2. The Rivalship of Peace

AMPLE HISTORICAL documents have described the Anglo-Saxon spirit that fueled the struggle for Texas independence in 1835–36 and the war with Mexico a decade later. Texas independence and subsequent annexation of the northern Mexican territory were essentially the reflection of a “manifest destiny.” The Anglo-Saxon nation was bound to glory, the inferior, decadent Indian race and the half-breed Mexicans were to succumb before the inexorable march of the superior Anglo-Saxon people. In more defined terms, this destiny called for an expansion of the nation westward to the Pacific Ocean and southward to the Isthmus of Panama, and it called for the ports that would assure the nation’s future as a mercantile empire. The oratory of the former secretary of state of the Texas Republic, Dr. Ashbel Smith, before a Galveston audience in 1846 was characteristic of the language of Manifest Destiny. Describing the Mexican War as “part of a mission, of the destiny allotted to the Anglo-Saxon race,” he argued that “the war in which we are now engaged is comparatively a small matter, except as hastening and precluding to the rivalship of peace.”

At the time of Smith’s address, there remained only the task of fulfilling the “grand, the important consequences of the Mexican War,” of securing “the end of the institutions of Mexico” and carrying out the “substituting of new institutions.”

Once annexation of Mexico’s northern territories was formalized, the institutional transformation of which Smith spoke revolved fundamentally around the question of what was to be done with the annexed Mexican settlements. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo had outlined the general provisions for the protection of the Mexican person and property in the ceded territories. But in the immediate, day-to-day sense, there remained the matter of carrying forth the mission for land and trade, and there was the matter of dealing with the hatreds and prejudices created by war, and the question of establishing stable government.

This chapter explores the role of these basic elements—the sentiments of war, the need for stable governance, the desire for land and trade—in the immediate postwar period. The manner in which these elements mixed and separated along the Texas border region influenced the character of Mexican-Anglo relations in the latter half of the nineteenth century. These elements set the initial ground from which Mexican-Anglo relations would evolve.

Sentiments of War

War and annexation, so far as the survivors are concerned, generally raise the question of what to do with the defeated enemy. In theory and in practice, extermination and assimilation have defined the two extremes, with most outcomes falling in between. There are two major sequences. First, on the one hand, the occupying power may simply overwhelm the defeated people through immigration and settlement, so that within the space of a few years everything becomes completely transformed. Laws, public customs, authority, even the physical appearance of old settlements become foreign and alien to the native people.

The second sequence may have the same results but over a much longer stretch of time. There usually come first the merchants, who belligerently or paternalistically serve as intermediaries between the natives and the new authorities. They may even intermediary and be seen as trusted protectors by the native people. There may be a period where a “bicultural” or “hybrid” generation exists, where the stamp of the native is still strong and vigorous. Nonetheless, the new rulers, however bicultural, plant the foundation for a complete transformation. They represent the seeds of a new development, or an irrevocable change in evolution.

—Both postwar sequences unfolded in Texas after its independence in 1836. The experience was determined mainly by previous settlement patterns, established travel routes, and, of course, economic incentives. There was no gold rush in Texas, but the land rush and the chaos of war overwhelmed the Mexican settlements above the Nueces River. Ten years later, in 1846, the Rio Grande settlements experienced the trauma of war and annexation. The fact that the land beyond the Nueces was seen as a “wild horse desert” spared these settlements the tragic experience of independence. This semi-arid region west and south of the Nueces presented few opportuni-
ties beyond the commerce of El Paso, Laredo, and Matamoros. In these places, where Mexicans were the dominant population, an accommodating understanding between American merchants and the old Mexican elite worked to keep local matters under control.

Above the Nueces

The Texans, as historian James Crisp aptly put it, a "people of paradox." José Antonio Navarro and others like Juan Seguín had believed it possible to be both a proud Mexican and a loyal Texian. During the rebellion against the Santa Anna dictatorship, such beliefs were not contradictory. Initially at least, the rebellion appeared to be another provincial revolt of liberal federalists against the conservative constitutionalist led by Santa Anna, a struggle similar to others then occurring throughout Mexico. The character of the Texas revolt changed, however, after 1836. The political alliance between Mexicans and Anglos in Texas, the alliance that made Lorenzo de Zavala the first vice-president of the republic for a few days, began unraveling soon after the rout of Santa Anna's Army at San Jacinto. A spirit of revenge and avarice prevailed in the young republic, and many ex-soldiers carried out raids that claimed the land, stock, and lives of Mexicans, allies and foes alike. Many of the victims had fought alongside the Anglo colonists against the Santa Anna dictatorship. As a descendant of a loyalist Texian family put it, "these men who had favored the independence, suffered from the very beginning—Many lost their grants, and all lost their ideal—The Republic of Texas."

The bitter aftermath of the Texas Revolution was felt most directly by the Mexican settlements along the Guadalupe and San Antonio rivers, those closest to the Anglo-American colonies of Austin and DeWitt. Here the Mexican communities were subjugated and in many cases expelled. In 1837, the Mexican communities of Victoria, San Patricio, La Bahía (Goliad), and Refugio were the first to feel the vengeance for the massacres at Goliad and the Alamo. The old Mexican town of La Bahía, once an important port with a thousand residents and the unlucky site of Fannin's massacre, was completely razed, and the fort and church destroyed. All that remained of this town when journalist Frederick Olmsted rode through in 1855 were extensive ruins and a "modern village... composed of about twenty jacobos." Even the aristocratic family of the empresario Don Martín de León was not spared reifications. A. B. J. Hammett, biographer of the family, has sketched a vivid portrayal of the bitter experience of the Texas Mexicans loyal to the Texan cause: "This family like other loyal Mexican families were driven from their homes, their treasures, their cattle and horses and their lands, by an army of reckless, war-crazy people, who overran the town of Victoria. These new people distrusted and hated the Mexicans, simply because they were Mexican, regardless of the fact they were both on the same side of the fighting during the war." During the brief tenure of the Texas Republic, Texas Mexicans suffered from forced marches, general dispossession, and random violence. In 1836 over a hundred Mexican families were forced to abandon their homes and lands in the old settlement of Nacogdoches in what is now East Texas.

San Antonio, the old capital and stronghold of Texas, the life and property of Mexicans were hardly secure. Juan Seguín, captain in the Texas army, hero of San Jacinto, and (until recently) the last Mexican mayor of San Antonio, in 1840-43, noted that in those days "the American straggling adventurers... were already beginning to work their dark intrigues against the native families, whose only crime was, that they owned large tracts of land and desirable property." More eloquently, San Antonio claimed then, as it claims now, to be the first city of Texas, it was also the receptacle of the scum of society. My political and social situation brought me into continual contact with that class of people. At every hour of the day and night, my countrymen ran to me for protection against the assaults or exactions of these adventurers. Some times by persuasion, I prevailed on them to desist; some times also, force had to be resorted to. How could I have done otherwise? Were not the villains my own countrymen, friends, and associates? Could I leave them defenseless, exposed to the assaults of foreigners, who, on the pretext that they were Mexican, treated them worse than brutes?"

Due to murder threats against him and his family, Seguín was forced to flee to Mexico in 1842.

Other prominent families left, and by the 1840s, according to Canary Islander José María Rodriguez, "at least two hundred Old Spanish families" who had lived in San Antonio in the early 1800s were gone. The machinations of Texas authorities and merchants against the landowning families were hardly disguised. Texan Army officer Thomas Jefferson Green, for example, was asked to use his military position to further his interest in Bexar County land by Edward Dwyer, a prosperous San Antonio merchant. In a letter to Green,
dated October 4, 1836. Dwyer observed: "... the people [of San Antonio de Béjar] ... are not sufficiently scared to make an advantageous sale of their lands. In case two or three hundred of our troops should be stationed there, I have no doubt but a man could make some good speculations with Gold and Silver. Bank notes will not do to purchase land from Mexicans."

Even without the use of force or fraud, the great apprehension about the new Anglo-American rule compelled many Mexican landowners to sell and leave San Antonio. The erosion of the land base that formed the principal wealth of the Spanish-Mexican population began immediately after 1836. In the six years following the Texas Revolution, from 1837 to 1842, 13 of the most prominent "American buyers" purchased 1,768,574 acres from 351 Mexicans. Members of the Mexican elite were also actively involved in buying land, but the amount they accumulated—the 14 most prominent Mexican buyers purchased 278,769 acres from 67 Mexican owners—was hardly comparable with that amassed by the Anglo pioneers.11

Ten years later, in the aftermath of the Mexican War, another series of punitive expulsions occurred in Central and Southeast Texas. Entire communities were uprooted. Mexicans were driven from Austin in 1853 and again in 1855, from Seguin in 1854, from the counties of Matagorda and Colorado in 1856, and from Uvalde in 1857. Frederick Olmsted in his "saddle-trip" through Texas described these Mexicans as "lower-class" peons who were being expelled on charges of being horse thieves and conscriptors of slave insurrection. One newspaper item told the story of this period plainly:

MATAGORDA.—The people of Matagorda county have held a meeting and ordered every Mexican to leave the county. To strangers this may seem wrong, but we hold it to be perfectly right and highly necessary, but a word of explanation should be given. In the first place, then, there are none but the lower class or "Peon" Mexicans in the county, secondly, they have no fixed domicile, but hang around the plantations, taking the likeliest negro girls for wives, and, thirdly, they often steal horses, and these girls, too, and endeavor to run them to Mexico. We should rather have anticipated an appeal to Lynch law, than the mild course which has been adopted.12

Even in San Antonio there was an attempt to drive away a large section of the Mexican population, but the plan failed because the Germans, who would have formed a major element of the proposed vigilante committee, refused to support these efforts. "They were of the opinion," observed Olmsted, "that this was not the right and republican way."13

By 1857, San Antonio had been half-deserted by its Mexican population. Of the town population of 10,000, 2,000 were Mexican; 4,000 were German, and the remaining 3,000 were American. The San Antonio of Olmsted was quite different from the San Antonio of Juan Seguin only twelve years before. The "money-capital" and government were in the hands of the Americans, while most of the mechanics and the smaller shopkeepers were German. The Mexicans appeared "to have almost no other business than that of carrying goods. Nearly 60 percent of the Mexican work force were cartmen."

The American settlers, in speaking of Mexicans, constantly distinguished themselves as "white folks." Newcomers were sometimes surprised at the rights of Mexicans. Olmsted overheard one newcomer informing another American that he had seen a Mexican with a revolver and stating that they shouldn't be allowed to carry firearms. The other replied that it would be difficult to prevent it—"they think themselves just as good as white men."14 Around the Victoria area, Anglo-Americans had sharply distinct views of Germans and Mexicans. "They always employed German mechanics, and spoke well of them. Mexicans were regarded in a somewhat un-Christian tone, not as heretics or heathen to be converted with flannel and tracts, but rather as vermin to be exterminated. The lady was particularly strong in her prejudices. White folks and Mexicans were never made to live together, anyhow, and the Mexicans had no business here. They were getting so impertinent, and were so well protected by the laws, that the Americans would just have to get together and drive them all out of the country."15

Not as fortunate were the Mexican teamsters who carried freight along the San Antonio-Goliad highway. During the summer and fall of 1857, Mexican teamsters were attacked by masked bands. The assailants were believed to be American teamsters who resented the competition with Mexicans. Despite seventy-five murders, civil authorities proved unwilling to arrest the attackers. As a result Mexicans began leaving San Antonio and prices increased 50 percent. After considerable pressure from San Antonio merchants, a troop of Rangers was detailed to patrol the trade routes in November. The raids ceased but no suspects were ever apprehended. The raids proved successful: Mexicans were effectively removed from the freight business between San Antonio and Gulf Coast ports.16 Thus, in the region where considerable numbers of Mexicans and
Anglos lived, the tragic aftermath one expects of war—recriminations, dispossession of land and belongings, violence, and revenge—was much in evidence.

Along the Rio Grande

Although the Rio Grande settlements south and west of San Antonio were not directly affected by the Texan struggles for independence, these wars depopulated the coastal areas close to the Nueces River, the boundary between the Mexican states of Texas and Tamaulipas. The livestock industry in this area was completely disrupted as Mexican settlers fled from their haciendas to the protected towns of the Rio Grande. As a measure of retribution, the Texas Republic had declared Mexican livestock to be public property, prompting many Texan veterans to conduct stock raids below the Nueces. These "reckless young fellows," according to one old-timer, were the first to be given the name of "cowboys." 10 In short, between 1836 and 1846 the strip between the Nueces and the Rio Grande constituted a veritable "no-man's land," claimed by the Republics of Texas and Mexico but actually controlled by Indian tribes.

Military occupation in 1846 and subsequent annexation replicated, in some respects, the experience above the Nueces after Texas independence. On the one hand, the fate of Mexican property rights was uncertain. Squatters and adventurers were everywhere; tales of fraud and chicanery were common, and deliberations in the Texas Legislature and in Texas courts all suggested an eventual confiscation of Mexican-owned property. The considerable expense of legal proceedings to defend old Spanish and Mexican titles, together with the uncertainty of the outcome, prompted many owners to sell to interested American parties at low prices. 11

On the other hand, as had happened with the Texas Revolution, there was considerable repatriation after the Mexican War. Mexican refugees moved across the Rio Grande and settled among the old-established towns of Paso del Norte, Guadalupe, Mier, Camargo, Reynosa, and Matamoros. Other refugees established new towns, such as Nuevo Monterrey (now Nuevo Laredo) opposite Laredo and Mesilla and Guadalupe, both near El Paso del Norte. 12 Despite these refugee movements, Texas south and west of the Nueces River remained predominantly Mexican in population.

Unlike Texas above the Nueces, where the Mexican population had soon found itself outnumbered, the length of the Rio Grande region remained isolated until the turn of the century. Following the initial Anglo settlement after the Mexican War, there was no continued influx. The only exception was the Civil War period when another layer of ex-soldiers and merchant-camp followers was added to the communities of the Upper and Lower Rio Grande valleys. El Paso served as an important stop for travelers and merchants, but permanent Anglo settlement remained small until the arrival of the railroad in 1881. In South Texas, Laredo and Brownsville were completely away from the westward land movements and no free land existed. As in the case of El Paso, the few Anglo settlers who came were merchants, lawyers, or professionals whose occupation was tied with the northern Mexican trade or the new land business of the border region. 13

The first U.S. Census, taken shortly after annexation, enumerated approximately 14,000 Mexicans in Texas, a serious undercount which may be attributable to the personnel employed to collect the data—U.S. marshals, soldiers, and tax officials. The French clergyman Abbé Emanuel Domenech, for example, questioned the numbers, believing that "the Mexicans were then (of 1848) the most numerous, notwithstanding all that compilers of statistics have stated to the contrary, next the Anglo-Americans, and then the Germans." For the stretch of Texas the abbé was most familiar with, he was correct. Eighty to 90 percent of the population in a 100-mile-wide strip along the Texas-Mexico border was Mexican, and in some places the proportion of Mexican to Anglos reached about twenty-five to one. 14

According to the best estimates Olmsted found, in 1850 there were 17,000 Mexican inhabitants in the state. Approximately 7,000 were concentrated in the region above the Nueces (around San Antonio and Gal- lardo), 5,000 were below the Nueces (Laredo and the lower Rio Grande), 8,000 were in West Texas (El Paso and Presidio), and 4,000 were "floating about" the state. Comparable estimates for the Anglo population were 130,000 above the Nueces and 20,000 south and west of the Nueces. In other words, in 1850 the population beyond the Nueces consisted approximately of 3,500 Anglos and probably 18,000 Mexicans. 15

In the immediate postwar period, this demographic mix made for an unstable situation. As had occurred earlier (in the 1830s) with the San Antonio and Victoria settlements, the Rio Grande settlements attracted the worst elements among the Anglo pioneers. In Laredo, as José María Rodríguez recalled in his memoirs, some Americans "began a movement to clean out the Mexicans. They would rant at public meetings and declare that this was an American country and the Mexicans ought to be run out." 16 In the Lower Valley, Abbé Emanuel Domenech, who ministered to the religious needs of the Brownsville area from 1849 to 1855, was blunt in his appraisal of the
The Americans: "The Americans of the Texian frontiers are, for the most part, the very scum of society—bankrupts, escaped criminals, old volunteers, who after the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, came into a country protected by nothing that could be called a judicial authority, to seek adventure and illicit gains." The abbe had especially harsh words about the Texas Rangers and ex-army volunteers in the area, describing them as "the very dregs of society, and the most degraded of human creatures." The Abbe Domenech was equally frank in his judgment of Mexicans: "I could never comprehend the Mexican's submission, supporting, as he did, at once the cruelty and the contempt of a nation which he so jealously detested, had not been so often the witness of his incredible nonchalance and imperious meekness. In these badly-organized regions, the Mexican might have an easy vengeance on his persecutors, who are quite the minority on the Texian frontiers; but vengeance is not in his heart; he would rather forget an injury than take the trouble of avenging it." Notwithstanding the abbe's assessment, the situation along the Rio Grande proved to be extremely volatile. All that was lacking for the emergence of a movement of resistance and retribution was a precipitating gesture or act of defiance. The first Cortina War, which exploded a few years after Domenech had returned to France, had such origins.

According to the well-embossed story, Juan Nepomuceno Cortina, son of a wealthy landowning family in the Lower Valley, came to the defense of a farmhand named Amparo and former servant from the beating of Brownsville Marshal Rob Shears. Cortina shot the marshal in the arm in self-defense and carried the ranchoero off to his ranch. Charges of attempted murder were filed, the Brownsville authorities refusing to compromise with Cortina. In response, Cortina and his supporters rendezvous and captured Brownsville, the initial blow of a six-month-long war. Retiring to his Rancho del Carmen (in Cameron County), Cortina issued the following proclamation to the Mexicans of Texas (November 23, 1859): "Mexicans! When the State of Texas began to receive the new organization which its sovereignty required as a part of the United States, flocks of vampires, in the guise of men, came and scattered themselves in the settlements, without any capital except the corrupt heart and the most perverse intentions. . . . Many of you have been robbed of your property, incarcerated, chased, murdered, and hunted like wild beasts, because your labor was fruitful, and because your industry excited the vile avarice which led them." Within a month, Cortina had organized an irregular force of five to six hundred men. Many of those involved in the Cortina War, according to a federal report on the matter, were rancheros who had been "driven away from the Nueces." Cortina defeated the Brownsville Rifles and Tobin's Rangers from San Antonio, maintaining control of the region until the U.S. Army sent troops in December 1859.

The results of the Cortina War, according to the army commandant, were the depopulation and laying to waste of the whole country from Brownsville to Rio Grande City, 120 miles. Business as far up as Laredo, 240 miles, had been interrupted and suspended for five months. There remained no property belonging to Americans that had not been destroyed. And those rancheros spared by Cortina's men had been burned by the Texans.

At the other end of Texas, attempts to assert ownership over several large salt deposits in the mid-1870s ignited a confrontation known as the "Salt War." Anglo merchants and politicians had shown interest in the salt lakes at the foot of the Guadalupe Mountains since annexation, and conflict over various schemes to tax the salt had constituted a volatile element in El Paso politics. For a hundred years or more the residents of El Paso, San Elizario, and other towns along the Upper Rio Grande had hauled salt from the lakes freely. The lakes had created in these towns a group of merchants who piled salt throughout northern Mexico. In 1877 Judge Charles Howard attempted to make the lakes into "a money-making proposition," but his actions, including the public murder of Louis Cardis, the leader of the Mexican opposition, aroused a "mob" to seek revenge. Howard and two of his associates were killed, and the relief troop of Texas Rangers was defeated before order was restored.

Thus, along the border, overt land dispossession, expulsions, and other repressive measures were not safe options. The Anglo pioneers were quite conscious of their small numbers in the region. After the Cortina rebellion, the threat of an uprising formed an important undercurrent in their psychology, a fear that perhaps motivated the practice of benevolent patronato on their part. The "Cortina War" of 1859–60 and later of 1875–77 and the El Paso "Salt War" of 1877 were examples of what could happen; in all three episodes, competing claims to land or livestock precipitated a state of virtual warfare, with a mobilized Mexican element matching arms with the local constabulary and the Texas Rangers. The losers in these conflicts were usually the uninvolved civilian population, who bore the brunt of escalating and indiscriminate retaliation and counterretaliation. Indeed, the Nueces Strip of South Texas and the Trans-Pecos region of West Texas remained "untamed" for nearly fifty years after annexation. A frontier battalion of Texas Rangers, stationed in the border zone until 1920, represented the armed force of the Anglo-Texas order. A military unit during the Mexican War, the Texas
Rangers functioned as the military police of occupation, waging sporadic warfare whenever the need arose. 2

Prosperity and stability, however, could not be maintained under such volatile circumstances. Peace and everyday governance required a more secure arrangement.

Structure of Peace

The changes brought about by Texas independence and later American annexation were clear: a new political authority, new markets, and new land laws, to mention the most sweeping. A highly conspicuous elite of Anglo merchants, lawyers, army officers, and officeholders now controlled the trade and politics of the annexed Mexican settlements. Whether they lived together above San Pedro Springs in San Antonio, or on the bluff overlooking the bay of Corpus Christi, or around Franklin's store opposite El Paso del Norte, the clique of Anglo merchants, military officers, and lawyer politicians constituted a self-conscious foreign enclave. 3 How did they govern?

In the case of the Texas-Mexican border region and generally in the annexed Southwest, the ability to govern in the immediate postwar period was secured through an accommodation between the victorious Anglo and the defeated Mexican elite, with the latter in command of the Mexican communities. In sociological terms, this accommodation was essentially a "peace structure." 4

By "peace structure" I refer to a general postwar arrangement that allows the victors to maintain law and order without the constant use of force. The concept focuses on the manner in which victors are able to exercise and establish authority over the defeated. In the Texas-Mexican region, such a peace structure was characterized by two major aspects: one, the subordination of Mexicans to Anglos in matters of politics and authority, and two, the accommodation between new and old elites.

The Fabric of Peace

Although the American presence generally represented a new class in an old Mexican society, it did not completely transform the traditional authority structure. On the contrary, the American merchants and lawyers merely affixed themselves atop the Mexican hierarchy. In some cases, they intermarried and became an extension of the old elite. For individual families of the Mexican elite, intermarriage was a convenient way of containing the effects of Anglo military victory on their status, authority, and class position. For the ambitious Anglo merchant and soldier with little capital, it was an easy way of acquiring land. The social basis for postwar governance, in other words, rested on the class character of the Mexican settlements.

These settlements were essentially a three-tiered society composed of landed elite, small landowners (ranchoeros) and peons. San Antonio in the 1840s, for example, was a highly structured class society. At the top were the prominent landed families, who lived in spacious flat-roofed stone houses, below them were the ranchoeros, who spent most of their days working their cattle and horses and whose small adobe homes usually consisted of one sparsely furnished room, and at the the bottom tier of the class order were the laborers, or peones, who lived a mundane existence, often no more than mud houses with thatched roofs. 5 A prominent contemporary of the period, José María Rodríguez, described the "great distinction between the east and west side of the (San Antonio) river" in the following manner: "The west side of the river was supposed to be the residence of the first families here, and the descendants of the Indians and Spanish soldiers settled on the east side of the river. . . . Most of the Canary Islanders who lived on this [west] side took great pride in preventing any marriage with mixed races and when one did mix he lost his caste with the rest." 6 Although frontier conditions made this caste system somewhat fluid, and families could in generations pass from one caste to another, the lines themselves were clearly drawn. Moreover, they were distinctions that the American pioneers were quick to recognize and accept. Ample evidence points to an early accommodation between old and new elites. Although initially outside this Spanish-Mexican structure, the Anglo-Saxon pioneers were accepted—depending on their class, of course—as equals by the "Spanish" elite. 7 By 1842, however, of the first six years after independence, the peaceful accommodation that had characterized Mexican Anglo relations was transformed.

The loss of land, the flight of the Mexican elite, and the Mexican War a few years later quickly eroded the influence of Mexicans. In spite of this, San Antonio after the Civil War still had appearances, according to one resident, of a village "typical of Mexico." The "early Americans" had become acclimated, had intermarried in many instances, "and in turn kept up many of the customs of this quaint old Spanish town." The town of about ten or twelve thousand inhabitants had a mingling of American, German, and French colonists with a large Mexican population. In the plaza could be heard "a babble of voices from three or four languages" but "almost everyone spoke Spanish and most of the business was conducted in this common language." 8
that "the political border was at the Rio Grande, but Military Plaza was the commercial and social border between the countries." 36

The Rio Grande settlements south and west of San Antonio differed little in their social structure. At the time of American occupation in the mid-nineteenth century, there were four major strata: the land elite; the atrinados, or landless relatives of the elite; the rancheros and vaqueros; and the pastores. The society of the time has been described as a "patrilocal" one where the landlord acted as the head and the vaqueros and pastores acted as "faithful" subjects. 37

Of the Rio Grande settlements, Laredo represented the peace structure at its best. Although Laredo had suffered from the depredations of "East Texas outlaws" and many families had resettled across the river (thus founding Nuevo Laredo), much of the strife prevailing in the Texas interior had been avoided. To a large extent, the confirmation of twenty land grant titles by the Texas Legislature in the 1850s was responsible for the peace. The wealth and power of landed elite were generally left undisturbed, and considerable intermarriage bound the old and new elites. Thus, in the postannexation politics of the area, ethnic divisions were secondary to those of class. Ordinances were published in both English and Spanish, American and Mexican holidays celebrated, and political offices divided equally. Mexicans ran the city while Anglos ran the county. Likewise, there was a tacit division of labor, Mexicans ranched and farmed while Anglos commerced. 38

In the Lower Valley, the conservative upper class, fearful of outright confiscation of their property, was divided in their response to the Anglo presence. According to a well-informed source, some landed families "learned to get along with Americans by overlooking whatever misfortunes fell on the lower class of Mexicans." Retaining their property and benefiting from the American presence, the established families had little cause for complaint. 39 Their loyalties were subjected to a difficult test with Cortina's rebellion in 1859. Some lent the "war" quiet approval while others organized the repression of the "uprising." Unwavering support for the Anglo military forces—the Brownsville Rifles, the Texas Rangers, U.S. Army troops, and, later, Confederate troops—came from the Laredo elite in the form of a company of Mexican rancheros led by Santos Benavides, grandson of Don Tomás Sánchez, founder of Laredo.40

As in San Antonio and Laredo, the accommodation between the old and incoming elites in the Lower Valley manifested itself in tactical marriages. It was customary among the Mexican elite, as Jovita González has noted, that daughters were "married at an early age, and not for love, but for family connections and considerations." 41

On the other hand, for the Anglo settler, marrying a Mexican with property interests made it possible to amass a good-sized stock ranch without considerable expense. The Americans and the European immigrants, most of whom were single men, married the daughters of the leading Spanish-Mexican families and made Rio Grande City "a cosmopolitan little town." Among those who claimed the Spanish language as their own were families with such surnames as LaCaze, Laborde, Lafargue, Decker, Marx, Block, Monroe, Nix, Stuart, and Ellert. As one Texas Mexican from this upper class recalled: "There were neither racial nor social distinctions between Americans and Mexicans, we were just one family. This was due to the fact that so many of us of that generation had a Mexican mother and an American or European father."

Another way of securing political and economic alliances through kinship was through the sponsorship of baptisms, confirmations, or marriages. The sponsors then became compadres and compadres of the invitees. For the ranchero families whose daughters did not have enough status to qualify as marriage partners for the Anglo elite, the compadrazgo served as another manner of linking the future of their families with that of the new entrepreneurial and political upper class. Likewise for Anglo merchants and lawyers, this quasi-religious institution of the compadrazgo became a familiar vehicle for gaining recognition, status, and protection. 42

For the Anglo settlers, some degree of "Mexicanization" was necessary for the most basic communication in this region, given the overwhelming number of Mexicans. But such acculturation meant far more than the learning of a language and a proper etiquette; it represented a way of acquiring influence and even a tenuous legitimacy in the annexed Mexican settlements. From participation in religious rituals and other communal activities to "becoming family" through godparenthood or marriage—such a range of ties served to create an effective everyday authority, a type that Ranger or army guys alone could not secure.

Occupation Politics
The military occupation established the pattern and climate for civilian rule. This meant that the interim military government of the Mexican settlements of the Upper and Lower Rio Grande valleys did not allow the defeated Mexicans to rule over the victorious American soldiers, however lowly in rank. This applied, by extension, to the American quartermaster employees and merchants accompanying the army of occupation. Mexican civilian leadership was kept...
continued administrative functions but military personnel were under distinct military jurisdiction. Thus in 1850 a sizable fraction of the Anglo population in the Mexican settlements was essentially immune from the acts of civilian authorities. In San Antonio nearly half of the American population was part of the military presence, either as enlisted personnel or as wagon surveyors working for the military. Another 9 percent were merchants or clerks. In the occupied Lower Rio Grande Valley, nearly 40 percent of the American population were army personnel or employees and 15 percent were merchants or clerks.

Once martial law was lifted and troops withdrawn or discharged, Americans and Mexicans, former enemies, maintained their distinct statuses in the courts, in the political parties, and in the town administrations of the old settlements. Two questions had to be settled. One concerned the status of Mexican property in the state. Since Texas had, under the terms of statehood in 1845, retained jurisdiction over all the land within its borders, it claimed to be exempted from the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. Thus the former republic carried out its own deliberations concerning the status of the annexed Mexicans and their land grants.

To adjudicate the matter of land grants, Governor Peter H. Bell appointed William Bourland and James Miller to investigate the validity of Spanish and Mexican titles. In Webb County, site of the first hearings, the Bourland-Miller Commission encountered opposition from Mexican landowners, who believed that the investigation was out to destroy rather than protect their rights. The impartiality of the proceedings and the prompt confirmation by the legislature of the commission's recommendations removed “this unfounded prejudice” and secured the loyalty of the landed elite of the Laredo area to the new order. Other landowners beyond the Nueces were not as fortunate and thus not as loyal as the Laredo grantees. In the Chihuahua Seccession, only seven of the fourteen land grants were recognized. Of approximately 350 cases in the Tamaulipas and Coahuila secessions, “some two hundred” were confirmed by the legislature in 1852, and another 50 were subsequently confirmed by 1901. Of course, many of the grants confirmed were already owned, in part or whole, by Anglos.

The second question requiring immediate attention was the political status of the Mexican in Texas. One of the liveliest debates in the Texas Constitutional Convention (1845) concerned whether or not the Mexican should be allowed the right to vote. The debate centered on whether the qualifying adjective “white” should be retained in the constitutional provisions that described the voters of the state. The Harris County representative argued that the qualifier “white” should be kept, not because he feared the Spaniard, he welcomed them as he welcomed any portion of the Caucasian race that desired to settle in Texas, rather he feared the mass immigration of “hordes of Mexican Indians” — “silently they will come moving in, they will come back in thousands to Texas, in thousands to California, perhaps to Nebraska, and what will be the consequence? Ten, twenty, thirty, forty, fifty thousand may come in here, and vanquish you at the ballot box though you are invincible in arms. This is no idle dream, no bugbear, it is the truth. The proposal failed, however, because of opposition by several Angelos, Texas allies and protectors of the Texas Mexican elite (like Col. Henry Kinney of Corpus Christi), José Antonio Navarro of San Antonio, the only Texas Mexican and the only native-born Texan at the Constitutional Convention, argued eloquently against the proposal.

In spite of the formal defeat of disfranchisement at the convention, Mexicans in certain districts were denied the vote or allowed only limited participation. Corpus Christi merchant Henry Kinney observed that in several counties the practice immediately after independence had been to withhold the franchise from Mexicans, even though they may have fought against a people “of their own race.” Traveler Frederick Olmsted observed that, if the Mexicans in San Antonio voted, they could elect a government of their own, “such a step would be followed, however, by a summary revolution.” Where Mexicans did have the right to vote, protests and threats from Anglo-Americans were constant reminders of a fragile franchise. A typical protest was exemplified by a hotly contested election for state representative from Nueces and Webb counties in 1860, where S. Kinney of Corpus Christi lost to Charles Callaghan of Laredo by a margin of thirty-five votes. The Corpus Christi Ranchero noted that Kinney was the choice of fifteen of sixteen voters where the English language was spoken and that “American men in an American country should have a fair showing in shaping the destinies of the country.” The Fort Brown Flag of Brownsville joined in the protest, editorializing that “we are opposed to allowing an ignorant crowd of Mexicans to determine the political questions in this country, where a man is supposed to vote knowingly and thoughtfully.” Disfranchisement was the usual sentiment of disgruntled losers in electoral politics.

Where Texas Mexicans constituted a significant portion of the male vote, the politicians among the American settlers proceeded to instruct and organize the new voters. A common pattern was the monitored franchise, where Mexicans voted according to the dictates
of the local patron, or boss. Since these political machines delivered sizable blocs of votes in state and national elections, the Anglo patron acquired influence far beyond that usually accorded “backwater” county politicians.

Generally, the lesser bosses were members of the wealthy Mexican families who had entered the political arena to maintain and defend their traditional status, as in the “suburbs” of Brownsville, San Antonio, and El Paso. But in all these instances, including places where Mexicans controlled most offices, as in Starr and Zapata counties, the figure of an Anglo boss legitimized Mexican political involvement. In the 1850s, the specific arrangements varied. Cameron County in the Lower Valley showed a nearly equal division of county commissioner positions. In Webb County, Anglos ran the county while Mexicans ran the city of Laredo. In El Paso County, the pattern was reversed, and Anglos ran the city while Mexicans ran the county.

The role of the Mexican elite as influential politicians was contingent, of course, on the presence of a large Mexican electorate. In San Antonio, where the Mexican population increasingly declined through the nineteenth century, Mexican representation on the city aldermanic council fell at an exponential rate after 1836. In 1837, for example, all but one of the forty-one candidates running for city elections were of Spanish-Mexican descent, a decade later there were only five. Between 1848 and 1866 each aldermanic council included one or two Mexican representatives; after 1866, however, even token representation was rare. Mexican political clubs remained active but constituted minor actors in the city’s affairs. Through the early 1900s, the Mexican voice in city politics was symbolically represented by Anglo officials with familial ties to the Mexican upper class—the Lockwoods, Tobins, and Callaghans, for example.

Pursuit of Trade

While the peace structure assured a degree of stability and continuity in the annexed settlements, the accommodation existed ultimately to serve the “right of trading” of the Anglo Pioneer Settlers. This signified the formation of an “export-oriented” elite whose activities would gradually dissolve the colonial character of the Mexican settlements, particularly the stress held on the land. Once the expectations of war and the “rule of cowboys” had subsided, the play of the market became a primary instrument of displacement in the annexed territories. This export-oriented elite, consisting of Anglo-American merchants and land lawyers with Mexican merchants as minor partners, was the basic catalytic agent in this transformative process.

The connection between the Mexican War and the origins of an Anglo-American mercantile elite was intimate and clear. Many merchants had been “camp followers” who were impressed by the trade potential with northern Mexico. Another layer was added by Gen. Zachary Taylor’s army and the citizen employees of the quarter-master. Many of the soldiers discharged at Camargo, for example, remained in the area following the declaration of peace. Henry Clay Davis, one of those released at Camargo, married the daughter of a landed Mexican family and built a rancho and a mercantile house across the river on land belonging to his father-in-law. The Davis Ranch formed the beginning of Rio Grande City. Other prominent pioneers came to the Valley as part of Taylor’s quarter-master system. Cattlemen Mifflin Kendrick, who married the wealthy Petia Vela de Vidal, and Richard King were civilian pilots of the army’s steamboats.

The quarter-master system set up to supply Taylor’s army of occupation in northern Mexico lay the groundwork for the merchants and entrepreneurs in the newly acquired region. Of San Antonio

Table 1. San Antonio Aldermen by Ethnicity, 1837–1904

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Non-Spanish-Surnamed</th>
<th>Spanish-Surnamed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1837–1847</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1848–1857</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1858–1866</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1867–1874</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1875–1884</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1885–1894</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1895–1904</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Olmsted noted that the capital owned there was “quite large. The principal accumulations date from the Mexican war, when no small part of the many millions expended by Government were disbursed here in payment to contractors. Some prime cuts were secured by residents, and no small portion of the lesser pickings remained in their hands.” In the Lower Rio Grande Valley, a significant new element in the local economy was the steamboat. When the government auctioned off its river craft as surplus material, it transferred the infrastructure it had developed over to the hands of the new capital-based elite. Charles Stillman in partnership with the river captains who had worked for the quartermaster—Mifflin Kenedy, Richard King, and James O'Donnell—purchased the craft and within a few years established a monopoly of all transportation on the river. This included a ferry from Brownsville to Matamoros, through which all goods to and from northern Mexico had to pass. Rates were high but there would be no competition in the freight business until after the Civil War.

The Business of Merchants

Among the most prominent merchants of the annexed Southwest belongs Charles Stillman of Brownsville, a true “Connecticut Yankee.” Stillman, the son of a wealthy Connecticut merchant, had settled in Matamoros in 1828 to handle the Mexican end of his father’s shipping trade. By 1846 “Don Carlos,” as he was known to his Mexican clients, had developed an annual business of $75,000 to $80,000, double that of any other American merchant with the exception of the U.S. consul, J. P. Schatzell, who claimed an annual business of $150,000. Trade of such magnitude, it should be noted, was not unusual for American consular officers at Matamoros. As historian Leroy Graf explained the matter, since Matamoros was not considered a “choice” assignment, the “most patently regrettable” individuals, adventurers who were anxious to accumulate a great financial return, were appointed.

Much of Stillman’s success in business stemmed not just from entrepreneurial talent but from the unusual political ability to maintain “good faith” with the warring sides during the Texian troubles, the Mexican War, and again during the American Civil War. In 1846, for example, Stillman was on hand to greet the columns of Taylor’s army as they marched into Matamoros.

Stillman, as did probably most astute frontier merchants, fully understood the import of the Mexican War. Supported by the commerce accompanying the logistical support of Taylor’s occupation of northern Mexico, Stillman built a dependable ferry service from Matamoros to Fort Brown and the new settlement forming on the communal lands of Matamoros. By the end of 1848, barely ten months after the ratification of the treaty, Stillman had already organized a land company to sell lots and develop the town of Brownsville on Matamoros’ former ejidal lands. As a final demonstration of the meaning of annexation, Stillman purchased the government’s war surplus river craft to control transportation and freighting around Matamoros-Brownsville. Tom Lea summed the matter well: “Peace or war, he used what he made to make more.”

Col. Henry Kinney was another frontier merchant with the rare political skill to maintain tacit Mexican support in spite of increasing tension with Anglo-Texan troops. In 1840 Kinney had set up, in company with an Alabama trader, a trading store on the Tamaulipas side of the Nueces River where it empties into Corpus Christi Bay. This store, which survived at the pleasure of both Texan and Mexican troops, became a principal conduit for the Mexican smuggling trade. When Taylor’s army arrived at Corpus Christi Bay in 1846 to assert the Texan claim to the Nueces Strip, a claim that Kinney had done much to promote, Kinney was appointed quartermaster for the troops. In a few months, “Kinney’s Ranch” became a boomtown of two thousand inhabitants, excluding troops. Kinney was in the enviable position of being merchant, quartermaster, and staff officer all at once. Col. Henry Kinney’s good fortune was temporary, however. After the war, he attempted to develop the town of Corpus Christi, much like Stillman had done with Brownsville and Henry Clay Davis with Rio Grande City. Kinney’s colonization schemes failed, however, and left him penniless.

In sum, the successful frontier merchant was the one who learned to anticipate and adjust to shifting political allegiances. The art of business overrode patriotic idealism, affording merchants an aura of neutrality. Thus the wartime profits of the Civil War, like those of the Mexican War some fifteen years earlier, proved to be a boon for the most opportunistic entrepreneurs.

The Practice of Lawyers

An integral member of the capital-based Anglo elite was the lawyer, who basically served to organize the land market in the new territories. For example, Stephen Powers of Brownsville, the best versed lawyer in Spanish and Mexican land law, cleared the titles to an immense portion of the grants lying between the Nueces and the Rio Grande. The building of the Kinz and Kenedy ranches was ex-
sentially the legal handiwork of Powers and his junior associate, James B. Wells. In Laredo, Edwin A. Arlee, associated with the firm of Albert L. McLane, successfully represented many Mexican land grant heirs in establishing the legality of their land titles. In El Paso, Dale Evon Owens from Chicago established an important practice.  

San Antonio’s most prominent lawyer was Samuel Maverick, son of a wealthy Charleston merchant, graduate of Yale College, and owner of considerable holdings in the East and in Texas. Maverick, however, is best remembered for the business he never cared for. According to the well-known legend, Maverick was so busy with his land business that his unbranded cattle usually wandered loose around San Antonio. The residents, on seeing an unbranded stray, got used to saying, “There goes a Maverick,” and in this fashion all strays and unbranded cattle came to be known as “mavericks.”

By virtue of their office, land lawyers were the critical intermediaries between the land-based Mexican elite and the capital-based Anglo merchants. Letters to Powers and Wells suggest the role. On the one hand, there were inquiries, mainly from prospective Anglo buyers, of the status of certain land claims and titles; on the other hand, there were powers of attorney, mainly from Mexican landowners, for representation in land litigation as well as last wills and testaments of deceased Mexican landowners; and, finally, another group of letters referred to land taxes and sales, settlements regarding claims, mortgage payments, and notices of land surveying. Not surprisingly, as mediators of the land market, the land lawyers evolved into the most powerful political brokers of the new order. Brownsville lawyer Herbert Davenport described Powers’ position pointedly: “He was almost the only public man of his day who understood the points of view of both the resident Mexicans who had owned land in that region before 1848, and the incoming Americans, and he rendered inestimable services to the border region by maintaining harmony among them.”

According to Evan Anders, Powers built up influence among both the ranch owners and the Mexican population by “defending the land rights of certain Mexican families and by persuading others that they never really owned their land.”

On Powers’ death in 1883, his pupil James B. Wells inherited the law practice and powerful political position. Wells continued to maintain close ties with the region’s great landowners—he himself would accumulate over 44,000 acres—and, even more than Powers, he became known as the “friend and protector” of the impoverished Mexican masses. Much of his influence stemmed from his efforts to provide relief for Mexican rancharios and their families during the severe drought of 1893, as well as through his sponsorship of weddings,
baptisms, and funerals. As one commemorative account summed up the matter, Powers and Wells were brilliant politicians and talented courtroom lawyers with an extraordinary command of “simple, Anglo-Saxon English—which any English speaking ranchero, or the dumbest of jurors, could understand.”

The Interests of Mexican Entrepreneurs
Together the American merchant and the land lawyer provided the financial capital and legal work necessary to loosen Mexican ownership of land. Many of the Mexican elite who cooperated with the new authorities and merchants, on the other hand, shared in the prosperous trade of the postwar period. The new international boundary had given the river a strategic commercial significance. Wealthy Mexican families with branches on both sides of the river were in an excellent position for managing international trade. That this international trade consisted mainly of smuggled goods mattered little, for the trade had quickly acquired, in the minds of both Mexican and Anglo entrepreneurs, a legitimate status.

The smuggling trade flourished in the immediate postwar period. In the 1850s (and through the present decade of the 1980s) this trade consisted largely of manufactured goods flowing south into Mexico and agricultural goods flowing north into the United States. During the Civil War, Anglo and Mexican merchants of the river towns, from Brownsville through Laredo, gained small fortunes supplying the Confederate forces and transporting Confederate cotton down the Rio Grande for export. Mexican merchants established a line of freight boats to navigate the Rio Grande as far up as San Ygnacio in Zapata County. The Rio Grande, as an international river, represented the Confederacy’s only market outlet not blockaded by Union forces.

This commercial success was premised, of course, on the political and military support for the Confederacy by the landed Mexican elite. In South Texas the Mexican elite of Webb and Zapata counties, under the leadership of Santos Benavides of Laredo, protected the southwestern flank of the Confederacy from “renegade” Mexican leaders, such as the “brigand” Juan Cortina, who operated with federal support during the Civil War.

But such political accommodation was not sufficient to account for continued land tenure. The strategic nature of the river was an important factor in the survival of old landed families in the lower border counties, as opposed to other families whose lands were located some distance from the border. The former’s access to wealth was based on trade, along with the right politics, accounted for their sur-
cess. Santos Benavides, for example, who rose to the rank of colonel because of his loyalty to Texas and the Confederacy, and Antonio Vidalauri, a fellow Confederate officer with considerable landholdings, were in 1860 among the recognized "types of successful men in Texas." Benavides was known as the "merchant prince of the Rio Grande" and Vidalauri was engaged in extensive business projects, including mining, in Mexico. Among other positions, both had served as mayor of Laredo. 8

The successful elite of the lower border counties combined large-scale ranching with an import-export business between Saltillo, Monterrey and either Brownsville, Corpus Christi, or San Antonio. They also engaged in farming, planting the first cotton and introducing the first modern plow and the corn planter. 9

A Concluding Note
This brief description of the activities of the mercantile elite does not exhaust the number of adventures that this group concocted during the years following annexation. It is no exaggeration to say that there were hardly any major crises in which some merchants were not involved. This was a time when the spirit of Manifest Destiny was running high and even the wildest scheme seemed a worthwhile gamble. If one scheme turned sour, then there were others. Thus Col. Henry Kinney, representing the adventurous frontier merchant, left Texas after his "boom" of Corpus Christi fizzled to do some filibustering in Nicaragua.

In Texas, however, there was plenty for merchants to do. A campaign to create a new state separate from Texas, armed filibusters to establish a new republic in northern Mexico (the Republic of the Rio Grande), the politics of smuggling and tariffs—these suggest some of the political activities of the pioneer merchants during the ten years following the war. Even the first Cortina War of the late 1850s, according to some accounts of the time, was an exaggeration designed to get the soldiers, along with their business, back to the border. 10 Intrigue permeates the historical record. There is no need to claim that merchants were alone in all of these adventures and projects; by themselves they could hardly have done much. But merchants were central figures in molding the spirit of Manifest Destiny into concrete demands and proposals. As a class, merchants provided the stimulus and vision for many of the border difficulties during the postwar period. They were the architects of development.

The nature of the postwar order beyond the Nueces should be clear. The landed Mexican elite sought to protect their property through some form of accommodation and even subordination to the new authorities and merchants. Romance aside, marriage appeared to be mutually advantageous. As in so many historical situations where a defensive landed upper class and an ambitious mercantile group have met, marriage between representatives of the two seemed to be a classic resolution, a suspension, of the conflict between these two classes.

Nonetheless, there was a marked tension between the pursuit of commercial interests and the maintenance of peace. The "rivalship of peace" of which Ashbel Smith had spoken was inherently a contradictory proposition. Conflict over land claims, over access to water and natural resources, and over ownership of cattle and sheep constantly threatened the stability of the region's peace structure.