5. Sociological Aspects

Published by

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Life in Laredo: A Documentary History from the Laredo Archives.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/7387.

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Every October 12 when the United States is commemorating Columbus Day, Mexico is celebrating “Día de la Raza,” the day on which a new “race” was born, a new people created from a mixture of those who came from Europe and those who were native to America. The term used to define this mixture is *mestizo*. Spain was extremely class conscious, and this was only one of a whole catalogue of new terms that were used to define the blood mixtures of the Spanish colonial people. Even second-generation Spaniards born in America were a separate class and known as *Creoles*. The colonists who came directly from Spain were generally known as “peninsulars,” but there were distinctions here, too.

There is a wonderful quotation from Shakespeare that sums up the whole situation: “Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them.”¹ The “born greats” who came to America were few and for the first century at least were generally viceroyys and bishops or persons of high rank. Those who achieved greatness were the conquerors and explorers who more often than not came from the lower classes in Spain but received a certain status because of their exploits and became *hidalgos* (*hijos de algo*, literally “sons of something”).² In America many of them were like the feudal lords
of medieval Europe and were granted large tracts of land by the Crown, which often included a number of Indian resident workers. These were called *encomiendas*: entrustments. For the *hidalgos* it was important to maintain a certain status, but that became more difficult as families grew and had to share the same original grant or receive portions of it in last testaments. So the archives are full of petitions for more land and settlements of quarrels over land disputes.

What does all of this have to do with Laredo? In this rural society the land owners, who were mainly ranchers, were also at the top of the social ladder. They tended to form something of an elite and were the wealthiest. Tomás Sánchez was among them and could be considered a kind of *hidalgo*. Their “greatness,” however, was measured more by how much they owned than by what they had done. Still, Sánchez had a certain greatness thrust upon him by succeeding generations of Laredoans who admired and revered him as the founder of their city. It is also true that this group of men gave the city its mayors and aldermen. They were among the “*hombres buenos,*” the distinguished citizens who were considered trustworthy and were called on to act as a jury in disputes to be settled by verbal arbitration. More on that later. Theoretically, since Sánchez was born in Ciénaga de Flores he was really a Creole, but he and most of the original settlers of Laredo considered themselves Spaniards, or “Españoles,” the elites.

Evidence that the Spanish class differences pervaded the colonial system comes from a decree of Sánchez in May of 1779:\(^3\)

Since procuring quiet and tranquility of the settlers in this town under my care is a major goal, in order to avoid all kinds of harmful vices which are the bane of Republics, I must and do order through this proclamation that one hour after eight o’clock at night (which will be officially announced by the playing of a drum) everyone without exception, visitor or resident, should be in their houses except for the soldier sentinel who goes about on horseback watching the town. For anyone found
in the street or in some other place outside of his house, should the case arise, I hereby impose for nobles a fine of twelve pesos and fifteen days in jail, and for ordinary citizens one month in jail and six pesos fine which will be taken from the least used of their belongings. . . .

The distinction between “nobles” and “ordinary citizens” is interesting. There were not any blue-blooded nobles in Laredo. The words could almost be replaced by “rich” and “poor.” I suspect that if someone like Santiago de Jesús Sánchez was caught in the street late at night he would be admonished and sent home. Being a son of Don Tomás he would be one of the “nobles” but I doubt that he would spend fifteen days in jail, or even pay the fine. Another Spanish cultural touch pervades the documents. Noble or ordinary, rich or poor, every man is always referred to as “Don.” Even criminals are not deprived of the title. Respect for persons is deep-rooted. This also included a certain individuality for women. In legal matters, for instance, women went to court under their maiden, not their married, names. This is true also when they were involved in contracts, deeds, and wills. The social standing of women was in no way subservient to that of men.

The census of 1789 distinguishes three classes of people: Spaniards, Mestizos, and Mulattos with a total of 700. Like something of an afterthought, there is a mention of 110 Carrizo Indians “attached to the town of Laredo.” In forty-four years the population had grown almost ten times. A final annotation to the census draws another notable distinction. In a brief description of the town there is mention of “85 dwellings, not counting those in which the troops live.” Frequently the military personnel were counted apart, like non-residents, or a separate class of people.

Other kinds of distinctions arose with time. In the early years only landholders were allowed to vote. In the later censuses there were indications as to whether or not persons could write their names. In 1819 the census takers divided people into two main groups: Europeans and
Spaniards, and Indians and Castes which included Mestizos and “those of African origin.” The second group outnumbered the first 798 to 620, for a total of 1,418 inhabitants. About one-fourth of these were less than seven years old. In the last census under Spain in 1820, the results were the same, with one person less.

All of this gives some idea of the patchwork quilt appearance of society in Laredo. After 1821 many of the former distinctions disappeared from the reports. Once Mexico got past its empire stage there was a definite movement to eradicate any traces of Spanish class structure and it became the custom to refer to all persons as “Citizen,” imitating the equality trumpeted by the French Revolution. In spite of that, there was a definite servant class in Laredo that everyone acknowledged but which was never officially recognized as such. More on this in Chapter 7.

Over the next thirty-five years the population of Laredo fluctuated considerably. The highest figure found in the archival documents is for the year 1828, which registers 2,054 inhabitants. Three years later the census counted 1,698, a drop of nearly 400 persons. There are no evident explanations for this, although one of the reasons for the variation in numbers over the years was the withdrawal of troops stationed there to serve elsewhere, especially in the continuing Centralist-Federalist political struggles. It’s also possible that census takers did not include those living on the south side of the river who were really part of the local population. The statistics below, taken from the archives, indicate how the population changed over the years after Mexican independence.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1823</td>
<td>1,402</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1824</td>
<td>1,570</td>
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<tr>
<td>1828</td>
<td>2,054</td>
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<td>1831</td>
<td>1,698</td>
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<tr>
<td>1833</td>
<td>1,734</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1835</td>
<td>1,979</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1837</td>
<td>1,736</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1845</td>
<td>2,011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1853</td>
<td>1,437</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There are some plausible explanations for some of the changes in addition to the obvious increase in the birth rate. Under the presidency of Guadalupe Victoria, the country was relatively stable between
1824 and 1828, and Indian attacks were far fewer and more successfully repulsed. Not only that, but a large group of Lipans asked to settle near Laredo and were given permission. They may have been counted in the census numbers. Altogether this could account for the increase of almost 500 persons during this time period. The increase during the first half of the 1830s would seem to follow the normal patterns of population growth. What is somewhat surprising is the increase in 1833, a year when ninety people died in a cholera epidemic. The drop between 1835 and 1837 may have been associated with Mexico’s struggle against the Texas rebels on the one hand, and the political upheaval that removed Santa Anna from the presidency on the other. Again, it would be a question mainly of the movement of troops.

By the time of the crucial years of the Mexico-U.S. war, Laredo’s population had risen again to the 2,000 mark. The census of 1845 is extremely interesting because it lists each household by streets with the occupants, their ages, and sometimes their professions. The next available figures in 1853 dramatically show the effects of the Treaty of Guadalupe and the incorporation of Laredo into the United States in 1848. A good number of the inhabitants moved across the river into what became Nuevo Laredo. This was in no way a foundation from scratch, but rather a somewhat explosive increase in what had simply been “the other side” of town. Nevertheless, over a thousand people ceased to be Mexicans and saw the stars and stripes flying over their city hall. The increase by 1853 was due in part to an influx of immigrants from other areas of the United States, some of them people who were on their way to California because of the gold rush but who decided to remain in Texas. During this time another kind of “mestization” took place, a mixture of Americans and Mexicans, although a visitor around that time referred to Laredo as “a quaint village with very few American families.” Other bloodlines also appeared in Laredo with persons like John Z. Leyendecker of German ancestry who came in 1847, and Raymond Martin from France, who came in 1854. In 1855,
the last year covered by this history, there is only a census of children in Laredo between the ages of six and sixteen. There were 467,13

What was the town environment like, and how did it change? The initial records are mainly from Mexico City and have nothing to do directly with the town itself. The earliest censuses say something about housing but nothing about what living in town was like. A first indication that there was room for improvement comes from a decree of the mayor in 1796.14

Because I have received repeated complaints from various individual residents of this town about the damage being done to their lots and houses by hogs, cows, and even small pigs, which I have observed, and since this is so prejudicial to society and it is my responsibility as Judge to stop such damage, I order everyone in the town who has hogs and milk cows to take care that others receive no damage which can easily be avoided by penning up the hogs as well as the little pigs and cows at least at night, having it well understood that I will not in any way permit a person who has received damage from these animals to harm or kill them, and if any omission or disobedience in this matter is found out, measures will be taken against such individuals according to what the law states. I order everything contained in this decree to be exactly observed.

The town of Laredo, September 24, 1796.
José Jesús de la Garza

Twenty years later, Mayor José Andrés Farías had the same complaint.15

From evident knowledge based on experience today we see much disorder which reduces towns to a miserable condition, and I have found some of the worst of these rampant in this town under my care, among which . . . is the filthiness of the
lots, most of which look like stables instead of houses. This comes from the raising of pigs which everyone has and nobody takes care of, not being responsible for what the animals need, doing harm to the other residents with two things resulting: first, sickness among the settlers because the pigs are naturally dirty, and secondly, the resentment and bad will which arises between people either because the animal is killed or because of the damage which it did and the indifference of the owner.

Farm animals weren’t the only problem.16

Because the abundance of dogs in this place is highly excessive and these animals are harmful when they are loose . . . anybody who wants to keep a dog in the house for its defense may have an animal on the understanding that it must be kept tied up from dawn until the drums that serve as a curfew, and that if he wishes to let it loose the lot must be fenced in; if it isn’t, the dog must remain tied up. Anyone who acts to the contrary will see that the patrol ordered to make the rounds will kill the dogs on the commander’s orders.

Laredo, April 19, 1818. D. José Francisco de la Garza

The complaint of swine running loose came again in 1826 and prompted a decree from Mayor Rafael López de Oropeza levying stiff fines on those who were negligent in this matter.17 But some things seldom change. In 1845 Mayor Agustín Dovalina found it necessary to appoint someone to check on the ownership of stray animals.18 Municipal ordinances in 1850, 1854, and 1855 had to deal with this problem.

Those who have pigs will take care to enclose them and for any which are found in the streets they will pay a fine of one real every time this happens, and if the owner, advised by the
police, does not redeem them in two days they will be sold at public auction and the money placed in the funds. If the number of pigs exceeds twenty they will be kept outside of the town. [In 1854 and 1855 ordinances against pigs running loose in the streets had to be repeated.]

Goats will be kept outside of the town and enclosures made for them.

Those with milk cows will be careful to keep them enclosed in corrals and take them outside of the town in the mornings.19

In their attempts to run a respectable town, the authorities were often faced with other kinds of problems: illegal butchering of animals, illegal pricing, concubinage, which had “become more customary,” and theft, which was “commonplace.”20 Unfortunately, what we know about Laredo comes mostly from the complaints of the citizens and the rules and regulations meant to rectify situations that had somehow got out of hand. Still, these things reflect the society of the town and the human side of life in Laredo.

It is a kind of axiom that people and problems go together. Rights and duties become confused; personal preferences dictate conduct; temperaments and personalities sometimes clash; possession is strongly defended. It was somewhat in the normal course of events that Laredo neighbors and citizens, subject to the vagaries and foibles of human nature, would come into conflict with one another. Some way of settling matters had to be found. The frontier towns did not have a complete system of government, especially in regard to the administration of justice, which was found in the larger centers except when they were the headquarters of a subprefecture (such as Mier and Guerrero). For a long period of time the person in charge of these places wore two hats: he was both the mayor and the justice of the peace. Part of his job was to settle the quarrels and disputes that arose. Sometimes he would do this with just the individuals involved and some witnesses. Often he
would have the litigants call in some men whom they considered trustworthy, honest, in good standing, and of good judgment. These were the *hombres buenos* we referred to earlier. They were really arbitrators. After hearing both sides, they would try to get the two parties to come to some agreement. If they could not, the arbitrators would give their opinions as to how the quarrel should be settled. The judge would usually agree, and his decision was final. Most of the time the disputants would agree and everyone would sign a written statement of settlement. These “judgments” were known as verbal arbitrations, and there are many examples of them in the archives. The claims brought to these “courts” covered a wide range of things, but the most common were unpaid or owed money, services paid for and not received, physical abuse or injury, unreturned or stolen goods, stolen or lost animals, marital problems, malicious gossip, and quarrels over land ownership. The following are summarized excerpts of some cases. They are presented chronologically and while these come from the 1830s and 1840s, such situations certainly weren’t limited to that time frame.

October 30, 1833—Arbitrators: Basilio Benavides and Teodosio Treviño

Esteban Grande claimed more than 100 pesos from Nieves de la Garza in payment for back rent of a house for five years. On her part, de la Garza said that when she rented the house he asked that a corner room be reserved for himself. The arbitrators said that while Grande had a right to the rent, he should also pay for the corner room he was using in the amount that Sra. de la Garza could have received for it had she rented it to someone else. The judge proposed a compromise rent of 12 *reales* a month which both parties agreed on. The renter was ordered to pay 22 pesos in back rent.21

January 13, 1834—Arbitrators: José María Ramón and Ignacio Rodríguez
Doña Petra González accused José María González of coming to her house and hitting her, causing a wound on her head. The accused responded that the constant insults of his sister had exasperated him beyond control and when he went to discuss things she repeated her insults and he reacted. The arbitrators said that according to the laws of the state they should try to settle things amicably, and if they couldn’t then the injured person should appeal to a competent tribunal. The judge agreed.

April 12, 1834
José Cuellar claimed from Inés Sánchez a pair of pants which he had paid to have fixed. She had pawned them to Apolonio Ramón for a peso. He was instructed to give them back and received his peso. Cuellar left the paid money with Sánchez and was warned not to deal with her any more. She was also threatened with a fine if she would do such a thing again.

May 16, 1834—Arbitrators: José Francisco de la Garza and José Trinidad García
Viviana Núñez complained that her husband Urbano [the text has Ervano] Mendoza had struck her on the head two or three times with a steer’s tail causing two wounds which bled profusely. The arbitrators agreed that the attack was unjustified and the damage was evident and that Mendoza should be punished according to the law, but since it was the first time this happened his spouse agreed to let it go providing it would never happen again, and if it did then the law would be applied. Meanwhile she would go to her mother’s house where she could be cured and then return home, both promising to live harmoniously. Tomás Flores signed for Núñez and Elisario Pisaña for Mendoza.
June 16, 1834—Arbitrators: Trinidad García and Eugenio García

Blas María Díaz said that his great-grandson who was living in Bruno Delgado’s house had been maltreated by him and had been tied to a pole for three days. Díaz asked that someone else be his guardian. The arbitrators decided that the boy should live with his aunt Viviana Díaz, and Bruno should pay four new-born cows, two yearling calves, 4 bags of corn and two almudes of corn seed. Everyone signed.25

June 20, 1834—Arbitrators: Gregorio García and Trinidad García

Ursula Adame complained that her husband, Polonio García, was not fulfilling his responsibilities of providing the family with food and clothing because he was giving gifts to another woman with whom he was having illicit intercourse. García admitted his illicit relationship and said it was because his wife had denied him his matrimonial rights, and that if his wife had consented any of the many times he tried amicably to ask her he would have stopped. Resentment between the two grew daily. He said that he may deserve punishment for his anger but not for neglecting his family, as everyone knew. The arbitrators agreed that both should be punished but because it was the first time, they would be excused, but if there were any recurrence the husband would be put in chains for ten days and the wife wear knee clamps, both outside of the house, and this punishment would be doubled or tripled with an additional fine of ten pesos; and if they didn’t try to live in peace and harmony in their house the punishment would be applied immediately. Francisco de la Garza signed for Adame and Eugenio García for Polonio.26
November 3, 1834—
Ramón de la Garza came in the name of Jesús Rodríguez about a bay horse stolen from the farm of Namuseno [sic] Gutiérrez, as well as a saddle and some trousers stolen from Andrés Martínez. Mateo Treviño admitted having taken all these things and having sold them to Roberto Pérez, the foreman at the Golondrina ranch near Carrizal. They agreed to go to the ranch and recover the goods, and if that were not possible then Treviño would have to pay for them.27

March 29, 1836—
Gregorio García complained that his servant Santiago Navarro did not want to accompany him on a trip to Béjar. The judge ordered him to go with the agreement he would receive two reales a day.28

April 7, 1836—
Juan José Moreno said that he had given José María Sisnero [sic] two pesos to make a cot. Sisnero assured him it would be ready in three days. Three months had gone by and the work still was not done and Moreno wanted his money back. Since the accused had no excuse the judge ordered him to return the money.29

April 11, 1836—
Francisco Sartuche said that there was a dead cow on Nepumoceno Treviño’s land, which had disappeared from his milking stable, and when he went to find where they had taken it with a yoke of oxen, he found out they had thrown it into the river, and he had witnesses who agreed. The accused admitted that he had decided to throw the cow into the river. They agreed that it was worth twelve pesos. The judge warned them that this sort of thing shouldn’t happen again.30
June 27, 1836—

Blasa Herrera demanded satisfaction from Josefa García for three bunches of grapes that her son and the two sons of Francisco Botello took. Agatón [the husband] was ordered to pay two *reales* for each bunch. Because the two women had insulted each other they were fined five pesos and were warned to maintain a good fence or wall along the line which divides their properties.\(^{31}\)

October 31, 1836—

Agatón Castillo said that Manuel Treviño had broken into his house and forced open a trunk. The judge ordered the accused to appear but he fled taking with him some of the things he had stolen. Residents were sent in pursuit and he was brought back. Since there was no safe jail he was ordered to be put in chains. The following things were missing: a shirt, three pairs of white shorts, a hand-made napkin, two boxes of bullets. Since this individual was very dangerous to the town and there had been continual complaints of thefts, the judge ordered he should be kept in jail at night and work in public projects by day.\(^{32}\)

August 21, 1837—

The veteran corporal Ignacio Bustamante came and said that when he was asleep in his house last night his daughter Carmen had left the house and from what he had learned she was in the house of Tomás Flores. I ordered Flores to come and he said that Carmen Bustamante had come to his house at midnight and that he was actually on his way to inform about this. The judge ordered the said Carmen to come and asked her what reason she had to leave her house, and she replied that her mother was constantly hitting her over nothing, and she suspected it was because of her stepbrother Albino who had given her a gold chain, some rings and other jewelry. She was asked
why he had given those things and she replied that he was interested in her person but that she had never wanted to consent to his pretensions. The judge ordered the things given back to Albino and he was sent to the barracks for eight days for having attempted something against the laws of Holy Matrimony. He was warned that if in the future he did not stay away from the house of his stepparents as they wished the full force of the law would be applied. Carmen was told to go back home to her parents and they were told to look on her as a daughter and not abuse or nag at her to avoid another extreme and shameful situation.33

October 12, 1837—Arbitrators: Agustín Dovalina and Faustino Ramírez

Teodosio Guzmán accused Benigno Herrera of having entered his house and struck him. The accused replied that it was true that he had gone to the house and that Guzmán had received him with insulting words, and they both started to fight. They were told to name arbitrators who heard both sides and urged them to come to some mutual pardon. Guzmán said he forgave Herrera and asked that he not be punished since he was his godfather, but that he should not come to his house any more. Herrera agreed but said that not coming to the house was mutual. The arbitrators said that if either of the two should cause trouble again he should be fined five pesos. The judge and witnesses signed.34

The following is interesting because it corroborates what was said earlier about servants.

March 20, 1838—Arbitrators: José Flores and José María González

Salvador Cuellar had claims against a servant who had left
and gone to Juan Salinas of this town. Salinas was called and rejected Cuellar’s claims. Since they could not come to an agreement the plaintiff was asked to explain his claim in greater detail. He said that Gabriel Villarreal had left his service owing him 78 pesos 4 rrs. His contract stipulated that the person who would buy him was responsible for his debts, and if he were not paid then the servant should return to his service. He had not been able to get either the servant back or the money he claimed that Salinas owed. The judge and arbitrators then asked Salinas to respond to the charges. He said that the servant had fled and had worked for him only a month and a half, and that his opponent had let him go so he could collect what he owed, and therefore he did not believe he was the only responsible for the debt, and that if someone wanted to pay for him he would give him the document in his possession. He called two witnesses: Faustino Ramírez and Urbano Mendoza. The first was asked about the matter and said that one day when he was in Salinas’ house the said servant came asking him for four pesos for which he would go and work for him, with permission of his owner. The second witness said that from his house he heard the servant ask his owner Salvador Cuellar to let him work for someone else since Cuellar was asking for ten pesos for a carbine which the said servant had stolen. His master answered that he could not give him permission but would give him his account so he could look for the money. These were the statements of the witnesses and Salinas’ response. When the disputants had left, Flores was asked to give his opinion and said that the question was very simple and according to the document Cuellar had, he should be paid. The judge was told that José María González, whom the defendant had named, was working on another case at the time, so the opinion of Flores prevailed and Salinas was told to pay Cuellar.35
[no date, but between February 5 and 10, 1842]

Urbano de la Garza claimed that Eugenio Treviño did not give him a receipt for 120 pesos, 100 for the teaching of his children and 20 to pay for any needs while they were in his care, and he wanted one. Treviño said that the reason he hadn’t given a receipt was that he was waiting until he had finished with the teaching of the children put in his care, but that if Garza wanted a receipt he would give him one.36

March 14, 1842—

Antonio Baca said that Florencio Canales had entered his field without his permission and taken some dry branches for kindling, and even if he had asked he would have been refused. Canales admitted that he had done so on the basis of a decree which he had from the Subprefect, which he showed. The judge having heard both sides urged them to an agreement. They decided that in the future Canales could make use of any dried branches or tree trunks he wanted except those which had been set aside for Baca since there had been some cost involved in getting them.37

June 20, 1842—

Citizen Muñoz said that his brother-in-law, Teodoro Gamboa, had gone to his house to insult him for ridiculous reasons and had threatened him with a gun while insulting him with the most vile words telling him he was a sodomite. Gamboa said that he had done this because Manuel Mendiola told him that Muñoz had used him in that way. Since Gamboa had no proof of this the judge ordered them to avoid anything like this in the future and if they didn’t the one who started it would be fined five pesos.38
October 14, 1842—

Captain Agatón Quiñones said that on the campaign which they made into Texas he recognized a horse that Leonicio Castillo had as his own property. He said that the Sgt. Hilario Mendiola and some others in the Company of Laredo also recognized it, and he told Castillo that he should return it when they got back here, which he has not done. Then he told him it would be necessary to resort to authority and he still didn’t comply because he had lent it to someone in Santa Rosa. Castillo said he recognized the plaintiff’s claim and that the horse was known to various individuals of those who went to Texas, but that he had bought it in Los Langeneles; however, he had already freely decided to return it when he got back from the trip or be responsible for its value. The two men agreed that Castillo should find out what right the person who sold it had to it.39

December 1, 1842—

Mariana Sánchez said that for three years Albino Carrasco has owed her a half fanega of beans which somehow got lost from a shipment he was asked to bring and for which he had been paid. Since the plaintiff did not want to wait any longer, Carrasco admitted the claim and they agreed that the beans were worth three pesos. The judge ordered the payment made within eight days of the current date.40

December 20, 1842—

Domingo Dovalina claimed from Guadalupe Ochoa a blanket, which he won from a servant of Viviana Díaz; he wanted it back or four and a half pesos, which is what it cost. Ochoa replied that it was true he had won the blanket but he believed he had played with a free man, and besides that, the said blanket had suffered misfortune during the invasion of the Ameri-
cans and had been among the things declared by the town as lost. Therefore, he believed he had no responsibility over what was being claimed. The judge after hearing both sides ordered Ochoa to give back the blanket or pay four and a half pesos.41

After Laredo came under different juridical systems (first Texas and then the U.S.), the neighborly quarrels continued but they were now settled in an official court. Already in 1847 the district court registered Esteban Herrera vs. Romano Mendiola over a stolen horse; Agapito Galván vs. Francisco de Toro for money owed; and Francisco Treviño vs. Viviana Díaz over payment for beef.42

Perhaps much of the above seems like a lot of trivia, fussing over blankets, beans, and beef. Yet, these are the threads that make up the tapestry of daily life in Laredo. There is an almost indirect reference to another facet of it in the last example. Guadalupe Ochoa admitted he had “played” for the blanket he won. He had obviously engaged in some kind of gambling. In colonial times this practice was frowned on and the Spanish authorities issued various decrees to prevent it. The first one to appear in the archives was transmitted from Spain by the viceroy in 1768 recalling the prohibition against “forbidden games” promulgated in 1745 and 1746, though none are named specifically.43 Apparently some Spaniards felt that the Indians in the missions or those who had settled peacefully near the Spanish towns could be taken advantage of since they were beginners and learners, and the governor had to issue a decree in 1778 forbidding any gambling with the Indians.44 Even, and perhaps more importantly, at the local level this kind of diversion was censured. The magistrate in Laredo in 1783 issued the following:45

I forbid, warn against and declare illegal all card playing such as lansquenet, those with stakes, gambling, and any other kind under the pretext of amusement, in view of the very serious consequences and losses which originate from this cursed abuse;
therefore, in compliance with my obligation I must and do order that what is decreed herein be observed, and whoever violates it be fined six pesos and spend a month in jail and three months service on horseback. Santiago de Jesús Sánchez

The civil authorities were not the only ones to condemn this activity. In 1787, the archbishop of Mexico City, who was also the interim viceroy, repeated various decrees against gambling, card playing and other illegal games. One year later Mayor Miguel Ponce Borrego had to remind the citizens that “the repeated laws entirely forbidding games like lansquenet, knocking down pins, pigeonholes, and other games of chance, or private gambling should be strictly observed without violation, and the one guilty of any is subject to what has been decreed in the said laws.” Somewhere in the succeeding years regulations eased up. In a reversal of policy, the Crown decided to make the best of a bad situation and made the sale of cards a state monopoly, turning vices into pesos for the treasury. In 1806 the price of cards went up from four reales to eight, and in 1815 the lottery was legally established for Mexico. Even after independence there was some control. A decree of 1832 stated that only the government had the right to sell playing cards, and ten years later there were more regulations on their manufacture and sale.

It would seem that all forms of entertainment were controlled in one way or another. Ponce Borrego also decreed that “No one should hold dances in his house or any other without the necessary permission, and much less should musicians play anywhere unless I know they have permission to do so under the said penalty.” Two years later we find the order that “any musical entertainments which currently take place must have my permission first, and it will be until nine or ten o’clock at night and with the proper arrangements to avoid offenses which take place against God, the King, and the public.” Presumably the people in Laredo knew what the offenses were and such things did happen even much later on. In 1826 some soldiers
apparently defied the regulations, leading the mayor to decree that “Dances are absolutely forbidden until the government to which I will explain last night’s happenings resolves and determines the limits which my authority has.”52 The departmental leaders did in fact give the mayors broad authority to control gambling and other forms of entertainment. A decree of 1833 lays down a number of rules, among them that public dances could be held no more than three times a week unless they were in private homes, and even then they had to end by midnight.53 As the years went by the rules were relaxed somewhat, even to the point that liquor and other things could be sold at a dance, but always under the watchful eye of the authorities.

If a dance is held for the purpose of selling liquor or other things, in addition to the one peso for the license there will be an additional charge of two reales up to two pesos when the owner or someone else sells such things at the aforementioned entertainment, the amount being decided by the Mayor who gives the said license.54

Things did not change much when Laredo became part of the United States. New sources of entertainment were both permitted and restricted. Billiard halls were allowed, but there was a tax on them. The same city ordinances in 1853 state that “no dances may be held without previous permission, and never on Sunday.”55 The council further decreed that “The racing of tame horses in the city streets is forbidden, as well as those of wild animals, and whoever wants to do this for any reason should do so outside of the town.” This same order was repeated in January 1854.56 Perhaps some spirited citizens were trying to emulate Pamplona or remembering that in 1842 the town council had given Pedro Carrera permission to hold bullfights in the month of December.57

Laredoans didn’t always have to rely on entertainment and diversion at home. Especially after independence there were invitations from...
other towns to attend their local fairs and celebrations. The archives contain communications from Zamora, Matamoros, Monclova, Monterrey, Saltillo, and Mier announcing events to which “outsiders” were welcome.58

The city ordinances of the two years mentioned above brought a surprising and probably welcome innovation. Saloons were allowed to remain open until 8:00 p.m. While the drinking of alcoholic beverages would not be classified by most as entertainment, it frequently accompanied it in one form or another. We saw above that provision was made for liquor to be sold at dances. From colonial times the manufacture and sale of alcoholic beverages was very strictly controlled and there were many decrees from the Crown and the authorities in New Spain regarding both things.59 Six months after taking over the Laredo garrison, Lamar ordered that the mayor should “give notice to the venders of liquors in this place, that from and after this date no sales at wholesale or retail of vinous or spirituous liquors will be permitted under the pain of confiscation of all their stock on hand, as well as such other punishment as the Commanding Officer shall decree.”60 The town council was much more understanding and undoubtedly gained popularity with its wise decision. It is evident that the social life of Laredo was not without its diversions, but there were always some kinds of restraints.

The same restrictions were also somewhat severely applied to another aspect of social life. In the days of no plumbing or central water supply, the brooks and streams and rivers were the sources of water for all of the needs of society except where wells could be dug. Laredo’s geographical situation precluded this possibility, so the Rio Grande was the source for drinking, washing clothes, and bathing. Cleaning clothes was a sort of social connection. Women gathered to do the laundry and at the same time could chat or gossip over local events. Bathing was a different problem. In an age of much permissiveness such as ours, it is sometimes difficult to understand one of strict moral standards, a time when all male-female relationships outside of the family
were regarded with much suspicion, when situations that might be considered normal were also considered occasions of temptation and sin. To this day, when women in rural areas of Mexico bathe in the river, they are seldom entirely undressed. In any case, both the parish priest and the mayor considered it their responsibility to make sure that every precaution would be taken to avoid anything which might be misunderstood or in some way cause scandal. What follows is typical of the mentality and the efforts to avoid problems.61

Town of San Agustín de Laredo, May 3, 1784
Because the Ecclesiastical Judge and parish priest of this town has forbidden the bathing of men and women together in the river and at the same time has asked for my help to correct this because it is excessive and without any modesty since it is done without decency and gives bad example to children which leads to their perdition, and at the same time is an offense against both Majesties, and since it is my obligation to give immediate assistance to remedy this danger and give the said parish priest the help he has asked for, I hereby order all parents that for no reason or pretext should they allow their daughters to go to take baths together with men, even though they be their own brothers, nor at irregular hours, and I order anyone who finds them in these circumstances to inform me immediately in order to take measures to put them where they can be corrected. I permit only married men who can go with their wives for the said bathing, understood that they go alone, or at most with their daughters but no other unrelated persons. And to avoid any embarrassment or frivolous accusations (which are presently happening) I reiterate my order that the baths for women should be after sunset, and for the men after the Angelus, and the one who disobeys anything that is stated herein will be imprisoned for ten days and pay a fine of six pesos which I now impose for the future and which will be used for law enforce-
ment expenses; and so that this order is known by everyone and nobody can claim ignorance, I order that with the playing of drums (when there are the most people) this decree be read, and those who are present should inform those who are not. Given in the said town in the said month and year, acting as judge with witnesses for lack of a clerk . . .

Santiago de Jesús Sánchez  Witness Joseph Antonio Chapa
Witness Blas María Díaz

In the same decree referring to dances, Ponce Borrego also treated this problem.62

1. No one who has female children or girls left in their care can send them to the river after night prayers on the pretext of drawing water or washing because it is certain that this will be the cause of very serious scandal and offenses against God. Anyone found at such hours at the said river will be taken away from the person who has her and placed where care will be taken to avoid offenses against God, and this will be done even though they have been placed by the Ecclesiastical Judge.

2. No man without sufficient reason will go to the shore of the said river after dark and anyone who does so will be given the punishment which corresponds to his disobedience.

3. During the day, no man should go for any reason to talk to women who are washing or drawing water, and anyone found out or known about will suffer the punishment of one month in jail and a fine of six pesos to be applied to the expenses of the church.

All of these rules and regulations reflect a certain innate distrust of human nature but in the last analysis they were meant to help society function well and preserve a Christian atmosphere and spirit, something which existed from the foundation and imbued the culture. And this is the theme we take up next.
ENDNOTES


2. Something similar is England’s knighthood where ordinary men become “Sir” because of some accomplishment.

3. F 22, D 3.

4. F 33, D 1, 2; F 32, D 7.

5. F 64, D 22.

6. F 65, D 44.

7. For those not familiar with Mexican history, one of the leaders of the independence movement was Agustín Iturbide who managed to get himself proclaimed constitutional emperor of Mexico in 1822. He soon aroused opposition by autocratically ignoring the constitution and in less than a year he was deposed and exiled to England.

8. 1823 F 69, D 26; 1824 F 74, D19; 1828 F 83, D 18; 1831 F 92, D 1; 1833 F 98, D 27; 1835 F 118, D 4; 1837 F 133, D 3; 1845 F 169, D 7.

9. F 170, D 73.

10. F 198, D 27.


13. Leyendecker’s arrival is noted in *The New Handbook of Texas*, 2: 53. The census is found in F 189, D 5.


15. F 61, D 6.

16. F 63, D 16.

17. F 77, D 49.

18. F 171, D 1.

19. F 184, D 3, Chapter Two, numbers 17, 21, and 22. The ordinances of 1854 and 1855 are found in F 186, D 2.


21. F 97, no. 10.

22. F 105, no. 2.

24. F 105, no. 35.
25. F 105, no. 44. An *almud* is equivalent to 1.58 liters.
26. F 105, no. 47.
27. F 105, no. 74.
28. F 126, no. 6.
29. F 126, no. 10.
30. F 126, no. 16.
31. F 126, no. 22.
32. F 126, no. 32.
34. F 132, no. 24.
35. F 135, D 1-4.
36. F 154, no. 2.
37. F 154, no. 6.
38. F 154, no. 25.
39. F 154, no. 45.
40. F 154, 57.
41. F 154, no. 59. The reference is to the sacking of Laredo which had taken place less than two weeks before and is mentioned in Chapter 4.
42. Deed Records of Webb County, Texas, Volume A, last pages.
43. F 9, D 3.
44. F 21, D 4.
45. F 27, D 7.
46. F 31, D 2.
47. F 32, D 6.
48. F 50, D 3; F 60, D 18, 19.
49. F 95, D 6; F 153, D 1.
51. F 34, D 9-7. This decree comes from José González.
52. F 77, D 37.
53. F 98, D 42.
54. F 150, D 36. The town council decreed this on April 21, 1842.
55. F 186, D 2.
56. F 184, D 3-27. The first decree was published in June of 1850. The 1854 prohibition is found in F 186, D 2.
57. F 156, D 19.
58. In order of the cities mentioned: F 77, D 35; F 98, D 131; F 119, D 22; F 139, D 2; F 156, D 16; F 163, D 4.
59. See endnote 2 of Chapter 3 for a list of these decrees.
61. F 28, D 1.