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Review of *The Tejano Community, 1836-1900* By Arnoldo De Leon

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Persons of Spanish-Indian or Mexican descent who were incorporated into the United States in the nineteenth century belonged to one of three major subcultures: the Californio, the manito (Hispanos of New Mexico and Colo-
rado), or the Tejano. Leonard Pitt has written a comprehensive social history of the Californio (1966), and now Arnoldo De León gives us a counterpart volume on the Tejano. De León’s purpose is to capture the essence of the “ordinary” Tejano in Central, South, and West Texas between Texas Independence (1836) and the turn of the century, and he develops the theme that in the nineteenth century the Tejano’s culture was basically preserved while at the same time the Tejanos had to accommodate themselves to Anglos (pp. xii–xiii).

In his first chapter De León gives an overview of Tejanos in the last century. The next eight chapters concern politics; rural workers; urban workers; housing, diet, and family structure; religion; folklore; entertainment; and education, community organizations, and Spanish-language newspapers. The final chapter is a short epilogue. The diverse information presented is drawn from primary sources including city directories, newspapers, and a sampling of the federal census schedules for Bexar County (San Antonio), the lower Rio Grande Valley, and El Paso County. An impressive number of secondary sources are also cited.

De León’s major finding is that Tejanos were Anglicized and became socially, economically, and politically bicultural, yet in their religion, language, folklore, and daily lifestyles they preserved their culture and maintained their ethnic identity (see especially pp. 138, 141, 153, 182). As De León sorts through items that were Anglicized and those that were preserved, he relates anything but a happy story. Basically a poor and illiterate people, most Tejanos were dispossessed of their land and were forced to take menial jobs while, at the same time, they were disdained as backward, were segregated residentially and educationally, and were at least temporarily disenfranchised. De León contends that the Tejanos survived through diligence and resourcefulness, and that they countered “white” oppression with a degree of resilience and a sense of cultural pride that is not generally appreciated.

Because he is somewhat sympathetic in his interpretation of the Tejanos, De León is not always convincing. One wonders if most Tejanos were genuinely “thirst[y] for knowledge” (p. 187), and one questions whether “a dynamic Tejano community” actually “thrived in Anglo Texas” (p. 203). Moreover, De León leaves a number of questions unanswered. Did Tejanos in the nineteenth century identify with the self-referent “Tejano” or with “Mexicano” (an especially interesting question regarding Tejanos in the El Paso District)? Were there any cultural differences between the Texas-born and the Mexican-born of this group? In a broader sense, how were Tejanos different from Californios or manitos? These are minor matters, however, for De León has written a balanced, thoroughly documented, and insightful social history that fills a major void in Chicano historiography.

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