

Macarena Hernández: 'Hidden history'

09:55 PM CST on Sunday, November 13, 2005

Every family has a storyteller. In mine, it was my *tio* Cleto, my mother's younger brother. He collected dates and names and mapped out our family tree, sharing it with his children, nieces and nephews, hoping we would always remember where we came from.

As kids, when we visited my grandfather's rancho in Mexico, we would gather around my *tio* Cleto, who was full of wisdom, biblical and historical. He would tell us that Tejanos – U.S.-born Mexicans – used to own the Rio Grande Valley, the string of towns and cities along the Texas-Mexico border where I was born and grew up.

But all that changed between 1910 and 1920, he would say, when Anglo land developers and Midwestern farmers moved to the Valley and, in many cases, forced out the original landowners.

Earlier this year, when I was still living in the Valley, I heard of a Dallas storyteller traveling across Texas screening a documentary about those days, when thousands of Tejanos died at the hands of the legendary Texas Rangers.

Theaters sold out. Crowds were stunned.

Kirby Warnock was telling the rest of Texas the story that my *tio* Cleto had told me years before.

A business-proposal writer by trade, Mr. Warnock could pass for Robert Duvall's younger brother. He dug into his family's savings for about \$50,000 to produce this film, a moving tribute to oral historians and a clarification of Texas history.

The film, which took five years to make, memorializes the thousands of innocent Tejanos hanged, shot or burned by those supposedly sworn to protect them. For bringing this story to a general audience, Mr. Warnock, a self-described redneck, is my nomination for *The Dallas Morning News'* Texan of the Year.

Mr. Warnock grew up watching romanticized versions of the Texas Rangers. I grew up hearing stories about the terror *los rinches* inflicted on Tejanos and Mexicans. *Los Rinches*, my uncle would tell us, were known to intimidate Tejanos into surrendering their property for little or, worse, nothing at all.

"There's a lot of proof that it happened," Mr. Warnock said. "But it's tucked away. It's hidden history."

It was certainly hidden at my Valley high school, despite a predominantly Mexican-American student body. I became more familiar with this part of my history when I went to college.

Anglos who see *Border Bandits* "are just shocked," Mr. Warnock said. "They say, 'How come I've never heard of this?'"

"Hispanics are somewhat angry and relieved – angry that this happened, but relieved that the story is finally coming out."

Border Bandits also recounts how Mr. Warnock's grandfather was haunted for the rest of his life by seeing his own father's murder – shot in the back by a Ranger.

Back then, the Rangers would boast of killing a certain number of men, "not counting Mexicans." Photographs of corpses piled high or strewn by a road were turned into postcards, like those of blacks lynched in the South. At one point, killing Tejanos had become so common that a San Antonio newspaper announced that it would no longer write about them. Although historians say it's hard to pinpoint an exact number, most estimate that 3,000 to 5,000 innocent Tejanos were killed.

By the time I was in high school, most Valley towns were run by Anglos, like the McAllen family, whose history was more readily available than my own. It took Mexican-Americans decades before they rose to political power. It wasn't until 1997 that the city of McAllen, the Valley's economic engine, elected its first Mexican-American mayor, Leo Montalvo.

Learning about the long, intertwined history between Mexican-Americans and Anglos will help clarify a few things. Among them, that Mexicans were among Texas' original settlers.

As some Mexican-Americans rightfully claim, "We didn't cross the border. The border crossed us."

Macarena Hernández is a Dallas Morning News editorial columnist. Her e-mail address is mhernandez@dallasnews.com.

Online at:

http://www.dallasnews.com/sharedcontent/dws/dn/opinion/columnists/mhernandez/stories/DN-hernandez_11edi.ART.State.Edition1.e122f29.html