

DISPARITY AND

RAFAEL LONGORIA

AS THE DEBATE OVER THE PROPOSED NORTH AMERICAN FREE TRADE AGREEMENT MOVES TO CENTER STAGE, NEW ATTENTION IS BEING PAID TO THE MEXICAN-AMERICAN BORDER. OF PARTICULAR INTEREST FROM THE TEXAS PERSPECTIVE IS THE PORTION OF THE BORDER SHARED WITH THE MEXICAN STATE OF TAMAULIPAS, SINCE MOST TRADE BETWEEN THE UNITED STATES AND MEXICO PASSES THROUGH THIS RELATIVELY SMALL AREA. THE PAIRS OF CITIES THAT STRADDLE THE RIO GRANDE IN THIS REGION, SOME FOUNDED IN THE 1700S, HAVE DEVELOPED COMPLEX ECONOMIC AND HUMAN TIES. BUT DISPARITY AS MUCH AS PROXIMITY SHAPES THE CHARACTER OF THESE RELATIONSHIPS.

MEXAMERICA

In his book *The Nine Nations of North America*, Joel Garreau describes nine distinct regions where shared cultural, economic, and geographic characteristics transcend political divisions. In the region he calls "MexAmerica," with or without NAFTA, the affairs of Mexico and the United States are already irrevocably intertwined. In Garreau's words, "MexAmerica is most evident along the 1,933-mile border that the United States shares with Mexico, but it is highly visible as well in such diverse nonborder cities as Los Angeles, Phoenix, Albuquerque, Santa Fe, Pueblo, San Antonio, Austin, and Houston."¹

In the U.S. portion of MexAmerica, an area that was once a part of Mexico, Spanish colonial roots are still strong. But 20th-century migration has also been crucial in the development of MexAmerica's present character. Northward migration increased as the economic disparity between the two sides of the border grew,

then accelerated in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when the economic boom in the Sun Belt coincided with the Mexican economic collapse and with political violence in Central America.

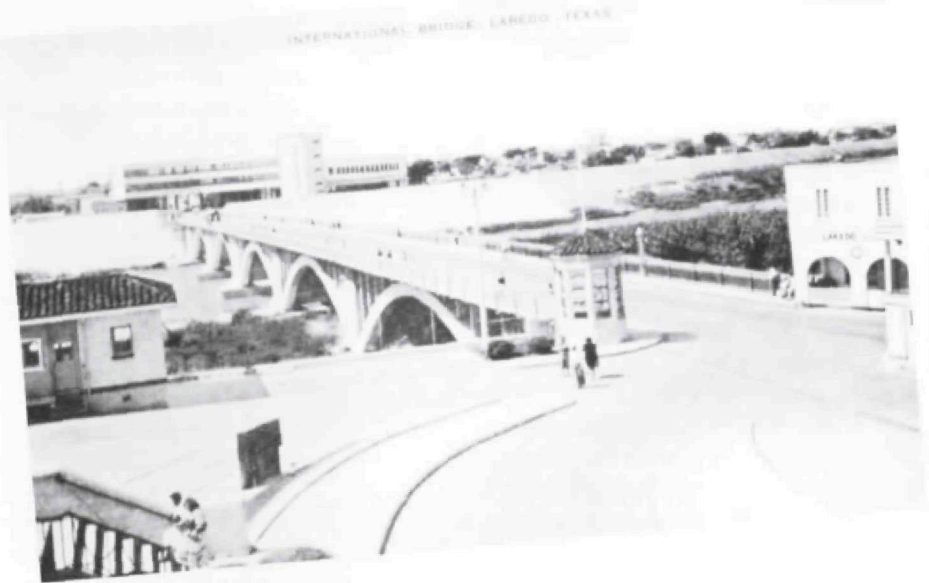
It is also important to understand the significant role of the electronic media in the cultural reshaping of this region. Every major city on the U.S. side of MexAmerica now has access to at least two Spanish-language television channels, and some of these cities have more than a dozen Spanish-language radio stations. Similarly, many radio stations in Mexico play only American music. And all large Mexican cities, even those outside MexAmerica, now have access through cable and residential parabolic antennas to a wide selection of English-language channels. Of course, cultural cross-fertilization predates the invention of radio. The many words that have been assimilated into English (rodeo, ranch, plaza, patio, tornado) and into Spanish (boiler, Pullman, bar, motel, trailer) clearly reflect the cultural and economic dominance at different periods.

The cross-cultural influences are not limited to language: the *New York Times* recently reported that sales of salsa had surpassed sales of catsup in the United States. And under the liberalized investment policies of the Salinas administration, American fast food chains are now selling *hamburguesas* all over Mexico. Observers comment that America is becoming "increasingly Mexican in its ethnic and cultural orientation," while Mexico is "increasingly 'Anglo' in its economic orientation."² And while this phenomenon is spreading throughout the two countries, the border is still its epicenter.

DIFFERENCES ALONG THE BORDER

The character of Garreau's MexAmerica is far from uniform. There are significant differences as one moves east to west, and even larger differences moving perpendicular to the border.³ In his insightful book *Distant Neighbors*, Alan Riding identifies eight different cultural regions within Mexico, including three in northern Mexico: the border cities, the northwestern states, and the northeastern states.⁴ While such a degree of differentiation might seem like hairsplitting to those not familiar with Mexico, consider the obvious differences between California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas. Texas has a good claim to being the place where MexAmerica originated. Stephen F. Austin and his Central Texas colonists might be the earliest examples of the hybrid culture, since they became Mexican citizens in order to settle in the area, even though this required learning

International Bridge between Laredo, Texas, and Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas, c. 1950.



The George Fuernberg Texas Postcard Collection (Courtesy of Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries)

Spanish and converting (at least nominally) to Roman Catholicism.

Present-day Texas shares a border with four different Mexican states: Chihuahua, Coahuila, Nuevo León, and Tamaulipas. The northeastern Mexican states and Texas have a great deal in common. This is the birthplace of *vaquero* culture and the mecca of *norteño* music. For many years Texas and Coahuila formed one entity, with Saltillo as the provincial capital. And until 1848, what is now known as South Texas was a part of Tamaulipas.

The formation of the Republic of the Rio Grande, a short-lived but colorful episode, exemplifies how the histories of this region are intertwined. During the early part of the 19th century, the northeastern states were a stronghold of Mexican liberalism. The conflict of *Federalistas* (liberals) and *Centralistas* (conservatives) dominated Mexico throughout the 1800s. The Federalistas sought a decentralized republic with strong state governments. Their aspirations were enshrined in the Mexican constitution of 1824, which was modeled after the U.S. constitution and embodied the principles of the French Enlightenment.⁵ It was the Federalistas who encouraged the colonization of Central Texas by Anglo-Americans, in the belief that the settlers would share their liberal views and strengthen their political position within Mexico.⁶ The ascension to power of the Centralistas in the early 1830s eventually brought about the conflict that resulted in the independence of Texas. This and the Centralista repudiation of

D PROXIMITY

THE TEXAS-TAMAULIPAS BORDER



Avenida Guerrero at Plaza Hidalgo, Nuevo Laredo, c. 1950.

the constitution of 1824 prompted the northeastern states to attempt to form their own republic in January 1840. The Republic of the Rio Grande comprised the states of Tamaulipas, Coahuila, and Nuevo León, as well as the southern tip of present-day Texas. With Laredo as its capital city, it acted as an independent nation until November 1840, when its army was defeated and the Centralistas regained control of the region.⁷

DIFFERENCES ACROSS THE BORDER

Today the overwhelming majority of the border population lives in one of six pairs of "twin cities." Of these 12 cities (San Diego-Tijuana, Mexicali-Caléxico, El Paso-Ciudad Juárez, Laredo-Nuevo Laredo, McAllen-Reynosa, and Brownsville-Matamoros), two are located in California, with their counterparts being in Baja California Norte, while four are in Texas, with one twin in Chihuahua and the other three in Tamaulipas.

Although the pairs of twin cities are totally interdependent, differences in architecture, pedestrian activity, merchandise on display, and street noise are all immediately evident when crossing the border. It begins at the river, for which the two nations have different names: what Americans call the Rio Grande is known in Mexico as the Río Bravo. However, the most noticeable difference is the great disparity in the wealth of the two countries. Ironically, at the Rio Grande, one of the United States' poorest regions adjoins one of Mexico's richest

areas. To quote one study, "Although poverty in Mexico increases away from the border, in the United States the reverse is true."⁸

The everyday life of the border is shaped by these disparities. On bridges all along the river, rush hour peaks every day around 8:00 a.m. for northbound traffic and 6:00 p.m. for southbound traffic. In the mornings, hordes of salaried employees who take advantage of lower living costs on the Mexican side legally commute to their jobs in the United States. At dusk they return to Mexico in time for dinner. Some even trek back and forth for lunch. A sizable number of Mexican teenagers cross the border every day to learn English by attending one of the private schools on the American side. Conversely, there are also well-to-do Mexicans who prefer to live on the American side, where utilities and other services are more reliable, and commute daily to their businesses across the river.

Mexican shoppers from as far away as Mexico City cross back and forth constantly, fueling the enormous retail business on the American side that has been created by the extreme protectionist policies of the Mexican government. Shopping for groceries is also an international affair. Residents usually develop a dual routine: meat, processed foods, and dairy products are bought on the U.S. side, while fresh fruits and produce are cheaper on the Mexican side.

In the 1920s, Prohibition on the American side coincided with the closing of all Catholic churches during a vicious

period of religious persecution in Mexico. This situation brought about truly international wedding arrangements. Regardless of where people lived, the religious ceremony had to take place on the American side, while lively receptions could only be held on the Mexican side. It was also Prohibition that initiated tourism on the border. Restaurants, bars, and casinos proliferated as the border became the most accessible place for Texans to drink alcohol legally.⁹ Even today, Texas teenagers cross the bridges every weekend to dance and drink at the many establishments on the Mexican side of the border where minimum age is never an issue.

Prostitution, too, is part of the border. On the Mexican side, municipalities can create *zonas de tolerancia*, walled precincts within which prostitution is allowed, even though it is illegal outside. Some of these districts are of considerable size and contain elaborate nightclubs with fantasy themes. For better or for worse, the pilgrimage to the border whorehouse – captured in such novels as Larry McMurtry's *Last Picture Show* – has become one of the rituals of the region.

It must be noted that as widespread as the traffic between the two countries is, the rights of the inhabitants of the two sides are far from symmetrical. Since Mexico's passport control stations are located at least 26 kilometers from its boundaries, a free-zone ribbon runs parallel to the border. Every resident of the American border towns can enter the Mexican border towns without showing any documents. On the other hand, a considerable number of residents of the Mexican side are forbidden from entering the United States under any circumstances by the stricter American passport control rules. Many Mexicans have lived their entire lives within sight of an American city and yet have never been able to visit that city legally. For a Mexican, obtaining an entry visa to the U.S. is strictly a matter of socioeconomic class.

THE TEXAS-TAMAULIPAS BORDER

The history of the border shared by Texas and Tamaulipas illuminates how the region has been shaped by a long succession of fateful decisions made in distant capitals. Three events altered the region fundamentally: the Spanish settlement of the area, part of a larger strategy to prevent France from expanding its presence in North America; the signing of the

Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, which defined the border as we know it; and the arrival of the railroads, which converted a remote outpost into an important link in the chain of international trade.¹⁰

THE ESCANDON SETTLEMENTS

On 3 September 1746, Don José de Escandón, the future *conde de Sierra Gorda*, was charged by the viceroy of New Spain with the mission of colonizing *el seno mexicano*, a region that comprised what is now the state of Tamaulipas as well as the southern tip of present-day Texas. This area was inhabited by nomadic tribes of Indians whose now-forgotten culture fell victim to European expansionism. Since the fierceness of the native tribes had kept settlers out of the *seno mexicano* for two centuries, Escandón – who had won a considerable reputation as a soldier fighting the Indians of Guanajuato and Querétaro – was chosen over several other Spaniards who were competing for the prestigious assignment and its potential economic rewards.

Between 1749 and 1755, Escandón directed the establishment of 20 towns and created the province of Nuevo Santander, named after his Spanish birthplace. His settlements included a string of villages straddling the banks of the Rio Grande: Camargo (1749), Reynosa (1749), Revilla (1750), Mier (1752), and Laredo (1755). All these towns were organized with a central plaza and a regular grid extending from the center according to the very precise rules enumerated by the Law of



Don José de Escandón, conde de Sierra Gorda.

the Indies. The settlers recruited for Nuevo Santander were *criollo* ranchers from neighboring Nuevo León and Coahuila whose growing herds of livestock required more range, and who were attracted by the subsidies and tax remissions offered to those who joined Escandón's settlements. This civilian pattern of settlement was very different from the pattern in Texas, New Mexico, and California, where missions were established to convert the local



Nuevo Laredo.



Matamoros.

Indians and military presidios were built to provide protection.¹¹

In the early years of Nuevo Santander's existence, all grazing land was held communally by each town's settlers. But in 1767 the land on both sides of the river was distributed by a visiting royal commission. Each family received a large but narrow *porción* with river frontage to raise livestock, as well as a plot to build a house in town.¹² This accounts for the predominant regional pattern of ranchers living in cities and commuting to oversee their working lands rather than living on their rural properties.

THE CREATION OF THE BORDER

In 1848 the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo formally concluded the Mexican-American War, with disastrous results for Mexico. Half of the country's territory, including California, Arizona, and New Mexico, was ceded to the United States.

Texas, whose earlier independence had been the direct cause of the war, was already incorporated as a state of the Union. However, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo extended the southern boundary of Texas from the Nueces River to the Rio Grande.

At the time, Laredo was the only sizable settlement between the Nueces and the Rio Grande. While Texas had been part of Mexico, Laredo had never been part of Texas. But overnight it became part, not only of the state of Texas, but of the United States as well. This brought about

the creation of Nuevo Laredo, which, as the romantic myth goes, was founded by Laredoans who crossed the river to continue living in Mexico.¹³

While the rest of Nuevo Santander's river towns remained in Mexican territory, they also experienced radical changes. Suddenly they became part of an international boundary line. And since the residents of all these towns had *porciones* on both sides of the river, the new border caused unimaginable trauma for the local families.

The new international boundary also opened the way for Anglo-American settlement of the north bank of the Rio Grande, which eventually resulted in the dense network of small towns and farming communities that stretches from Brownsville to Roma, with McAllen at its center.

RAILROADS AND INTERNATIONAL TRADE

The arrival of the railroads in the 1880s changed the economic base of the region. Until then, the inhabitants had lived off the land, very much as their predecessors had in Escandón's time. The railroads converted the two Laredos into an inter-

national trade center; 30 years later they made possible large-scale produce farming in the lower Valley by opening up Midwestern markets.

Four railroad lines converged in Laredo–Nuevo Laredo: Ferrocarriles Nacionales de México (connecting Laredo to Monterrey and Mexico City), the International & Great Northern Railway (connecting Laredo with San Antonio and St. Louis), the Texas-Mexican Railway (connecting Laredo to the port of Corpus Christi), and the Rio Grande & Eagle Pass Railway (which connected Laredo and the neighboring border towns).

As soon as the railroad lines became operational in 1881, Laredo–Nuevo Laredo became the principal crossing for trade between the United States and Mexico, a position that it still maintains. Because of the railroads, the population of Laredo increased from 3,521 in 1880 to 11,319 in 1890, the largest percentage increase of any decade in its history.¹⁴

MAQUILADORAS AND NAFTA

The proposed North American Free Trade Agreement, if adopted, has the potential of being another major catalyst for change in the border. The efforts to bring



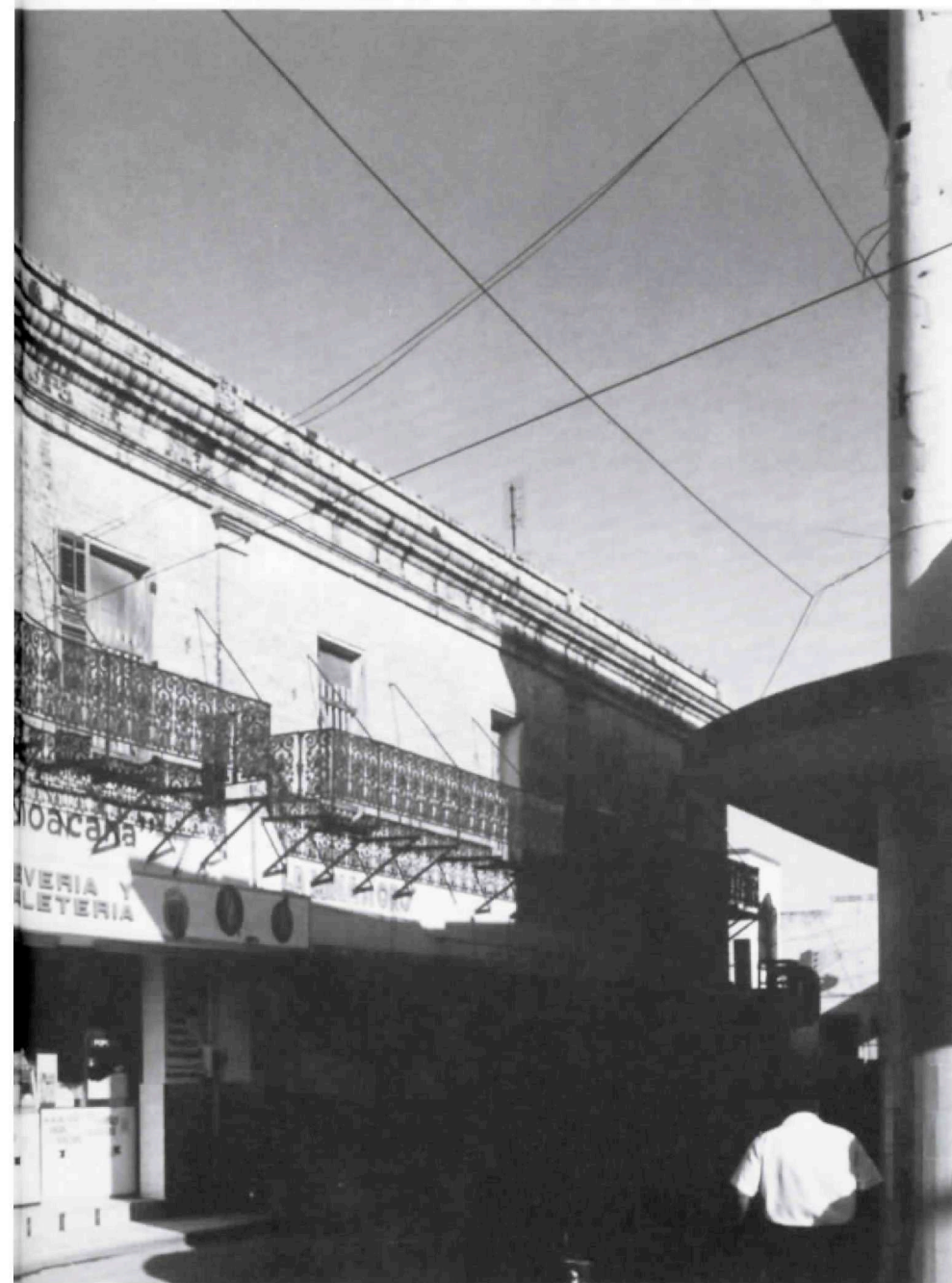
Texas and Tamaulipas.



18th-century *porciones* and land grants on the north side of the Rio Grande.

Map from a drawing by José Jackson. Courtesy Texas A & M Press.

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about a trade agreement can be traced to the success of the *maquiladora* industry. The word *maquiladora* was adapted from the Spanish term used to describe the milling of someone else's wheat for a portion of the resulting flour. The current concept is similar to that ancient practice: foreign components are brought into Mexico to be assembled, taking advantage of the abundant supply of inexpensive labor. The finished product is shipped back to the United States, where, upon reentry, customs duties are levied only on the value added abroad.

In 1965 the Mexican government opened the door to the creation of the *maquiladora* industry as part of its Border Industrialization Program, whose principal objectives were to reduce unemployment in northern Mexico and to attract foreign capital. By the 1980s, *maquiladoras* along the border were one of the few economic success stories in Mexico. It was then, after decades of trying to ignore the economic importance of the United States to Mexico and the multiple links between the two countries, that the Salinas administration took the first steps toward integrating the economies of North America.

In effect, *maquiladoras* are a way for

Mexico to export its labor without exporting its workers. This has potential benefits, as envisioned by treaty proponents, for both countries: Mexico alleviates its huge unemployment problem, thus reducing the pressure for people to emigrate illegally to the United States in order to find work.

If the increased prosperity in Mexico is coupled with a relaxation of that country's longstanding protectionist policies, a consumer market of considerable size will be created for American and Canadian goods. Mexican consumers will have access to cheaper and better goods, while Mexican producers will have access to the huge American market. The resulting political stability in Mexico would not only benefit its citizens but also decrease the national security concerns of its northern neighbor.

The residents of the border overwhelmingly support NAFTA because they believe that the agreement would greatly enhance the local economy. However, concerns are being voiced in communities on both sides of the border. In Mexico, people worry about whether Mexican manufacturing and service industries will be able to survive once protectionist poli-

cies disappear. In the U.S., retailers fear that the end of Mexican protectionism will mean the end of their prosperous businesses. American labor unions are pooling all their resources to fight what they perceive as a flood of cheap labor that will inevitably lower their wages and weaken their bargaining position. In addition, serious concerns about working conditions in *maquiladoras* and the environmental consequences of unregulated



Reynosa.

industrial processes are being voiced on both sides of the border.

In his autobiography, José Vasconcelos, who went on to become the cultural czar of postrevolutionary Mexico, describes his childhood in Piedras Negras–Eagle Pass at the turn of the century, a time when international trade was beginning to dominate the local economy.¹⁵ Vasconcelos recounts his years as a resident of the Mexican side of the border attending a school on the American side during the day. The wounds of the Mexican–American war were still fresh, and his memoirs are full of heated battles between Mexican and Anglo-American schoolchildren. It is undeniable that, at least from the Mexican perspective, the war still shades the relationship. The pain of losing land in 1848 was aggravated during the Mexican revolution by what was perceived as aggressive U.S. meddling in the internal affairs of Mexico. The revolutionary triumph in 1920 brought about an era of intense nationalism and vocal anti-Americanism that culminated in the nationalization of the oil industry and the expulsion of foreign companies from Mexico.

The history of distrust has prevented Mexico from taking full advantage of its enviable location next to the largest economy in the world and has prevented a meaningful dialogue between the two countries about their shared concerns. Beyond its economic significance, a North American common market would signal the end of hostilities and the beginning of a mature relationship between Mexico and the United States. ■

1 Joel Garreau, *The Nine Nations of North America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981), p. 211.

2 John R. Weeks and Roberto Ham-Chande, eds., *Demographic Dynamics of the U.S.-Mexico Border* (El Paso: Texas Western Press, 1992), p. 271.

3 *Ibid.*, pp. 3–12.

4 Alan Riding, *Distant Neighbors: A Portrait of the Mexicans* (New York: Random House/Vintage Books, 1986), p. 403.

5 Gilberto Miguel Hinojosa, *A Borderlands Town in Transition: Laredo, 1755–1870* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1983), pp. 26–27.

6 Lorenzo de Zavala, *Journey to the United States of America* (1831). Reprint ed. (Austin: Shoal Creek Publishers, 1980), pp. 96–97.

7 Jerry Thompson, *Sabers on the Rio Grande* (Austin: Presidial Press, 1974), pp. 88–95.

8 C. D. Dillman, "Border Urbanization," in E. Stoddard, R. Nostrand, and J. West, eds., *Borderlands Sourcebook* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1983), p. 243.

9 Ismael Villarreal Peña, "Breve Reseña de Historia Regional, no. 3," *El Mañana* (Nuevo Laredo), 12 November 1987, sec. 3.

10 Jerry Thompson, "Historical Survey," in Mario L. Sánchez, ed., *A Shared Experience: The History, Architecture, and Historic Designations of the Lower Rio Grande Heritage Corridor* (Austin: Los Caminos del Rio Heritage Project and the Texas Historical Commission, 1991), p. 26.

11 J. B. Wilkinson, *Laredo and the Rio Grande Frontier* (Austin: Jenkins Publishing, 1975), pp. 11–19; Hinojosa, *Borderlands Town*, pp. 4–19.

12 Thompson, "Historical Survey," pp. 26–27.

13 Manuel Ignacio Salinas Domínguez, *Orígenes de Nuevo Laredo* (Ciudad Victoria: Universidad Autónoma de Tamaulipas/Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas, 1981), pp. 21–26.

14 Hinojosa, *Borderlands Town*, pp. 117–18.

15 José Vasconcelos, *Ulises Criollo* (México City: Fondo de Cultura Económica/Lecturas Mexicanas 11, 1983), pp. 17–52.