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Hispanic Women in the Mexican-American Frontier

Premise

The long Spanish tradition of having highly assertive and politically active women did not end with Mexican independence. The role of Hispanic women in shaping the Mexican-American frontier is definitely not as passive as we are led to believe and it could possibly be a lot more active than the Anglo counter part.

Introduction

Culture is a complex concept and the more I read about Hispanic culture, of which I am a member, the more confused I got. I didn't just see my premise – that the perception of the Hispanic woman as a submissive creature trapped in an inflexible paternalistic society is false, a myth and as illusive as Cíbola – collapsing, but my whole concept of historiography undermined. Particularly disturbing was Sarah Deutsch's excellent book, *No Separate Refuge*. As I read her description of the Chicano settlements in New Mexico and Colorado, I found some elements in common with my experience, but as a whole, these villages were as alien to me as they would have been to any Anglo. Deutsch made a statement that the Spanish government and later the Mexican government encouraged communal living by providing land grants for the village rather than the individual. The village would then determine the "grazing" rights of individuals on communal land. Was this only true in New Mexico? If not, when did it stop? I know that Jose Pedro Pérez bought land from the original grantee in 1747. Nowhere in any of my collection is there any mention of "grazing" rights or use of communal lands. If Sarah Deutsch's

observations are accurate, it must only apply to a particular locality. At first this bothered me. Can any general statement about any large group be true?

Settlement in New Mexico was encouraged through communal land grants. This was the model used in the “re-conquest” of Spain and was quite different from the settlement model used in Nuevo Santander (South Texas and part of northern Mexico). In the “re-conquest” model, each settler owned a small agricultural plot, a house and the land immediately surrounding the house. The rest, generally used for grazing, was owned communally. Elected boards assigned grazing rights and delegated maintenance work.^{1[1]} The model worked well for survival in a hostile environment. “Chicano” villages in New Mexico and Colorado in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century were followed the same pattern with some modifications.^{2[2]} These villages were no longer whole communities. The elite collaborators experienced a steady decline in power and by the early twentieth century had virtually disappeared.^{3[3]} Each village had its set of rules that, for the most part, followed the same traditions. For example, daughters usually inherited land equally with sons, though, in some villages, they may get livestock, furniture and goods in lieu of land. Following the Spanish tradition, the woman retained the right to whatever property she had when she entered marriage as well as the right to community property.^{4[4]}

The key to independence is the right to own and control property because it gives you more options. It is this small difference in legal tradition that has had a big impact on the role of women in even the very poor Hispanic communities of New Mexico and Colorado. It was not

unusual for women to actively participate in business ventures. In the poor communities of Colorado and New Mexico, where Anglo medical care could not be trusted, the midwife and the “*curandera*” (healers) were held in high esteem and very influential.^{5[5]} The role midwife was considered a calling and not taken lightly.

I admire Deutsch for going with the evidence even if it meant discarding her premise. The problem I see it is that Deutsch, while she hints at it, does not make a clear distinction between cultural and environmental influences. Language, religion and certain basic concepts of property rights are obviously cultural, but most of the village behavior described by Deutsch is more in reaction to a very hostile environment and not cultural in origin.

After perusing over the book for a while, I began to see that this book, in a strange way, supports my premise. Deutsch’s description of the strong role of women in the New Mexico settlements coincides with my experience, but most of the rest was alien to me. The difference is that the environment of the enclave in which I was reared was quite different from the settlements in New Mexico and Colorado. This, to me, shows that Hispanic society is not as inflexible as most believe.

Spanish Colonization of New Mexico

In *When Jesus Came, the Corn Mothers Went Away* Ramón A. Gutiérrez examines Spanish colonization in New Mexico through the window of marriage and sexuality from 1500 to 1846. While the first permanent Spanish missions and presidios in New Mexico were established in 1540 with the expedition of Francisco Vásquez de Coronado real colonization didn’t start until the re-conquest of New Mexico in 1693.^{6[6]} It was with the re-conquest that

Hispanic (Spanish, Creole and Mestizo) families came to settle and a greater effort was made to incorporate the Pueblo Indians into the Spanish political and economic system. My interest is in this later era.

There was a period of accommodation between the Indians and the settlers in certain aspects but not full incorporation. The Pueblo Indians paid tribute and in exchange the crown protected their legal rights and the integrity of their villages and their lands.^{7[7]} The Spanish government, in an effort to legitimize their rule, took the duty of protecting Indian legal rights quite seriously. The courts were readily available and the Indians won most of their cases. Even in cases where the Spaniard was technically right, but morally wrong, the court would rule in favor of the Indian castigating the Spaniard that he should have known better.

The Pueblo Indian concept of marriage was very similar to the Spanish tradition though not a monogamous, lifelong commitment – whenever the woman took a notion she could look another husband.^{8[8]} In Pueblo Indian marriages, the woman had the final say in the home. While the woman in the Spanish marriage didn't quite have the power of her Indian counterpart, there are certain Spanish traditions that do allow great influence. The woman could own property. The dowry was legally inalienable female property. At her death, the dowry went intact to her children, lacking those; it reverted to her natal family.^{9[9]} The *arras*, what the groom's family contributed to the union, which was limited to ten percent of the man's worth, became property of the bride.^{10[10]}

Assertive women were not unusual in Hispanic society, especially on the frontier in the mid eighteenth century. In 1744 Feliciana Chávez, wanting to break her betrothal to Isidro Sánchez, paraded through the streets of Santa Fe firing musket and shouting defamatory statements about her fiancé. Isidro complained to the governor, but he ruled that this was not in his jurisdiction and hence beyond his power to remedy.^{11[11]}

Ramón A. Gutiérrez gives a good account of the era through a unique window, but as the title indicates, it is presented somewhat from an Indian perspective and automatically biased against the Spaniards. I particularly disagree with his argument that the Spaniard's sense of honor requires wife beating. I can't imagine Ferdinand beating Isabella. Wife beating is considered deviant behavior in the Hispanic community.

Spanish Colonization of South Texas: Nuevo Santander

With some recent exceptions, most American historians on the Spanish Conquest of the Americas have concentrated on the exploits of the *Conquistadores* and adventurers (all male) in their quest to find gold and save souls while ignoring the contributions of the more mundane Hispanic settlers wresting a living from a harsh land in a hostile frontier. This sense of history has given the impression that the land was vacant and ready for the taking by the edict of Manifest Destiny. This misconception is especially true in South Texas in spite of having a well-defined and settled Hispanic society. Most histories of South Texas start with the arrival of Anglo adventurers and entrepreneurs like Captain Mifflin Kenedy and Captain Henry Clay Davis completely ignoring that the fact that these men married daughters of well established Hispanic landowners. Walter Prescott Webb flatly stated that the Spanish had minimal impact on the Americas.

The perception of South Texas as an empty “no man’s” land persisted into the twentieth century. In 1853 an anonymous writer in *De Bow’s Journal* wrote, “The Mexican and aborigines [of Texas] are reduced to a cipher and will soon disappear.”^{12[12]} Another Anglo writer commenting on the loneliness in settling in region wrote, “Prior to the coming of the railroad in 1904, the lower Rio Grande Valley was virtually ‘*terra incognita*,’ and fully ninety five percent of the population were Latins.”^{13[13]} The implication of this statement is that “Latins” don’t really count even though the region had experienced a great population growth during this period.

In *Tejano Legacy Rancheros and Settlers in South Texas 1734-1900*, Armando C. Alonzo shows that South Texas was not a vacuum. The population in South Texas grew from a little over 9000 in 1850 to almost 80,000 in 1900.^{14[14]} More important than just the population numbers is the fact the “Latins” were not a monolithic group of landless survivors. There were enclaves of complete and sophisticated Hispanic society that have survived through turmoil of war, raids and changing environment. Alonzo does not delve very deeply into the political aspects of the era. He tells the story by concentrating on statistics giving not only on the population but the number of ranches, cattle, horses and goats/sheep (*ganado menor*) of the different periods. It is interesting to note that it was not always a steady increase.

Anglos and Mexicans In The Making of Texas, 1836—1986 by David Montejano is a refreshing break from the *veni, vidi, vici* type of literature so prevalent in popular United States histories in general and in Texas histories in particular. It is also a break from the “counter”

history form, which basically substitutes a few Hispanic names in the protagonist roles, but still adheres to romantic western tales with, at most, superficial analysis of the real conflicts of the epoch. Instead we have a readable, interpretive history that delves deeply on the consequences of events on the people that lived in the region.

In this work, Montejano examines Mexican-Anglo relations “since the Alamo” along a 200 mile wide strip from Brownsville to El Paso with the primary objective of filling a void, to make history real and relevant. He successfully weaves the study to serve both sociology and history by organizing it into four distinct periods: incorporation, reconstruction, segregation and integration that are, in turn, examined in detail.

Incorporation: 1836 – 1900. In this region with the low Anglo population, incorporation was a period of accommodation featuring four distinct groups, the landed Mexican elite, the ambitious Anglo merchant, the poor rancher and the lowly laborer. The new Anglo elite was generally “Mexicanized” by intermarriage with the landed Mexican elite. However, Montejano argues that the hacienda economy was fatally undermined by the Mexican War. The competition between fixed income landed elite and the regenerative merchant income was basically unfair and by the end of the century the landed Mexican elite, except for small enclave along the border, had disappeared.

Reconstruction: 1900-1920. This was a rather violent period. The ranch society was undermined by the agricultural revolution. The prime cause of the agricultural revolution was the sudden jump in land prices. Land simply got too expensive to be left for pasture. In a very short time ranch land was cleared for farming and with it came an influx of farmers and farm wage earners. This conflict precipitated an armed Texas-Mexican revolt that was brutally suppressed by the Texas Rangers under the guise of fighting Mexican bandits.

Segregation: 1920-1950. This is the “modern” farm society. The intensive labor requirements of this system, mostly Mexican migrant, overwhelmed the local population, which, in turn, created racist policies of political control. Are the Mexican people of the southwest an ethnic group or a race? Montejano demonstrates that while race is usually associated with color, it is quite arbitrary and ultimately a political decision rather than a physical characteristic. The insightful observation that the Mexican people are both; an ethnic group by language and heritage and a “race” when subjected to policies of discrimination, clears an ambiguity that allows better understanding of the Mexican-Anglo relationship in the different epochs.

Integration: 1950-now. The farm society was undermined by World War II and urban industrialization. It seems that social progress is made only after violent upheavals. Be that as it may, but the returning veteran was much more aggressive in demanding his rights which led to the demise of Jim Crow. The author argues for inclusion.

I liked this book. It is well written and very well documented. I was pleasantly surprised to find several references in his bibliography to rather unknown books. The greatest weakness that I find, besides the complexity of some of his passages, is that he does not explore some of the enclaves that do not fit the model he proposes. It seems that the people in Starr County, somehow, were able to keep their lands. The population, including its elected officials, has remained predominantly Hispanic. I believe there is, to this day a passive resistance, to incorporation. Of course there has been a price to pay for this resistance, besides being one of the poorest counties in the country, it has the reputation for being one of the most lawless. If we judge lawlessness by the number sting operations conducted in this county, the reputation is, indeed, deserved. Perhaps laws have been passed to criminalize the population – a different form of Jim Crow.

One of the enclaves that survived this period as a whole Hispanic community is Rio Grande City, which is across the Rio Grande from Camargo, Mexico. It is rather isolated and it is probably this isolation that allowed it to survive as a complete Hispanic community. It was not a passive community resigned to whatever fate may offer, but an active, litigious society. Court records show numerous lawsuits, which were not solely the domain of the elite. Access to the courts was readily available to laborers. In one case (1878), Augustín Gastón, a ranch hand, sued my great grandfather Enemecio Pérez, the ranch owner for wages.^{15[15]} This suit was followed with a counter suit for the recovery of lost or stolen cattle. I'm not sure how the case was finally decided. However, it should be noted that all the court documents in this period were hand written in both Spanish and English. This is not an isolated example. It seems that Enemecio Pérez was in court quite often.

Enemecio Pérez kept very good records of all his expenditures. His financial ledger/journal is very complete with summaries that are cross referenced to other pages in the journal that contained detailed accounts of expenditures. Enemecio had a daughter, Timotea, and two sons, Juan Diego and Casimiro. In his journal he kept track of his expenditures on each of his children. Besides clothing, meals and other necessities, his budget had an entry for the cost of education, which included his daughter. Timotea's fine penmanship and precision in expression show a fine education.

Later there was a falling out between Timotea and her father. Timotea fell in love with a man her father did not like. Juan Treviño came from an elite family, but he was a gambler and a womanizer and Enemecio did not want such a man for his daughter. However, against the desires of her father, she eloped, marrying through the Catholic Church. At that time, the Church

viewed the consent of the lovers as manifestation of God's Will and preferable to the desires of the parents. On January 6, 1896 made this entry in Spanish to his journal:

“August 22, 1887 was the last day we had the company of our daughter in our home. She left without my consent or knowledge to satisfy a caprice.”

He then continued with details of the people responsible for misleading this wayward youth. The people he names include Timotea's aunt, his sister and several cousins. He also states that Timotea, to aggravate him caused damages to the estate and furthermore charged for material to build a house. The total sum of the damages and the charges came to \$600.00. He added the note that he would deduct this total from her inheritance.^{16[16]} Later, Timotea sued he father for her maternal inheritance. She won the suit! There is nothing submissive about Timotea and she not just an exception. Daughters going against the will of their fathers, while not common, were not rare in Hispanic society.