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The Hoggs of Texas: Letters and Memoirs of an Extraordinary Family, 1887-1906

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The Hoggs of Texas, Letters and Memoirs of an Extraordinary Family, 1887-1906 by Virginia Bernhard. Texas State Historical Association. 2013. Contents: Acknowledgments. Introduction. Source Notes. Map. Illustrations. Writers. Abbreviations. Notes. Index. Pg. 308. Paperback \$35.00.

A reader quickly moves past the jokes – Ima, Ura, Shesa, etc. – and becomes immersed in the lives and the times of this remarkable, extended family. We track back to a time when there was no air-conditioning, when a mosquito bite could result in malaria, when tuberculosis had no cure. These were times marked by copious numbers of letters, not by instantaneous electronic messages. We can be grateful for these 19th-20th century correspondents; they tell us of campaign speeches lasting three hours, backyard livestock in Austin which did not provoke lengthy city council debates (and yes, the Hoggs raised pigs, though not with their Austin menagerie of ducks, geese, chickens, dogs, horses, and two ostriches.)

We are startled to read James Hogg's opening remarks to Ima on May 6, 1902 from the Hotel Sabine in Port Arthur, "Dear Ima: At last I am at this fine hotel..." (p. 224). Any of us who have lived or toured present day Port Arthur can barely imagine it as a thriving city. It was a time when the railroad commission's work was actually designed to curb and control corruption in the sprawling railroad business, the commission being Hogg's creation. And during Ima's years at the University of Texas, she said enrollment had reached the "exciting One Thousand." (p. 188)

The milieu of the time comes alive in these letters. Gammel's book store was a cultural hub, frequented by the governor and his family. William Jennings Bryan, for whom James Hogg was an ardent campaigner, was a visitor in the family's Austin home. The trip from Austin to Sallie Hogg's ancestral home in East Texas took a full, arduous day. The "barrels of sugar and flour, one hundred pound cans of lard ... bacon bought by the side" (p. 65) were items not often found in today's shopping carts (though these items certainly contributed to the governor's corpulent physique.) The every-day-ness of the letters can provide vivid appreciation of the events. Any history student will treasure such correspondence in her or his research. Any student interested in turn-of-the-century Texas history will find Virginia Bernhard's compilation stimulating and informative, a good beginning point for several related pursuits. The letters and excerpts from Ima Hogg's memoir are interwoven with careful editing by Bernhard. Her spare use of explanatory remarks enhances the chronological flow of the narrative.

Above all, we become well acquainted with the Hogg family – the parents, children, aunts, uncles, nephews and nieces – and their strengths and foibles. They were indeed an extraordinary family, yet so like many of our own.

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