The Red River Bridge War: A Texas-Oklahoma Border Battle by
Rusty Williams (review)

Mark Stanley
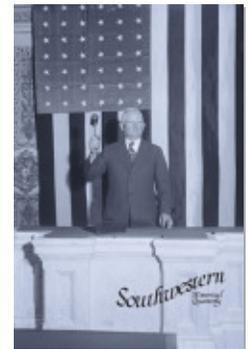
The Red River Bridge War: A Texas-Oklahoma Border Battle. By Rusty Williams.
  (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2016. Pp. 276. Photo-
  graphs, notes, sources, index.)

The Texas-Oklahoma rivalry goes back many years and has manifested
itself in many ways besides football. In *The Red River Bridge War: A Texas-
Oklahoma Border Battle*, author Rusty Williams chronicles an episode reveal-
ing not only the depth of the rivalry but also the states' economic inter-
dependence despite their social and political differences. The episode
centers on the 1931 opening of a new bridge over the Red River connect-
ing the cities of Denison, Texas, and Durant, Oklahoma. The new "free"
bridge along what is now U.S. 75 replaced a toll bridge owned by the Red
River Bridge Company. The ensuing legal battle between the bridge com-
pany and the states, as well as a federal injunction closing the free bridge,
resulted in a two-week armed standoff that became known as the "Bridge
War." Williams notes that although the Bridge War has "passed almost
entirely from memory" (3), it was then widely reported in newspapers
across the country, including the *New York Times* and *Washington Post.* Wil-
liams's work places new light on this almost forgotten episode.

    In the early twentieth century, infrastructure projects like roads and
bridges were considered crucial to economic development. Because of
the increasing importance of such projects as well as overall public good,
a growing portion of the population favored tax-payer rather than private
funding. Moreover, many people realized that tolls increased the cost of
doing business while decreasing profit. The latter point was especially true
in mid-1931, at the height of the Great Depression, when the Bridge War
occurred. To some casual observers, the episode was nothing more than a
"comic opera" or "clash" between two uniquely ambitious governors, but
to the thousands of Oklahomans and Texans who depended on crossing
the river as quickly and cheaply as possible, the dispute was an outrage
(3). They had been waiting for the free bridge for months if not years.

    As the opening approached on July 1, cities on either side of the bridge
planned celebrations. Farmers, businessmen, and travelers all waited with
anticipation. At the same time, claiming exclusive rights to crossing the
river, the Red River Bridge Company filed suit in federal court in Texas
asking for a restraining order preventing the opening until the company
received compensation. The resulting injunction prevented Texas from
opening the bridge until the case was settled. Thus, Texas Governor Ross
Sterling ordered blockades placed on the approach to the south side of
the bridge. Much frustration ensued—especially on the Oklahoma side
of the river. Two weeks later, Oklahoma Governor William "Alfalfa Bill"
Murray ordered highway department men to tear down the barricades,
thereby temporarily opening the bridge. Sterling responded by sending

a contingent of Texas Rangers to re-erect the barricades and guard the bridge. When Murray sent Oklahoma national guardsmen to the bridge, onlookers witnessed the curious sight of armed men facing off across the bridge.

The bridge soon became the center of national attention in what can only be described as a media circus complete with clamoring onlookers. It took several months for the legal case to play out. In the meantime, anger and frustration reigned among public officials and citizens over the bridge's continued closure. *The Red River Bridge War* reminds readers of the political, economic, and social importance of infrastructure in our daily lives. In the twenty-first century, when many infrastructure projects involve so-called "public-private partnerships," Williams also reminds us of the true human costs of tolled infrastructure.

University of North Texas at Dallas   Mark Stanley

Bulwark against the Bay. By Mary Jo O'Rear. (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2017. Pp. 192. Photographs, notes, bibliography, index.)

Readers looking for an interesting narrative history of Corpus Christi's twisting road to the construction of a seawall will enjoy *Bulwark against the Bay* by Mary Jo O'Rear. The book covers, in depth, the struggles among politicians, local stakeholders, and state and federal authorities as the city attempted to protect itself from hurricanes. Relying on research from regional archives, private collections, and local newspapers, O'Rear touches mainly on urban and political history. At its core, however, the book is a case study; it will appeal most to a South Texas regional audience.

The seawall was necessary because of devastating hurricanes in 1919 and 1933. O'Rear writes about several attempted improvements along the coast of the city from 1919 to 1941, when it was mostly complete. Most of the city's plans included general coastal improvements along the Gulf of Mexico and the city's bay, including coastal beautification, bridges, and a large dam project.

The author describes instances of grand plans and enthusiasm ending in failure. Throughout, she explores the role of engineers and the movers and shakers of Corpus Christi and South Texas politics. The struggle for the seawall that O'Rear describes was most often over funding. Ambitious plans without bonds, state funding, or federal money left voters both unmoved and without protection from hurricanes. Despite the difficulties, and with World War II on the horizon, boosters prevailed in finding the requisite funding to build a seawall that fit the growing city's needs.

O'Rear details the struggles of political, social, and bureaucratic figures over the various plans. She capably builds expectations around each