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*Cowboy Park: Steer-Roping Contests on the Border* (review)

Ryan R. Schumacher

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*Cowboy Park: Steer-Roping Contests on the Border*. By John O. Baxter, foreword by Richard W. Slatta. (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2009. Pp. 274. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. ISBN 9780896726420, \$24.95 cloth.)

Although steer-roping contests are now “sometimes regarded as a stepchild” (8) among modern rodeo events, they were crucial in establishing the enduring popularity of “cowboy sports,” as they are called in this volume by John O. Baxter. *Cowboy Park: Steer-Roping Contests on the Border* explores the early history of steer-roping contests, concentrating first and foremost on the cowboys and cowboy-sports venues of the American Southwest and northern Mexico.

Baxter explains that steer roping, like bronco busting, grew out of skills needed to be successful as an open-range cowboy: “During the years when cattle grazed freely on the public domain, cowboys had to be able to rope and ride bucking horses in order to hold a job. Before corrals and squeeze chutes became common, the best way to subdue a spooky steer for doctoring or checking brands was with a well-aimed loop thrown by a hard riding cowhand” (3–4). Skilled ropers competed in informal contests to determine who was fastest. By the mid-1880s, the ability of these events to draw crowds was clear, and civic leaders throughout the Southwest were sponsoring bronco busting and steer roping contests as part of holiday festivities.

During the 1890s and early 1900s, El Paso emerged as an important center for cowboy sports, with steer-roping contests as the marquee attraction. By the middle of the first decade of the twentieth century, however, the future of cowboy sports at El Paso—and the entire Southwest—seemed in doubt. Influenced by humane societies and cattlemen’s associations concerned about harm incurred to animals during the contests and in practice matches, the legislatures of Texas and New Mexico banned steer-roping contests in 1905 (Arizona followed in 1907). Like thousands of other past and present southwesterners, the steer ropers found a more permissive atmosphere in northern Mexico for activities that were illegal on the American side of the border. To fill the void, Cowboy Park opened in Ciudad Juárez in May 1907.

Cowboy Park served as the epicenter of steer-roping in the Southwest for the next five years. Disruptions associated with the Mexican Revolution made the schedule of events after 1910 erratic, however, with 1912 being the last year any events were held at the arena. By that time, cowboy sports had become well established thanks to Cowboy Park and events like Cheyenne Frontier Days in Wyoming, the Dewey Roundup in Oklahoma, and the famed Calgary Stampede, which was held for the first time in the summer of 1912.

Baxter keeps the focus of *Cowboy Park* squarely on competitors like Clay McGonagill, J. Ellison Carroll, and Frank Bojorques and their epic head-to-head contests. While working nicely to “humanize” the history, this approach also means some important themes are left unexplored, and makes the book feel somewhat repetitive. For example, although many important themes of the historiography of Progressive era are mentioned—humanitarian reform, urbanization, legislation against vices, the rising popularity of professional sports—none of these are dealt with in much detail. And it is hard to imagine that anyone but the most dedicated

steer-roping fan would not tire of the continuous recitation of details such as the times the competitors achieved in qualifying events. Baxter has a clear, engaging writing style, though, and the book is laced with enough cowboy and rodeo slang to keep such usage fun but not tiresome. The large number of handsome photographs culled from archives throughout the Southwest is quite impressive. Readers interested in the cattle industry or cowboy sports should find something to like in this attractive book.

*Texas State Historical Association*

RYAN R. SCHUMACHER

*The Master Showmen of the King Ranch: The Story of Beto and Librado Maldonado.* By Betty Bailey Colley and Jane Clements Monday, with Beto Maldonado, foreword by Stephen J. "Tio" Kleberg. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009. Pp. 246. Illustrations, appendices, bibliography, index. ISBN 9780292719422, \$45 cloth; ISBN 9780292719439, \$24.95 paper.)

Numerous publications provide extensive information on the establishment, investors, and cattle production of the King Ranch. Many of these previous studies tend to underscore the role of founder Richard King, cattlemen or cowboys, and the business development of the ranch. *The Master Showmen of the King Ranch* is a recent work based primarily on the life stories of Beto Maldonado and his father, Librado, who made significant contributions to the ranch's animal husbandry program by breeding cattle and preparing animals for public exhibition or sale from 1950 to 1986.

The Maldonados were among the numerous *kineños*, Mexican-American ranch workers who served in the construction, operation, and refurbishing of the King Ranch in the twentieth century. The book integrates data from twenty-seven interviews with members of the Maldonado family, the Stephen J. "Tio" Kleberg family, and ranch employees. The incorporation of the oral history accounts is the main strength of the book. Beto is the main storyteller of the narrative while authors Betty Bailey Colley and Jane Clements Monday provide brief written commentary throughout the text. Colley and Monday's new volume is the third one that they have written together on the *kineños*. Their two previous works are *Voices of the Wild Horse Desert* (1997) and *Tales of the Wild Horse Desert* (2001).

The authors assert that *Master Showmen of the King Ranch* "is a story about the family as they grew up on the ranch and about their everyday life with its challenges, tragedies, and joys . . . as a rare opportunity to experience a moment in time, gone forever" (xiii). The prologue rovides a verbatim account of one of Beto's lectures spoken during his bus tours of the King Ranch describing its history, landmarks, and animals while interweaving a few intriguing family stories. In chapter one, Maldonado and the authors discuss the public exhibitions of the Santa Gertrudis cattle (the ranch's world famous breed) across the country and in faraway destinations such as Casablanca, Morocco. The second chapter examines Beto and his father's involvement in the growth and advancement of the ranch's annual cattle auction. Chapter three offers insightful information on the ranch's