



PROJECT MUSE®

The Birth of a Texas Ghost Town: Thurber, 1886-1933 (review)

Kevin M. Brady

Southwestern Historical Quarterly, Volume 112, Number 4, April 2009, pp.
450-451 (Review)

Published by Texas State Historical Association

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/swh.2009.0053>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/408502/summary>

The Birth of a Texas Ghost Town: Thurber, 1886–1933. By Mary Jane Gentry. Edited with an introduction by T. Lindsay Baker. (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2008. Pp. 256. Illustration, notes, bibliography, index. ISBN: 9781585446291, \$29.95 cloth.)

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Thurber, which was located in the northwestern corner of Erath County, represented one of the most diversified communities in Texas as European immigrants, Mexicans, and local residents worked for Texas & Pacific Coal Company. Mary Jane Gentry documented Thurber's colorful history in her master's thesis, which was completed in 1946. After nearly sixty-two years, Gentry's never-before-published thesis is now available to a wider audience. Edited by T. Lindsey Baker, Gentry's *The Birth of a Texas Ghost Town: Thurber, 1886–1933* provides readers with a detailed history of the rise and fall of one of the most notable coal-mining and brick-producing communities in Texas. Additionally, the inclusion of Baker's introduction enhances the work as it examines Gentry's accomplishments and contributions as a Texas historian.

Prior to the 1880s, Erath County based its economy primarily on agriculture and cattle ranching. However, Thurber's growth and development was attributed to the Texas & Pacific Railroad extending its rail lines west of Fort Worth. With the increased demand for coal deposits to supply the railroads, William W. Johnson and Harvey Johnson opened a coal mine near present-day Thurber. By 1887, the Johnson Coal Company produced over four hundred tons of coal on a daily basis. Despite the mine's success, labor unrest at the mining settlement caused Johnson to sell the company. By November 1888, the newly established Texas & Pacific Coal Company purchased Johnson's mining enterprise.

During the early twentieth century, William Knox Gordon, who served as a general manager for the Texas & Pacific Coal Company, was responsible for supervising Thurber's fifteen coal mines and directing the town's development. Under the management of Gordon, the company chartered a new business, which was known as the Texas Pacific Mercantile & Manufacturing Company. By the early 1900s, the company operated a general store, saloons, a printing office, schools, bakery, dairy, churches, a slaughterhouse, and an opera house. While these businesses provided goods and services to Thurber's coal miners and nearby residents, they also generated tremendous profits for the Texas & Pacific Coal Company.

Although Thurber represented a prosperous mining community during the early twentieth century, economic factors led to the town's downfall. Demand for coal gradually declined as railroad companies switched to oil-powered locomotives. After the Texas Pacific Coal and Oil Company closed Thurber's mines in 1921, former workers gradually abandoned the town as they secured employment in other nearby communities. In 1930, Thurber's economic problems increased as the company closed the brick plant. During the next seven years, the Texas Pacific Coal and Oil Company relocated its general office to Fort Worth, demolished houses, donated school equipment, and sold public buildings. By 1937, Thurber resembled a ghost town as a few buildings and shacks lined the community's quadrangle.

One of the work's strengths stems from the author's use of primary materials. For example, Gentry utilized the Adjutant General's Papers, Erath County Court House documents, local newspapers, naturalization records, and oral interviews. The inclusion of these resources not only serves the reader's interest, but they also add to the author's credibility.

The book is well written and thoroughly researched. While the work provides readers with an excellent account of Thurber's vivid history, it also serves as a significant addition to the historiography of Texas communities during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Any historian interested in Texas history, urban studies, and business history would find this book a valuable resource.

Tidewater Community College, Chesapeake, Virginia

KEVIN M. BRADY

Building the Borderlands: A Transnational History of Irrigated Cotton along the Mexico-Texas Border, by Casey Walsh. (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2008. Pp. 246. Illustrations, photographs, maps, charts, bibliography, index. ISBN: 9781603440134, \$47.50 cloth.)

For eighty years, from 1880 to 1960, cotton was a preeminent crop along the stretch of the Rio Grande that separates Texas and Mexico. The crop's expansion was attributable to the advances in irrigation technology that developed along a singularly different pattern on either side of the border. Casey Walsh explores the topic of cotton production as a metaphor to explain the development of the borderlands, drawing together land use, migration and, above all, transnational politics.

The story is intriguing, traveling from one side of the river to the other, focusing primarily on the more complex ups and downs experienced on the Mexican side. In both areas the opportunity to bring prosperity to the growers (if not the harvesters) was precipitated by the problems confronted in the southeastern United States. The first of these, the Civil War and resultant end of slave labor was followed within a generation by the arrival of the boll weevil.

Mexico, not dependent on slaves, but resorting to virtually serf labor in the river-blessed Laguna region where production was first centered, recognized the potential of new irrigation technology. The munificent Anderson Clayton Company was only too pleased to become involved, and large-scale irrigation projects augured well for production closer to the border. Besides this generous contribution, Mexico's cotton was dependent on two factors: global needs and the federal and state governments' whims.

In Texas, although the world markets were certainly a determining factor, investment in the irrigation projects spurred by the 1902 Reclamation Act was primarily in private hands. By the early years of the twentieth century, the Texas borderland already boasted a citrus and agricultural base alongside the cotton. In these same years, Mexico was still striving to convert ranchland into suitably prepared acreage.

Mexico was handicapped by the land-holding system, which despite later expropriation, limited the opportunity for wide-scale development. A further