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Armando C. Alonzo. *Tejano Legacy: Rancheros and Settlers in South Texas, 1734-1900.* Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998. xii + 357 pp. $26.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8263-1897-8; $50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8263-1866-4.

Reviewed by Leslie Gene Hunter (Texas A&M University-Kingsville)
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Continuity and Perseverance in Tejano Ranching

In many histories of south Texas, conflict between Tejano and Anglo settlers is the central theme, but this study focuses on continuity and accommodation.[1] Armando C. Alonzo argues that Tejanos were a resilient, independent and practical people who succeeded in adapting to a frontier environment. Over the period stretching from the Spanish and Mexican times into the present century, they developed a special sense of place and created a Tejano homeland in south Texas.

According to Alonzo, older histories in the Anglo tradition–"Anglo mythic history"–often neglected the Tejano contribution to ranching, farming and town settlement of the Lower Valley, which these accounts characterize as a sort of "no-man's land" abandoned by the descendants of early Spanish settlers. For them, the history of south Texas began with the arrival of the Anglos in the 1850s who became large ranchers or with the connection of the railroads to the Lower Valley in 1904. Anglos were viewed as heroic pioneers clearing the brush, establishing irrigated farming, and bringing civilization to the region.

Tejanos have asserted their own "mythic history," which tells how they were displaced by "wholesale Anglo thievery" achieved by lawsuits, intimidation and the violence of Texas Rangers and other law-enforcement officers (p. 7). The loss of land was sudden and violent, and resulted in Tejanos becoming a colonized society.

Tejano Legacy moves beyond these myths to present a balanced account. The first three chapters describe the Spanish and Mexican periods of the Lower Rio Grande Valley and the establishment of the economic, social, and landholding culture of the settlers. Chapters four through eight describe adjustments after 1848 to the political problems of new sovereignty, such as land title questions, competition with newcomers for land, environmental difficulties, and changes in the ranching economy. The ninth chapter and Epilogue compare Hispanic land tenure in Texas to other parts of the Southwest and suggest revisions in much recent literature.

Tejanos remained the majority population in south Texas into this century. Generally, there were cordial ethnic relations, cooperative economic activities, and occasional intermarriages between Tejanos and newcomers from the United States and Europe. Sporadic conflict occurred but more often it was episodic and the result of a few frustrated individuals. Although there were Indian and Mexican raiders, Alonzo believes that this has been overemphasized, especially for the period after 1848. He disagrees with Arnoldo De Leon and others who had asserted the Tejanos "underwent a process of acculturation, which they term *biculturation*" (p. 143). Tejanos retained most of their cultural traditions. Some of the wealthier ranchers and businessmen did adapt educational and political aspects of U.S. society, but by the beginning of this century south Texas was still essentially Tejano in culture.

Several chapters deal with the issue of land tenure and conclude that Tejanos owned land for much longer than has usually been portrayed. The Bourland-Miller Commission (1850-1851) and subsequent legislative and judicial bodies generally "favored Mexican land tenure," according to Alonzo, and the impact of this validation of land titles "insured the persistence of a Tejano social and economic legacy that remains alive to this day" (p. 159).

The dynamics of *ranchero* landholder displacement is closely documented using Hidalgo County data which contradicts the interpretation of Rodolfo F. Acuna and others. "The actual process was gradual and incomplete, even after fifty years of Anglo competition for the grasslands of south Texas" (pp. 180-181). Most newcomers obtained land by purchasing from Tejanos not by shrewd or illegal manipulation. The latter picture, Alonzo notes, is supported only in Tejano oral histories.

Alonzo observes that other social scientists have "largely neglected the effects of social causes" relying as

David Montejano does "on changes in the market economy to explain Tejano displacement from the land." It was not merely market forces which contributed to the decline of Tejano stockholding but the persistence of egalitarian landholding traditions and a growing population. The practice of "partible inheritance" which had evolved from Spanish law played an important role. In contrast to David Monetjano's interpretation, Alonzo argues that Tejano *rancheros* did not live in a quasi-feudal Mexican hacienda society but on small independent ranching operations (p. 275).

In fact Alonzo's evidence from county tax probate records shows that Tejanos dominated in south Texas ranching during the period 1848-1885. It was from 1885-1900 that Tejanos experienced a major reversal in the ranching industry. This was the period when the practice of partible inheritance took its toll. Other factors contributing to Tejano decline were the need for extensive capital, recurring drought, and the vagaries of the livestock and wool market.

When he compares land displacement of Tejanos to Hispanics in Arizona, California or New Mexico, Alonzo concludes that Tejanos were somewhat better off as a result of more equitable adjudication procedures. "In a very important way, then, Tejanos may lament the loss of their lands, but not in the manner that John R. Chavez describes in his thesis of the lost-land image held by Chicanos in the Southwest. Chavez's argument fits in well with an ideological interpretation of the Chicano struggle for civil rights, but it does not explain the rich and varied Tejano experience of landholding and participation in the commercial ranching economy of the Lower Valley" (p. 280).

The volume is richly documented, and Alonzo makes impressive use of archival and courthouse records, manuscript census, bills of sale, tax rolls, probate records, brand books, as well as genealogies and family histories. The work would have been enhanced by the addition of more maps, photographs and an old fashion bibliography. Armando C. Alonzo has contributed a balanced study. It is cautiously worded and courteously argued and most importantly, perhaps, places the Tejano experience in the longer perspective of history.

[1]. See also Armando C. Alonzo, "Change and Continuity in Tejano Ranches in the Trans-Nueces, 1848-1900," in Joe S. Graham, *El Rancho in South Texas: Continuity and Change from 1750* (Kingsville: John E. Conner Museum, 1994), 53-68.

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