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Manuel F. Medrano

The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, manuel.medrano@utrgv.edu

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STORIES OF SOUTH TEXAS

EARLY SOUTH TEXAS RANCHOS - AN ENDURING LEGACY

by Manuel Medrano

The vociferous crow of a crimson rooster signals the impending dawn. A ring-tailed hawk perches on the bent branch of a *mesquite* tree where a *chicharra* has just completed her nightly serenade. Water gurgles from a clear pond next to a weathered windmill. The intoxicating aroma, of bacon, eggs, *chile del monte* and *pan de campo* (field bread) flows through an open window of the *casa grande*. A Mexican bridle clangs in the hands of an old *vaquero* who has been a man since he was twelve. He begins another day just as *vaqueros* have done for over two and a half centuries, at sunrise on a South Texas *rancho*.

The South Texas rancho began officially in 1749 when José de Escandón established the province of Nuevo Santander, a colony extending from the present-day Nueces River to the Panuco River in northern Mexico. With about 3,000 colonists and 146 soldiers, he laid the foundation for the *villas* and *haciendas* on both sides of the Rio Grande. 1 The first *villa* founded north of the river was Nuestra Señora de los Dolores. In 1753 Escandón awarded Don José Vasquez de Borrego approximately 320,000 acres near the Nueces River. 2 For validation, the Spanish government required that homes be constructed, boundaries be marked and animals be stocked on site. Within five years Dolores had over 3,000 cattle, 3,400 horses 2,600 mules and donkeys and 100 people living primarily in *jacales*. 3 A church was built nearby for religious services usually held by visiting priests. 4 For nearly seven decades until the Anglo Americans arrived, ranching was exclusively a Spanish and Mexican enterprise. The *rancho*, however, was much more than a place to grow cattle and horses; it was an institution with a character and work ethic all its own.

The *rancho* is a livestock business and has always been that way. Historians have called it self-contained and it probably was, having its own farm, chapel and *escuelita* (*small school*). Its livelihood was based on the sale of beef and beef byproducts such as tallow and leather. Life in northern New Spain was never easy. Survival depended on beef prices, weather, protection from thieves and avoiding disease. Of all the

challenges, isolation was the worst, so the *rancheros* functioned as a family of families, each with certain tasks and responsibilities, but all with a commitment to help each other.

Most of the *rancheros* were not *peninsulares* or creollos; they were *mestizos* - mixed bloods. That is how the Spaniards viewed them and that is how they viewed themselves. When they became part of Mexico, their lives changed very little, but they were no longer Spanish Tejanos; they were now Mexicano Tejanos. They lived and died under a *frontera* sky, brought into the world by a *partera* (*midwife*) and buried in the rancho *camposanto* (*cemetery*) near the corral.

The *dueños* (owners) lived better, ate and dressed better, but they knew that without the rest of the rancho family, they would not succeed. The *dueño*, who as the patriarch had unquestioned respect, bought and sold cattle, ordered the roundups and branding and even settled disputes among the *ranchero* workers. As Don Américo Paredes once wrote that he “was the final authority.”⁵ The *dueña* bore and reared their children, supervised and participated in the cooking and housekeeping and ensured that the Catholic faith and education survived on the *rancho*. If the *dueño* died, she became the final authority, managing the ranch and everyone on it. The *vaqueros* were without equal. They roped, mended fences, branded and did almost everything else that had to be done with the livestock. They displayed an unsurpassed horsemanship in the *rodeos*, the *coleadas* and the *carreras de gallo*. Even the Anglos acknowledged them, “to be the best hands that can be procured for the management of cattle, horses and other livestock.”⁶ *Rancheros* did not have doctors or pharmacists. Their pharmacy was the brush land, if they knew where to look and what to look for.⁷ *Curanderos* (folk healers) cured what they could, and the *rancheros* lived and died with the rest. Richard M. Dorson once described a *curandero* as one “who sees within one nation the uncertain balance between the high civilization and the village culture, and he recognizes that no observer can comprehend the whole without knowing something of both parts.”⁸ They were crucial to the rancho hierarchy.

Life on the rancho, however, was not all work and drudgery. *Bodas* (weddings) depending on socioeconomic class, were many times, three day festivities with plenty of food, drink and *baile*. One religious celebration, Feast of the Holy Cross, was celebrated on the first Sunday in May.⁹ It brought settlers together for mass and for dance that continued into the following Tuesday morning. Mexicano Tejanos did not have Christmas trees, but they did place *nacimientos* (nativity scenes) in their homes, and on January 6th, the Day of the Three Wise Kings, the family exchanged gifts. On special occasions, musicians visited the rancho to perform *corridos* (folk ballads) and on some evenings, families gathered together for *cuentos* (*folk stories*). Tejano historian Armando de Leon describes the importance of folklore as “an intrinsic survival tool for Tejanos; it identified them with the past...it lent a profound sense of cultural continuity traceable to Mexico’s colonial period.”¹⁰

Then, of course, there was la comida, the food, a perfect balance of heaven for the palate and hell for the body. For breakfast, *machacado*, *migas con huevo*, *frijoles*, *chile* and *café*. Dinner might be a hot beef stew, squash and *chile*. Living on a livestock ranch entitled Tejanos to partake in other delicacies such as *barbacoa de cachete* (shredded cheek meat from a steer), *cabrito* (young goat), *lengua* (beef tongue), and *ceso* (calf brain), all served with *chile*. For a change, there were nopales and tunas (cactus and prickly pear), abundant on the chaparral and prepared in a variety of ways, especially before Lent.¹¹ Long before it was microwavable and sold in the Hispanic food section at HEB, *menudo*, made with beef stomach, hominy and crushed *chile* powder, was a delicacy on the *rancho*.

When the Anglo Americanos came to South Texas, many of the lives of *rancheros* changed forever.

In many Anglo minds, rancheros were “different” and not white enough. Tejanos were characterized as indolent, immoral, and inferior in intelligence and work ethic, and in many cases U.S. history and literature books provided the “proof.” Regrettably, some still do. Soon, racial attitudes were infused into the underside of the *frontera* duality. Fortunately, over time, many of these have disappeared. Interethnic marriages between Anglo and Tejano families is but one indication.

The rancho legacy endures because its foundation endures. An appreciation and knowledge of the land, a firm handshake and an *abrazo* still mean something on the *rancho*. A work ethic rarely documented in traditional sources, respect for family and community, and an integrity to do the right thing persist, despite the decline and disappearance of many *ranchos* – all evidence that their South Texas *raíces* still remain.

ENDNOTES

1. Joe S. Graham. *El Rancho in South Texas* (Denton, Texas: University of North Texas Press, 1994), 19.
2. *Ibid.* 20.
3. Armando C. Alonzo. *Tejano Legacy: Rancheros and Settlers in South Texas, 1734-1900* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998) 30-31.
4. Graham, 16.
5. Americo Paredes. *With His Pistol in His Hand: A Border Ballad and Its Hero* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1957), 13.
6. Neal John O’Neill. *The Guide to Texas*, (Dublin: Joseph Blundell, 1834), 92.
7. Interview of Benito Trevino. March 18, 1999.
8. Richard M Dorson’s foreword in Americo Paredes’ *Folktales of Mexico* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1970)
9. Andres Tijerina. *Tejano Empire: Life on the South Texas Ranchos* (College Station: Texas A&M Press, 2008) 103.
10. Armando de Leon. *The Tejano Community* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1982), 156.
12. *Ibid.*, 121-123.

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