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OUR GRINGO AMIGOS:
ANGLO AMERICANS AND THE TEJANO EXPERIENCE

by Arnaldo De León

Early critics such as Oscar Handlin, Arthur Corwin, and Manuel Machado warned the practitioners of Chicano history in the 1970s about simplistic interpretations that involved counter-stereotyping and a "them-versus-us" perspective. Many of us who were part of that early generation of scholars dismissed these detractors as reactionaries who refused to countenance the strident cries against Anglo racism, colonialism, and cultural defamation.

After more than a score of years, Chicano historians have not departed completely from the portrayal against which Handlin and company railed. My own book, *They Called Them Greasers* (1983), paints just about every Anglo American who lived in nineteenth century Texas as a person with deeply ingrained racist attitudes ready to inflict violence on Tejanos. Of course, Chicano scholars have not been wrong in their depiction of the nature of white racism, but increasingly, historians must concede that Tejano history cannot be explained neatly as one of a monolithic Anglo society set in its oppression of Mexican Americans.

A number of things prompt us to be more multi-dimensional in depicting the Anglo in Texas history. First, logic itself tells us that Anglo American culture defies simple caricatures. American society consists of well-to-do and plain folks, Protestants and Catholics, European immigrants and native-born Texans, politically active leaders and the detached masses, reactionaries and reformers, ranchers, city-dwellers, and so on. Second, the term "Anglo" is not analytically precise, for white Americans differ in the ways I have just listed. Third, Chicano history over the last two decades has informed us that forces aside from white racism lie at the base of Tejano disadvantage. Scholars also acknowledge that the Chicano experience is itself complex and that time, class, setting, country of origin, and a plethora of other variables determine the destiny of a community.

What I propose in this essay, therefore, is to move away from the common depiction of Anglos as tormentors of Tejanos and chronicle cases where sympathetic whites have spoken out in behalf of Mexican American interests. These examples do not derive from new research; they have always been part of the general literature which shows that indeed, there have ever existed "gringos" who for one reason or another proved to be "amigos" of Tejanos.

Early historians such as Eugene C. Barker (more recently Seymour V. Connor and James E. Crisp) argued that amicable relationships between the two peoples developed smoothly after their initial contacts in the early 1820s. They noted that Anglos in that decade actually sought out Tejano
acquaintances for political alliances, business ventures, friendships, and even intermarriage, at least with those of the upper crust. No less than James Bowie and Erastus "Deaf" Smith had Mexican wives during the Mexican period (1821-1836), and each seemed to have accommodated well into San Antonio society. In that part of the republic and later the state, notes another historian, interracial marriages during the ante-bellum period involved at least one daughter from a prominent Tejano family marrying a white man.

More recently, David Montejano has explained how Anglo ranchers, merchants, and lawyers arrived in South Texas after the War with Mexico (1846-1848) and created alliances with the well-to-do in the region, among them Mifflin Kenedy who married Petra Vela de Vidal, and adopted Mexican ways as they developed their new ranch holdings or business enterprises. One might suppose that the above individuals formed close associations with Tejanos out of necessity, since intermarriage occurred in regions where they were in a minority, but in so doing they may also have been displaying their respect for the indigenous heritage and genuine love for their Mexican wives. Bexareños regarded Bowie, Smith, and other Anglos with affection and the vaqueros of the King Ranch (the Kineños) considered their affiliation with Richard King a distinction. They remained fiercely loyal to the King family through several generations.

Historians have also identified several Anglo Texan politicians who, since early times, represented Tejano issues. At the Constitutional Convention of 1845, for instance, Henry L. Kinney of San Patricio County and other delegates persuaded the assembly to publish some of its public documents in Spanish, but more significantly, joined José Antonio Navarro, the Bexar politician, in having the term "white" deleted from the article extending the franchise only to "free white males." The word's inclusion, they argued, might permit officials to exclude Mexicans from voting since society did not consider Tejanos to be "white." Kinney and colleagues further resisted efforts to dilute Tejano strength in apportionment and championed Tejano claims to lands received under Spain and Mexico.

Sam Houston commanded a respectable following among Mexican voters in San Antonio in the 1850s, and his appeal extended into neighboring counties where Tejanos lived. The Navarro, Rodríguez, and Menchaca families all supported his election as governor in 1859 and his victory that year resulted from their support as well as the strength of his personality among the Tejano community. Even Juan Cortina, who chose to work outside the mainstream, turned to Houston during the Cortina War (1859) in an appeal for legal protection of Tejanos.

Following the Civil War, newer personalities such as E.J. Davis and Louis Cardis emerged as protectors and spokesmen for Texas Mexicans. The former, a South Texas native, had recruited among Tejanos in that sec-
tion during the Civil War and then won widespread support among them when he campaigned for the governorship in 1870. The latter, an Italian immigrant, became an influential confidant of the native population in the El Paso region and defended their claim to the Salt Lakes at San Elizario in the 1870s. The controversy ultimately produced the El Paso Salt War of 1877.

The factors that prompted these historical figures to risk their political credibility and future by defending a people whom most of white society detested were probably varied. Some did it in the spirit of humanitarianism while others honestly sympathized with what they perceived as a voiceless community. Paternalistic bosses may have seen in traditional labor relations a practical system for delivering services.

Modernization and the electoral reforms of the Progressive Era diluted old relations between political bosses and Tejanos, though men such as Jim Wells and Archie Parr continued ministering to their Mexican constituents, a gesture appreciated by many poor folks in the lower valley and in Duval County. Similarly grateful were the less privileged in the Bexar County region for Maury Maverick's politics; during the Depression and World War II, he spoke out in behalf of Tejano health, culture, civil rights, and union organizing while serving as a congressman and mayor of San Antonio.

Pauline Kibbe, the executive director of the Good Neighbor Commission (GNC) during World War II and the years immediately following the war, fought an almost single-handed political battle to expose discrimination and poor working conditions among Mexican workers who migrated across Texas. She published a text titled Latin Americans in Texas (1946); the book and other activities in behalf of Mexican field hands provoked such a backlash from conservative businessmen, growers, and politicians that she resigned from the GNC in 1947 before certain dismissal by her political detractors. In the 1950s, other Anglo "amigos" included Ralph Yarborough, J. Franklin Spears, and Abraham Kazen. It is common knowledge that Hector P. García's modus operandi since founding the G.I. Forum in 1948 was to call up or write letters to Anglo friends in high places whenever strings needed to be pulled. In recent times, liberal Democrats have worked alongside Mexican-American legislators to help enact reform programs dealing with farm worker compensation, redistricting, school finance, and other issues of significance to the Mexican-American electorate.

Anglo labor activists also can be found responding, ever since the labor movement spread to Texas in the 1880s, to Tejanos who petitioned for assistance in ameliorating conditions in the work place. Among those unions receiving Texas Mexicans into their ranks during that epoch were the Screwmen's Benevolent Association of Galveston and the Knights of Labor. Then, in the early decades of the twentieth century, Anglo aware-
ness of the Tejano working class increased somewhat. This may have been
due to good-hearted sentiment or to the realization that Tejanos represented
an oppressed community; to these organizers, Texas Mexicans were
another group within the broader proletariat. The Industrial Workers of the
World (IWW), for one, showed interest in incorporating Tejanos into the
struggle against the capitalist class;25 the Texas Socialist Party sought,
through Tejano intermediaries, the organization of Tejano farm laborers;26
and even the conservative American Federation of Labor (AFL) in the late
1910s directed attention to Mexicans working in urban industries.27

During the Depression years, the craft-oriented AFL resumed activity
among Tejano farm hands, chartering an organizing committee in 1937 and
incorporating packing-shed workers into its affiliates in South Texas,
though much of the AFL work ceased by the end of the decade.28 Well
known is the CIO’s involvement through the United Cannery, Agricultural,
Packing, and Allied Worker’s of America (UCAPAWA) and the
International Ladies Garment Worker’s Union (ILGWU) in organizing
non-unionized Texas Mexicans in San Antonio in the 1930s and 1940s.29
Familiar to historians is the role played by Homer Brooks, husband of
Emma Tenayuca, in the UCAPAWA-backed San Antonio Pecos Shellers
strike of 1938.30 During World War II, the CIO’s International Union of
Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers successfully organized smelter and refin­
ery workers in El Paso and initiated efforts to improve working conditions
by eliminating occupational and wage discrimination.31 Of course, other
cases may be referenced. Part of the credit for organizing the farm workers
in the mid-1960s, for instance, goes to Eugene Nelson, a leader of “la
marcha” in 1966.32

Historically, charity- and reform-minded individuals and groups have
given generously of themselves, providing counsel to barrio dwellers,
volunteering their time to assist with problems of health and poverty, and
staffing community institutions designed to uplift the poor. In his memoir,
for example, Salvador Guerrero freely acknowledged his debt to some of
his teachers in the 1930s who helped not only himself but other members
of the San Angelo barrios with advice, positive reinforcement, and materi­
al aid.33 Various Anglo teachers in Mexican schools throughout Texas
ended their careers considering their teaching of English and American
ways to Spanish speaking children their life’s accomplishment.34

In the major cities, many a social worker took a genuine interest in
treating urban blight affecting Tejanos. Of course, many of these activists
were middle class folk wanting to impose their way of life on the poor,
but their zealosity seemed to have been sincere. Moderate sums of
money from subsidizing agencies, the Community Chest, for example, sup­
ported the Rusk Settlement House in Houston during the era before World
War II.35 During the years of the Depression, Father Carmelo Tranchese
earned a reputation as the “angel of the slums” in San Antonio for his tire­
less work among the most destitute in the city. Among other initiatives, he
helped establish relief agencies for striking workers, assisted in the implementation of health facilities in the West Side, and exerted every effort to see a public housing project established among the Mexican poor. In 1970, Dr. Fred Logan gave his life in Mathis for Chicano Power.

The military also traditionally offered a tolerant hand to Tejanos. During the Civil War, Colonel John L. Haynes, a Spanish-speaking Union officer from Rio Grande City, led a predominantly Tejano unit in the lower valley and in Louisiana in 1864-1865, commenting favorably on the contribution of his Texas Mexican soldiers whenever authorities questioned their abilities. The two world wars, and particularly the second, provided an especially welcome environment for Texas Mexicans; Anglos of diverse backgrounds formed close friendships with Tejanos who found, in contradistinction to settings back home, that race and schooling did not inhibit advancement. Hispanic military retirees today count Anglos among the closest amigos they have.

To the trained historian, the above portrayal of Anglo Americans in the history of Mexican Americans in Texas is as simplistic as the counter stereotype of white men as hard-core racists committed to maintaining some type of colonial order. For one thing, some of the figures, groups, and institutions mentioned above, their good deeds not withstanding, had another face. Jim Bowie, for instance, was no paragon of virtue. In the summation of historian Rodolfo Acuña:

Bowie [was] a wheeler and dealer, an opportunist, and an adventurer who was a slave trader by profession and genetic disposition. He married Ursula Veramendi, daughter of Governor Juan Martin de Veramendi then lied and swindled both the Veramendi family and government that adopted him. In the process Bowie amassed some 750,000 acres.

The Catholic Church in San Antonio in the 1930s did not exactly close ranks behind Father Tranchese's commitment to the Mexican American poor. In fact, many priests and the church hierarchy had close connections to Police Chief Owen Kilday, who opposed Emma Tenayuca and the pecan sheller's strike; the church, in fact, took a public stand against the strikers who desired not much more than an increase in dismal wages and improvements in their squalid working conditions in the sweatshops. Concerning Texas schooling, compassionate instructors probably numbered but a handful; the educational system in Texas has long held a reputation as a controlling institution that has debased young students with an ethnocentric curriculum, segregationist policies, and indifferent administrators. Considerate labor organizers may also have been uncommon. Often, the truly committed did not have the full backing of their federation; at other times, union members even opposed proselytizing among the Mexican working class. As to servicemen, they have not dutifully complied with the military policy of egalitarianism. John L. Haynes' Texas Mexican soldiers faced neglect, contempt, and discrimination in
promotion" and Hispanic personnel complain of similar treatment even today.  

Moreover, the people cited here as examples of "friends of the Mexicans" may have been driven to their actions by personal motives. The ranchers, merchants, and lawyers who married with women of elite families in South Texas may have done so to expedite acquisition of ranch lands, and to achieve financial stability and political influence. As late as the 1920s, and later in some counties of South Texas, local bosses delivered desperately needed services to Texas Mexican constituents, but they expected their subjects to vote faithfully for them at election time. Louis Cardis, a legislator from El Paso County in the late 1870s, Jim Wells, boss of Cameron County from the 1890s to the 1920s, and Archie Parr, a legislator from Duval County, 1914-1932, are but a few who profitted materially and politically from such an arrangement.

To close, this paper claims no pretensions of advancing any earth-shattering treatise. My intent has been to show simply that Anglos have played a greater role in the social advancement of Mexican Americans than generally credited. Obviously, I have left many questions unanswered. What segments of the Anglo population responded to the needs of Mexican Americans? Did the Anglos take an interest in the entire community, or just those belonging to the middle class? What mixture of circumstances motivated them to act? What does Anglo defense of Tejanos interests say about racism? Does racial prejudice derive from the psyche, or from tension among groups, as some sociologists argue? Answers to such questions might help round out our increasing knowledge of ethnic relations and Mexican Americans in Texas history.

NOTES


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