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Jesus F. de la Teja. *San Antonio de Bexar: A Community on New Spain's Northern Frontier.* Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995. xv + 224 pp. $37.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8263-1613-4.

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With this study of colonial San Antonio, Jesus F. de la Teja contributes an informative local history of the Spanish frontier in North America. Taking as his objective an analysis of the development of a frontier community, Teja examines the growth of San Antonio de Bexar over the course of the 18th century, tracks in detail the evolving character of its inhabitants, examines the *bexarano* patterns of land use, and describes the economic and material conditions under which these people eked out their existence. Teja's attempt to place his evidence within a discussion of the growth of community is not overly convincing, but his elucidation of the details of daily life in the rugged environment of colonial Texas ultimately presents an effective portrait of the town and its inhabitants.

Teja's premise, articulated in his preface, is that over the course of the eighteenth century San Antonio developed into a clearly defined "community," which he defines as a settlement of people that is characterized by shared attitudes and experiences, and by common cultural, religious and economic values. This is a promising thesis, but he does not develop the concept of community much further than this statement and leaves the manner in which his evidence supports his premise on an inferential level. The book is organized topically with chapters examining in turn the imperial setting of the founding of the Villa, the origin and character of the settlers and soldiers who made up the population, the process by which land was distributed, the manner in which the land around San Antonio was farmed and ranched, and the different modes of commerce and economic interaction that characterized the material life of this frontier town.

The settlement of San Antonio was typical of a number of 18th century locales in that it was composed of the three basic elements of mission, presidio, and settlers. In addition to this mix, a group of settlers from the Canary Islands, frequently referred to as *isleos*, settled in San Antonio in the early 1730's and rapidly became the dominant group of landowners in the early life of the villa. Teja stresses that while these groups originally possessed discrete interests and competed with each other for control of the local resources, over time the boundaries among them became blurred and the ongoing jousting for influence, land and resources became more a product of personality than of corporate or ethnic identity.

The most prominent example of this melding of interests can be seen in the evolution of the significance of the identity of the isleno faction of the population. Originally the crown had intended to send four hundred families from the Canary Islands to Texas, but the expense of sending the first contingent–of whom fourteen families arrived in San Antonio–militated against the recruitment of the remaining numbers. By virtue of their status as the original settlers the islenos became the principle landowners and dominant political faction in the early years of the settlement. The process of intermarriage with the non-isleno population began almost immediately, and by the end of the 18th century the most prominent families claimed descent from both groups of early settlers. So while the term "isleno" carried with it overtones of social status throughout the eighteenth century, within a few generations it had ceased to refer to an identifiable ethnic group.

This process of amalgamation is central to Teja's main thesis of community development, and he suggests that a similar blending occurred between the civilian settlers and the soldiers of the presidio. Early in the history of the settlement town and presidio formed discrete entities that interacted economically but that were socially and politically separate. As time went on, however, soldiers tended to retire from the military, bought land, and married into the civilian population. By late in the century the population of the region had increased enough that the army could recruit locally, thus augmenting the diversity of the interaction between army and town.

Probably the most interesting section of this study is

the description of the patterns of land-use–patterns that affected the character of life for all of the town's inhabitants. Teja describes in detail the process of distribution of three major tracts of land: the first to the isleno settlers in the 1730s, the second to a group of non-isleno families (known as the *agregados*) in the 1770s, and the third to settlers migrating from the abandoned East Texas settlement of Los Adaes in 1793. Along with the land, water rights in various configurations were also given out. For all of these distributions, Teja presents detailed evidence about how the land was divided among the settlers, how the water rights were determined, how the land was valued at various times during the century, and how the land was cultivated.

Teja also examines the character and conditions by which the countryside beyond the margins of the settled and irrigated land, the ranchland, was used. Whereas most of the community was involved, in some capacity, in the cultivation of the farmland, only a small percentage of the townspeople were involved in ranching activities. Typically the ranching operations were small and relatively informal. The management of livestock was difficult and dangerous, and as the relations with the Apache and Comanche peoples became friendly or hostile the ranches in the countryside were alternately occupied or abandoned. Much of the livestock operation consisted of the harvesting of wild cattle in a process that was ultimately destructive of the resource. Teja quotes several official complaints which pointed out that the current practices would result in the total depletion of the breeding stock. But the profits involved in this operation prevented official concern from significantly affecting the character of the process–along with the export of a small amount of corn, the wild cattle provided San Antonio with its principal export commodity. The cattle were driven to market in Saltillo, and occasionally into Louisiana. Only the most well-off of the *bexaranos* possessed the resources necessary to round up the cattle, and these men were also in a position to make sure that official concern did not translate into effective policy.

Teja's detailed description of the population and the land-use patterns in colonial San Antonio is quite informative and presents a good picture of the material elements of frontier life in this region. But while his information is good, he fails to place it within an analysis that successfully elucidates its significance. His evidence suggests that the progressive opening of additional land to cultivation over the course of the century resulted in the enfranchisement of groups of settlers who had few other means to support themselves. It is arguable that this process provided a mechanism of social equalization that effectively incorporated the disparate elements of bexarano society into a relatively cohesive unit–what Teja defines as community. It is also possible, however, to develop a contradictory interpretation. Numerous conflicts within the population, detailed by Teja, suggest that San Antonio saw its share of divisive activity. Teja does not attempt to reconcile these different tendencies, nor does he make any other systematic generalizations about his evidence: he fails to use his documentation to move his argument forward. As a result, the idea of community and community building receives little effective articulation.

Teja's study would have been more effective if he had made a greater effort to place San Antonio within a regional context. He makes occasional allusions throughout his text to San Antonio's similarities to and differences from other regions in Colonial Mexico. These comments are enlightening but again they are never developed in a systematic fashion. This is regrettable, since several pieces of evidence within the book point to the existence of a dynamic, if limited, interaction with other frontier centers in Northern Mexico–in particular Saltillo. While Teja is at pains to emphasize the parochial and impoverished condition of San Antonio, his evidence suggests that it formed a component part of a regional system that was connected by social and economic links. It would have been interesting to know more about the relationship between the locale and this broader economic and social context. Such an analysis goes beyond Teja's documentation, but there are sufficient hints of these connections in his presentation to think that this linkage could be probed further. Broadening the scope of the study might also have helped to demonstrate the importance of eighteenth-century San Antonio within the wider regional and colonial systems. As it stands, *San Antonio de Bexar* provides a microcosmic look at one particular frontier settlement, but the role that settlement played on the larger stage is only tentatively hinted at.

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