

Contending Visions of the Lone Star State: Debating Texas' Identity

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Author:

Glen Sample Ely

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Author:

Walter L. Buenger

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Reviewer:

Christopher Berg

Texas is in the midst of an identity crisis. Some historians, such as Walter Buenger in *Path to a Modern South*, argue that Texas has a strong connection to the South. Others, like Glen Ely in his new book *Where the West Begins*, contend that Texas – especially West Texas – is closely linked to the American West. Moreover, some historians believe that Texas is unique and defies historical categorization, echoing back to Texas' days as a Republic. Because of this confusion, regional historians have purposely left Texas out of their narratives because they, too, are unsure just what to make of Texas. For present-day Texans, the problem is separating fact from fiction. Confronting such unsavory topics as slavery, the Civil War, and race relations, according to Buenger and Ely, is the first major step in articulating a usable past for Texas.

Path to a Modern South is presented in a chronological fashion and is divided into three general 'Parts'. Part one, 'Foundations', contains the first two chapters: 'The fluid and the constant: persistent factionalism, lynching, and reform, 1887–1896', and 'Competition, innovation, and a changing economy, 1897–1914'. The second part, 'Transformations', contains the bulk of Buenger's analysis and is comprised of five chapters: 'A new political order, 1897–1914', "'Old Ideas'" and "'Improved Conditions'": law, custom, and memory, 1902–1914', 'An economic roller coaster, 1914–1930', 'World War I and a shifting culture', and 'Women, the Klu Klux Klan, and factional identity, 1920–1927'. Part three, 'Modernity', contains the final chapter 'Politics and culture, 1928' and the epilogue, 'Stars and bars and the Lone Star: memory, Texas, and the South'. Buenger's thesis is fresh but direct: 'this work suggests new ways of understanding ... the relationship between being southern and modern and the relationship between the most southern parts of Texas and the least southern. Ultimately it connects the present with the past' (p. 253).

Buenger's study focuses on northeast Texas. Southern influences pervaded society in northeast Texas because of its close proximity to the South. Behaviors typical of the Old South, scare tactics, discrimination, segregation and the like were the norm in northeast Texas after the Civil War. The sensibilities of the aristocratic ruling elite were offended by the reluctance of poor whites and blacks to endorse prohibition legislation. As the moral protectors of the region, Anglos felt obliged to eradicate every form of resistance with a verve unparalleled in Texas history. Non-conformists, that is, blacks and poor whites, were subjected to a series of indignities including intimidation, voter manipulation and fraud, the poll tax, and lynchings. Buenger retells the macabre events that led to several high profile lynchings in Northeast Texas with disturbing detail. These sadistic sideshows were popular events that could generate over 10,000 onlookers who watched while men were mutilated and burned. This deviant behavior positively correlates to that seen across the South.

Where the West Begins consists of five provocative chapters: 'Where the West begins', 'Gone from Texas and trading with the enemy: new perspectives on Civil War West Texas', 'Race relations as a barometer of Western identity', 'The "Garden of Eden" and the "Cowman's Paradise": nineteenth-century myths confront twenty-first-century environmental realities in west Texas', and 'Texas identity west of the 100th Meridian'. Reinventing local and regional identity, as Buenger argues, is part of a natural evolutionary process that continues unabated, but Ely argues that west Texas has always remained resolutely 'western' in outlook. Contrary to other parts of Texas, west Texas had consistently identified itself with the American West. Using a variety of sources and drawing upon geographical, ecological, and environmental studies, Ely ably demonstrates that west Texas was indeed 'western' – it possessed a distinctive environment, diverse cultures and its inhabitants were staunch supporters of the federal government. Southern norms and values may have crept into northeast Texas but they failed to successfully penetrate the 100th meridian into west Texas.

The racial violence against blacks in northeast Texas was especially harsh. In west Texas, however, race relations were 'milder and of a different character than that of the eastern section of the state' (Ely, p. 83). For Ely, these milder forms of discrimination are critical in understanding regional loyalties in west Texas. Ely interviewed two local Tejanos, Joe Primera and M.R. Gonzalez, who grew up in this part of the state during the 1940s and 1950s; both men noted that race relations were milder than those experienced in east Texas and had to do more with segregation than violence. After 1910, blacks and Tejanos enjoyed an easing of tensions because they were recognized as an important source of labor in a changing economic climate. Basic economic principles, not a moral awakening, dictated this new 'change' in attitude. Race relations in

west Texas dramatically shifted after the Second World War. Tejanos saw themselves in a new light and vocalized their discontent regarding their treatment by Anglos. Slowly west Texas Anglos acquiesced to Tejano requests for equal treatment.

West Texas had little in common with northeast Texas according to Ely. The most striking difference was the limited impact of slavery in the region. Most Anglos worked alongside Tejanos in a 'cooperative' environment in order to survive, and perhaps, even prosper. Another difference was the thriving economic relationships with the federal government and the United States Army. These connections to the federal government (traitorous activity as defined by the Confederacy!) were *the* difference between maintaining a basic standard of living and starvation for many families. The cotton economy was unsustainable in West Texas, making those trading relationships with the army extremely valuable. It is not hard to understand why west Texans welcomed the federal government, and the military, with open arms. In a region fraught with hardship, they brought a measure of stability and relief.

Many west Texans felt they were foreigners in their own land. They felt they were little better than second-class citizens because state funds or assistance never seemed to reach them. A laundry list of inequities galvanized west Texan sentiment against the state government and many began to mobilize in protest; at one point, they threatened to secede from Texas if a local agricultural college was not established in west Texas to educate farmers in the latest scientific and technological advancements, along the same lines as Texas A&M University in the east. Rather than risking internal dissension, much less the dreaded requiem of secession, the government quickly created what came to be Texas Tech University to assuage the farmers of west Texas. Increasingly marginalized, west Texans naturally felt a closer kinship to the West than to Texas proper.

Keenly aware of Texas' checkered past, Buenger and Ely are part of a growing number of Texas historians who are diligently raising awareness about the Lone Star state's controversial past. Texan history, as conceived by T. R. Fehrenbach and company, continues to resonate firmly in the hearts and minds of modern Texans. Coming to terms with Texas' imagined past, as conceived in the popular imagination, has been daunting for historians who have had to tirelessly challenge traditional Texas history. To the chagrin of many Texas historians, the infectious contagion percolating within Texas history persists. Historical reality means little to a populace blinded by a romanticized past.

Modern Texans' refusal to countenance their past or recognize the legitimacy of recent historical scholarship is frustrating for Buenger: 'Memory preoccupies more historians than ever before as they seek to understand why their published work stands rejected in favor of myths and fables of public memory of our past' (p. 227). Ely devotes the final chapter of his book to raising awareness of Texas' cloudy history. 'Texans must fully embrace', observes Ely, '*all* of their history, including all of the participants in that narrative' (p. 131). Nevertheless, as both authors lament frequently in their books, modern Texans suffer from 'amnesia' and a 'selective memory' about Texas' past (Ely, pp. 122-3). It is very difficult, according to Ely, to reverse generations of classical conditioning when something is deeply ingrained in the collective memory of contemporary Texans. 'Texas identity, once engraved in the cultural consciousness, is often impervious to change' (p. 74). However, slow headway is being made and that is an encouraging sign.

Revisionist studies are gaining momentum as time passes and, for many Texans, it is a bitter pill to swallow. Southern and western influences shaped the creation and evolution of regional identities and loyalties; they were the single greatest factor in charting the course of Texas' collective memory. The United States is made up of 50 states and many Americans feel stronger regional ties, such as those in New England or the South, than they do corporately as Americans. Likewise, it is reasonable to suggest that Texas, because of its unusual past, location and size, is composed of many conflicting regional loyalties. It would be an oversimplification to state that modern Texans are more 'Texan' than 'American' when they have passed through many phases of development, constantly shedding and re-creating their identity.

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