



PROJECT MUSE®

*The Settlement of Leon Springs, Texas: From Prussia to
Persia (review)*

Dan K. Utley

Southwestern Historical Quarterly, Volume 113, Number 2, October 2009,
pp. 262-263 (Review)

Published by Texas State Historical Association

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/swh.2009.0078>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/408555/summary>

From other perspectives, however, *Feast or Famine* is less successful. Horsman's evident talent for rooting through sources to compile hundreds of anecdotes is counterbalanced by a conspicuous lack of analysis or sustained attention to current historiography. Environmental historians will rightly lament Horsman's refusal to situate the agricultural transformations he mentions—forest clearing, prairie breaking, irrigation, and commercial game hunting—in an ecological framework. Historians of the borderlands will bristle at the book's embrace of a heroic Turnerian thesis with scant attention paid to the “middle ground” complexities of ethnic and racial interaction. Historians attuned to rhetorical tropes will be left frustrated by the way in which Horsman takes his travel narratives at face value, presumably uninterested in interrogating them as documents constructed by the era's literary modes.

These complaints have some justification. When Horsman mentions that a traveler in Wyoming “saw another new feature of western life—the Chinese,” he merely notes that the Chinese “were the main labor force on the western stretch of the transcontinental railroad.” (145) Their cultural, much less their culinary, role in the simmering ethnic stew of the West goes unmentioned. When he notes how “the best days of roaming the central Rockies to trap beaver were over by 1840” (92), he does so without acknowledging the broader environmental transformations pioneers had been initiating since the seventeenth century. And when he recounts a letter from Oregon that indulgently exaggerates the region's natural cornucopia, he observes that “her letter reads like a promotional brochure” without explaining that, as a settler with a clear self-interest in further immigration, the woman was writing dispatches *intended to be* promotional brochures. The two-page conclusion does little to address these concerns.

But these flaws are not fatal, primarily because *Feast or Famine* has one overriding strength—and although it is not necessarily a strength that scholars in the trenches will appreciate, it is one that a general readership certainly will: it is a fount of information regarding material culture of migrant trails. Horsman introduces us to stalwart migrants who went years without eating vegetables, ate buzzards and rats in times of privation, would eat up to eight pounds of meat a day (sometimes raw), made a delicacy of boiled buffalo innards, and leavened bread with “hop water” left over from making beer. Innovative and at times gag-inducing examples of culinary adaptation—even if they are not employed to address more sophisticated historical questions about identity, environmental awareness, or literary construction—can, in able hands, provide deeper insights into historical experience. *Feast and Famine*, for all its faults (or perhaps because of them), achieves this goal.

Texas State University—San Marcos

JAMES MCWILLIAMS

The Settlement of Leon Springs, Texas: From Prussia to Persia. By Jeanne Dixon and Marlene Richardson. (San Antonio: Passing Memories, 2008. Pp. 364. Illustrations, maps, notes, bibliography, index. ISBN 9781605850894. \$35.00 cloth.)

Those who endeavor to write community histories will no doubt identify with

the authors' introductory remarks, which, in effect, ask "What if nothing happened here?" The "here" in this case is the small community of Leon Springs in Bexar County northwest of San Antonio, and at first glance the authors' concerns might seem justified. Throughout its existence, Leon Springs has worked hard to assert its cultural identity, from its early years as a frontier settlement to the present day, when it finds itself competing for survival against an ever-encroaching suburban landscape. Searching for historical relevance in such an environment would seem a daunting task.

Authors Jeanne Dixon and Marlene Richardson are to be commended for taking on the challenge of documenting the history of Leon Springs. Fortunately for them and for the reader, they found plenty of good historical material to mine. The area served as home—sometimes only briefly, sometimes for long—to such notable Texans as colonizer John Meusebach and naturalist Ferdinand Jacob Lindheimer, and to such colorful characters as the sharpshooting husband and wife team of Ad and Plinky Toepperwein, legendary cavalryman Tommy "Pink Whiskers" Tompkins, and the eccentric Donkey Lady. Adding extra flavor to the overall story of Leon Springs are brief histories of early families, including the Aues, Von Plehwes, Altgelts, and many others who figured prominently in its development and character. The authors also give due attention to the significant historical influence of the U.S. military at nearby Camp Stanley and Camp Bullis.

Dixon and Richardson utilized a wide range of sources in their research, from the standard histories to newspapers, family records, and oral histories. They also made the effort to celebrate the diversity of their area's cultural history, which continues to change as the town grows. The text is lively and entertaining, and punctuated with verbatim reminiscences from the past and present. Throughout, there is humor and more than a few surprises, including how Leon Springs served as a staging point for the filming of the silent classic *Wings* (1927), recipient of the first Academy Award for best picture. The mental image of Clara Bow and Gary Cooper kicking around on the hardscrabble landscape of Camp Stanley is an interesting one.

Like most community histories, *The Settlement of Leon Springs, Texas* includes brief sketches of local businesses, schools, and churches, but it also broadens the scope a bit and brings the story up to the present with the inclusion of subdivisions, parks, restaurants, and dance halls. Importantly, there is also an overview of the role water has played in the settlement, from the original springs to recent floods.

Those readers who grew up in northwest Bexar County will find much to remember and recognize in the book. Those who recall Leon Springs simply as a sleepy hamlet between San Antonio and Boerne may be surprised to learn more about its rich history. And those who have not yet heard of Leon Springs or taken the time to turn off the interstate for the sake of chasing history might just find the incentive they need for the exploration. For those who might wish to explore further through additional research, the book serves as a good overview from which to begin such a journey.