For years, genealogists have traced and recorded the Box family roots. In particular, Mrs. Edna Box Riley made significant contributions through her literary compositions. Her research is confined primarily to the geographical boundaries of East Texas. However, with the availability and reexamination of the Bravo family history from South Texas, a definite genealogical link can be established with the Box family.

During the creation of Houston County, a group of over 100 intrepid settlers, including Stephen F. Box and his sons, petitioned the Texas Congress to establish the first constitutional county in the Republic of Texas, and on June 12, 1837, their request was granted. The election of county officials became the next order of business and the people elected John Andrew Box, son of Stephen and Keziah Albright, to a two-year term as a justice of the peace. Following his father’s footsteps in local politics, John Andrew became known as “Judge Box,” a title his father had garnered while performing similar duties in Alabama during the 1820s.

For John Andrew, performing a public service became synonymous with doing patriotic duty, a Box family trait. During the American Revolution, his grandfather, Robert Box, Sr., received land grants in South Carolina for providing supplies to the revolutionary armies. Sixty years later, in 1836, John Andrew, at the age of thirty-four, mustered in Sam Houston’s army under Colonel Sidney Sherman’s Second Regiment of Texas Volunteers and fought valiantly against General Santa Anna at the Battle of San Jacinto.

After an almost forty-year trek that began in Laurens County, South Carolina, during the last decade of the eighteenth century, continued to Franklin County, Tennessee, and then on to Blount County, Alabama, the Box family finally settled in Crockett, Texas, in 1834. Stephen and his sons applied for Mexican land grants from empresario Jose Vehlein. After obtaining a certificate of character from the alcalde in Nacogdoches and taking the oath of allegiance to adhere to the regulations described in the Colonization Laws of Coahuila and Texas of 1825, John Andrew accepted a first-class headright located on Walnut Bayou consisting of one league (4,423.4 acres) for being head of a household, and a labor (177.1 acres) for coming to Texas before March 2, 1836. Shortly after his arrival in East Texas, John Andrew’s wife, Polly Bynum, passed away, leaving their four children (William Robert, Nancy, Keziah, and Lina) under the care of an appointed guardian. John Andrew married Lucinda Yarbrough in 1838, and had ten more children.

A totally different topography of dense towering pine trees, rolling forests, and with the Trinity River to the west and the Neches River to the east greeted the Box family. The pine trees were described as being “fifty inches in diameter and from sixty to eighty feet to the first limbs. The towering branches entwine and entwined to keep all sunlight out also much moisture, infact a Heaven make

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The ground was a carpet with pine needles of many centuries. Colonists, animals and Indians could walk through the forest silently on the heavy carpet of pine needles. For their daily subsistence, the rich soil afforded the Box family a golden opportunity for farming and raising livestock.

The Boxes’ zealous participation in spreading the Methodist religion became an influential factor in relocating to a much larger area; East Texas soon became populated with newly arrived frontier families. Both John Andrew and his father continued as circuit riders and as exhorters, taking almost two months to complete the circuit. At home, Stephen fostered Methodism by donating three acres for the establishment of a church at the site where the Shiloh Methodist Church formerly was located. In 1838, Methodist preachers Littleton Fowler and Bishop Thomas Asbury Morris made frequent rest stops at John Andrew’s log cabin before continuing their journey to other settlements in East Texas.

Economic prosperity followed John Andrew and his family until the outbreak of the Civil War. Citizens from District No. 11, which consisted of Trinity, Houston, and Anderson counties, selected him as a delegate to the secession convention in Austin. According to the convention’s records, Box was listed as delegate No. 95 of 177 delegates, he was fifty-seven years of age, worked as a farmer with no slaves, owned 14,086 acres of land, possessed personal worth of $11,000, with 112 improved acres of land, 888 of unimproved acres, and twenty-five ginned cotton bales of 400 pounds each. Even though John Andrew voted in favor of secession, he remained at home to oversee the family’s interests and welfare.

John Andrew’s youngest son by his first marriage, Lina Helen Box, enlisted in the Confederate army on June 23, 1861, in Palestine, Texas, at the age of twenty-nine. He served in Captain John R. Woodward’s Company G, First Regiment, Texas Infantry; later this regiment joined others to become a part of Hood’s Texas Brigade. The war took its toll on his health, and on October 8, 1862, unable to perform his military duties, Lina received a medical discharge because of kidney problems. In his short military career, he rose from private to the rank of fifth sergeant.

After General Robert E. Lee surrendered at Appomattox on April 9, 1865, chaos, social disorder, and confusion permeated the East Texas communities. Hard times fell on the Box family, and John Andrew lost about 8,000 acres of land. Disillusioned and perhaps in search for a better socio-economic and political climate, Lina, still single, migrated southwest to Hidalgo County. He travelled by steamboat down the Trinity River to the Gulf of Mexico, briefly stopped in Galveston, then continued to Brownsville. Upon his arrival, he journeyed by wagon across the mesquite, cactus, and brush country to the border town of Hidalgo, the county seat of Hidalgo County.

According to a special commemorative feature that appeared in the Edinburg Daily Review, dated December 7, 1952, Lina already had visited South Texas and was familiar with the territory:

L.H. Box and his brother came to Southern Texas with Taylors’ army during the Mexican War. They rode around the country buying land and cattle with Mexican silver dollars ...
Lina's older brother, Williams Robert, had served as a private in Captain John Long's Company of Volunteers, and according to the story, Lina tagged along and travelled with him to South Texas. However, there are no muster roll records to verify his service.

At the age of thirty-four, Lina entered the political arena in Hidalgo County and served as district clerk from 1866 to 1869. In 1870, the Texas Bar Association admitted Box to practice in Brownsville, where he became a prominent attorney serving Cameron and Hidalgo counties. In 1874, he found gainful employment as a United States deputy collector of customs in Hildago. In addition to working full-time, Lina continued the Box family tradition of spreading the Methodist religion in South Texas. He also managed to maintain an active involvement with the Masonic Lodge by transferring his affiliation from Crockett to Rio Grande Lodge No. 81 on September 7, 1875. In land investments, he purchased a Spanish land grant (porcion 72), which became known as El Sauz Ranch, located on the southern part of Hidalgo County on the banks of the Rio Grande.

On August 28, 1874, Box married Louisa Singleterry, a native of Alabama. They made their home in El Sauz ranch, where their four children, John Leslie, Myona, Emma, and Lina (a girl), were born. On July 15, 1881, Lina received approval for a thirty-day leave of absence to seek medical help in San Antonio. He left his family behind since Louisa was expecting their last child. A few days later, after making the rugged trip by stagecoach on a hot and humid summer day (August 7, 1881), Lina dried of stomach ulcers at the home of Alexander H. Sutherland, a friend of the family and a Methodist minister from South Texas. The Reverend Sutherland attended to Boxes' last wishes and made the necessary arrangements for a Christian burial in San Antonio.

Emma Box, one of Lina's four children, was born on September 11, 1879, in the old town of Hidalgo, Texas. Family members described her as being bilingual, with beautiful, sky-blue eyes and blond hair. On the other hand, Emma's future husband, David Bravo, born in El Sauz Ranch and a Catholic who spoke only Spanish, had the following physical features: a prominent square jaw, big black eyes, and black hair. Even though little is known about their courtship, they obtained their marriage license in Hidalgo County on May 5, 1900. David and Emma set up housekeeping in El Sauz Ranch where David attended to ranching activities and Emma continued her active involvement with the El Divino Redentor Methodist Church of Hidalgo.

In their modest, one-room adobe house, situated on the ranch property, Manuel Box Bravo, the oldest of eight children, was born on May 2, 1901. Manuel spent his early childhood days growing up in a rugged frontier environment isolated from the mainstream of early twentieth-century American life. A first cousin of Manuel, who also grew up at El Sauz Ranch, reminisced about the times when they had to water the dirt floor constantly to keep it from picking up. In 1910, the Rio Grande flooded the ranch property and other ranches along the banks of the river, causing David and his family to move to McAllen. Tough economic conditions forced Manuel to quit school after finishing the eighth grade; afterwards, he found employment in different menial jobs. Three years later, Manuel's mother, Emma, arranged for him to work at her brother's (John Leslie) drugstore in Edinburg. John's wife,
Braulia, also helped out at the drugstore, a personal commitment to keep the family business prospering.

Manuel met his future wife, Josefa Villarreal, at the drugstore, when she visited her sister, Braulita. Josefa worked at the Hidalgo County Courthouse, which was situated directly across the street from the drugstore. After almost two years of courtship, on October 14, 1919, Manuel married Josefa at the Sacred Heart Catholic Church in Edinburg. After their honeymoon in Mexico, the Bravos returned to Edinburg where he found full-time employment in the county tax assessor's office. By the early 1930s, Manuel's diligent efforts paid off and he received a promotion to chief deputy in the county's Delinquent Tax Department. Throughout the ensuing years, Manuel and Josefa devoted attention to rearing their four children.

By design or by accident, Manuel gradually established a political base with his leadership in the Knights of Columbus, the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), and the Democratic Party. During the early 1930s, at the insistence of several Democratic leaders, Manuel campaigned for the office of Hidalgo County district clerk, a position his grandfather, Lina H. Box, had occupied sixty-six years previously. On April 8, 1932, the Edinburg Valley Review officially announced his candidacy. The primary election results indicated that Manuel had defeated two Democrat opponents by 3,130 votes. Incumbent L.C. Lemen easily won the nomination of the Good Government League. Manuel spent the ensuing months campaigning under the catchy slogan - "Elect these Democrats for a New and Better Deal in Hidalgo County. They stand for Honesty, Economy, Lower Taxes." Meanwhile, the Good Government League reminded voters of the Democratic Party's alleged past fraudulent elections.

In the November 8, 1932, general election, the Democratic candidates lost every county-wide office. Incumbent Lemen easily defeated Bravo by a total of 2,479 votes. After this setback, although he remained an active member of the Democratic Party, Manuel did not seek public office in Hidalgo County again. Hard times fell on him and his family; he resigned from his county job due to the political change in administration. The Great Depression impacted the county as well, and Manuel remained unemployed. In 1933, at the encouragement of his wife's older sister, Maria V. Cuellar, who lived in Zapata, Texas, Manuel moved his family to that small border community.

Slowly at first, but with gradual confidence, Manuel became actively involved in local politics, supporting El Partido Viejo, as supporters called the Democratic Party. Three years later, on the eve of the general election – November 3, 1936, the incumbent, County Judge Antonio Victor Navarro, suddenly withdrew from the election. Although the incumbent had been a county judge since 1926, he fell out of grace with Democratic Party leaders who then cajoled Manuel into accepting the judgeship and allowing a write-in campaign in his behalf. Almost anti-climactically, Bravo won the election with 227 votes, although Navarro still managed to garner forty-one votes.

On January 1, 1937, Manuel Box Bravo, at the age of thirty-six, became the twelfth county judge in the history of Zapata County and only the second official to occupy that office for twenty years (1937-1957). Judge Bravo was a staunch Democrat who gained the respect of his fellow politicians and friends.
through his involvement in numerous county, state, and national projects. The Judge Bravo Papers were first opened to the author on July 13, 1990, almost six years after his death. Following a rather lengthy family discussion on the judge's contributions to Zapata County and to south Texas, Mrs. Josefa V. Bravo granted permission to open an old filing cabinet that contained her husband's private and public papers.20

The Bravo Papers make reference to Brown and Root, the construction of Falcon Dam, the relocation of the town of Zapata and the surrounding hamlets, the Democratic Party, the Felix Longoria incident, discrimination, drought relief, El Chamizal Settlement, a hoof-and-mouth disease eradication project, the International Boundary and Water Commission, Knights of Columbus, LULAC, the F.B.I., the Roosevelt-Truman Campaign of 1944, soil conservation, and many more. Moreover, the judge's letters include correspondence with James V. Allred, Lloyd Bentsen, Jr., George Bush, Tom Connally, Jesse James, Rogers Kelley, Joe M. Kilgore, Coke R. Stevenson, Ralph W. Yarborough, George and Archie Parr, Kika de la Garza, Paul Kilday, and many others.

For Lyndon Johnson alone, there are over fifty letters, many of them not available at the LBJ Library. Their close friendship and association began during the special Senate election on June 28, 1941, for the vacant seat created by the death of Senator Morris Sheppard. Twelve days before the election, on June 16, Judge Bravo formally acknowledged his support for Johnson: "Am going to get what few votes I can for you, made my mind up when our Com[m]ander in Chief spoke. Please send me two hundred circulars of Roosevelt and Unity, as I intend to mail that many letters to voters in this county."

Although statewide election results declared Governor "Pappy" O'Daniel the winner by only 1,311 votes, in Zapata County, Congressman Johnson garnered 273 votes in comparison to twenty-one votes cast for the governor.

Judge Bravo's tenacious work during the election in 1941 caught Johnson's attention and a mutual bond between these two political figures became firmly established. Seven years later, in 1948, both were back in the political arena again. While the judge sought a seventh term, Johnson campaigned for the Senate seat left vacant when O'Daniel decided not to seek re-election.22 In South Texas, a heated election that impacted the senatorial election results pitted twenty-seven-year-old Lloyd M. Bentsen, Jr. from McAllen against Philip A. Kazen of Laredo for the 15th Congressional District seat.

Even though Governor Stevenson led with enough votes to achieve a majority, the primary ended in a run-off, scheduled for Saturday, August 28. Johnson won big in central and east central counties, and all the South Texas counties.23 In Zapata County, Johnson received 580 votes to Stevenson's twenty-eight, while Webb, Duval, and Jim Wells counties also voted heavily for Johnson. The race for the 15th District seat also ended in a run-off. The powerful Webb County Independent Club, led by County Judge Manuel J. Raymond, endorsed both Johnson and Kazen in the Democratic run-off. Raymond's political ally and compadre in Zapata County, Judge Bravo, also endorsed both candidates. Johnson had a special interest in this election. As historian Robert Dalleck indicated, "a run-off in the Rio Grande Valley between Lloyd M. Bentsen, Jr., and Philip Kazen for a House seat directly benefitted
Lyndon. Both men supported Johnson over Stevenson, and their higher respective totals in the run-off translated into more votes for Johnson. 24

The run-off in 1948 turned out to be a cliff-hanger with the final outcome enshrouded in doubt. A day after the election, Johnson, obviously concerned about the results, telegraphed precise instructions to Judge Bravo: "The race is so close that an honest error in Tabulation could easily make the difference. Please check the returns now in and immediately contact the chairman of your executive committee and ascertain when the committee will meet to canvass the result in your county ... I am now calling on you for what is probably the most important service you can render me ..." 25

Meanwhile, final district-wide election results gave Bentsen a victory of 1,000 votes over Kazen. As suspense in the Senate run-off mounted, on September 3, Judge Bravo received the following letter from Johnson:

It's still too early to say whether we have won or lost this election, but win or lose, I'll always be grateful from the bottom of my heart for the good people of Zapata County. Whether I am in the Senate or out, I hope that you and the good folks in your county will call on me at any time I can be of assistance to you. I am deeply grateful to you personally for your 'all out' efforts in my behalf ... When the last votes are counted and the election is over maybe we will have an opportunity to talk together personally and I shall look forward to that time. 26

On September 13, the State Democratic Executive Committee officially declared Johnson the winner over Stevenson by a difference of eighty-seven votes. Stevenson claimed that voting irregularities had occurred in Zapata, Jim Wells, Webb, Starr, and Duval counties. Johnson's lawyers argued that Stevenson received 1,102 fraudulent (tombstone) votes in one county and over 2,000 illegal votes in Galveston County. 27 Federal Judge T. Whitfield Davidson assigned James M. Burnett to conduct an investigation in Zapata County on September 29, 1948. When the proceedings began, Judge Bravo, the county officials, and the election officers were all present outside the county courthouse to answer the roll call. This was not the case in Duval County, where only eight out of fifty witnesses cooperated with the investigation - the others had suddenly disappeared in Mexico. 28

During Burnett's questioning, Mrs. Josefa Gutierrez, chairperson for the Zapata County Executive Committee, reported that the ballot results for precinct No. 3 were missing: "I left the four [election envelopes] in Mr. Bravo's office after we had the meeting and there were only those three left; I don't know what happened to the other." 29 After the noon recess, Judge Bravo testified that he received the election returns from the four precincts in sealed brown envelopes. During cross examination, the judge testified that when he went to check the four envelopes, the returns for precinct No. 3 were missing, "I checked in all my files and everything in the office, to see if they were misplaced." 30

At approximately 2:30 P.M., Judge Davidson telephoned Burnett to terminate the investigation in Zapata County immediately and to return all the impounded documents. Davidson's decision to suspend the investigation assured Johnson the Democratic nomination. And in the bitterly contested race in Zapata County, Guillermo Gonzalez defeated his nephew, Santiago Gonzalez.
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The correspondence between Judge Bravo and Lyndon Johnson during the Senate campaign in 1948 clearly indicates that Johnson did not know that the election was allegedly stolen on his behalf. For the next two years, whenever Johnson communicated with the judge he made it a point to mention the benign outcome of that election: “Often I think back to those summer days of 1948 when you helped so effectively to give Texas a new Senator. I am thinking of them now, as I write this letter. It gives me a feeling of intense pride to realize that you spared no time and no effort.”

All throughout his political career, Judge Bravo acted as a political leader for his own county and was not dominated or manipulated by outside political influences. A thorough search of the Bravo Papers failed to reveal a single document to substantiate Robert Caro’s negative assertion that Bravo was a “less well known, petty despot,” and that both Bravo and Johnson behaved as ruthless and deceitful politicians. Moreover, Judge Bravo emerged as jefe politico, which was within the accepted boundaries of community leader.

A product of two linguistic and cultural heritages, he utilized his bilingual and diplomatic skills to the fullest, both in his personal life, as well as in public office. He left behind a legacy of social, economic, educational, and political reform. During his twenty years as county judge, and even after his retirement from public office in 1957, his trust and political influence extended beyond the geo-political boundaries of Zapata County. Indeed, Manuel Box Bravo was a leader in South Texas politics.

NOTES


4 History of Houston County, 1687-1979, p. 263.


8 In 1852, the Texas legislature took portions of Cameron and Starr counties to create Hidalgo County. It was not until 1908 that County Judge Dennis Chapin moved the county seat to Edinburg. Eleven years later, forty-two prominent business leaders, including Lina’s oldest son,


1In 1872, Col. J.L. Haynes, collector of customs, highly recommended Lina to the secretary of the treasury, referring to him as "a gentleman of high standing and great influence in Hidalgo County..." Col. Haynes to Secretary of the Treasury, September 14, 1872 (letter in possession of Mrs. Virginia Bravo Lopez).


Elías Cavazos (son of Myrna Box and Porfirio Cavazos) interview with author, September 29, 1990, Zapata, Texas.

Josefa V. Bravo interview, John Leslie, a pharmacist, owned the Box drugstore, which was located at the corner of 12th and Cano. It was later relocated "two doors east of the First Bank, and its name changed to Edinburg Drug Company," Skinner, "Edinburg Remembered: The J.L. Box Home."

"Candidacy of Bravo Filed," Edinburg Valley Review, April 8, 1932.

"Elect These Democrats for a New and Better Deal in Hidalgo County," Edinburg Valley Review, October 26, 1932.


"County Judge Navarro of Zapata County Withdraws From Race on Election Eve," The Laredo Times, November 2, 1936; Josefa V. Bravo interview; Josefa M. Gutierrez, interview with author, December 28, 1990, Zapata, Texas. During the 1940s, Mrs. Gutierrez served as chairperson of the Zapata County Democratic Executive Committee.


Bravo to LBJ, June 16, 1941. Hereinafter Bravo Papers will be cited as MBBP.

LBJ to Bravo, July 19, 1948, Western Union Telegram, MBBP.


LBJ to Bravo, August 29, 1948, Western Union Telegram. MBBP.

LBJ to Bravo, September 3, 1948, MBBP.

Reference is made to an affidavit submitted on September 22, 1948 by Walter W. Jenkins, who was present at the state's canvassing subcommittee when the results for Jack County announced 894 votes for Stevenson and 879 for Johnson. The actual results should have been Johnson 894 and Stevenson with 879, but "the error was not corrected later." Defendant Lyndon B. Johnson's Opposition to Granting of Temporary Injunction," Federal Archives and Records Center (FARC), Fort Worth, Sec. 9, pp. 3-7.


Zapata County Hearings: Mrs. Josefa M. Gutierrez interview; Green The Establishment in Texas Politics, p. 116.


LBJ to Bravo, October 20, 1948, MBBP.