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Tejanos and the American Dream

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Historians have not been kind to Tejanos—at least until the present generation. Many have marginalized or maligned them to diminish their importance in Texas history, or to rewrite Texas history to emphasize Anglo achievements. Andrés Tijerina, in *Tejano Empire: Life on the South Texas Ranchos (Clayton Wheat Williams Texas Life Series)*, brings Tejano culture and values to life for modern readers who may be oblivious to their existence and their importance in Texas and Tejano history. David McDonald's painstakingly researched biography, *José Antonio Navarro: In Search of the American Dream in Nineteenth-Century Texas*, helps to illustrate many of Tijerina's themes and provides an articulate exemplar of Tejano values in the person of Navarro. Tejano contributions to the Texas experience can no longer be ignored. These complementary volumes propel Tejano studies to their proper place in Texas history.

Tijerina's book is divided into six thematic chapters and an epilogue: 'Las villas del norte'; 'Life in a casa de sillar'; 'Primos and compadres across the frontier'; 'The art and skills of Tejano life'; 'Tejano culture at work and play'; and 'A Tejano prayer'. In the words of the author, "This book attempts to provide a unified historical account of rural Tejano life and culture in the nineteenth century. It also attempts to explain why and how that culture could have been distorted or omitted from the pages of Texas history for so long, and to provide a viable paradigm for accessing previously untapped historical sources among seemingly inarticulate groups (p. xv)."

To accentuate the text, 18 drawings by renowned Tejano artist Ricardo Beasley were included. Through these drawings, the reader is transported to the ranchos of South Texas. Those familiar with Tejano history will recognize the significance of these hand-drawn plates. Beasley's iconic art makes a stunning visual impact on the reader. The fact these plates have never been published before sets Tijerina's study apart

because they poignantly recreate the daily human struggles of Tejano ranch-life. For Tijerina, Beasley's art and vision parallel his own and seamlessly harmonize into one organic whole: 'I [Tijerina] firmly believe that his spirit has found its own dear message in my story of Tejano pioneers on the ranching frontier' (p. xvii). Beyond the arguments outlined above, Tijerina hopes to reveal to his readers the heart and soul of Tejanos. 'My fondest dream would be to give to the reader a sense of the deep commitment that these Tejanos had for their family and their community in daily life' (p. xvii). A deeply personal memoir, *Tejano Empire* preserves a treasured past that was in serious danger of becoming a forgotten artifact.

Historians have anxiously anticipated McDonald's biography of José Antonio Navarro. Many have confessed that the enigma surrounding Navarro has overshadowed the man himself; one of the strengths of this study is the unveiling of the man behind the myth. No one is better qualified to write *the* definitive biography of Navarro than the former manager and park historian of the Casa Navarro State Historic Site. McDonald served as the manager of this site for over 20 years and devoted nearly three decades of intensive research to unraveling the many disparate pieces of Navarro's fragmented past. This is an extraordinary accomplishment considering the amount of detective work needed to faithfully reconstruct Navarro's life. McDonald's thoughtful account of José Antonio Navarro is a remarkable achievement and deserves a broad audience. With it, historians can now confidently debate Navarro's place in Texas history as well as address larger historiographical concerns, such as Navarro's Mexican identity.

McDonald chronicles Navarro's life in eight robust chapters: 'Roots, 1762-1816'; 'Emerging leader, 1816-22'; 'The making of a legislator, 1822-28'; 'Businessman, land commissioner, and politician, 1828-35'; 'Mexican-Texan, 1835-40'; 'Statesman and prisoner, 1840-45'; 'Tejano spokesman, 1845-53'; and 'Elder statesman, 1853-71'. For the interested reader, there are three helpful appendices and an excellent bibliography. In light of McDonald's analysis, historians can now see Navarro's place in history more clearly. Rich in anecdotal evidence, McDonald's study truly brings José Antonio Navarro to life for modern readers.

Nothing was more important to Tejanos than family (Tijerina, pp. 45-57). Indeed, it was the bedrock of ranch life in South Texas. Navarro's intimate relationships with his uncle José Francisco Ruiz and brother-in-law Juan Martin de Veramendi showed how familial ties provided a necessary advantage in South Texas. These relationships were invaluable to Navarro early in life and proved instrumental as he grew older. For example, the young Navarro learned the art of politics as a keen observer in the local Bexar assembly; this knowledge was the foundation upon which his legendary political career would be built. When a family member was in a privileged position, those within his 'inner circle' also materially benefited, and Navarro reaped many rewards from these lucrative connections. Likewise, when Navarro became an important man in his own right, he used his position to help those close to him and to broker new alliances.

Values such as trust, loyalty, honesty, and respect were the fabric of Tejano society (Tijerina, pp. 91-106). Tejanos were a dominant enclave and held title of some of the choicest pieces of land in South Texas. The clever legal maneuverings of many Anglo businessmen left many noble Tejano families landless. Unscrupulous tactics, such as those employed by some Anglos, left a bitter taste in many Tejanos mouths. Anglo encroachments on *their* lands and rights caused friction and strained relations between both sides. As a result, Tejanos slowly distanced themselves from them. Andrés Tijerina particularly emphasizes the gross negligence of some historians who wrongly label Tejanos as 'lazy' or 'drunkards' when, in general, they worked very hard to overcome a harsh landscape and rarely indulged in alcohol or tobacco. If all Tejanos were lazy drunkards, as some historians have argued, then how were they, like Navarro, able to attain prominent positions under various governments and amass considerable wealth in property? Contrary to the common characterization of Tejanos, most were hard workers who built their ranches from the ground up. Navarro was no exception. Because of his distinguished career and popularity, Anglos often tried to 'recruit' Navarro to their side and paint him more "white" than Mexican; he never acquiesced to their insistent overtures. Navarro saw himself as a Mexican first and a Texan second. He tirelessly advocated the rights of Tejanos throughout his political career. Navarro's opponents never questioned his integrity; though they vociferously denounced other Tejanos, they publicly praised Navarro.

Tejano virtues were refined and reinforced throughout their life through special cultural exchanges and rituals and were inculcated and communicated through education, music and religion (Tijerina, pp. 91-106; pp. 107-121). All were important to Navarro but he prized education most. His voracious appetite for learning more than compensated for his lack of formal education. Evidence of his high regard for education was his decision to send his son, José Angel, to Harvard College to receive a degree in law. Navarro influenced a great deal of legislation under various Texas governments, including the Constitution at the Texas Convention. His advocacy resulted in the removal of language that would have disenfranchised Tejanos. Navarro was also a devout Catholic. For instance, when the Know-Nothing Party in the 1850s threatened to hijack Texas politics under an anti-Catholic plank, Navarro and others banded together to defend Texas from such insidious ideas.

McDonald's narrative is filled with thematic threads. A few of these are of great significance in understanding Navarro because he spent the better part of his adult life in their pursuit. They were financial security, freedom and liberty. For Navarro, they *were* the 'American Dream'. Their achievement brought him great personal satisfaction (McDonald, pp. 88; 114; 126; 144; 241). Tejanos had a strong connection to the land and carved a distinct life out of it. They were a tough, resilient people who relished the freedom and openness of the chaparral. In spite of suffering a debilitating injury to his leg as a young man, José Antonio would never let it impede his ambition to realize his aims.

McDonald threads his text with Navarro's desire to fulfill the 'American Dream' and his dogged determination to let nothing, not even imprisonment in Mexico City under threat of death, stand in his way. However, though, this dream was Navarro's greatest ambition, and he would not compromise his ethics or convictions for mere temporal gain. He felt his destiny required that he do everything in his power to protect Tejano rights and promote goodwill between *all* Texans. With this deeply humane portrait, McDonald's research brings the enigmatic Navarro into focus for a modern audience.

Navarro is a compelling case study in Tejano character and work ethic. He epitomized many of the character qualities discussed in Tijerina's study. Though physically impaired, Navarro passionately accumulated property and prestige through various business deals. The 'American Dream' was important but, for Navarro, there were some things more precious than money. For Navarro, his character and reputation far surpassed the intrinsic value of any earthly possession. For example, his patience was severely tested when a 'simple' land deal turned into a bureaucratic nightmare, dragging on for several years. There were moments when Navarro bemoaned his misfortune to his friends in letters and, at one point, regretted the decision to ever enter real estate, but his moral resolve would prove far stronger than mere moods or words. In one letter, Navarro expressed his frustration with the 'wretched [land] contract' but, soon after, he stated unequivocally, that he 'was a slave to [his] word and to [his] honor' (McDonald, pp. 103; cf. 168).

José Antonio Navarro lived in serious times. These two revealing studies broke new ground in Tejano studies and Texas history. They will certainly influence and shape the future course of Texas historiography. Because of intrepid historians like those considered in this review, historians are having second thoughts about Tejano history and its place in the new Texas meta-narrative that is quietly emerging.

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