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Roadside Crosses in Contemporary Memorial Culture

Everett, Holly

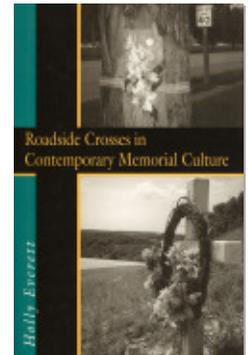
Published by University of North Texas Press

Everett, Holly.

Roadside Crosses in Contemporary Memorial Culture.

University of North Texas Press, 2002.

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CHAPTER TWO



The Cross-cultural Roadside Cross

In the *Austin American-Statesman* on December 31, 1996, a letter to columnist Jane S. Greig asked, “Where can I get information on the white crosses placed on the highway where someone has died in an accident? I’ve been told that MADD [Mothers Against Drunk Driving] puts them up where someone has been killed by a drunken driver. I’d like to place a marker at an accident site, but drunken driving was not involved.” Greig’s response noted that “the only white crosses (markers) legally on the right of way are placed by the Texas Department of Transportation in conjunction with MADD . . . Unauthorized markers periodically appear on the right of way but are removed.” The crews assigned to the removal of the markers must have been busy ones, fighting what appeared to be a losing battle. Roadside accident markers, governmentally sanctioned and otherwise, are a familiar feature of many Texas roadways, and indeed of streets and highways across North America.

A folklore discussion list bore this out in a striking fashion. A short query, posted on January 22, 1997, asking “Has anyone come across any articles or books about roadside memorials or accident markers?” soon elicited over fifty responses (Goldstein 1997). Remarkably, while the request was specifically for textual references, many replied not with citations, but with accounts of

their own experience. Respondents described roadside cross memorials in nineteen US states—Alabama, California, North and South Carolina, Connecticut, Georgia, Indiana, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Montana, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Dakota, Tennessee, Utah, Virginia, Washington, and Wyoming, as well as the Canadian province of Newfoundland, Mexico, Panama, England, Germany, Greece, and Ireland. Articles about the roadside cross tradition, or one cross in particular, have appeared in newspapers from Austin to Sydney, Australia (see Banta 1999; Delvecchio 1997).

Popular ideas about roadside memorials are reflected in oral accounts, newspaper and magazine articles which incorporate the memorials in pieces on drunk driving, motor vehicle safety or urban violence, and postcards like that produced by the Center for Southern Folklore depicting a white wooden cross on Highway 82 in Mississippi. Painted in red and black letters, the cross exhorts passing motorists to “GET RIGHT WITH GOD.” Web sites devoted to roadside crosses include a journalism student’s final project for a “news and new media” class at Northwestern University, and a site originating in Indiana, which offers white crosses for sale (www.netusa1.net/~ghollis/). Another site (no longer operable), which cautioned interested individuals to check local laws concerning roadside memorials prior to making a purchase, offered two alternatives to homemade crosses, stating, “The thought is wonderful but after a very short time the site is not.” Florida-based Imago Multimedia memorials featured a dove, in place of overt religious symbolism.

Further evidence of the roadside cross’s place in the public imagination exists in popular fiction. From Susan Power’s *The Grass Dancer*, “They passed dozens of white crosses along the route, each cross representing a highway fatality. So many Indians smashed themselves on the roads it was old news, but most accidents involved alcohol” (1994, 53). In John Nichols’ *The Milagro Beanfield War*, set in small-town New Mexico, an anonymous

Milagro resident protests the plans of wealthy landowner Zopilote Devine by erecting crosses “in memory” of him and his planned development, “Like mushrooms in damp leaves, they sprouted every night by a dozen roadsides—downtown, up in the canyon, out on the north-south highway. Their inscriptions either advised the passerby to *Pray for the soul of Zopilote Devine*, or to *Pray for the dear departed soul of the Miracle Valley Recreation Area*. A few times, even, flowery bouquets had been laid at these contemptible monuments commemorating a death or deaths which had not yet occurred. It was impossible, of course, to ignore the crosses” (1994, 304). Devine, mortally frightened by the crosses, begins to spend many of his waking hours removing and burning the wooden protests.

Finally, the scene of the tragic bus accident in Russell Banks’ *The Sweet Hereafter* is marked, several days afterward, by crosses. Lawyer Mitchell Stevens, inspecting the site, observes, “There had appeared one morning fourteen tiny crosses out at the crash site, which turned out to be the work of schoolchildren, at the instigation of the school board. So much for separation of church and state” (Banks 1991, 138). Banks’s novel, set in upstate New York, is based on actual events in the Texas town of Alton, near the Mexican border,¹ including the appearance of the crosses. On the fifth anniversary of the accident in 1994, twenty-one crosses still hung on the chain-link fence around the perimeter of the infamous gravel pit where the bus came to rest after leaving the road (Lemieux 1994). These fictional and factual examples provide a cross-section of the issues that often accompany roadside crosses, such as the separation of church and state, land ownership and reclamation, societal and governmental indifference toward death, and freedom of religious expression.

For instance, a state-sponsored program to memorialize traffic fatalities in Florida with small crosses was abruptly halted when the Department of Transportation and a state representative began to receive complaints about the display of religious symbol-

ism from the local chapter of the Anti-Defamation League. The state had approved the program as a move to curb the increasing construction of roadside crosses by private individuals (“DOT” 1998). The state-constructed crosses already in place were removed and the Department of Transportation later decided to use small disks printed with accident information (Porter 2001). Debate in Halifax, Nova Scotia, about MADD crosses began in January of 1998, with highway officials concerned that they cause motorists undue distraction, and MADD members arguing for increased recognition of impaired driving deaths (Dedrick, Dagle and Dagle 1998). Eventually, MADD crosses were approved for erection along the province’s highways.

Thus, the roadside marker landscape is constantly in flux as crosses are erected sometimes within hours of a fatal collision, and others are removed or abandoned. The narratives concerning such crosses are equally mutable, as individuals read about the anniversary of a tragic accident, encounter a cross for the first time upon taking a wrong turn or driving in an area of the city with which they are unfamiliar, or experience a loss themselves.

The underlying beliefs connected to roadside crosses vary as well. In Chile, because an accident victim’s spirit is troubled, it remains at the site rather than moving on to the next life. A cross erected at the site is tended not only by friends and family, but by all passersby, who pray to ease the spirit’s suffering (Woolf 1996). In El Salvador, the hazards of driving have been incidental to the appearance of memorial crosses. Small villages, devoid of motor vehicles save for small public buses until recently, shared the land with numerous small, white crosses. All death sites were marked with crosses, regardless of the cause. If someone died from a heart attack in a cornfield, a cross was erected there (Escobar 1998).

Wayside calvaries (roadside crucifixion scenes) and crosses line the roads of the Canadian province of Québec (Carpentier 1981), as well as many European countries. Roadside calvaries constructed by West Virginia millionaire Bernard Coffindaffer, consisting of

one large cross flanked on either side by two smaller ones are a common sight in twenty-eight states, including Texas. Coffindaffer began erecting the monuments, as instructed by a voice he heard while in the hospital, following his successful recovery from open-heart surgery (see www.christiancrosses.org/). Steve Thomas, an engineer living in the Texas Panhandle town of Pampa, erected a 190-foot cross next to Interstate 40 as an “advertisement for Jesus” in 1995. Thomas planned to help others build giant crosses in Illinois and Florida (Babineck 1997).

Folklorist James Griffith describes three white wooden crosses erected on a hilltop by a friend prior to moving to a new neighborhood in the Pimería Alta region of Arizona. “They stayed up for about five years, until some neighborhood kids dismantled them and took the pieces down the hill. The purpose of the crosses seems to have been protective: they appear to have been intended to make the area a better place in which to live” (1992, 142-43). Similar clusters of crosses, fashioned of wood and sometimes painted, mark a number of hilltops in the area.

Various cross memorials stand throughout England, dating from 1290 to the present. Beginning in the thirteenth century in Britain, crosses were cut into roadside turf in order to purge an accident or crime scene, albeit marking it more permanently than it might have been otherwise. Connecting the custom with that of the formal funeral procession was the practice of pausing along the route to the burial ground for “refreshment, prayers or singing” (Richardson 1993, 96). In Wales, prayers were said at every intersection, while in the Scottish Highlands, mourners added stones to cairns at each stop. Leaving a stone as a sign of remembrance has corollaries in Jewish tradition (Safanov 1948, 78), and in the piles of stones left at a number of the memorials detailed in chapter three. Widely known in southern England are the Eleanor Crosses, marking the resting places of Queen Eleanor’s funeral procession on its journey, in 1290, from Lincoln to Westminster Abbey in London. Of the twelve originally erected, only a few

remain, including the Victorian reconstruction in London now known as “Charing Cross” (Richardson 1993, 97; Benson 1976, 83-84).

Suicides were commonly buried at crossroads, in an effort to prevent them from becoming revenants (Barber 1988, 30, 55; Taylor 2000, 77). Others have noted that early custom required that anyone considered unworthy of burial in consecrated ground, or at risk of returning to trouble the living, be buried at a crossroads outside of town, often at the foot of a wayside cross (Benson 1976, 143; Taylor 2000, 77).

By contrast, in Greece memorials known as *proskynetári* may also indicate an individual’s escape from death, in which case they are constructed in part to thank divine forces that may have intervened. Like their counterparts that mark a death site, they serve as warnings to motorists and reminders of humans’ universal fate (Panourgiá 1995, 172-73). Further, although *proskynetári* often incorporate the cross, they are more usually designed to resemble both churches and gravesites. Anthropologist Neni Panourgiá writes, “they are not large—usually measuring fifty by fifty centimeters—they are set up on pedestals, and instead of walls, they have pieces of glass, like windows. Inside are placed an icon of the particular saint, Christ or Panayia (according to whomever is thought to have intervened), sometimes a photograph of the deceased, a *kandéli* [candle], and a bottle of oil, some charcoal, incense, and matches” (174). As a sign of the frequent and unavoidable intrusion of death into life, the shrines also communicate the desire to prevent accidental death.

Roadside crosses in the American south and southwest are perhaps the most well-documented in the United States, and are often connected with discussions of deathways in Native and Mexican-American traditions (Barerra 1991; Griffith 1992; Owens 1998; McRee and Larcombe 1993; Zimmerman 1997). For example, in the roadside memorialization practice of the Tohono O’odham Indians in southern Arizona, such assemblages repre-

sent a combination of O'odham and Catholic belief and date back to a 1958 automobile collision in which seven people were killed. Memorials are constructed only for those who die suddenly, and therefore badly. Distinguishing them from other shrines and aboriginal trail markers on the reservation, the assemblages feature a cross as the primary element while still exhibiting a high degree of individual creativity. Secondary elements may include candles, flowers, fences, saint figurines, and American flags. Although they may be visited and attended to at any time, All Souls Day, November 2, is particularly important in the maintenance cycle. During the week prior and a few days after, the sites are cleaned and redecorated, and prayers are offered for the deceased (Kozak and Lopez 1991).

Until about 1960, the Arizona Highway Department erected similar markers at the sites of fatal accidents. Roadside memorials in Arizona do not always incorporate a cross, however, nor do they commemorate a traffic fatality. For instance, Griffith describes a six-foot-high *nicho* on Interstate 19, "It is made of local stones and whitewashed. Although it is dedicated to Santa Teresa, several statues of other saints and members of the Holy Family share her space. It was erected in memory of Arthur Lee, a former owner of the Sopori Ranch, who fell off his horse in 1934 and was dragged to death. The shrine is traditionally cared for by children at the ranch. The last time I visited it, the space in front of the tiny altar was crowded with candles and artificial flowers" (1992, 104). Although its center point is a *nicho* rather than a cross, the memorial includes items commonly associated with roadside crosses: flowers, candles, stones, and religious icons.

Roadside crosses in Arizona and New Mexico are sometimes assembled from pieces of wreckage, or else constructed of wood, iron, cement, or stone. New Mexico writer Estevan Arrellano's first memory of *descansos* dates from his childhood, "I remember my aunts asking, 'Is your *tío* [uncle] Julian's *descanso* still up?' My *tío* Julian had died at any early age bringing firewood from atop

the mesa on a *carro de bestia*, a horse-drawn wagon. To this day, every time I climb the mesa I go directly to his *descanso* and straighten it up with rocks.” (1986, 42). Crosses in New Mexico appear in both rural and urban contexts, including Santa Fe street corners (Arellano 1986).

Crosses commemorate deaths both in and outside of cemeteries, and also mark sites of death not caused by automobile accidents. A shrine in a Tijuana, Baja California cemetery was erected at the death and burial site of murdered Mexican soldier Juan Castillo Morales, more commonly called Juan Soldado.² Near Waco, Texas, at the former site of the Branch Davidian compound, wooden crosses commemorated those killed during the siege and fire of 1993, until more permanent memorials could be put in place.

The Sign of the Cross

As largely unauthorized markers of liminal space (Graham 1996, 478), roadside crosses, especially on heavily-trafficked urban streets, are dynamic, polysemic communicators. I refer to Charles Peirce’s trichotomy of signs to analyze the crosses and their place in Austin’s cultural landscape semiotically, specifically his classification of a sign based on the relation between sign and referent. In this regard, roadside crosses fall into all three classes — icon (resemblance), index (contiguity) and symbol (arbitrary relation) (Fiske 1982, 49-57; Nöth 1995, 42-45). As an icon, the cross is “motivated” by the structure, according to Christian tradition, upon which Jesus Christ was crucified. The cross is related indexically to an accident which occurred in a given spot, perhaps the only indication that anything out of the ordinary ever took place there. Symbolically, the cross represents physical death followed by spiritual rebirth into an eternal state of existence to all those even vaguely familiar with the tenets of Christianity. Thus, each marker affords the viewer a powerfully iconic moment, with spatial, temporal, and magico-religious implications.

The cross as an indication of death is connected with the biblical account of Jesus Christ's death and resurrection as told in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Prior to the infamous execution, crosses were understood as threatening symbols of Roman power and punishment (Benson 1976, 24). The cross carried extremely negative associations, then, not only for Christians, but for Jews and other groups alike who had suffered under Roman rule (Henry 1925, 23; Rees 1992, 69). As such, the cross was a symbol of brutal death, and thus rejected for use in worship by the early Christians until late in the fourth century, and then not bearing any representation of Christ.³ The crucifix, a cross with the figure of Christ upon it, entered into regular use in the eighth century (Firth 1973, 48). The beginning of the cross's acceptance as a religious symbol may be found in the writings of Saint Paul to the Galatians (Henry 1925, 23-24). Paul rejected the world as he felt Christians were then rejected by Roman society, "But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world" (Gal. 6: 14).

The cross is also connected with the idea of the "cosmic world tree," representing the continuity of the life cycle (Rees 1992, 69-70; see also McDannell 1995, 120-121). Other associations with the tree, and thus immortality, result from the embrace of both good and evil by the crucifixion. "The tree of the knowledge of good and evil in Eden is replaced by the trees on which the good and evil thieves are crucified. The crucifixion of Jesus represents the absorption of the other side of things into a complete whole: Jesus accepts both the good thief and the bad . . ." (Reese 98). Theologian Gustaf Aulén also stresses the cross's symbolic duality while insisting on its singular conclusion. Indeed, the "gospel of the cross" preached by the apostles depended upon the death *and* resurrection of Jesus Christ (1970, 188). Further, in the actual and symbolic suffering of Christ, he is experientially connected to all of humankind (169; Tuan 1978, 98), and made

the perfect instrument of reconciliation: “And having made peace through the blood of his cross, by him to reconcile all things unto himself; by him I say, whether they be things in earth, or things in heaven” (Col. 1:20). In the horror of the crucifixion, Aulén emphasizes the link between the harsh reality of human existence, including “human wickedness and hardness, . . . accidents, catastrophes,” the suffering of Christ and thus of God (1970, 186, 167); however, it is equally important to recognize, in this tribulation, the victory represented by Christ’s empty tomb, which in turn is symbolized by the “empty” cross.

The acceptance of both good and evil, and the final triumph of good through eternal life, is crucial to many of my informants’ understanding not only of the loss of their loved ones, but of the message of the roadside crosses. Some stressed that visiting their children’s grave sites, while important to them, is tempered by the knowledge that their children are not there. Further, while some are convinced of their children’s presence at the respective accident sites, they also believe them to be in heaven. Indeed, religious expression, while reinforcing perceived links between humankind and Jesus Christ, by no means fixes him to a certain place or time. As the risen Christ, “the promise of his presence is every day to the end of time” (Aulén 1970, 182). Thus, just as the physical and verbal symbolism related to Christ does not anchor him in the space-time continuum, neither are the accident victims magico-religiously affixed to their death sites by means of the cross.

Powerful symbolism aside, the cross may be viewed with some suspicion by Protestant groups in the southern United States, who regard it as more indicative of Catholicism than a pan-Christian emblem (Jordan 1982, 50-51). The sentiment was echoed in my interview with Shilah Lamay, during which she discussed her ambivalence toward the cross erected in memory of her daughter Heather by schoolmates. Moreover, utilizing Christian symbolism to make a political statement, as in the case of Mothers Against Drunk Driving memorials, is a tradition in American public life

that seemingly contradicts the legal separation of church and state. It is, however, in keeping with the concept of civil religion, first expounded by Jean Jacques Rousseau in *The Social Contract*.

Sociologist Robert Bellah has written extensively on the idea of American civil religion, from an examination of the Declaration of Independence to the rhetoric of the Johnson administration (1963-69), noting a common “set of beliefs, symbols, and rituals” (1990, 62) e.g., a belief in “the Almighty,” the cross, and the observance of Memorial Day. Of relevance to the present discussion is his differentiation between denominationally defined faiths such as Catholicism, Protestantism, and Judaism, and the “very activist and noncontemplative conception of the fundamental religious obligation” (264). As civil religion is not typified by the hushed seclusion of a cathedral, chapel or temple, but thoroughly grounded in the activity of the public arena, denominational differences are obscured.⁴

Civil religion is invoked, especially, in times of crisis and uncertainty, as during the war between the states, the assassination of President Kennedy, the Vietnam war, the ongoing AIDS crisis, and the terror attacks in New York City and Washington, D.C. Indeed, in 1995, literature and religious studies scholar Peter S. Hawkins cited “the acts of piety that have grown up around both the VVM [Vietnam Veterans Memorial] and the [AIDS] quilt” as “the most vital examples of popular civil religion we have” (1995, 762). At public sites where the sacred and profane intermingle, people of varying cultural, and thus religious, backgrounds come together to mourn.

In theory, civil religion’s all-encompassing public embrace excludes religious intolerance, with an emphasis on Christian symbolism without specific invocation of the Christian church (Bellah 1990, 264, 267), similar to the use of the cross without strict adherence to the beliefs in which its religious significance originated. Hence, it becomes representative of religious or spiritual belief in general, a symbol adoptable by diverse individuals and groups.

Crosses, Custom and Civil Religion

Texas was not officially part of the United States until the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848 (Fehrenbach 2000, 272-273). The Austin area was the northernmost point of a number of Spanish expeditions and a few failed missions, but the more successful settlements date from the period of Mexican rule. Present-day Bastrop, for example, southeast of Austin on Highway 71, is the result of an 1832 Mexican land grant. However, the present Mexican-American population in the region may be more directly connected with recent immigration, rather than early colonization (Simons and Hoyt 1992, 177-78). At any rate, cultural ties to border areas remain strong. Often, immigrants in the Austin area are also helping to support relatives in Mexico.

Mexican culture is a part of everyday life for many individuals in central Texas, in street (e.g., Guadalupe, Nueces, and Rio Grande streets) and place names (Mendez Junior High School and Américo Paredes Elementary School). Further evidence comes in the form of: a regional dialect that incorporates countless Spanish words and expressions; Tex-Mex, the regional cuisine; Tejano music; holiday celebrations on *Diez y Seis*, *Cinco de Mayo*, and *el Día de los Muertos*; and customs, such as birthday *piñatas* and roadside crosses.

Early Catholic priests and settlers brought with them death customs including that of burying fellow believers in hallowed ground, or *camposanto*. In the early days of Spanish colonization of the Americas, when travelers often found themselves far between established settlements, those dying en route had to be buried *in situ*. Crosses at the site of interment served not only to mark the spot, but to informally consecrate it (Barrera 1991, 278).

Historical references to the custom of marking significant sites, including graves, with a cross include those found in correspondence and journals dating from the time of Spanish exploration of the area, prior to settlement. The diary entries of Fernando del Bosque, on a journey across the Rio Grande toward present-day

Eagle Pass and perhaps beyond in 1675, record the numerous instances in which a wooden cross was constructed and erected to claim land for the Spanish monarch ([1908] 1963, 293-307), as do those of Juan Domínguez de Mendoza, on a 1684 expedition to western central Texas ([1908] 1963, 321-333). Alonso de León (son of Ponce de León) made five expeditions into Texas, the first in 1686 and the last in 1690. It was during the last foray that he recorded, “As we went down toward the river [Rio Hondo] we found some large white rocks, on some of which we saw some crosses cut, and other figures artificially made with great skill, apparently a long time before” ([1908] 1963, 392).

Descansos (resting places) were erected in Embudo, New Mexico at least as far back as the 1700s, during which time they were banned by the governor: “There were so many that travelers who stopped to pray for the souls of the departed became easy targets for the Indians. . .” (Arrellano 1986, 42). Griffith cites a Franciscan historian’s translation of the complaint of a Catholic bishop, circa 1783, about “the large number of crosses on a road where travelers were being killed by Apache Indians” (Woolf 1996; Griffith 1992, 101-102).⁵

Jean Louis Berlandier describes a trip made in August of 1829 from Laredo to Matamoros, during which he and his fellow travelers encountered more than thirty crosses. Initially, they thought the crosses were indicative of recent deaths at the hands of bandits. But, “[L]ater we learned that several crosses were very old and indicated places where the Comanches had massacred travelers or herdsmen. Lastly, we learned that rancheros sometimes bury their relatives in these places, or else put a cross at the spot where they rest with a corpse which they are taking for burial to the cemetery of a neighboring town” (1980, 429).

At the same time, other burials were similarly marked. In 1828, Berlandier and his party, passing through recent battlesites of Mexico’s war of independence, saw soldiers’ remains everywhere, as the dead were sometimes left as they fell. It is in this context

that he notes the contrasting humanity of Colonel José Félix Trespalacios (on the Mexican side): “He gave burial to almost all the dead which were found. At the foot of an old oak, respected by the years, a grave was dug, and the remains of those adventurers who arrived to proclaim independence were buried. A cross carved in the trunk of that live oak indicated the site of the grave. Placed at the height of a man’s head, renewed from time to time by the soldiers of the presidio who carve it as deep as the wood, it seems to be freshly engraved” (284). Not all accidental or military deaths were consecrated in such a manner, however. Berlandier documents their discovery of at least one corpse that they happened upon and apparently left to decompose (233).

Father Damián Massanet, who accompanied Alonso de León on two sojourns into Texas, notes a similar occurrence, in which Indians led him to a spot where the dead bodies of two Frenchmen lay ([1908] 1963, 391). However, De León’s account of the same incident is quite different. He writes, “we came to where they told us two Frenchmen had died, where they wished to make a settlement, and where we saw the graves. We placed a cross in a tree for them . . .”(417). The discrepancy between the two accounts underscores the difficulty of tracking the appearance and disappearance of roadside crosses. Arrellano, seeking out an 1846 Taos Rebellion battle site along the Old Apodaca Trail—he had read about it while researching his family’s genealogy in an old journal—came upon rocks literally covered with crosses (1986, 42). Like many items of folklore, *descansos* have often been deemed superfluous to the historical record, except when problematic as in the case of Griffith’s Catholic bishop or Embudo’s eighteenth-century governor.

In accordance with Berlandier’s account, folklorist John O. West identifies the custom with the transport of the coffin from the church to the *camposanto* following a funeral. The places at which the pallbearers stopped to rest were *descansos*, as were the places of ritual pausing—to recite the rosary or a requiem prayer—

inside the cemetery. Older cemeteries featured *descanso* shelters. Thus, the *descansos* represented a very real, as well as metaphorical, interruption of life's journey, as do roadside crosses today (1988, 236-39).

Many Mexican-Americans view the tradition as a distinctly Mexican one adopted by "Anglos." Although in north and central America the crosses are fashioned out of many different materials, including wood, metal, cement, and sometimes pieces of the wrecked automobile(s). That most commonly occurring in Texas, as in Mexico, is the white, wooden cross, usually accompanied by flowers, and perhaps other items such as photographs, notes, and/or religious objects.

In the recent past, policy decisions regarding roadside crosses were made at the discretion of each of the Texas Department of Transportation's (TxDoT) twenty-five district enforcement agencies. The city of Austin and the surrounding area comprises the "Austin district." Some agencies chose to allow the erection and maintenance of certain types of markers, such as those constructed by Mothers Against Drunk Driving,⁶ while others adopted a strict no-marker stance, such as the Dallas district. MADD memorials were the only authorized roadside markers in the Austin district until November 2001, when TXDoT policy was amended to allow markers to be erected for any traffic fatality through department offices.

The Austin MADD chapter, known as the Heart of Texas Chapter, maintains records of crosses erected through the organization, and the Austin TxDoT enforcement agency keeps a file of MADD cross "permits" (Ohlendorf 1997).⁷ To erect a cross through the Heart of Texas MADD Chapter, individuals must complete a form available through the chapter office that includes construction specifications and guidelines. Following submission of the application, an organization representative files a similar form with the TxDoT. The form stipulates that the District Engineer reserves the right to remove the cross if it is deemed to be hazardous to drivers in any way.

Texas residents have erected roadside crosses in all regions of the state. South Texas's increasing proliferation of crosses, in fact, has been problematic for TxDOT officials. In the spring of 1997, an engineer in the Austin district office made a special presentation to a group of highway maintenance supervisors on the roadside cross "problem" in the Valley, specifically the Pharr district (encompassing Brooks, Cameron, Hidalgo, Jim Hogg, Kenedy, Starr, Willacy, and Zapata counties). The assemblages had become so numerous as to render routine roadway maintenance difficult. Additionally, TxDOT officials feared they were dangerously distracting to drivers (Hurt 1997). Folklorist Alberto Barrera documented over forty-eight crosses in Starr County alone at the beginning of the 1990s (1991, 292). The southern county, at the edge of the Texas-Mexican border, is home to approximately 49,000 people and is one of the fastest growing counties in the state (Ramos 1997, 268). In keeping with popular belief about roadside crosses in the state, the population of Starr county is primarily Hispanic (97.2%), and Roman Catholic (85.6%).

As Barrera found in his sample, however, it is important to note that not all Mexican-American Catholics practice the custom (279). Indeed, the custom is quite widespread outside its community of origin. Counties with considerably smaller Hispanic and Catholic populations are also home to similarly styled roadside memorial assemblages, such as Blanco, Gillespie, and Kerr counties, to the west of the Austin area (Ramos 1997, 152, 195, 222, 488-89).

As well, south central Texas is home to a number of historic German settlements. Galveston, San Antonio, and Houston had considerable German populations by the end of the 1800s, between one-quarter and one-third of the total (Jordan, Bean, and Holmes 1984, 85-86). The German, and largely Lutheran, heritage of these areas, especially historic German settlements such as Fredericksburg in Gillespie county, still marks the landscape, ex-

amples of which are the material and form of the area's roadside crosses (Jordan 1982, 105-15). I photographed seven in between Johnson City and Kerrville, travelling by U. S. Highway 290 west and State Highway 16.

Set back from the road against a barbed wire fence running alongside State Highway 16 between Kerrville and Fredericksburg is a sheet metal cross, painted white, for Tori Eckhardt (Fig. 2.1). The cross stands about six feet high, and features a photo-ceramic portrait of Tori at its center. A small black plaque with gold lettering, a few inches below the photo on the vertical, reads:

IN MEMORY
OF
TORI
ECKHARDT
10-11-77 — 9-26-95

Further down the vertical is a large red bow and an arrangement of red poinsettias. Just south of the cross, a visitor has placed a large Christmas wreath supported by a wire stand.

A similarly constructed cross, also fashioned from white sheet metal, stands several yards from US 290 at the rear of a highway rest stop. Approximately a foot shorter than the cross described above, its intricate design includes an almost identical plaque as well as an attached plant holder. The plaque states:

IN LOVING
MEMORY OF
OUR BELOVED
KRISTA
MAE
VOLLMAR
8-27-72—6-9-91



Fig. 2.1 Sheet metal cross for Tori Eckhardt on Highway 16

Flanking the cross on its eastern side, a two-foot limestone cross stands in front of three large stones. The cross's face is inscribed with countless "X"s, or Saint Andrew's crosses, the significance of which is unknown (Fig. 2.2).⁸

Crosses also intermittently appear alongside US 290 heading east out of Austin, varying in size, construction, and decoration. Many are without identifying markings or inscriptions, whether by design or age. Farm to Market Road 1488 intersects 290 in the town of Hempstead. I photographed two memorials on the two-lane highway, including one consisting of a Calvary-like display of three crosses set back a few yards from the road. The tallest of the white, wooden crosses, approximately two and a half feet high, is flanked on either side by the two others of almost equal height. The large grapevine wreath to the east of the crosses, featuring pink silk roses, greenery, and a card of condolence firmly links the assemblage to traffic fatalities.⁹

Another roadside cross, unique to the sample area, stands roughly thirty miles east of the three crosses noted above on the same highway (Fig. 2.3). The memorial features an eighteen-inch cross atop a wooden picket fence, almost identical to the *cerquitas* (little fences) serving as grave site boundaries in many Mexican-American cemeteries in Texas and New Mexico (Jordan 1982, 70-71). The entire structure is painted white. The side of the *cerquita* parallel to the roadway has been decorated with a lasso and three or four bouquets of artificial flowers. At the time I photographed the memorial, there was no evidence of anything inside the boundary of the fence.

The population in the counties through which these sections of US 290 and FM 1488 run, with the exception of Travis county, is predominately white, Euro-North American, with African Americans comprising the next largest group in all but Montgomery county (Ramos, 1997, 148, 189, 228, 243, 282-83). In Montgomery county, in which the above cross and *cerquita* stand, Hispanics comprise the second largest demographic group. Addi-

tionally, the area presents a mix of dominant religious groups, including Southern Baptist, Roman Catholic, and Lutheran.

During the course of a half-hour drive from Conroe, the largest city in Montgomery County, to New Caney, I photographed ten crosses. In contrast to those documented on 290 and 1488, all but one of the ten bear at least a name, if nothing else. Three metal crosses, painted white with black lettering, were each attended by white, red, and purple silk poinsettias driven into the ground at the base. It is important to note that the crosses are not grouped together, indicating that each spot is significant and likely an actual death site. The cross farthest from the road is the most explicit in this regard (Fig. 2.4), and reads:

INRI
 AQUÍ FALLECIO
 ALBERTO FUGAROS
 RECUEDOS [sic]
 DE ESPOSA E HIJA Y FAM.
 DECANSA EN PAZ
 8-4-68—21-7-95
 [Here died/Alberto Fugaros
 remembrance from wife and daughter and family
 rest in peace].

Nearer the road are the crosses for Antonio Hernandez Bolanos (“RECUERDO DE FAM Y AMIGOS, FALLECIO 21-7-95”) and Lazaro Hernandez Zamudio (“RECUERDO DE FAM Y AMIGOS, NACIO EL 2/4/76, FALLECIO EL 21/7/95”). The crosses are among the more traditional memorials included in this study, in terms of their construction, spatial arrangement, and Spanish epitaphs. Further east, the memorial for Jerry Lee Adams, resting in a bed of clover, combines a white wooden cross with a planter base. Tributes include artificial flowers and a package of M&M candy.



Fig. 2.2 Limestone cross with inscribed "X"s



Fig. 2.3 Cross and *cerquita* on 1488 near Interstate 45

This short sampling of crosses outside the main study area, together with those documented by Barrera, provides a useful cross-section of vernacular roadside memorials in the state and highlights the variety of construction and design that marks the custom. Like the counties upon which I focus in the following chapters, Travis and Hays, those described above straddle cultural borders, namely Catholic and Protestant, and Euro-North American and Mexican-American.

The influence of Catholic, hispanic culture is certainly strong in the area, permeating central Texans' day-to-day existence. Consequently, a custom such as that of the roadside cross, with roots in Spanish tradition, may be practiced by a Southern Baptist female of British descent with little concern for its origin or similarity to other of her beliefs. Additionally, the tradition has variants

in a number of cultures, as detailed above, and is a feature of popular culture as well.

The symbolic strength of the cross derives from centuries of association with powerful images of suffering and hope. It continues to be informed by the controversy its presentation invariably evokes. In contrast to the plethora of official historical markers and monuments in the Austin area, handcrafted and often meticulously maintained roadside memorials communicate more personally about events in the present, rather than the past. The Austin area's roadside crosses represent individual and community responses to the grief, anger, frustration, and anxiety about vehicular carelessness and crime, and the dangers of urban space.



Fig. 2.4 Cross farthest from road, for Alberto Fugaros