting glimpse of the festering tension between Estella Zermeño and Newton Warzecha. Exultant over her suc-

cess in lobbying the Texas Historical Commission for a historical marker, Zermeño presents a family history at a day-long conference in Goliad organized to recognize the history of Tejanos in Goliad. In her talk, Zermeño tells of her family's loss of 9,500 acres in Refugio County after her grandmother's uncle was murdered in 1877. Warzecha, who had heard Zermeño, later exclaims that the presentation was "very, very, very anti-Anglo." From his point of view, "an entire history of bad race relations is being dumped on him and the presidio for commemorating one historical event. "By golly, get over it!" he finally exclaims, "It's history! I'm one hundred percent Polish. Wouldn't it be pretty ridiculous of me to carry on grudges and dislikes against Germany because of what they did to Polish people? How is it any different than this?" As the article moves to its close, the reader is left with a palpable sense of how deeply Zermeño and Warzecha disagree over how the legacy of Goliad should be remembered.

But Balli does not simply accentuate the seemingly irreconcilable differences between the two antagonists. Her conclusion shows that resolving the conflict will be difficult – but possible. The controversy, Cecilia suggests in the very last lines, can be resolved because Zermeño is aiming for a justifiable civic goal: she simply wants her history, her legacy, recognized; she has no interest in questioning the motives, or demonize the actions, of her antagonists. In the very last sentence of the article, Zermeño offers a way of depicting the issue that suggests a means of reconciliation: "It's not a race issue," Estella adds, "it's a moral issue. Can we call it that?"<sup>51</sup> Approached as "a race issue," the disagreement over Goliad remains frozen in perceived racial differences that are fixed and immutable. As a moral issue, rooted in opposing claims to fairness, the controversy can be aired openly, the legitimacy of clashing claims can be recognized, and a resolution can be achieved. From beginning to end, "The Second Battle of Goliad," leads the reader into a sympathetic understanding of the disagreement that points the way towards reconciliation. Here, and in all of her articles about the border, Balli, like her predecessors from

Brownsville, enacts the role of cultural intermediary – bringing mutual understanding across cultural divides to a broad regional and national readership.

As a writer who seeks to loosen the knots of misperception that characterize border issues, Cecilia Balli has focused much of her attention on the drug-associated violence that has engulfed Mexico since the election of Calderon in 2006 and that has cast a pall of apprehension over the border cities from San Diego and Tijuana, to Brownsville and Matamoros. Beginning with her 2003 article about the murder of young women in Juarez, Mexico, “Ciudad de las Muertes” (*Texas Monthly*, June, 2005), Balli has written a series of important articles about border violence: “The Framing of Mario Medina?” (*Texas Monthly*, July 2004) “Borderline Insanity,” (*Texas Monthly*, August 2005), “The Border is Wide” (*Harper’s Magazine*, October 2006) “Ghost Town” (*Texas Monthly* February 2011), “The Missing” (*Texas Monthly*, September 2011), and “Calderon’s War: The Gruesome Legacy of Mexico’s Antidrug Campaign” (*Harper’s Magazine*, January 2012). To the wrenching topic of violence in Mexico, Balli brings her broad understanding of culture, her profound capacity to empathize, and her unassuming courage.

### **Oscar Casares, the ‘Bard’ of Brownsville.**

In broad terms, the literary achievements of both Cecilia Balli and Oscar Casares mark the evolution of Mexican-American literature since the 1930s, when Paredes could only envision vengeful violence or mute capitulation as means of coping with the subordination and exploitation of Mexican Americans. Paredes, and the generation that followed him, established the border as a legitimate subject for intellectual and literary exploration. Cecilia Balli and Oscar Casares, along with other Mexican American writers born during the 1970’s, or later, can take for granted a broad audience that recognizes the importance of the border and is receptive to fresh new depictions of border experience. Both Balli and Casares are distinctive voices within the broad and vibrant scene of contemporary Chicano letters. And both have the same funda-

mental orientation that characterizes the previous generations of writers who have been born into the unique nexus of influences that distinguishes their place of origin, Brownsville-Matamoros. Like their literary predecessors, both act as cultural intermediaries, evoking the texture, and translating the meaning, of border life for readers who are distant from that experience.

While Casares shares some fundamental attributes with Balli, his writing is strikingly distinct from hers. In Balli's work, some facet of Border experience is typically fore-grounded as the central focus of attention. For Casares, the Border is a backdrop for the exploration of human concerns that are both immediate and universal. Whether in *Brownsville Stories*, his essays for *Texas Monthly*, or his recently published novel, *Amigoland*, the Hispanic heritage of Brownsville is the taken-for-granted reality within which his characters struggle with existential dramas, whether an old man aching for deliverance from his loneliness, or a young adult who has passed adolescence but cannot seem to find his way into adulthood. Animating his work is a quintessentially modern consciousness that reaches back to ancestral cultural roots as an anchor of meaning within the disorientating homogenization of modern life. And any equally deracinated reader, also removed from the good earth of his own ancestral heritage, can be vicariously nourished by Casares' literary retrieval of his own early experience in the hybrid world of Brownsville.

As an author, Casares writes about Brownsville with considerable narrative distance. Yet as a story-teller, he is a product of Brownsville. All of his fiction and essays are inspired by the same oral tradition that fired the early fiction of Paredes, and that inspired Zavaleta to write about the *curandera* tradition of the border. As Cecilia Balli recounts in her 2003 article about Casares, he recognized his own gift for telling stories when he moved to Minneapolis and found himself able to mesmerize acquaintances with his stories. "He had inherited a special gift from his family," Balli explains, "especially from two of his uncles: Tío Hector and Tío Nico...The two men could dramatize life's little moments—

something as mundane as a fumbling attempt to cut down a tree branch—in ways that made the everyday seem extraordinary.”<sup>52</sup>

Not only did Casares grow up absorbing stories, as had Paredes and Zavaleta, but he did so in the same part of Brownsville where they had grown up – and thus was thrown into direct relationship with Tony Zavaleta, who has acted as protector, mentor, friend, and landlord to Oscar over the years. Zavaleta first met Oscar when he enrolled in his sociology class at TSC, and went on to join the group of students and friends who helped Zavaleta win election to the Brownsville City Commission in 1984. Zavaleta remembers:

we became very close friends for many reasons. His brother, Louis Casares, was on the planning and zoning commission; and I actually knew his father because his father was one of these USDA river riders. So their whole family became part of my inner circle. And then there was a time when they [Oscar's parents] became worried about Oscar and I had just gone through a divorce, and I was renting a very large house not more than a couple of blocks from where I live today. His mother, or his father, called me because they were really worried about Oscar, about the influences that would affect him for the rest of his life. So I said send him over. I have room here. Tell him to come over and bring his stuff and he can stay here. And so he became my roommate. He was a kid; he had worked on my campaign. And now he was invited to live in my house. And so I consider Oscar as my fourth son, my adopted son, spiritually and emotionally. So Oscar becomes literally part of the family; at family meals; family holidays, Oscar is there until he left and went to UT Austin. And then years later, after he's Oscar Casares, and he's in-between marriages, and I'm living in a big house, and he asks for a room



-- a place to write his novel, *Amigoland*. The Tony Zavaleta who is acknowledged in *Brownsville Stories* is my son. But I'm acknowledged in *Amigoland*.<sup>55</sup>

Oscar not only found story-telling, and stories, in Brownsville. He also found guidance, through family and through an extended network of friends and caring adults, such as Tony Zavaleta.

Oscar Casares' career took off with the publication of *Brownsville Stories* in 2003, the same year that Cecilia wrote her tribute to him in *Texas Monthly*. In that article, she astutely points out that *Brownsville Stories* lacks any sense of resentment, exclusion, or exploitation. Other Mexican-American writers, Balli points out, such as Jovita González de Mireles, John Rechy, Rolando Hinojosa-Smith, Sandra Cisneros, and Dagoberto Gilb focus on political themes such as cultural conflict, immigration, and labor exploitation. Like Cecilia Balli, Casares had grown up after the battles for cultural recognition had been won, in a city where racial divides simply didn't exist. "We *are* the mainstream in Brownsville" Oscar explained to Cecilia, "I think we need the literature that is considered activist. That just wasn't my experience in Brownsville."<sup>54</sup> Balli observes that Casares is impatient with the whole issue of ethnic labels. "In the past ten months since I signed a contract," he tells Cecilia, "I have not had one conversation about 'Mexican-Americans' or 'Latinos.' I just don't have that conversation with Little & Brown."<sup>55</sup>

Casares' themes are not self-consciously political, and he seeks to reach a broad, mainstream audience. But, as his 2006 article "Futbol" demonstrates, he does not avoid politically charged subjects, nor is he insensitive to the history of his community, or to the vestiges of racism that continue to shape public attitudes about immigration and the growing demographic presence of Hispanics in American politics.

In the fall of 2005, the soccer team of his own alma mater, Porter High School, traveled to Round Rock, some thirty miles north of Austin, to compete against the Coppell Cowboys, from North

Texas, for the boys' 5A state soccer championship. The Coppell Cowboys were formidable opponents: they had competed in the state championships for the last three straight years, winning the championship in 2004.

The game took place against the backdrop of the Congressional debate over immigration and calls for the border to be sealed with a seven hundred mile fence. As the championship game progressed, the Porter team endured ugly taunts from the fans of their North Texas opponents, who held up a sign with the words "STOMP BROWNVILLE" underneath an image of the cartoon character Speedy Gonzales being stomped by a large shoe. When officials forced the fans to take down the sign, they erupted into sporadic cheers of "GO USA! GO USA! – implying that the mostly Hispanic Porter High School players were not American. Their cheers were punctuated with occasional shouts of "You suck, you beaner!" Despite these provocations, Porter won the championship game, 2-1, in overtime.

In "Futboll," Casares deftly reveals the rich ironies conveyed both in the racial taunts used by the Coppell Cowboys – and Porter's plucky victory over their favored opponents. As a cartoon character, Casares points out, Speedy Gonzales, defeats his enemies by running circles around them, which is how the Porter team, using short passes and teamwork, beat their opponents. The game, Oscar, concludes, "turns out to be the classic American story: Underdog sports team from a small, remote town defies the odds and earns a bid to play in the championship game, where these players must now face a formidable opponent in a match that forces them to look inward if they hope to win."<sup>56</sup>

Porter's victory was not only a classic American story; their victory was a feat made possible *because* of their Americanism. The Porter Team had an advantage, a style of play adapted from Mexican soccer, that the mono-cultural Coppell Cowboys had not anticipated. "Porter plays a faster-paced soccer" Casares explains, "that focuses on shorter passes, in what some people might describe as more

of a Mexican style. It certainly isn't the kind of soccer most kids across suburbia grow up with. The quicker technique makes sense because of the smaller size of the players in the Rio Grande Valley. Porter's approach to the game is actually quite common in this region of Texas, as well as on the other side of the river, because until recently, crossing over to Matamoros was the only way for boys to play on leagues year-round."<sup>57</sup> No less than Robert Fulton, who, in 1807, had adapted the Scottish steam engine to create the American Steamboat, the Porter team had invented their own form of "Yankee ingenuity." They had adapted a Mexican style of play to achieve a competitive advantage against the higher-ranked Coppell Cowboys.

Underscoring how Porter won by relying on quintessentially *American* virtues, Casares recounts how the Porter coach, Luis Zarate, called a time-out in the middle of game to help his players shake off the taunts and concentrate on their game. Zarate had himself grown up playing on both sides of the river before becoming a placekicker for the University of Houston and knew how to reach his players. Coach Zarate had told them, probably in Spanish, the common language of soccer along the border, "Focus on your game. At the end of the day, people are going to be talking about who won the game, not about these other things." What Coach Zarate wanted, Casares explains, was to embolden his players with the truth that they had earned their right to be on that field. "You're here. You belong here!" Zarate had exclaimed to his players. "Here at the state championship, here in Texas, here in the United States." Casares extrapolated, "They had traveled all the way from Gladys Porter High School, in the shadows of a proposed anti-immigration wall, to the 5A state championship, and they were exactly where they should be."<sup>58</sup> Jorge Briones, Porter's star player, went on to score the two goals that won the game and made Porter the first Rio Grande team to win a 5-A division title in any sport. When they returned, all of Brownsville became part of "Porter Nation" in celebrating their victory.

With a subdued tone of pride, “Futbol” celebrates the virtues of hard work, perseverance, and ingenuity that made the Porter team *American*. In the last lines of the article, Casares recounts how he happened to call the team’s coach, after their return to Brownsville, while they were being feted as guests of honor at the grand opening of the new Brownsville Wal-Mart Supercenter. Asking to speak to the team’s MVP, Jorge Briones, Casares could hardly hear him because of the din and noise in the background. “Can you wait a minute, sir?” he asked. And then we both stayed on the line, listening to “The Star-Spangled Banner” playing in the background.”<sup>59</sup>

In “Futbol,” Casares defends his own alma mater against racially charged taunts that recall the social subjugation that Mexican-Texans experienced before the pre-Civil Rights Era. From a cultural perspective, the article mediates differences between social groups: What Coppell Cowboy fans perceived as alien and “other” are re-defined as cultural traits – pluck, resiliency, resourcefulness – that mainstream readers of *Texas Monthly* would recognize and celebrate. Mexican-American readers, for that matter, could recognize a cultural skill originating in their own community, playing “Mexican-style soccer,” as a familiar, and honorable, example of adaptability and resourcefulness, not a foreign practice that merited derision. From a rhetorical perspective, the article is enhanced by the distance that the author places between himself and his subject. In “Futbol,” one particular soccer game is placed within the broader context of America’s cultural wars over immigration and national identity. The subject-matter, Porter High School’s soccer team, is provincial, but the tone of the writing, and the implied sensibility of the author, is urbane and cosmopolitan. The narrative distance that distinguishes “Futbol” is characteristic of Casares’s writing. His fiction and essays look back to the bi-cultural lore of his own hometown for meaning and orientation from a present that is implicitly urbane and cosmopolitan, but also deracinated and anonymous.

In "Christmas in Brownsville," Casares recounts returning home from Austin, his home of many years, to help an old high school friend, Victor, along with assorted family members and friends, kill a pig for Christmas tamales. The tradition, known as "*matanza*," slaughtering of a pig, had emerged in pre-modern Spain as an emblem of Christian faith that defied Moorish rule. Spaniards had brought the practice to the New World, where it was married to the more ancient Aztec practice of making tamales. The custom had been second nature for Oscar's father back in Mexico in the 1920's, but, after moving to Brownsville, the Casares family had begun buying their tamales ready-made for Christmas. As a middle-class urbanite, accustomed to buying pork neatly wrapped in cellophane from the supermarket, Casares is comforted by the *camaraderie* occasioned by the pig's killing, but unsettled by the brutality of the whole process. After the pig had been delivered in the bed of a pickup, it is shot dead in the backyard, hung from the branch of a mesquite tree, and bled. Casares powerfully captures his discomfort in a few lines of dialogue:

"It's your turn." Victor was holding the hacksaw out to me. "For what?" "To cut something off, man," he said. "You do the ribs." He showed me how, and I stuck my arm into the dark cavity. For the next fifteen minutes I worked with the cold air pushing me from behind and the heat of the pig's remains rising up to my face. I tried to concentrate on what I was doing, but I kept wanting to stop. I wondered if it were somehow possible to start over, take it all back, sew the head on, remove the bullet from its skull, patch up its heart, let its hair grow back. When I felt the animal's frame breaking into two separate parts, I knew just how crazy this idea was."

Butchering the pig is repulsive, even as sharing a Christmas dinner of tamales reconnects Casares with a family tradition brimming with associations and meaning. Casares yearns to retain an emblem of his old life in Brownsville, into his present, which is

disconnected and distant from the familiar rhythms of his old life. In the last lines of the essay, he goes out to pick up the tamales for his own family's Christmas gathering, writing, "I turned the car around and headed toward the airport. It was the middle of the morning, and the clouds were breaking up some. As I drove there, I thought maybe this year I'd buy an extra dozen tamales, just to take with me when I left home again."<sup>60</sup>

Casares' recent writing consistently seeks to retain a grip on the receding past that offers a touchstone of origin, a ground of identity, amid the whirling confusions of contemporary American life. Casares' recent novel, *Amigoland*, published in 2009, is about two estranged brothers, Don Fidencio and Don Celestino, who are stung by the indignities of growing old in a contemporary Brownsville that they no longer recognize. Through vividly etched scenes that are both tender and gritty, the two brothers renew themselves, while healing their broken friendship, by relocating the ancestral *ranchito* in Mexico, which their grandfather had left in the late nineteenth century. The same theme, retrieving a receding past in order to renew identity, infuses the recent essays that Casares has published in *Texas Monthly*. In "Pet Project," Casares contrasts the self-indulgence of caring for a "pet" in contemporary Austin with boyhood memories of the rough and certain manner – learned growing up on a ranch in Mexico – that his father used to care for the family dog. In "Departed," published in *Texas Monthly* in 2010, Casares laments that not only he, but most of his family members, have left Brownsville – which remains a necessary touchstone for the renewal of identity. In the last lines of the essay, Casares explains:

Not long from now, when my children are old enough to understand, I plan to take them to see the house on East Nineteenth. Maybe my mother will still own it; maybe by then we will have sold the place. What matters is that they see it for themselves, even if we are just parked on the street.

Look over there, I will say to them. I used to live inside there when I was about your age.<sup>61</sup>

All of Casares' writing evoke what it was like to live in Brownsville during an era that has receded into the past and that can be retrieved, experientially, only through story. His stories do evoke the rich hybrid culture of the Texas Border, but their actual concern is about how the accelerated changes of the modern world have separated us from our roots. In one sense, Casares' literary preoccupations stand in stark contrast with Américo Paredes, who always wrote about the border as a palpable cultural reality, not as a receding historical memory. Born in the 1970s, rather than the 1920s, Casares is naturally more preoccupied with the acceleration of historical change. Yet Casares, along with Cecilia Balli, Manuel Medrano, and Tony Zavaleta, share an attribute with their great predecessor: All have used their writing to bridge cultural differences rather than to express social grievances. Across three generations, all have acted as cultural intermediaries, seeking to make the experience of the South-West border palpable and comprehensible to a broad national audience.

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## Endnotes

1 [Census.gov/gfd/states/48/4810768.html](http://Census.gov/gfd/states/48/4810768.html).

2 Brownsville, along with the whole Rio Grande Valley, has produced a broad array of writers not mentioned in this study. For an overview of the literary culture of deep South Texas as a whole, see Dameron, Charles F. Jr. "The Fictional World of the Valley." *Studies in Brownsville & Matamoros History*. Ed. Milo Kearney, Anthony Knopp, and Antonio Zavaleta. Brownsville: UTB/TSC, 1995: 229-37.

3 David Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas, 1856-1986* (University of Texas Press, Austin) 1987, p. 35.

4 John Morán González, *Border Renaissance: The Texas Centennial and the Emergence of Mexican American Literature*, (Austin: University of Texas Press), Chapter 1, "Texanizing Texans": Texas Centennial Discourses of Racial Pedagogy," pp.29-66.

5 Milo Kearney and Anthony Knopp, *Boom and Bust: The Historical Cycles of Matamoros and Brownsville* (Austin: Eakin Press, 1991) p. 232.

- 6 This view of the broad significance of Paredes' work is developed in Richard Bauman's insightful introduction to his collection of Paredes' essays, *Folklore and Culture on the Texas-Mexican Border*, (Center for Mexican American Studies, University of Texas at Austin, 1993) pp. ix-xxiii.
- 7 Manuel Medrano, *Américo Paredes: In his Own Words, An Authorized Biography*, (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2010) p. 75.
- 8 Ibid, p. 78.
- 9 Richard Bauman, *Folklore and Culture on the Texas-Mexican Border*, p. xxiii.
- 10 Manuel Medrano, *Américo Paredes*, p.10.
- 11 Ibid, p. 12.
- 12 Ibid, p.20.
- 13 Ibid., p.31.
- 14 Ibid, p. 130-1.
- 15 Américo Paredes, *Between Two Worlds*, (Houston: Arte Publico Press, 1991), p. 54.
- 16 Ibid., p.18.
- 17 Ibid, p.43.
- 18 Between the 1870's and the 1930's, the heaviest concentration of lynchings in Texas took place in the counties along the Brazos River, between Waco and the Gulf of Mexico. Cynthia Skove Nevels, *Lynching to Belong: Claiming Whiteness through Racial Violence* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2007), p. 154. Hispanic men, along with Blacks, were victims of the racial violence that peaked, in Texas, during the early 1920's. Carrigan, William D., and Clive Webb. "Muerto por Unos Desconocidos" (Killed by Persons Unknown): Mob Violence against Blacks and Mexicans." *In Beyond Black and White: Race, Ethnicity, and Gender in the U.S. South and Southwest*, ed. Stephanie Cole and Alison M. Parker, 35-74.
- 19 Ibid, p.31.
- 20 Ibid, pp.22-34.
- 21 Ibid, p.149.
- 22 Ibid, p. 33.
- 23 Américo Paredes, *Between Two Worlds*, p.84.
- 24 Ibid, p. 88.
- 25 Quoted in Medrano, *Américo Paredes*, p.42.
- 26 Medrano, *Américo Paredes*, p.54.
- 27 Web launched his academic career by writing a master's thesis on the Texas Rangers in 1920, which he published, in a revised and expanded version, in 1935 as *The Texas Rangers: A Century of Frontier Defense*. "WEBB, WALTER PRESCOTT," *Handbook of Texas Online*.



- 28 Quoted in Medrano, *Américo Paredes*, p.55.
- 29 Ibid., p.150.
- 30 Américo Paredes, *Folklore and Culture on the Texas-Mexican Border*, (Austin: Center for Mexican American Studies, 1993), p.46.
- 31 Ibid, p.xiv.
- 32 Américo Paredes, "The Mexican Contribution to Our Culture," *The Texas Observer*, August 12, 1963.
- 33 Interview with Antonio Zavaleta.
- 34 Ibid.
- 35 Ibid.
- 36 Ibid.
- 37 Ibid.
- 38 Ibid.
- 39 Ibid.
- 40 Antonio Zavaleta and Alberto Salinas Jr. *Curandero Conversations: El Niño Fidencio, Shamanism, and Healing Traditions of the Borderlands*. (Brownsville: The University of Texas at Brownsville and Texas Southmost College, 2009), p. 39.
- 41 Medrano, *Américo Paredes*, 135.
- 42 Interview, May, 2010.
- 43 Cecilia Balli, "Return to Padre," *Texas Monthly*, January, 2001.
- 44 Interview
- 45 Ibid.
- 46 Cecilia Balli, "The Second Battle of Goliad," *Texas Monthly*, May, 2001.
- 47 Ibid.
- 48 Ibid.
- 49 Ibid.
- 50 Ibid.
- 51 Ibid.
- 52 Cecilia Balli, "Bard of the Border," *Texas Monthly*, January, 2005.
- 53 Interview with Anthony Zavaleta.
- 54 Cecilia Balli, "Bard of the Border."
- 55 Ibid.
- 56 Oscar Casares, "Fútbol," *Texas Monthly*, November, 2006.
- 57 Ibid.

58 Ibid.

59 Ibid.

60 Casares, "Christmas in Brownsville," *Texas Monthly*, December, 2010.

61 Casares, "Departed," *Texas Monthly*, March, 2010.

# Patricia Cisneros Young: One of Our Own

by

Ronny Noor

*Books have value only when they lead to life, serve and are useful to one's existence. Every hour spent with a book is wasted if not a spark of strength, a feeling of rejuvenation, a touch of newness result from it.*

— Hermann Hesse

It was the fall of 2001. On a warm mid-morning of tropical south Texas awash with August sunshine, I stepped into a classroom in Cardenas North to teach a recently introduced undergraduate course, which has, in the meantime, become my staple, my bread and butter, if you will, called Literary Analysis. This course is unlike any other in the English department, designed to prepare students not only for other upper-level English classes but also for the statewide teacher certification examination. It demands a close reading of mainly fiction and poetry to crack the intriguing shell of the text in order to decipher the underlying meaning. Students are required to write a paper of a thousand words every three weeks or so, employing suitable literary devices and theories. They have to go through peer critique and teacher-student conference as well for each paper. Consequently, they must be on their toes for the duration of the entire semester.

There I noticed, on the very first day, a well-dressed and well-coiffed lady who appeared a good deal older than the other students in class, occupying the last desk in the left corner. Despite her age she was not particularly conspicuous because in spirit she was in league with the rest. Nonetheless she caught my eye for as a student, not very long ago, the last desk on the left had been my favorite seat.

During our conference for the first paper, she did not seem to be very pleased with my comments on her draft. I advised her not to jump from point to point without delving into her claims and explaining them in detail with evidence. "Show," I said, "don't just tell. Give us the sight, the sound, and the smell. Inject some life into your text." Thereupon she said that she had never had problems with her writing. She had always received very high grades in all her classes holding down, like most of our students, a steady job. She had been a baker, a realtor, a mortgage lender. She had also raised three children. Numerous students had made such claims before; so I took it as a psychological game to impress a professor. Hence I said politely, after listening to her with rapt attention, "I understand that you're a very able person, with a good deal of experience. But education requires dedication. So if you spend some time working on my suggestions, your paper will improve."

I was pleasantly surprised when she, after making the required changes, brought the paper again to my office a day later for further critique, something very few students do. "I'd like to improve my writing," she said, lowering herself on the chair to my right. "And I'll do whatever is necessary." That was music to my ear. I wished all students had said that. So I, after going through the paper line by line, made some more suggestions for improvement. This happened throughout the semester, for all the four papers. She visited my office two or three times for each paper, and told me after the last conference, "You've taken the fun out of reading, sir." Then she added promptly, before I could ask a question: "But I enjoy it more, because now I don't read just for pleasure but for meaning. I can savor the juicier bits more than I did before." After a pause, sounding like the French poet Paul Valéry, she concluded with a genial smile, "Literature seems to have taken a deeper hold of me."

It was a course on critical reading, not creative writing. So it caught me unawares when six years later I discovered my name among those of a few worthy colleagues in the dedication section of her first story collection, *South Texas Tales: Stories My Father*

*Told Me.*<sup>1</sup> She had never mentioned to me that she was working on a story collection although, in the meantime, she had taken a graduate course with me and, after completing her studies, begun teaching full-time at Rivera High and as an adjunct faculty in our department, taking care of freshman composition. When I asked her about this honor one evening in the hallway of the department, she said that my critique had helped her to look at her own writing critically, to give it depth and meaning, confirming the new novel champion Alain Robbe-Grillet's observation that, contrary to popular belief, critical preoccupation, far from sterilizing creation, may very well serve it as a driving force. Since that day, I have had many discussions with her on her stories, their contents, their backgrounds, and their relevance to the Texan as well as American culture.

The writer Christopher Isherwood believed that writing "must conform to the language which is understood by the greatest number of people, to the vernacular."<sup>2</sup> In other words, the writer must not only know the language of her characters but also that of her readers. Patricia Young certainly does both, her sentences flowing effortlessly page after page as if she is telling a story, not writing some ponderous word-structure meta-fiction that does not have much to say about the human condition. Born and bred in south Texas, her ear is attuned to the cadences of the dialects of her native land, both English and Chicano. That is why she can represent Red Collins, a Texas Ranger who kills Mexican-Americans for just being who they are. Here Collins is desperately trying in his South Texas demotic to attract the attention of a banker's daughter who couldn't care less for the lower orders:

"Well, I'll be hanged if you're not the prettiest little thing in Brownsville, Miss Beth, I declare! How'd you get so purdy?" Collins exclaimed. "There ain't nobody in Cameron County that can hold a candle to you, Miss Beth, oh Miss Beth, Miss Beth!"<sup>3</sup>

She is equally adept in Chicano English. One of her unforgettable characters is a sadistic deputy named Garcia, a Mexican-American who beats a mentally disturbed but innocent young man to death. He bids the young man's father thus in his native dialect: "Leesen, we doan answer to jou! Jou do what we tell jou."<sup>4</sup>

The mastery of the vernacular, however, is not enough to make someone a writer. The writer must also have an acute power of observation, extensive knowledge of history in case of historical fiction, and honesty to represent her characters faithfully, with an outlook that is universal. Patricia Young's stories reveal all those characteristics. Her stories are historical, which is indicated in the subtitle of the book, *Stories My Father Told Me*. They are, in many ways, akin to Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, because the nine stories collected here do not exactly come from her father but, being of Spanish descent, she weaves the history of Spanish settlement in Mexico and south Texas into her stories, the vicissitudes of those settlers as their rulers changed, and their contributions to the culture of the land they inhabited. Patricia Young is in the best position to record such events because she can trace her ancestry to the Spaniards who sailed to the Americas in the sixteenth century from the Leon and Santander regions of Spain. They first settled in the Nuevo Leon area and later, in 1749, moved to Nuevo Santander, comprising the Mexican state of Tamaulipas and southern Texas. After the Mexican-American War (1846-1848) in the wake of the 1845 U.S. annexation of Texas, her family came under the jurisdiction of the American government, when the U.S. claimed all land north of the Rio Grande. It was a land-grabbing scheme the New England sage Ralph Waldo Emerson termed "rank imperialism," capturing it thus in one of his poems:

Behold the famous States  
Harrying Mexico  
With rifle and with knife!<sup>5</sup>

After the conquest, Mexicans in the conquered region were subjected to denigration and violence, not unlike the English in

England after the Norman Conquest in 1066, which was so masterfully portrayed by Sir Walter Scott in his voluminous works of fiction, especially in *Ivanhoe*. Young takes a page from Scott in the heartbreaking story "Bloody Moon Lullaby," in which two deputies savagely kill Andres Cantrell, a twenty-two-year-old Mexican. Once a strong and talented boy, Andres "could swim farther than his competitors, wrestle youths twice his size to the ground, and run like a gazelle."<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, one day while he is bending over to lift a crate in his father's warehouse, a careless worker drops a box of more than a hundred pounds on him, displacing the discs in his neck. Doctors, masseurs, and volcanic mud fail to cure him. He begins to see visions of demons, and when the excruciating pain drives him into frenzy, he walks all over Brownsville. One day a bailiff named John Polk sees him walking down a street wildly gesticulating with his arms. He calls to him but receives no reply. So he gets out of his car and hits him with a baseball bat he keeps in the trunk of his 1952 Ford, throwing him off balance. But Andres recovers, snatches the bat, and hits the bailiff in the groin before bolting. He is later arrested for hitting a government official. However, due to his father's pleading, the judge decides to send Andres to the San Antonio Mental Hospital for evaluation.

On his way to San Antonio, the sick young man is accompanied by a deputy named Garcia with a disreputable past. Garcia's mind

was engrossed in the joy he had when he used to pull the legs off of captive frogs . . . He'd also set dogs and cats on fire and laughed when they squealed. He would seek out songbirds and shoot them out of the trees . . . as a stray animal catcher. . . [he'd] catch the animals in a noose and drag them choking and struggling to the cages. He'd lift them up in the air and see how long it would take them to die.<sup>7</sup>

A sadist, in other words, a “bad guy” hired by the authorities to do the dirty work for them to “keep dem Meskins in line or they’ll take over.”<sup>8</sup> When the driver, another deputy, pulls over the van to relieve himself, Garcia moves from the front seat to the back, next to Andres, who has by then begun to sing to himself. But Garcia brings down his baton, falsely accusing him of trying to escape. As Andres begins to cry, the driver joins Garcia in beating the young man, asking him to shut up. They beat him till blood drowns his voice. He is free at last, free of the torture of the deputies whose “bloody batons, the metallic smell of blood, and their own sweat all mingled together in the cauldron of corruption.”<sup>9</sup> This is the most significant story in this collection, historically speaking. There is no question about the historical references on which the author draws in this ingeniously devised story. It is not without reason that the bailiff is called John Polk, whose accusation leads to the torture and murder of Andres, just the way the claims of then American President James Polk against the Mexicans – that they had invaded the U.S. – led to the conquest and torture of Mexicans in the conquered territory of south Texas, as reflected in the three lines I have quoted above from Emerson. The story also shows that conquest never lasts forever. Today’s conquerors may very well be conquered tomorrow. The Spanish conquistadors conquered Mexico, killing and torturing the natives, taking their land, and in a reversal of fortune, their descendents meet the same fate at the hands of their conquerors. This philosophical insight lifts the story of Andres’ death from just a time piece to a timeless truism of universal significance. It is, therefore, worthy of inclusion in any anthology of American short fiction.

Violence, an integral part of American culture, continues in “Killer,” titled after a man whose hands would shake if he did not kill, not animals but his fellow humans. The story is sprinkled with tidbits of history – of the descendents of the Spanish conquistadors losing their dominance in Mexico after its independence, Anglos taking over the lands of the former Spanish settlers after the U.S. conquest of south Texas, and Santa Anna being forced to



sell more than half of Mexico's territory to the U.S. for twelve million dollars. Here the author strays a little from history, for Santa Anna ceded only Texas signing the Treaties of Velasco in 1836, but it was José Manuel de la Peña y Peña, who was president of Mexico during the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, which ended the Mexican-American War in 1848, the U.S. paying Mexico fifteen million dollars for the newly acquired territories. This historical disconnect may very well be intentional on Patricia Young's part. History is a version of what really happened, she wants to imply, with victors and victims giving different interpretations, and many in the public living with a sketchy and incorrect knowledge of it. However, the most remarkable aspect of this story is its psychological penetration into the mind of a killer. Below is the reason in his own words why Jorge Guerrero has become one:

My mother remarried after my father died. She married a no-good piece of trash Indian who drank and beat me just for fun. I remember that when he drew blood and I tasted it in my mouth, I swore that I'd get even with him. I'd grow up and then I'd get him. Well, the sadist died before I could and all that I can do now is throw trash on his grave, which I do with weekly regularity. I've built a huge pile for the buzzards to eat. It's not enough though, all those years of yearning for revenge and then not getting relief make me want to kill everybody else.<sup>10</sup>

This could be from the diary of a serial killer, including Ted Bundy, the most famous of modern serial killers. And like Bundy, who kept killing college girls for being jilted by one while in college, Jorge Guerrero keeps killing people because, as he claims, "Maybe it's all that pent up hatred for my stepfather. I keep killing him over and over again."<sup>11</sup> But if you live by the sword, you also die by the sword. He finally meets his end at the hands of a friend, who shoots him in self-defense.

Violence, however, does not always have to be met with violence. There are better ways to solve problems. That's what is shown in "The Courtship of Red Collins." Red is a young Texas Ranger in the 1920s, a "blustering redneck" who is proud to tell his fellow Anglos that he joined the Rangers at nineteen to keep them safe "from dem Meskins!",<sup>12</sup> and he has killed them just for looking at him "the wrong way."<sup>13</sup> One Sunday, on his way home from church, when he is suddenly stricken with polio, Cesar Gomez comes to his aid. Cesar takes Red to his house and nurses him, which reminds the reader of Gerasim's nursing of Ivan Ilyich in Tolstoy's famous story "The Death of Ivan Ilyich." He helps Red with the bedpan, cleans his soiled body, and changes his linen twice a day. Moved, Red confesses to Cesar that, in a vision, he saw two Mexicans – a man and his eleven-year-old son – whom he had killed ten years ago knowing full well they were innocent because the Rangers were "thirsty for blood."<sup>14</sup> Red asks for forgiveness without realizing that they were Cesar's brother and nephew. That revelation freezes Cesar. He can take revenge if he wishes. The killer of his kin is right there in his house. But he is a religious man who believes in "the Holy Spirit, the holy Catholic Church, the Communion of Saints and the forgiveness of sins and life everlasting."<sup>15</sup> So, after much deliberation, he prepares supper for his relatives' killer – a dozen corn tortillas and a soup with tomatoes, garlic, and oregano. "I've had my 'dark night of the soul'," Cesar tells him before they sit down to eat, alluding to a treatise by the Spanish poet and Catholic mystic Saint John of the Cross, "and I'm alright now. Just so you know, now that we're being honest with each other, you killed my brother and my nephew. I forgive you."<sup>16</sup> Thus their parallel lives "converged." Cesar is magnanimous, but his magnanimity does not spring from an inner enlightenment; it comes from his belief in a revealed religion, not fashionable after the Enlightenment and which will not be found in the pages of mainstream literary journals. In this respect, Rudolfo Anaya is more in tune with the spirit of the age when he observes in his classic novel, *Bless Me, Ultima*, that "the tragic consequences of life can be overcome by the magical strength that resides in the

human heart."<sup>17</sup> However, what is important in Patricia Young's story is not what prompts Cesar to forgive the killer of his brother and nephew but that his path has "converged" with that of Red's, which has been possible due to forgiveness. It has given them both a chance to live and a chance for a new beginning, because an eye for an eye would make the whole world blind, as Mahatma Gandhi said so wisely.

Forgiveness looms large in Patricia Young's stories. In "Doña Porfiria Comes Calling," Porfiria's father sells her to Emiliano because of the money he owes him. That begins a life of torment for the poor Porfiria, who is raped, starved, beaten, and burned with a pan. She has even a lump on her backbone to remind her of Emiliano after his death from yellow fever. Even then she forgives him because of her faith in God. Another example of forgiveness is found in "Shibboleth," where Don Pedro is poisoned by a "Masonic cabal" because he would not hand over his property to the sect. When the people become aware of it, they boycott the businesses of the sect members. Only one member of the sect survives the "onslaught of public indignation" after condemning the Masons.<sup>18</sup> Don Pedro's relatives forgive him, and this "cautionary tale of vendetta and mercy" becomes an "heirloom that would be passed down from generation to generation."<sup>19</sup> And Patricia Young passes it on to us.

These stories, through faith in God and forgiveness, celebrate life over death. Hence, it is just appropriate that Patricia Young concludes her collection with the celebration of life in the ironically titled piece "A Good Day for Dying." Sebastian, an eighty-year-old *ranchero*, who has lost his wife and most of his friends, thinks that his work is done on this earth and that the time has come for him to die. So he summons his two daughters and his grandson from Texas A&M to his ranch for his death. A feast is arranged butchering cattle, pigs, goats, and chickens. Chairs are set in a circle under his favorite mesquite tree. But as he sees his daughters and his grandson, he realizes that he is still needed on this earth. His daughter Marta needs "her comeuppance;" his other

daughter, Maria Jose, needs “protecting;” and his grandson Diego needs him “for security” until he can “stand on his own two feet.”<sup>20</sup> So he tells his grandson as they all gather under the mesquite tree:

Diego, God has opened my eyes about my life. I’m not going anywhere! I will stay until He decides that it’s the right time for me to go. We’ll celebrate life and enjoy each other’s company. I’m sending for a trio to sing ballads to us, and I’m going to have a fiesta! There’s plenty of food and here’s some of it now!<sup>21</sup>

Sebastian’s day of death becomes a celebration of life. A free man, Benedict de Spinoza maintained, thinks of nothing less than of death and his wisdom is a meditation not of death, but of life. Yes, life is indeed interminable, Isabel Allende’s Eva Luna told us before in her Chilean tales.

The preeminent British writer Salman Rushdie believes that a “book is a version of the world.”<sup>22</sup> This book is a version of Patricia Young’s world, not just a reflection of the past but a recreation of it, intricately woven with history and imagination, facts and fiction. Many of the characters in her stories once lived in south Texas and breathed its air. I have heard from her about a man whose hands shook if he did not kill someone, a Texas Ranger who cut down Mexicans indiscriminately out of hatred, and a woman whose husband tormented her savagely. To these, and other, facts of life, Patricia Young adds her imagination to create memorable characters like Jorge Guerrero, Red Collins, and Doña Porfiria. Her stories ring true because she knows the place, its inhabitants, and the history of both. And she presents them to the reader in a manner that makes them vivid. They come alive in her words and phrases. The reader can see the streets, hear the voices, and feel the pain as well as the joy of her characters. That’s why she was invited by many organizations to give readings from her book. She read before sizable audiences in Brownsville and Austin, and many cities in between, including McAllen, Edinburg, and San

Antonio. I was present at two of those readings. It was a genuine treat. She made her characters seem real with the nuances of her delivery of their dialogues, using the right intonation and pitch, giving the audience a joyous hour.

One can, however, contend that her characters are shallow, do not have introspection or spiritual depth; in other words, they are not enlightened in the Kantian sense. They are the product of their environment and their heredity. What sustains them is their faith in a world of violence and brutality, not to mention injustice. And Patricia Young uses it, in the best naturalistic tradition of the early twentieth century – around the time most of her stories are set – to relate to her reader in no uncertain terms that forgiveness is better than revenge, convergence is better than divergence, and life is better than death. There lies her great wisdom, the wisdom of this grandmother of three, which is hardly found in American fiction, long or short.

The University of Texas at Brownsville

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### Endnotes

- 1 Patricia Cisneros Young, *South Texas Tales: Stories My Father Told Me* (Mustang, Oklahoma: Tate Publishing, 2007).
- 2 Gore Vidal, *The Second American Revolution and Other Essays, 1976-1982* (New York: Random House, 1982), p. 48.
- 3 Patricia Cisneros Young, *South Texas Tales*, p. 108.
- 4 Patricia Cisneros Young, *South Texas Tales*, p. 133.
- 5 Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Ode" 16-18. *The Portable Emerson*. Ed. Carl Bode (New York: Penguin, 1981), pp. 646-649.
- 6 Patricia Cisneros Young, *South Texas Tales*, p. 128.
- 7 Patricia Cisneros Young, *South Texas Tales*, pp. 133-134.
- 8 Patricia Cisneros Young, *South Texas Tales*, p. 131.
- 9 Patricia Cisneros Young, *South Texas Tales*, p. 143.
- 10 Patricia Cisneros Young, *South Texas Tales*, pp. 35-36.

- 11 Patricia Cisneros Young, *South Texas Tales*, p. 37.
- 12 Patricia Cisneros Young, *South Texas Tales*, pp. 112.
- 13 Patricia Cisneros Young, *South Texas Tales*, p. 109.
- 14 Patricia Cisneros Young, *South Texas Tales*, p. 123.
- 15 Patricia Cisneros Young, *South Texas Tales*, p. 124.
- 16 Patricia Cisneros Young, *South Texas Tales*, pp. 126.
- 17 Rudolfo Anaya, *Bless Me, Ultima* (New York: Warner Books, 1972), p. 249.
- 18 Patricia Cisneros Young, *South Texas Tales*, p. 85.
- 19 Patricia Cisneros Young, *South Texas Tales*, p. 85.
- 20 Patricia Cisneros Young, *South Texas Tales*, p. 169.
- 21 Patricia Cisneros Young, *South Texas Tales*, p. 171.
- 22 Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (New York: Penguin, 1991), p. 412.

## Brownsville's Love Song to Matamoros

Cherished mother of my soul,  
such a joy it's been to me,  
though not in your keeping as before,  
to live here right next door,  
where at all times I can see  
you and console.

I return to childhood haunts.  
In the old *mercado* still I shop.  
To the Plaza Hidalgo I get away,  
listening to mariachis play.  
In the Teatro de la Reforma then I stop,  
and eat in well-known restaurants.

My family identity fits me well:

*Me. xicana de Americano.*

Forget me not, my mother dear,  
for I will stay forever near,  
*pueblo simpático Chicano,*  
and our lives will still be swell.

— *Milo Kearney*









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