East Texas Historical Journal

Volume 29 | Issue 2

Article 6

10-1991

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Recommended Citation

Roff, Sandra (1991) "Visions of a New Frontier: Nineteenth Century Texas Guidebooks in the New York Public Library and New York Historical Society Collections," *East Texas Historical Journal*: Vol. 29: Iss. 2, Article 6. Available at: http://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/ethj/vol29/iss2/6

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VISIONS OF A NEW FRONTIER: NINETTENTH CENTURY TEXAS GUIDEBOOKS IN THE NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY AND NEW YORK HISTORICIAL SOCIETY COLLECTIONS

by Sandra Roff

THESE are the Gardens of the Desert, these The unshorn fields, boundless and beautiful, For which the speech of England has no name — The Praries. I behold them for the first, And my heart swells, while the dilated sight Takes in the encircling vastness.¹

William Cullen Bryant's description in "Prairies of Texas" gave a tempting picture of land waiting to be cultivated, waiting for settlers who would help transform it into the American West's Garden of Eden. By 1837 the slogan "Go West young man, go forth into the Country", was being used to promote the westward movement as a solution to the economic ills of the East.² Guidebooks or "how-to" books written first by early adventurers and later by land and railroad developers became a new literary genre.³ Oregon, California, and Texas were among the localities represented by this type of booster literature;⁴ across the country or even from one continent to another, these guidebooks reached out to city and country dwellers alike.⁵ The pioneer spirit prevailed and countless adventurers lured by the hope for everything from health to wealth journeyed to their Western utopias.

The booster paper, publishing important information for prospective travellers, assumed part of the responsibility for attracting settlers to newly formed towns, villages, and cities, and it was not unusual for newspapers to precede the settlement of the community.⁶ Enthusiastic editors often embellished their descriptions to attract home-seekers and fact and fiction became closely joined. The land was the most fertile, the air the healthiest, and the natives the most friendly - claims hard to resist for those seeking a better life. Texas was one of the earlier western regions to receive publicity in the form of booster literature. The earliest emigrants - those 20,000 who arrived prior to 1830,⁷ probably had little to help guide them. However, adventurers who waited found that these new guidebooks gave them information on the supplies needed for their trip, the best routes to travel, and most importantly, what they might expect once they arrived at their destination. A collection of this promotional literature can be found in the U.S. History, Local History and Genealogy Division of the New York Public Library, much of it part of a collection of local history ephemera;⁴ a sampling is also available at the New York Historical Society. These primary sources of information bring to life a description of a West previously unknown.

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As early as 1831 a pamphlet was issued by the Arkansas and Texas Land Company;⁹ this was followed by hundreds of others either written to insure commercial interests or to relate personal experiences of brave pioneers. Mary Austin Holley, a cousin of Stephen F. Austin, published in 1833 an account of her journey in the Fall of 1831 to Bolivar, a new Texas settlement founded by her brother.¹⁰ In addition to providing general observations on Texas, she included a section for emigrant mothers:

With a view to emigrant mothers, on whom the comfort of every family, and the general well-being of the infant colony, so much depends, it has been thought that, a journal in detail, one of themselves, would furnish more hints for the judicious arrangements of the voyage and the indispensable attentions to the comfort and economy of an infant establishment, than could be gathered from the more abstract and general views of gentleman travellers ... But the author having ample means of information, may without vanity, indulge one hope, as she professes but one aim — utility.¹¹

Mrs. Holley, again attempted to inform her emigrant audience about Texas in her 1836 work:

Not only are events of stirring interest 'treading on each others heels' with the swiftness of the phantasmagoria displaying characters of no ordinary proportions, but new local advantages, new facilities for the manifold operations of society, and new natural beauties, are constantly developing themselves to excite our wonder and delight.¹²

A.A. Parker, travelling in the Autumn and Winter of 1834-1835, presented an encouraging picture of conditions "out West." The preface to his account stated that "He has given a concise form, such descriptions, incidents and anecdotes only, as he believes may instruct and amuse, and enable the public to form a correct opinion of the country."¹³ The possibility that Texas might not be quite the utopia thought was suggested when Parker wrote:

Texas, like a beautiful damsel, has many charms and attractions, but is not entirely faultless. Indeed, there is no such place as a perfect elysium on earth. And those who have formed their opinion of the country from some of the many late publications concerning it, will feel some disappointment on their arrival.¹⁴

Dispersed throughout the pages of this volume was his advice on various subjects. He felt that families should travel together to assist one another, and that the Fall was the best time of the year to journey to Texas and other western areas." Probably the best advice he gave was that "emigration, like matrimony, ought to be fully considered; as a bad move in this particular, is attended by many evils, and cannot be remedied."¹⁶

The 1830s proved to be a productive decade for Texas guidebooks, and several more personal narratives appeared on the market. The Mexican dispute over Texas was of concern to prospective settlers, and several narratives addressed the political climate of the period. *Texas, Sketches* of Character; moral and political condition of the Republic; the judiciary, & and Three Years in Texas. Including a view of the Texan Revolution, and an account of the principal battles, together with descriptions of the soil, commercial and agricultural advantages, & are two such examples.¹⁷ The primary attraction at this time was free land. The Republic was generous and the law stated that any family man who settled in Texas between March 1836 and October 1837 would receive 1,280 acres of free land. A reduction was later made to 640 acres, but this was still a sizable holding for any family.¹⁸

Dr. Joseph E. Field claimed in the preface to his volume that he originally was enticed to visit Texas by newspaper accounts.¹⁹ Being one of the few early authors who mentioned the subject of religion in his book, he tried to console those who feared Texas might be a heathen land:

That fair portion of the Mexican territory, called Texas, which has become, of late, the theatre of so much relentless barbarity and bloodshed, early attracted the attention of the first settlers of that country, particularly of the religious part of the community. There are standing at this time, within nine miles of the town of San Antonio de Bera, four Catholic churches,... Some of these, in a state of the greatest perfection, bear date [sic] as early as the commencement of the last century.²⁰

David B. Edward, in The history of Texas; or the emigrant's, farmer's and politician's guide to the character, climate, soil and productions of that country; geographically arranged from personal observation and experience, stated in his preface that he aimed "to stress a neutral course, between the extravagant representations of the monopolizing land speculator, and the unwarrantable scurrility of the viciously prejudiced - prejudiced because they found wanting a capital, as in older countries, and because hardships were to be endured, as in every new country, before idleness could be indulged or luxuries obtained!"²¹ Although he described the physical beauty of Texas and its easy accessibility, he also discussed such problems as land speculation. His true feelings, however, were evident when he wrote: "There is no better advice than 'to let well enough alone.' Ipso facto, all changes may be for the worse as well as better; and what we are used to though not so good as might be, may suit us better."²² This advice probably gave some readers reason to decide against taking on the challenge of settling this new land. Richard S. Hunt and Jesse F. Randel, in a narrative written in 1839, also presented an encouraging picture of Texas as the land of opportunity, but candidly stated: "Should the slaves of Mexico invade your homes, you will have the satisfaction of knowing that those homes are richly worth defending."23

Those not discouraged by the guidebooks of the 1830s found that a new assortment appeared in the 1840s to quell their curiosity. Several of these authors emphasized the spiritual concerns of the emigrant. Reverend A.B. Lawrence,²⁴ wrote both *Texas in 1840* and *A History of Texas*, published in 1845. In the introduction to the earlier work he stated, "Should the influence of this little work ... induce many Christians to plant in that country the germs of the future churches of the Redeemer, the writer and publisher will be entitled to the thanks of the community, and the consciousness of having done good to their fellow men, both in temporal and spiritual concerns."²⁵ Spreading Christianity was also an aim of Orcenth Fisher in *Sketches*. He wrote that "If this little work shall ... be the means, under God, of furthering the holy cause of Christianity among the people there, by inducing Christians and Christian ministers to direct their energies to that portion of their work of this favorable juncture, the author will feel himself amply compensated."²⁶

Guidebooks presenting personal recollections continued to appear on the market into the 1860s. Those narrators who actually resided in Texas hoped that by sharing their experiences with the reader they would lure emigrants with tales of wealth and success:

A country, in short where to my knowledge there are plenty of men who are worth from ten to one hundred thousand dollars and who, but a few years ago, had hardly a dollar they could call their own, and many of whom, had they remained in their native countries, would most undoubtedly have remained there forever poor, and at this time getting their daily bread with their daily labor, instead of being as they are among the wealthiest of this naturally great and delightful country, doing what they do at their leisure or pleasure.²⁷

During the same decades when personal narratives achieved popularity, guidebooks also appeared to promote commercial ventures. The Galveston Bay Company, organized in 1830 to encourage colonization of its Texas land grants, expounded the opportunities awaiting settlers in the Address to the reader of the documents relating to the Galveston Bay and Texas land company which are contained in the appendix.²⁴ Browsing through this volume, the reader found page after page of praise, if not for the climate, then for transportation or inexpensive land. "Among the inducements to imigration presented by this interesting country, the facility and cheapness of access to it, are by no means inconsiderable."²⁹ Few other examples of early Texas commercial interest guides have survived, even though other companies, such as the Texas, Agricultural, Commercial and Manufacturing Company and the Texas Emigration and Land Company were formed and settled during this period.³⁰

Migration to Texas slowed during the Civil War and in fact actually retreated. The agricultural frontier along the entire eastern border of the Great Plains remained about the same from 1850 to 1875.³¹ During Reconstruction the promise of the Republican Party to develop the West was added impetus for settlers to venture to the new frontiers.³² The commercial guidebook gained popularity and the Texas legislature in 1871 created the Bureau of Immigration which published its own promotional literature that was distributed in the United States and abroad. According to the Annual Report of the Superintendent of Immigration (1874), the demand for these pamphlets was greater than the supply: The appropriations made by the Thirteenth Legislature for the collection, printing and distribution of maps, statistical and other information had been exhausted by my predecessor, leaving me no fund with which to purchase maps (of which there was none turned over to me), advertise, collect and publish for distribution such statistical and other information as the law contemplated, and proper answers to the numerous questions I was receiving from all parts of the country demanded.³⁴

The Superintendent of the Bureau of Immigration, J.B. Robertson, pleaded in the annual report for funds to support the efforts of his bureau based on the claim that agents of other states actively publicized the attributes of their regions and on occasion actually misrepresented Texas. He felt that those who now requested information about Texas and its advantages were intelligent farmers, manufacturers, and miners who would greatly benefit the development of this Western state.³⁵ Robertson argued that if Texas distributed publications about Texas, "this great tide of immigration would be idly turned and brought into our State, from which it would take but a few years to make her population have to be estimated by millions (sic) of intelligent, thrifty tillers of her virgin soil, giving life and vigor to her commerce, manufactories, and prosperity, unparalleled to her industries."³⁶

Texas the Home for the Emigrant, from Everywhere was the publication of the Superintendent of Immigration for the State of Texas in 1875. As was the claim of many previous guidebooks, this pamphlet aimed "to give true and reliable information upon all subjects relating to this Empire State."³⁷ Presented was a glowing account of the opportunities awaiting the settler in a variety of occupations:

The rich will find here profitable fields of enterprise for their wealth. The cunning hand of the mechanic will find profitable employment and fair reward; the Farmer and Laborer will find cheap land, a mild and healthy climate, a fertile soil, reliable seasons and a market in a convenient distance for the products of his labor.³⁴

The future was bright for those who chose Texas as their new home a future filled with endless possibilities to achieve happiness and success: "Each day and year is marching her onward and upward, which her merits and intrinsic worth entitle her to, and they will be hers."³⁹

Transporting the emigrant to this land of "milk and honey" became easier with the post-Reconstruction development of a complex railroad system. Land companies formed by the railroads published pamphlets to attract those willing to work and offered them farm lands for a small down payment and liberal terms.⁴⁰ A publication in 1873 by the Texas Colonization, Land and Trust Company described the advantages to farmers of settling in Texas as opposed to Kansas or Arkansas and recommended the Missouri, Kansas and Texas Railroad for the trip.⁴¹ A Circular of the Texas Colonization, Land and Trust Company with a brief description of Texas, Northwestern Texas and Young Country focused on North-Western Texas: NORTH-WESTERN TEXAS, and more particularly the country of YOUNG and counties adjacent thereto, in its large tracts of rich and unoccupied lands and unsurpassed advantages in other respects, offers to the settler, and capitalist seeking profitable and secure investment, numberless and unequalled opportunities to secure competence and wealth.⁴²

This was just the beginning of a period of growth for Texas supported by commercially-backed literature that promoted nearly every section in Texas.

Railroad companies distributed guidebooks in the 1870s without charge to the prospective pioneer at home as well as abroad. Bryant's Railroad Guide, spreading news of growth and progress in Texas, was free to those interested.⁴³ The promise to increase the number of pages and subjects covered in the next issue of the guide proved there was a commitment on the part of the railroads to promote "the general upbuilding and development of our State."⁴⁴ Among the varied subjects covered in the pamphlet was advice to travellers that warned the novice of unknown dangers. "Never delay — so as to have to run yourself to death to catch a train and then perhaps, as a penalty for your indescretion, get your leg crushed in your attempt to get on while the train is in motion."⁴⁵ The popular testimonial approach used in the section "Notes of Travel in TEXAS" attempted to convince the public of the credibility of the guide. An example was a letter dated November 17, 1875:

I would say to an honest and honorable people wishing to come to Texas, that they will find this, upon the whole, the finest State in the Union, and will find Texans a hospitable whole souled people, and among them less of the old bitterness left as the result of the war, than is to be found in any other State."⁴⁶

This was not the only guidebook for emigrants which used the testimonial to make its claims more believable. The Galveston, Harrisburg and San Antonio Railroad Company, in its *Description of Western Texas*, stressed that the statements made would be backed by the names of men who could vouch for their validity:

The reader is neither asked nor desired to receive the description of this country, and its social condition, without testimony. If he is a Mason, an Odd Fellow, or a Patron of Husbandry, he will find the names and addresses of the officers of these fraternities, to whom he can apply, and from whom he can ascertain whether that which is said, is not substantial truth.⁴⁷

Railroad companies continued their efforts to entice settlers to Texas. The Missouri, Kansas and Texas Railway promoted the "Empire State" in its literature appropriately written by a forty-year resident of Texas, a fact enabling "him to speak with confidence on the subject treated of."⁴⁸ The General Passenger Department of the Missouri Pacific Railroad Company in 1890 tried to attract men and women by providing detailed information on ways to acquire public lands.⁴⁹ The Union Pacific similarly dealt with the subject and gave the impression to its readers that they must quickly make a decision since the supply of land was running low. "Think on these things. Then act promptly if you expect to get your choice of the cheap lands."⁵⁰

By the last quarter of the nineteenth century, towns and counties throughout Texas already had been settled, providing an opportunity for guidebook literature to present the changes and report on the successes of the communities. Kerr County, Texas, by the publication date of its guidebook in 1880, had experienced hard times, but was now claiming to be a productive, healthy place to live and work:

It was [Guadelupe Valley] settled by German colonists twenty-five years ago, who at first experienced almost starvation, Indian raids, pestilences and poverty; but they struggled through and to-day the town contains a thrifty and prosperous population of nearly 300, several good stores, a good hotel, mills, cotton gins and all the other concomitants of a thriving place ... Surely in the light of this no immigrant should despond because of ill luck at first.³¹

Allaying fears of the dangers of living in an "untarned" land was important if the author was to attract new settlers. "Outlaws and desperados are of the past, no homicide having been committed here since 1876, while Indian raids are also at an end, none having taken place since Sept. 1878, and the settlements west being now so strong that none need be feared. In short, life and property, are as safe here as in the North or in England."⁵² To make Kerr County even more attractive a description of its healthy climate appeared, a subject of concern to health-conscious Americans believing in the curative qualities of water: "For pulmonary diseases this locality is especially recommended, while some mineral wells relieve dyspepsia, etc."⁵³

In addition to guidebooks aimed primarily at attracting Americans to Texas, there were also those produced with the specific purpose of enticing the foreign born. Germany was experiencing a period of political upheaval and the lack of economic opportunity for its workers during the 1840s. The industrial revolution of the eighteenth century had left its mark on the Germans. The new improved machinery replaced many workers formerly employed in hand-work, leaving many unemployed and with no prospects for the future.⁵⁴ The stage was set for the new books written by Germans to glorify life in Texas. Ferdinand Roemer, in his *Texas*, informed his readers about the geology of Texas, while G.A. Scherpf, in a work published in 1841, claimed that his purpose was to provide information about Texas to help those considering emigration.⁵⁵ The guidebooks accomplished their task and the Germans came to Texas in substantial numbers during the 1840s and 1850s, leaving their impact on the economic, political, and social life of Texas for the decades to follow.⁵⁶

The English were also early enthusiasts of Texas, and they, too, write articles, books, and pamphlets for propaganda purposes.⁵⁷ O'Neill, in *The*

Guide to Texas, emphasized the fact that Texas was now attracting settlers from Europe as well as America and emigrants from France, Germany, Great Britain, and Ireland could now be counted among its new inhabitants. The author stated that his object was to provide an account of the country, its resources, prospects, and political condition — not unfamiliar topics for writers of guidebooks.⁵⁴ He did, however, warn his readers by stating the following:

Those persons, however, who are established in comfort and competency, with an ordinary portion of domestic happiness, who have never been far from home, and are excessively attached to personal ease, who shrink from hardship and danger, and those who being accustomed to a regular routine of prescribed employment in a city know not how to act on emergencies, or adapt themselves to all sorts of circumstances, had better stay where they are.³⁹

Unfortunately this work was not based on the author's experiences but was a mosaic taken from an Galveston Bay Company pamphlet published in 1831 and the early guidebook, *Texas*, by Mrs. Holley.⁶⁰ The English writers who were to follow succeeded in providing their audiences with accounts written after actually inhabiting Texas and reporting on their findings.

Arthur Itkin, in his guidebook published in 1841, provided the prospective English emigrant with a "concise and cursory, but at the same time, practical account of Texas."⁶¹ The cheap land and the possibility of trade between England and America were especially appealing to the English, and this book helped to promote the Texas colonization project of Itkin and his father. The author resided in Texas for a short period, and accepted an appointment as consul. He never actually served since the English treaties were not ratified until June 28, 1842, and by that time his successor already had been selected.⁶²

The merging of diverse cultural groups from Europe with the pioneers who ventured into Texas from other parts of the United States helped shape the uniqueness of this western state. In the early years guidebooks were usually the first and possibly only description the prospective emigrant had of life in Texas. The embellishment of these books with glorious descriptions of abundance and fertility gave credence to the myth of the garden, which argued that the main force in the future of the West was agriculture.⁶³ The authors romanticized Texas as the land of opportunity, waiting for the industrious and pious to labor with love in a land where the rewards would be great. The warnings and negative elements often mentioned in the guidebooks probably did not affect the readers as much as the advantages which most authors diligently noted. The American booster spirit thrived on taking chances and the hope was always present that by moving they would find the ideal place to settle and call home.⁶⁴

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