

# Life in Laredo

*A Documentary History from the Laredo Archives*

Robert D. Wood, S.M.

## Life in Laredo

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from the Laredo Archives*

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Number 2 in the Al Filo Mexican American Studies Series

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## Preface

**F**or several years I toyed with the idea of writing a history of Laredo, but meanwhile decided to publish a few volumes of the documents that I thought might be more useful. I am grateful to the Webb County Heritage Foundation for their award recognizing these efforts. The present history is the result of some stimulation sparked by Dr. Roberto Calderón of the University of North Texas who was looking for something special to celebrate in 2005 the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of Laredo. I hope this work will be of interest and satisfaction to all Laredoans, a number of whom have shared their friendship with me for many years, and a source of new information for all who are interested in the unique history of a place that has been part of Spain, Mexico, and the United States.

The history of Laredo is certainly not unknown. Several works have already been written. In addition to *The Story of Laredo* in nine volumes, there are period or topical works and monographs by Kathleen Da Camara, Rogelia García, Stan Green, María Guerra, Gilberto Hinojosa, Jerry Thompson, and J. B. Wilkinson, to name a few. I have cited some of these works where additional information was needed. What makes this history special is that except for a few sources, mainly in Chapter 1, all of the information comes directly from the Laredo



Archives, from which 477 documents have been presented in whole or in part, or referred to. Other histories have used the archives but without location references, mainly because at the time the archives were not as organized as they are now. The first work based on the Laredo Archives after their discovery was a thesis written in 1935 by Natalie Walsh and titled *The Founding of Laredo and San Augustine Church*. In addition, Sebron Wilcox delivered a number of papers based on information from the archives to various groups and organizations in the late 1930s and early 1940s. Copies of these are kept with the Laredo Archives in the Special Collections area of the Louis J. Blume Library at St. Mary's University in San Antonio, Texas.

Writing a history always poses some problems. Perhaps the most basic is how to approach the material. The strict chronological method has more order to it, but at the same time it forces the reader to go back and forth to find similar material. For a history like that of Laredo, it seems to me that a topical presentation offers a more coherent and unified vision of what happened, even though the timelines in the various chapters may tend to repeat themselves since there is a chronology within each chapter.

Section I on the background gives a history of the Laredo Archives, explains the reasons for their present location, and describes how they are referred to. Section II examines eight aspects of life in Laredo from its foundation until the 1850s, or Laredo's first one hundred years. Section III contains some reports from the various officials in Laredo on the conditions of the time. Since this work is in English and the archives are in Spanish, it was necessary to translate all of the documents used and all of the translations are mine. The endnotes indicate the source of each document and the reader who wishes to refer to the original text can do so either on microfilm or from the photocopies of them.

RDW, SM

En la Villa de San Augustin de Laredo, en veinte y dos  
 dias del mes de Octubre, de mil setecientos setenta y  
 dos años: Ante mi Don Thomas Sanchez de la Ba-  
 rera, Capitan reformado, y Justicia mayor de ella,  
 Ferrigor, con quienes antes se recepitoxia, y en  
 el presente papel comun a falta del cellado: parecio  
 el medio Cauildo de esta Villa, compuesto de Don

**I. Background Factors:  
 The Source, the Laredo Archives**

Thomas de Castro, Don Marcos Mendizola de segundo voto, y el  
 Procurador General, Don Foxibio de Monte ma-  
 or, a quienes yo fee, conozco, y dipearon: que por  
 quanto en Cumplimiento de sus Obligaciones,  
 y representando en mi convocacio, voz, y caucion por  
 todos los Vecinos de que ve compone esta precia  
 cha Villa, respecto a vex este, el Ultimo año del  
 quinquenio, en que nos hallamos obligados,  
 a contribuir al Real derecho de Alcauala, con  
 la cantidad de doscientos y cincuenta pesos.



In singing “The Cowboy’s Lament” (“As I walked out on the streets of Laredo . . .”) one could easily forget that this intriguing city was once a part of Spain. In a way this was fortunate because the preservation of papers and records dealing with national, municipal, legal, commercial, religious and social affairs was one of the ongoing and important requirements of Spain from her colonies. Each town was expected to report regularly to the higher echelons of authority. It was likewise expected to preserve copies of all of the decrees, ordinances, and legislation from the Crown and the viceregal, regional, and local governments, as well as the active and passive correspondence, copies of reports, and such things as the census. The accumulation of all of this material is what constitutes an archives. The preservation of all of these documents is another matter and depends very much on how succeeding generations appreciate their historical value. All too often they are relegated to some out-of-the-way spot with an agglomeration of boxes and bundles considered too important to throw away but never really referred to. And then, for some, there comes a time when they seem to be an encumbrance, when they are no longer a vital link to the past but a present nuisance, and they face the fate of all unwanted things.

This might have been the case with the Laredo Archives if the historical interest of a court reporter and the concern of a janitor had not intervened. In 1934, when the clerk's office in the Webb County Courthouse in Laredo was being remodeled, a bundle of old papers surfaced. The court reporter, Sebron Sneed Wilcox, recognized them as old Spanish documents and recalled that already in 1850 the Texas Legislature had decreed that all old records were to be kept in the courthouses.<sup>1</sup> Mr. Wilcox searched around for more but at the time found nothing. Shortly afterwards, the janitor, Francisco (Pancho) Ramírez, was given orders to clean out the basement. When he came across eight bundles of old papers he saw they were in Spanish and informed Wilcox, who took them. Many of the bundles were water-damaged and some were fragile, but Wilcox was convinced he had in his possession the old Spanish records of Laredo.<sup>2</sup> For confirmation and assistance, he turned to the parish priest of Laredo, Fr. Florencio Andrés, O.M.I., who shared his enthusiasm for history and who helped him begin to organize and decipher some of the documents. They were separated into major chronological periods and placed for preservation in eight green steel boxes, measuring six by eight by fifteen inches. Box 8 was marked "of special interest." For the next two years, both Fr. Andrés and Mr. Wilcox went carefully through the documents gathering information. On the basis of this, Wilcox began giving talks to various groups about this important find. Fr. Andrés transcribed some of the documents into typewritten form and even translated some of them.

After one of his talks in 1936, Wilcox was approached by one of his listeners, Thomas Sutherland, who was with the Historical Records Commission. He suggested that it would be possible to make transcriptions of the documents through the Works Progress Administration. Wilcox readily agreed and three workers were assigned to the task under the direction of Ricardo de la Garza. The object of the work was to copy each document in typewritten form, line by line, so that each page would look exactly like the original, but be more easily read. In

1940, when de la Garza was appointed by the State Historical Records Survey as Supervisor for District 11, which included Laredo, the transcription work was taken over by this group. In December of that same year Juan Villasana Haggard was named to prepare the final draft of the transcriptions which were “some 15,000 pages.” By 1952 the existence of the archives was well known enough to be included in the second volume of the *Handbook of Texas*.<sup>3</sup>

In 1958, Dr. David Vigness of Texas Technological College (now Texas Tech University) obtained permission from Wilcox to microfilm the archives for their Southwest Collection. The documents were microfilmed as they were found in the boxes. When it was discovered that some of the end portions of the film were defective, an additional roll of “retakes” was made. For several years this was the only source of access to the documents outside of the originals.<sup>4</sup> In this same year, Wilcox decided to give bound copies of the transcripts to the library in Laredo, the State Archives, the University of Texas Library (Austin) and the National Archives in Washington, D.C.<sup>5</sup>

Wilcox had long been an admirer of the work on Texas history done by Bro. Joseph Schmitz, S.M. of St. Mary’s University in San Antonio.<sup>6</sup> “Prior to his death on May 12, 1959, Mr. Wilcox had expressed his desire to donate this collection [the Laredo Archives] to St. Mary’s University of San Antonio where it would be permanently cared for and made available for future historical research.”<sup>7</sup> On July 14, two months after his death, fourteen crates of documents about Laredo arrived at the university. They included not only the Laredo Archives, but many personal papers of Mr. Wilcox and some fifty documents on Palafox. Their presence at the university was debated and disputed over the next twenty years.

In March 1960, the state archivist, Dorman Winfrey, proposed moving the Laredo Archives to Austin. The response was that they were a gift to the university which had no reason to relinquish them. In the hope of clarifying this and removing further difficulties, there was a formal presentation of the archives to St. Mary’s University by

Mrs. Wilcox and her son William on December 10, 1960. This was duly noted in the January 21, 1961, issue of the *San Antonio News*. In the succeeding years, Miss Carmen Perry spent innumerable hours removing the documents from the boxes in which they came, making records of every document, organizing them chronologically, and putting them in acid-proof folders.<sup>8</sup> The director of the university library, Bro. Paul Novosal, S.M., then had them photocopied and microfilmed.<sup>9</sup> It was Miss Perry's intention to index the archives but before that could happen she accepted a position at the University of Texas at San Antonio.

The first indication of the contents of the eight boxes of documents came from Richard Santos, the Bexar County archivist, who in 1966 published "An Annotated Survey of the Spanish Archives of Laredo."<sup>10</sup> Miss Perry herself wrote a fine description of the archives and her work with them in 1968 and the *San Antonio Express* carried two articles describing her work of "codifying" the archives.<sup>11</sup> All of this work made it clear that the archives could be divided into two major time frames: the colonial period from the foundation to 1821, and the Mexican period from 1821 to 1848. The documentation after 1848 is relatively sparse and much of it is in English.

Something should be said about the total contents of the archives. Various figures have been given as to the number of documents and pages. In her previously cited article Miss Perry claims that she actually counted the documents and states that there are 3,254 documents containing 13,343 pages. However, the counting of the number of documents depends on how they are considered. Some folders contain a notebook (*cuaderno*) with all of the correspondence of a given year. This might contain 120 letters, each of which was sent as a separate document, but the collection of them might be listed as one document. It is probable that Miss Perry did consider such groups individually and her count is accurate.

For a city of the importance of Laredo, one might expect to find a room full of documents. Unfortunately, this is not the case. There is

very little documentation from the first years after the founding of Laredo. Few people knew how to write and there was probably no public scribe. The documentation from the first period would normally include first and foremost the land grants given to the early settlers of Laredo. Unfortunately, outside of what is mentioned in the official visits of 1757 and 1767, there are none of these, though some references to them exist in copies of inventories of estates and last wills made after this time. Neither are there any individual birth, marriage, or death records except in a few instances where they were used as testimony in court cases.<sup>12</sup> Most of the documentation from the first period tends to reflect Spain rather than Mexico. There are many royal and viceregal decrees on a wide variety of subjects. Other types of documentation will be noted in the course of this work.

There is evidence that the archives have been picked over various times and a number of documents have found their way into private hands and homes. Fr. Andrés noted already in 1936 that pages were missing from what is now Folder 82. As previously mentioned, he himself left dozens of typewritten pages that he had transcribed or translated from the archives, yet some of the original documents with which he worked are not in the present collection. The same is true for documents mentioned by Mr. Wilcox (mostly wills and deeds). Forms of the Historical Records Survey list thirteen documents, mostly from the late 1700s, from the governor to Tomás Sánchez or Laredo which were found in the district judge's office in Laredo. These were almost surely extracted from the Laredo Archives. There are no documents from the first months of 1840 regarding the Republic of the Rio Grande. Given the fact that Laredo was to be the capital, some documentation certainly existed. In spite of these lacunae or omissions, the Laredo Archives offer valuable insights into the life of the town during its first one hundred years, and indirectly of the whole region of Nuevo Santander, later Tamaulipas.

Problems as to the ownership of the Laredo Archives began in October 1969 when very unexpectedly St. Mary's received a letter from



the Wilcox heirs suggesting that the university purchase the archives which, according to them, had been merely loaned, not given or donated. It was also intimated that an “eastern university” was willing to purchase them for half a million dollars. The university had already spent \$40,000 restoring and microfilming the collection and did not feel it should simply surrender it. Much correspondence went back and forth and finally the Texas Library and Historical Commission obtained a court restraining order against any sale. The city of Laredo, meanwhile, had also sought to have the documents transferred back to Laredo, basing its claim on the Laws of Texas published in 1850. Negotiations dragged on and finally on July 18, 1972, an agreement was reached. Important sections of this agreement are cited here.

WHEREAS, the State of Texas, St. Mary’s University of San Antonio and the City of Laredo have a common interest in preserving, protecting and developing for the use and benefit of all of the citizens of the State of Texas all of such historical documents as may constitute the “Laredo Archives”;

WHEREAS, the State of Texas, St. Mary’s University of San Antonio and the City of Laredo desire to resolve all differences which they may have as to their respective claims to legal title and the consequent legal right of possession as set forth in their respective pleadings in the aforesaid suit;

NOW, THEREFORE, for and in consideration of the premises and the mutual covenants of the parties as hereinafter contained, the parties do hereby expressly agree as follows, to-wit:

- I. St. Mary’s University of San Antonio has bargained, sold, transferred and assigned and does hereby bargain, sell, transfer and assign to and unto the State of Texas all of its right, title and interest, if any, in and to those certain historical papers and documents commonly referred to as the “Laredo Archives”. . . . It is expressly understood and agreed, however, that there is excepted herefrom and reserved unto St.

Mary's University of San Antonio, Inc. exclusive and uninterrupted perpetual possession of said documents, with the unlimited right to use and permit the same to be used for all reasonable historical research purposes, subject only to the obligation of St. Mary's University of San Antonio, Inc. hereby expressly assumed as follows, to-wit:

- a) St. Mary's University shall at all times while in the possession of said documents exercise its best efforts to take good care of said documents in accordance with good archival practices.
  - b) Should St. Mary's University of San Antonio, Inc. hereafter decide for any reason whatsoever to dispossess itself of said documents, then possession thereof shall forthwith be delivered to the State of Texas and to no other party.
2. The City of Laredo, State of Texas, has bargained, sold, released and quitclaimed and does hereby bargain, sell, release and quitclaim to and unto the State of Texas all of its right, title and interest, if any, in and to said "Laredo Archives."
  3. Each of the parties hereto expressly agrees that they will not assert against each other any claims in the pending lawsuit adverse to the agreement as to title and possession herein above set forth. . . .

This was not the end, however. In 1974 the Wilcox heirs obtained a court order demanding a reconsideration of the 1972 agreement since they had been excluded from it. The court proceedings dragged on for over five years. In December 1979 *The Laredo Times* reported that the archives would belong to the city of Laredo but be housed at St. Mary's University. That was not to be, however. The "Final Judgment," set down on February 22, 1980, reaffirmed the decision of 1972 especially in regard to the state of Texas ownership, quoting from

its various paragraphs. It did, however, stipulate the return to the Wilcox family of the so-called “Wilcox collection” and the Palafox papers.

In 1991, I was appointed university archivist.<sup>13</sup> Within a short time I was receiving requests for information about the Laredo Archives. Realizing I needed to know a lot more about them, I began to complete the chronological work started years before by Miss Perry and at the same time made a card index of all of the documents which I later used to publish the *Indexes to the Laredo Archives* in 1993. Since then six volumes of documents have been published along with a revised edition of the *Indexes*.<sup>14</sup>

The present history has cited portions of documents or even entire sections already published. When these are referred to in the endnotes, **F** means Folder and **D** the Document within a given Folder according to the present organization of the archives at St. Mary’s University, or as these documents are listed in the *Indexes to the Laredo Archives*. An appendix in the second edition lists all of the documents which have already been published. Another common abbreviation in the endnotes is **AGN**, which stands for Archivo General de la Nación of Mexico.

### ENDNOTES

1. Wilcox was appointed County Clerk (court reporter) for the 49<sup>th</sup> District Court in 1911 by Judge John F. Mullaly. For a biography see *The Handbook of Texas: A Supplement* (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 1976), 3:1110.

2. Wilcox’s account of the “discovery” and the value of the archives was published in the *Southwest Historical Quarterly* 69, no. 3 (January 1946): 341. Some of this was reprinted in the *Jim Hogg County Enterprise*. Much of the content of this chapter appears in Jerry Thompson’s *Sabers on the Río Grande* (Austin: Presidial Press, 1974), 219–21, but at the time of its publication the final settlement had not yet been made.

3. Published in Austin by The Texas State Historical Association. Entry is found on page 28. Most of the article was borrowed from Mr. Wilcox’s article cited above. The archives themselves remained in his possession all this time.

4. The microfilm version is mentioned by Ray Sylvan Dunn in an article about the Southwest Collection and published in *The American Archivist* 28, no. 3 (July 1965): 414. This microfilm edition became obsolete when the documents were re-microfilmed later according to a new organization. The additional roll really only complicated finding the documents since it was out of sequence.

5. The gift to the State Archives resulted in an article by one of the staff there, Jaime Platón, titled “The Spanish Archives of Laredo” published in *Texas Libraries* 22 (Jan.-Feb., 1960): 12–13.

6. Bro. Schmitz’ books *Texan Statecraft* and *Thus They Lived* are considered “classics” for the history of the Republic of Texas.

7. Anita C. Saxine, “The Laredo Archives Now Housed at St. Mary’s University,” *Texas Libraries* 42, no. 4 (winter 1980): 160–64.

8. Miss Perry was a native of Torreón, Coahuila, Mexico, and had extensive experience in translating and teaching Spanish. She was the head of the Daughters of the Republic of Texas Library at the Alamo before joining St. Mary’s.

9. Several state entities now have copies of the microfilm, notably the State Archives, the Laredo Public Library, the Dallas Public Library, Texas A&M International University (Laredo) and the University of North Texas (Denton). The photocopies are kept in the Special Collections area of the Louis J. Blume library at St. Mary’s University along with the transcripts of each document. The original documents are stored in a steel fireproof file case with a combination lock and are kept in a fireproof vault.

10. Cf. *Texana* 4, no. 1 (spring 1966): 41–46.

11. Carmen Perry, “The Spanish Archives of Laredo,” *St. Mary’s University Bulletin* 1, no. 4 (October, 1968): 3–8. *San Antonio Express*, 19 July 1968, 2-B and 28 July 1968, 18.

12. Angel Sepulveda Brown and Gloria Villa Cadena have published two volumes of Marriage Books of San Agustín Parish of Laredo. The first (1989) covers marriages from 1790–1857, and the second (1993), covers 1858–1881.

13. I had spent seventeen years in Latin America and become fluent in Spanish. I had also done research in a number of Spanish archives both in Spain and in Latin America, which familiarized me with the old Spanish script and abbreviations, and had presented my Ph.D. thesis in Spanish to the Pon-

tifical Catholic University of Peru. I gained archival experience organizing the archives of the geographical unit of the religious order to which I belong.

14. These volumes were privately printed and sold to a limited clientele of persons who I knew would be interested in the documents. They were all part of what I called the Laredo Archives Series and included the following: 1) *Documentos para la Genealogía* (1998, 194 pp.) which contained documents taken verbatim from the archives; 2) *Documentos referentes a los Indios/ Documents on the Indians* (1998, 90 pp.) which gives the original Spanish version and my translation; 3) *Documents for the History of Laredo* (1999, 116 pp.); 4) *The History of Mexico 1809–1845 in the Laredo Archives* (2000, 46 pp.); 5) *Index to the Municipal Correspondence 1825-1845 and Verbal Arbitrations and Decisions 1832–1842* (2000, 76 pp.); 6) *Death and Taxes* (2001, 65 pp.). These publications are in an 8½ by 11-inch format. Volumes 3 to 6 are translations into English. The revised edition of the *Indexes* was done in 2000 in a 14 x 8½-inch format. Only a few copies were made.

En la Villa de San Augustin de Laredo, en veinte y dos dias del mes de Octubre, de mil setecientos setenta y uno años: Ante mi Don Thomas Sanchez de la Barrera, Capitan reformado, y Justicia mayor de ella, Ferrigor, con quienes antes se recepitoxia, y en el presente papel comun a falta del cellado: parecio

**II. Life in Laredo**

el medio Cavildo de esta Villa, compuesto de Don Thomas de Cuellar, Regidor de primer voto, Don Marcos Mendizola de segundo voto, y el Procurador General, Don Foxibio de Montemayor, a quienes yo fee, conozco, y dipearon: que por quanto en cumplimiento de sus Obligaciones, y representando en mi convocacio, voz, y caucion por todos los Vecinos de que se compone esta precidicha Villa, respecto a ver que en el ultimo año del quinquenio, en que nos hallamos obligados, a contribuir al Real derecho de Alcaualata, con la cantidad de doscientos y cincuenta pesos.



## 1. Beginnings and Consolidation: 1747–1767

The Six Flags entertainment parks in various states that were once part of the Louisiana Territory remind us of the “ownership” of these lands by various governments, and while it was never part of the Louisiana Territory, the history of Laredo has to begin with the desire of Spain to protect the possessions it had had in America for over two centuries.<sup>1</sup> Ambitious, adventurous, and courageous explorers had extended Spain’s territory in North America far beyond what it was really able to control effectively. This did not really matter all that much until France and England also laid claims to territory in North America and began systematically colonizing. English expansion toward Florida and the Mississippi was worrisome. The second flag, that of France, flew somewhat tenuously over the Gulf Coast and eastern Texas, but never anywhere near Laredo even though the French had been permanently in the area since 1699 when Biloxi was established. New Orleans became a French crown colony in 1731 despite protests from Spain, which claimed all of the territory along the coast of the Gulf of Mexico.<sup>2</sup> Laredo under the flags of Mexico and the United States will be described in this work. The fourth flag, that of the Republic of Texas, never flew over Laredo, and the sixth flag, that of the Confederacy, occurred at a time outside the framework of this history. There was



one other flag, however: the red, white, and black flag of the Republic of the Río Grande, which lasted 283 days. So the sovereignty of the land where Laredo lies was really under four flags. The significance or importance of this is simply that any settlement made in the territory was subject to all of the laws and decrees of the controlling entity, and its history was colored to some extent by this fact. The Laredoans in many ways established their own little world which respected the supreme authority and even took advantage of it when necessary or possible, but they could also circumvent undesirable situations or regulations and survive or even thrive under different governments.

The Spanish authorities in New Spain (Mexico) felt that the unpopulated northeastern part of the country was in imminent danger, even though some missions and forts had been successfully established farther north in the territory known as Texas. By 1738, a decision was made to do something about this but various conflicting proposals delayed any action until 1746 when the new viceroy, the Count of Revilla Gigedo, chose José de Escandón, who had had remarkable success in subjugating and colonizing the Sierra Gorda mountain area of eastern Mexico. He was asked to undertake the same task for the northeast, which now became known as Nuevo Santander. For two years Escandón personally explored and inspected all of this territory with an eye to future settlements, particularly along the river known as the Río Bravo or Grande del Norte. He also came across a number of Indian groups which had come under Franciscan influence and were friendly. On April 17, 1747, he wrote to the viceroy:

Through the good offices of the said Captain [Don Blas María de la Garza] four captains of the nearby clusters of huts of Indians were waiting for me there and showed me a good part of them, and having been offered gifts and clothes, agreed to come together and began to bring their families which, according to what the Captain told me, are more than 100. For this purpose about 500 *varas* [1,390 ft.] away I marked off a location and

lands so that a Mission with the name of San Agustín de Laredo could be put there. For the spiritual administration of the Indians and Spaniards there are two religious of the Apostolic College of Guadalupe.<sup>3</sup> And so that the said Indians can maintain themselves by sowing and reaping I left a provision of corn, as much as the general scarcity of the frontier would allow me.<sup>4</sup>

The name chosen by Escandón was in memory of the Spanish city of Laredo founded in 1201 by Alfonso VIII and located on the coast of the Bay of Biscay between Bilbao and Santander. Although there was no Spanish settlement until eight years later, in his report in 1751 Escandón lists “Mission Laredo—San Agustín—77 Indian families.”<sup>5</sup> The following year the missionary himself, Fray Juan Bautista García, wrote:

Here, though materially speaking there is no mission because no adequate place has been given for its foundation and there is no beneficial source of water right now, formally speaking there is, and in my opinion it will be the best because once the desired water is obtained the location is splendid, very fertile with good lands, all useful . . . and there are seven Indian nations all subjected.<sup>6</sup>

Spaniards from the south were slowly infiltrating the area opened up by Escandón. By 1755 there were twenty-four villages or towns in Nuevo Santander, with 8,989 Spaniards and 3,443 Indians in various missions.<sup>7</sup> Some had already settled on the north side of the Río Bravo. This was made possible by the discovery of two places to ford the river, which at that time was two to three times its present width. The first ford was discovered in 1748 by Jacinto de León about one-fourth of a league upriver from the present site of Laredo, and the second some three leagues downriver by Miguel de la Garza where even small animals could wade across.<sup>8</sup> These fords, known by the names of their

discoverers, eventually became known as El Paso de los Indios and La Cañada.

One of the early settlers in this region was Joseph Vásquez Borrego, whose large tract of land was known as Dolores and who was considered in charge of the territory with the title of “Captain.” Among the colonists was Tomás Sánchez who had come from his ranch in Coahuila, Mexico, and settled on the south side of the river opposite Dolores.<sup>9</sup> Seeking more lands to expand his herds, and perhaps more independence, when Escandón visited the colony in 1754 Sánchez, then forty-five years old, asked permission to establish a colony elsewhere and offered to do so at his own expense. He was directed at first to the Nueces River but found no suitable site. Permission was then given to search upriver along the north side of the Río Bravo. Sánchez set out on his quest, crossing land filled with mesquite and huisache trees and cactus, and arrived at a site of high bluffs overlooking the river set off by two small creeks flowing into it. This seemed an ideal place. There is no evidence that this was the same spot marked out years before by Escandón but Sánchez undoubtedly had information from him and from Fray Juan García who in 1754 was still calling himself “Misionero en la [*misión*] de San Agustín de Laredo.”<sup>10</sup> Perhaps the missionary even encouraged him to go there. The area was already known because of the two river crossings previously mentioned which were used as part of the trail from Nuevo León and Coahuila in Mexico to the interior of Texas.

May 15, 1755, is considered the foundation date for the new settlement of Laredo although the official approval from the viceroy is dated August 9, 1756.<sup>11</sup> This decree is based on a request from Escandón for the settlement to be made after Sánchez returned from his exploration and informed Escandón of his choice. Given the title of “Captain” and allotted fifteen leagues of pasture land, Sánchez then set out again with his wife, Catarina de Uribe, their nine children, eight servants and attendants, and three other families from Dolores. Later they were joined by seven more families making eleven in all and numbering eighty-five

persons including four bachelors.<sup>12</sup> One source says “they built huts,” quite possibly with the help of the Indians of the so-called “mission” since most of the Spaniards were accustomed to the *encomienda* system in which the Indians did most or all of the work. Two years later Sánchez stated that there were no Indians gathered into the village. However, the very first census of Laredo in the Archives is that of Indians annexed to the city, but that was thirty-one years later.<sup>13</sup>

Interested in learning about the progress of the new colonization, in 1757 Viceroy Marqués de las Amarillas named Captain José Tienda de Cuervo to reconnoiter the whole area and write a report on his findings.<sup>14</sup> The visitor arrived in Laredo on the morning of July 22 and the following day Tienda took statements from Sánchez and what might be considered the first census of the settlement by questioning the male inhabitants about their civil status, families, and ownership of weapons and animals.<sup>15</sup> From the beginning it was clear that the main interest was in raising livestock. The little colony had altogether 10,215 animals, about one-fifth of them belonging to Sánchez, who was the only one who owned mules and oxen. While only nine persons had horses and seven had cattle, all the settlers had hundreds of sheep and goats. The hot, dry climate, noted by Tienda, and the paucity of rainfall made crop-growing difficult, although Sánchez said the land was fertile but admitted that irrigation would be a problem, if not impossible. This was compensated for in part by the abundance of game of all kinds and fish in the river. Tienda likewise noted the absence of forest timber for building but admitted that stone was abundant. As the years went by, however, the inhabitants used adobe, cane, and grasses which were much easier to work with. For decades Laredo did not have many stone masons.

As a representative of the Crown, Tienda was attentive to three basic issues. The first was land ownership. The most serious problem was the fact that there were no official limits to the settlement or to the plots claimed by the individual settlers. He wrote: “The permanent boundary of the lands of the vicinity will have to be established and a

formal distribution made of them to the settlers.” This was not so much out of solicitude for property rights as for concern over the loss of revenue in taxes which property owners had to pay. It would be ten more years before this would happen.

Secondly, since the colonization was meant to be a barrier against Indians who were raiding Spanish settlements as far south as the Pánuco River, the question of their presence was important. When asked about them, Sánchez replied that there were so many they couldn't be counted but that all of them, including the Apaches who showed up from time to time, were peaceful and had not caused any problems.<sup>16</sup> Finally, since the Spanish Crown from the time of Isabella had always been concerned about the religious welfare of its overseas subjects and the efforts made to evangelize the native peoples of the Americas, Tienda asked who was administering the sacraments to the settlers and whether any Indians had been gathered together for instruction. Sánchez replied that a priest was brought from Revilla, twenty-two leagues away, in case of emergencies or special needs and that he came for the “annual precept.”<sup>17</sup> Tienda noted: “The settled residents want a clergyman, whom they lack, to serve them, and since their meager resources can not support him, are asking the king to give them this spiritual benefit.”

The problem was addressed two years later when the bishop of Guadalajara, Fray Francisco de San Buenaventura, came on a visitation.<sup>18</sup> He stayed in Laredo three days. He discovered that “everyone is ignorant of the principal mysteries of our Holy Faith which they need to know in order to be saved.” Even more, “they had not had a Minister since their foundation; they don't go to confession or fulfill the obligations to the Church. Captain Don Thomas [*sic*] Sánchez was [acted as] the parish priest who officiated at the baptisms and burials.” Sánchez himself told the bishop that the priest from Revilla, except for the annual visit, had come only once to hear the confession of the daughter of Tomás de Cuellar, and that Gertrudis de Treviño had died without the sacraments. He offered to pay 150 pesos a year for a resi-

dent priest. The bishop was evidently impressed with what he learned and on the way back to Guadalajara he stopped in Boca de Leones and sent for a priest from Saltillo, gave him 150 pesos, and sent him to Laredo.

This didn't resolve very much. A year later Escandón informed the viceroy that the priest was as much a problem as the Indians. After telling the viceroy that Apache Indians on the south side of the river were being closely watched, he adds:

The residents are exasperated by the novelties which they say the priest sent by the Illustrious Bishop of Guadalajara to Laredo is introducing. Coarsely censuring things which are not going well is not something this colony needs at its beginnings, and I am afraid that his anxiety to bring things to fruition before their time can prevent a happy result, or retard it a great deal.<sup>19</sup>

As the decade of the 1760s evolved, with one exception things were not going too well in Laredo. The settlers had planted corn but the crop failed. Few new families or persons came to strengthen the colony. Escandón felt that this was “something which would have been very different if a Religious had been placed there . . . . I fear that the rest will leave saying that they can not support the priest, to which I would add that he could never live on the offerings of fifteen poor families.”<sup>20</sup> The problem persisted and by 1766 Escandón noted that “several [priests] have come and gone in the seven years they have been administering there, and in spite of the efforts that Guadalajara seems to have made to sustain them, at times there has not been any-one.”<sup>21</sup>

In the same year Joseph Ignacio María Alegre y Capetillo wrote:

I have seen the village of Laredo several times and I was there in January of this year for some twelve days. The settlement is made up of thirteen badly built huts including one really un-

worthy which serves as a church and is so badly located, roofed and fenced in that wind, rain and animals can enter and leave from anywhere. Besides that, the place does not offer much hope for development because it is not possible to get more water than what they can get for drinking from the Río Grande river with a great deal of effort. A priest from El Reino serves there and maintains himself with his own funds since what the authorities and residents give him is not enough as he himself assured me and can easily be seen. Captain Thomas Sánchez who with his relatives and associates make up this village does not receive a salary.<sup>22</sup>

Then, as Tienda had pointed out, there was the question of land ownership. The fact that there was no organized system of partitioning the land was a deterrent to new settlers arriving. Some of those already there had begun using land on the south side of the river for pasturing their animals. Although the viceroy in 1764 had relayed the orders from the Crown regarding land distribution, nothing had been done in Nuevo Santander. And there were those who thought it was high time to get some organized form of government.

The one positive factor was success with the livestock. The area was “so good for all kinds of livestock that the whole other side of the Río Grande del Norte is filled with them.”<sup>23</sup> Ironically, this was also to be the source of many problems because of theft both from Indian raids and from quarreling owners. The first recorded incident involving animals comes in 1767 when Sánchez accused Vásquez Borrego of stealing a herd of sheep or goats from him, along with several other animals. A “trial” followed and even though the witnesses did not agree at all on numbers, the judge favored Sánchez and demanded restitution from Vásquez.

It was in 1767 that the question of property ownership was finally settled. The viceroy, Marqués de Croix, determined to carry out the land reforms ordered three years before, appointed a commission to

do this in the Province of Nuevo Santander. The acting governor, Juan Fernando de Palacio, was named head of the commission and was assisted by José de Osorio y Llamas as secretary, and various other persons. Their task was to have experts survey the land, the town and its jurisdiction, portion out sections of land to the settlers and have all this officially recorded, both for legal and tax purposes.<sup>24</sup> In another sense it was meant to confirm the rights of individuals who had been using the land since their arrival. It was for this reason that some of the settlers on the south side of the river asked to be included in the survey though this area was not part of the original grant.

The commission arrived in Laredo on June 9. What they found was a far cry from the rules and regulations set down by Spain for the founding of a town. There was little organization and no mission. Perhaps somewhat frustrated but undaunted, the commission chose José Prudencio García as surveyor to be assisted by two experts, Juan Bautista Villarreal and Miguel Díaz. Domingo Toboada, also a surveyor, was appointed to represent the Crown. Some of the older settlers likewise helped because they were familiar with the current claims of land and the length of ownership, and also knew those persons who had served the Crown in some way. However, the first task was to determine the arrangement of the town itself according to Spanish standards by choosing a site for the public square and laying out the adjacent streets in gridiron fashion. The most important sections or lots in this area were reserved for the church, the rectory, the town hall, a jail and the families of the most prominent citizens.<sup>25</sup> An area of about a mile surrounding the town was set aside for common pasture lands open to everyone. The allotted lands outside the town extended on an average of fifteen miles in each direction. By the time the surveying was done eighty-nine sections had been laid out, thirty-six on the north side of the river and forty-three on the south side, and given to sixty-seven individuals on both sides of the river.<sup>26</sup> The partitioning led immediately to objections from José Vásquez Borrego who considered it an incursion upon lands that belonged to him. When his petition was reviewed, however,



several arguments were put forward against it and he had no choice but to ask for a year to remove his animals and possessions from the lands which had been assigned to Laredo, and this was granted.<sup>27</sup> Apparently, Sánchez did not know about this because the commission had scarcely left when he wrote a note to Vásquez in almost obsequious language asking him to free up the lands he was using within ten days!<sup>28</sup>

Sánchez, in fact, had other things to take care of. The commission's authority was not limited only to the distribution of land. It also laid down some conditions which had to be complied with if the grants were to take effect. Each lot's owner had to take possession of it within two months and build a house within two years or lose the lot. No property could be given in any way to an ecclesiastic. "Permanent and visible landmarks" should mark off the sections, and provisions were made for newcomers to the town. All settlers were obliged to defend the town with their horses and weapons in case of an invasion. At the end of each year all the residents should elect a solicitor by majority vote, who would "look after and protect the interests of the community," especially by having a temple of worship built and sustained by profits from the town lands.<sup>29</sup> Money from the fare for using the canoe to cross the river was also to go for this purpose. The local residents, however, were exempt from paying this fare. Finally, all of the documents from this Visit were to be kept in a municipal archive which would thereafter preserve all official documents.

In some ways, the history of Laredo really begins with this visitation. The town now had geographical, legal, and political organization, and in some senses a new social and cultural consciousness. What it did not have and would sorely need was military protection.

#### ENDNOTES

1. See the preface for information on other histories.
2. The French Legate in Galveston in 1843 referred to Laredo as "a poor village in the interior." Cf. Nancy Nichols Barker, *The French Legation in*

*Texas* (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 1971), 2: 466.

3. There were several Franciscan Apostolic Colleges in Mexico, but the two that sent missionaries to Nuevo Santander and Texas were in Querétaro and Zacatecas. These religious eventually came into conflict with one another over authority and this had an adverse effect on the missions.

4. Mexico D. F., Archivo General de la Nación (hereafter AGN), Provincias Internas, Vol. 179, pp. 321–22. Blas María was the chief of the Guajolote Indians.

5. AGN, Provincias Internas, Vol. 180, p. 181.

6. AGN, Provincias Internas, Vol. 179, pp. 302–3. The writer lists these “nations” as: Farehuanos, Pajaritos, Venados, Paisanos, Cueros, Quemados, Texones, and Guajolotes.

7. AGN, Historia, Vol. 29.

8. Webster defines a league as “any of various units of distance from about 2.4 to 4.6 statute miles.” In the Archivo de la Secretaría de Fomento in Mexico City, the section of Cartografía (mapping), Folder 12, No. 1120, is about “islands in the Río Bravo.” Possibly such islands made the fording of the river easier.

9. There seems to be some confusion about the full name of Tomás Sánchez. Roldolfo González de la Garza, *Apellidos de Tam., N. León, Coah. y Texas* (Nuevo Laredo: H. González de la Garza, 1980), 21, presents evidence that his mother was Josefa de la Garza, and concludes that his full name should be Tomás Sánchez de la Garza. However, there are six documents in the Laredo Archives signed by Sánchez. Five of these begin with the words “Tomas Sanches de la Barrera.” One has “de la Barreda,” which is most likely a misspelling on the part of the scribe. I would suggest that Sánchez de la Barrera was the father’s full name, and Tomás would be Sánchez de la Barrera y de la Garza.

10. AGN, Provincias Internas, Vol. 179, p. 395. The Spanish bureaucracy always moved very slowly.

11. AGN, Provincias Internas, Vol. 110, pp. 86–86a.

12. AGN, Historia, Vol. 56, Nos. 284, 285.

13. Laredo Archives, Folder 32, Document 7, July 10, 1788.

14. The Visit has been published in various forms. It appeared in English in 1903 translated and edited by Herbert Eugene Bolton and was published in *The Quarterly* of the Texas State Historical Association (volume 6, no. 3, pp. 187–203). The original source is in AGN, Historia, Vol. 54.

15. See Appendix I for names and details.

16. The most frequent and constant complaints to the authorities over the next one hundred years were precisely about the Indian incursions, raids, and killings of settlers. The various attempts to bring about peace usually ended in failure. Perhaps the Apaches were merely scouting the Spanish strength and possessions.

17. The Catholic Church required its members to receive Holy Communion and go to Confession at least once a year. In modern times, this has changed somewhat but in the eighteenth century it was a “law” under pain of mortal sin.

18. There are two sources for this information: AGN, Provincias Internas, Vol. 248, ff. 108, 144b, 150b–154b, and Juan López, *Nueva Galicia y Jalisco, un Esfuerzo Continuada* (Guadalajara: Banco Refaccionario de Jalisco, 1980), 200. It’s astonishing to realize that until 1777 the bishop of Guadalajara had the territories of Jalisco, Durango, Coahuila, Nuevo León, Nuevo Santander, and Texas under his administration. That he could visit at all was really remarkable given the vast territory and the many difficulties involved in travel.

19. AGN, Provincias Internas, Vol. 110, f. 153. August 9, 1760.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 174. December 30, 1761. The implication is that a Religious would be supported by his religious order and not be a burden to the people.

21. *Ibid.*, f. 280.

22. *Ibid.*, Vol. 248, ff. 101-102. The priest, D. Joseph Lafaita y Berril, was from El Reino de Nuevo León. Most of the local Spanish authorities received some sort of subsidy or even a full salary from the Crown.

23. *Ibid.*, f. 162.

24. In the official documents the term *porción* is used. “Lot,” “plot,” and “tract” are all words that would indicate its significance in English. I have chosen to use the word “section,” which the English dictionary defines as “a distinct part of a territorial . . . area; a piece of land one square mile in area forming one of the . . . subdivisions of a township.” The Spanish measurements are different, but the word conveys more clearly the idea of the division of land. There are several copies of the Visit of 1767 with the Laredo Archives, although they do not form part of the archives as such.

25. The town lots were to be twenty by forty *varas*, the streets were ten *varas* wide. A *vara* is 2.78 feet.

26. For the ownership of the lands see Appendix II. Besides the *Visita*

itself, I am indebted to Jerry Thompson's *Sabers on the Río Grande* (Austin: Presidial Press, 1974), 25–29, for many of the details regarding the Visit and surveying.

27. This information comes from a typescript made by Fr. Florencio Andrés in 1936 and which he says he found in the city hall in Nuevo Laredo.

28. AGN, Provincias Internas, Vol. 248, p. 326. July 24, 1767.

29. The Spanish term is *Procurador*. See endnote 2 of the next chapter for an explanation of the translation.

## 2. Laredo's Leaders

Politics and the weather are probably the most talked about topics everywhere. While we can not do much about the second, we consistently try not to let the first interfere with our lives too much, or else we try to figure out ways in which we can use the current political situation to our advantage. A civilized society can not really exist without government, but in the long run the government can be successful only insofar as the citizens themselves have something to say about it. How did all of this affect the local situation in Laredo?

Spain was a monarchy and as such had established a highly centralized system that was used throughout the Spanish empire. The chain of command was clear and authority unquestioned. Leaders at various levels considered themselves little kings and they often used their positions to influence events or situations and some of them were not above fattening their bankrolls in whatever way possible. There are archival documents forbidding the sale of vacant positions.<sup>1</sup>

Since authority was related in some way with nobility, everyone who exercised it had to have some sort of title. This was true starting with the viceroys who were usually the “Marquis” or “Count” of something-or-other. When it came to the provinces, the titles were not as pretentious, though Escandón was both Lieutenant General of the Si-

erra Gorda and Captain General of Nuevo Santander, which meant that he had a right to appoint lesser authorities and confer some title on them. He did this when José Vásquez Borrego established his ranch at Dolores, commissioning him as Captain. Vásquez, in turn (and certainly with Escandón's permission), gave the same title to Tomás Sánchez when he set out to establish the new colony of Laredo. The title of Captain gave him both civil and military authority.

Captain Sánchez governed his little colony for twenty-eight years with a brief interval of two and a half years from 1767 to the middle of 1770. For nearly twelve years at the beginning, he did this on his own without any other officially elected assistants. If there had been at least a scribe we might know a lot more about this period. Most of what we know we have already seen in Chapter 1. In 1767, when Palacio made his visit and the land distribution took place, he also stipulated that at the end of the year all the residents should convene and elect a solicitor to look after the interests of the community and to work with the magistrate. Joseph Martínez de Sotomayor had already been appointed chief magistrate, or mayor.<sup>2</sup> Following orders somewhat, the community chose two other officials, Nicolás Campos Castellanos and Salvador González Hidalgo, but rather than acting as solicitors they were more our equivalent to aldermen, except that they didn't really have districts to represent.<sup>3</sup> Both of these men proved to be problems for Sánchez.

Martínez de Sotomayor's land holdings were on the south side of the river. He wanted to move his office there and encouraged a number of the residents to go across also, to the point that it began to look like the original settlement might be abandoned. Sánchez objected and brought the situation to the attention of the governor who in turn asked the viceroy to let him replace Martínez and try to settle the problem.<sup>4</sup> As a result, in July 1770, Sánchez was reinstated as mayor, with José Leonardo Treviño to assist him. Sánchez also succeeded in getting the governor to decree that no recruitment for new settlements could be done in Laredo, thus thwarting any attempts of the

residents to move elsewhere.<sup>5</sup> Next he had to deal with complaints against the two former aldermen. González Hidalgo was accused of maltreating many of the citizens in various ways and stealing animals. The case was sent to Revilla to be settled.<sup>6</sup> At almost the same time accusations were brought against Nicolás Campos for malfeasance of funds. He was arrested and tried and his property confiscated to make up the deficit. The governor exonerated him of the charges, but more proof surfaced and orders for his re-arrest went out, but by that time he had fled elsewhere. He eventually returned and asked for restitution of his goods, offering proofs of his innocence.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps his actions contributed to the lack of financial resources in the town. But when Sánchez wrote to the governor about the excise taxes that the town owed for the previous five years, which amounted to 250 pesos, he laid the blame more on the Indian raids and the low remuneration received for the mules and cattle that had been sold. He said that the “obedient vassals of His Majesty” were willing to pay but asked that the town be excused from payment for the next five years.<sup>8</sup>

Meanwhile, the main reason for removing Martínez still existed. Sánchez sought ways to get those who had moved across the river to return. He issued four decrees to this effect, two in 1774, one in 1775, and another in 1781.<sup>9</sup> In the second he said, “I must and do order that from today, July 1 of ’74, all of the settlers in this my jurisdiction return to reside in this town in the space of three days, as we have promised our Monarch (whom God protect) under the penalty of 12 pesos.” The fourth time he was more direct and indicated offenders by name.

I am telling all of the residents and settlers of this said town who are actually on the other side of the river, namely D. Pedro García Dávila, D. Leonardo Sánchez, D. Baltasar de Villarreal, D. Joseph González, D. Albino Martínez, Justo Joseph Quintana and Serreco Tanaella, to live in their houses [on the north side of the river], those who already had them and those who did not yet build them, within a period of fifteen days

from the day of this announcement, under penalty of twelve pesos fine and one month in jail for anyone who, knowing very well about it, has not carried out this order . . . and in view of fulfilling the orders given me, as I have said, I expressly order all of those included in this decree to consider themselves notified and within the said period they must be part of the population in the plazas and streets of this town. I will give a lot to whoever has not built a house, so that he may build one. Anyone who is ignorant of this will nevertheless be subject to the penalties imposed.

It's hard to say whether Sánchez' authority was not very compelling, or the citizens on the south side were simply stubborn. On the one hand, Sánchez really did not have many ways to enforce the fines and it was only years later that one of his successors managed to build a jail. On the other hand, Laredo's population had grown and perhaps the need for the return of the "renegades" wasn't really that urgent except for the fact that there had to be enough men on hand in case of Indian raids. In 1775, the governor, writing to the town of Mier, noted that there was "a detachment of residents" in Laredo to fight the Indians.<sup>10</sup> This, in fact, brought about a kind of dual-authority situation that at times became problematical. Most of the time, however, the military leader and the mayor were able to work closely together. Nevertheless, the authorities in Mexico City made it clear that the supreme military commander of any province also had political authority if he felt it necessary.<sup>11</sup>

Sánchez continued his efforts to make Laredo a respectable town. When questionable night life seemed to be causing problems, he placed a curfew of 9:00 p.m. on everyone.<sup>12</sup> At the same time he settled disputes over land and animals and alleged thefts. While he continued to hold the title of mayor from 1783 to 1787, the reins of government were in the hands of his son, Santiago de Jesús Sánchez, who had been the assistant mayor [*Teniente Mayor*] since 1782. Tomás lived nine



more years, dying on January 20, 1796. To this day no one knows exactly where he is buried.

The immediate succession of mayors is not completely clear. Since there is no official list of the mayors, the only indication is from documents written or signed during these years, and these are very few; nor is there any indication as to how these men assumed office.<sup>13</sup> The first election returns in the archives are from 1817. Relying on the documents, however, one learns that in June of 1788 the town council sent a petition to the governor asking permission to round up stray cattle for the residents. It is signed by Joseph González as mayor, and José de Jesús Sánchez and Antonio González as aldermen. But a month later, a decree of eight ordinances for the city was promulgated by the mayor who was then Miguel Ponce Borrego. His signature appears on another document a year later, but in November 1789, Captain Claudio Lacomba cited himself as “military commander and Mayor of this town.”<sup>14</sup> From 1790 on, things are clearer. Joseph González was in office by June of that year and held the hearings on the botched Indian raid the previous April. He also ordered that the citizens capable of doing so should bring fifty large stones to the plaza and help build a jail.<sup>15</sup> He remained in office until late 1794 or early 1795 when he was succeeded by José Jesús de la Garza who finished the century as Laredo’s mayor. One indication of the growing importance of Laredo came in 1794 when General Félix Calleja divided the militia of the north into three companies and placed one of them in Laredo.

It would be interesting to know what the various mayors did while in office, how they exercised their leadership. Some of what we know will be mentioned in the succeeding chapters. However, most of the documentation in the archives until about 1810 comes from the viceroy or the governor. Some of these communications affected the lives of the Laredoans, especially the decrees on taxes and the sale or purchase of land, but most of them touched on situations that were far removed from the frontier environment and people who in many ways were struggling to survive. In any case, the communications were kept,

even if they were ignored or not observed. What they basically tell us is that, removed as they were from the center of things, Laredo's residents were still citizens of Spain and subject to Spanish laws.

During the first decade of the 1800s the political situation in Spain changed somewhat abruptly. In 1808, Charles IV was forced to abdicate in favor of his son, Ferdinand VII. Shortly afterwards, Ferdinand was made a prisoner by Napoleon who placed his brother on the Spanish throne. In defiance of this, Spanish representatives gathered in Cádiz in the south of Spain and formed a legislature that claimed to act in Ferdinand's name. This body, which included representatives from the American colonies, had strong Liberal tendencies and passed a number of laws giving more personal freedom. In 1812 it promulgated a new constitution, which in many ways strongly resembled those of France and the United States. This was done in part to try to quell the increasing insurrectionist movements taking place in Spanish America. As we will see in the next chapter, this was also happening in Mexico. José Ramón Díaz de Bustamante, who had been the mayor of Laredo from 1803 to 1807 and again in 1809 and 1810, was at the time the military leader, and it was he who convinced Captain Ignacio Elizondo, who had opted for the revolutionary movement, to rejoin the royalists and support Spain.<sup>16</sup> In 1802 and 1808 Lieutenant José Lafuente was the acting mayor in Laredo.

During the troublesome years of the revolutionary movement, Joseph González once again was Laredo's leader. With the exception of the first years of independence, he would be the last to hold office for more than a year. When Ferdinand VII returned to the Spanish throne in 1814, he spent much time undoing the work of the Cádiz legislature. He invalidated the Constitution of 1812, sent the American delegates back home and ordered the restoration of the pre-1812 political structures.<sup>17</sup> This seems to have included annual elections, which Laredo had not been following, but from 1814 on, with the exception previously mentioned, Laredo had a new mayor every year.<sup>18</sup> It was not always a new person, however. In the time frame of this history, five

individuals were in office more than once, and a couple of them several times.

The election procedure under both Spain and Mexico was a form of indirect democracy. In a monarchy it was an innovation; in a republic it was a limitation. In the last years of the colonial period, a relatively small group of “principal citizens” (landholders and persons of influence) chose the officials. After independence, the system of appointing local authorities varied according to the national constitution, which was determined by the political group in power (Liberals or Conservatives). That changed at least six times from 1821 to 1846. For the most part, elections during the Mexican period followed the colonial pattern and were never direct elections as we think of them today. Those who had a right to vote were limited to householders and property owners, and they did not vote directly for the persons to hold office. They elected electors, usually seven, who in turn chose the officials. It was the same system Europe had used for centuries to elect the Holy Roman Emperor. It was also a system that was somewhat elitist and one in which it would be hard to avoid choosing one’s relatives, friends, or cronies. The other side of that coin, of course, is that there were not all that many people who were literate or who were really qualified to hold public office. In any case, during both periods, the minutes of the elections were sent to the capital of the province or state for approval and the men could then take office. The minutes of the elections of 1818 offer an example of the procedures in the late colonial period.<sup>19</sup>

Town of Laredo, November 9, 1818.

In the town of San Agustín of Laredo, Province of Nuevo Santander of which the Lieutenant Colonel Don Juan de Echandía is the Governor, on the ninth day of the month of November of one thousand eight hundred and eighteen, I, Mayor D. José Francisco de la Garza and the Solicitor D. Polonio García called together the residents on the preceding

day (because it was a holiday), brought them to the house of the Captain D. José Lázaro Benavides for lack of proper offices, and told them we would proceed with the election of the Mayor and Solicitor who would be in office for the coming year of eighteen nineteen, according to the decrees of December 17, 1811, issued by the Commandant Brigadier General Joaquín Arredondo for the creation of these positions, which was read to them out loud, and of December 5, 1815, by the Governor of this Province which states who is eligible, and we the principal residents of this town then proceeded with the elections without discussion and using little papers on which Don Yldefonso Ramón received the most votes for Mayor and D. Juan Nepomuceno García for Solicitor. They both agreed and accepted their offices, and since those elected are capable and with sufficient qualities to serve in the offices to which they have been elected, despite the fact that the first-named was diffident about governing, those convoked beg the governor, if he is satisfied, to approve the elections which have been held in the name of all of the inhabitants of this jurisdiction, and in testimony of which they have signed before us, the Mayor and Solicitor mentioned above, and the witnesses attending in place of an official scribe of which there is none, according to the terms which the law requires and to which we witness.

José Francisco de la Garza Polonio García Yldefonso Ramón Nepomuceno García  
 José Lázaro Benavides Tomás García Dávila (signed also for) Juan José Quintanilla  
 Juan Ramos Lino Villarreal Francisco Treviño Blas María Díaz Florencio Villarreal  
 José María González Rafael López de Oropeza Manuel Sánchez Teodocio Treviño  
 Teodocio Treviño (for Marcos Villarreal)  
 José Antonio García witness Guadalupe Arambura witness Salvador Flores

The document also gives us an idea of who the “principal citizens” were. Practically speaking, men from this group would govern Laredo for the next twelve years, five of them as mayors and others as solicitors

or aldermen. The positive side of this is that it kept a kind of continuity which helped to bridge the change from colonialism to nationalism.

Between 1819 and 1822, however, the political situation still dictated the choice of authorities. This was a time of upheaval in the Spanish colonies and there was even a revolt in Spain itself. As a consequence, in 1819 Mayor Ildefonso Ramón received an official communication from the governor requesting a list of nominees for mayor for the following year, presumably to assure that they were persons loyal to the Crown.<sup>20</sup> During 1820, two men held the office of mayor: José Antonio Benavides from February to July, and José María de Tovar from August to December. This was due to the fact that during that year the Constitution of 1812 was reinstated and the authorities called for new elections according to that constitution.<sup>21</sup> In the elections for mayor during 1821, Victorino Dovalina was chosen. At the time few could have envisioned the dramatic events which would take place before the end of that year. By mid-September, the Plan of Iguala had been promulgated, the viceroy forced to capitulate and compromise, and Mexico's independence from Spain declared. In the next three months things moved swiftly in an attempt to set up a new government while still adhering to the old form. Mexico was to be a constitutional monarchy and one of the first needs was to choose members for the congress to write a new constitution.

On December 27, 1821, Victorino Dovalina, Teodocio Treviño, Fernando García Dávila, and José de Jesús Benavides met in the city hall to elect a person from the district who in turn would serve as one of the persons to elect the representatives to the congress of the "Mexican Empire." Teodocio Treviño was chosen. An interesting phrase in the minutes states that the election was carried out "according to the fundamental bases of the Plan de Iguala and the treaties of the town of Córdoba forming the constitution of the Empire."<sup>22</sup> At the same time, orders were sent out that no changes of authority should take place until further notice. Consequently, Dovalina continued in office throughout 1822. In December of that year the notice was given to

hold elections and José María de Tovar once again became the mayor of Laredo.<sup>23</sup>

Individuals are important and are the makers of history, and excerpts from the elections of succeeding years show who the Laredoans thought would be capable, reliable, and trustworthy both as electors and as leaders. Sometimes political preferences came into consideration, but there were no parties or platforms or political campaigns (though one can imagine certain candidates drumming up support from relatives and friends), and the choices came down to character and experience and the common good.

In the town of Laredo on the 21st day of December of one thousand eight hundred and twenty three I, citizen José María Tovar, constitutional Mayor of this town, in accordance with article 303 of the constitution, convoked the residents present so that according to the same article they could name nine electors who next Sunday will choose the city council for 1824. . . . Those with the greatest number of votes by plurality were José Antonio García, José Lázaro Benavides, Teodocio Treviño, Francisco de la Garza, Guadalupe Arambura, Basilio Benavides, Juan José Soto, Manuel Sánchez and José Benavides which I the mayor announced to the gathered citizens, asking them if they had any complaint regarding bribes so that the elections would go to certain persons, to which they all responded no, and in virtue of which and as testimony I made a document which I signed along with the interim secretary named by the same group. José María Tovar.

In the said town on the 28th day of the same month and year . . . the nine electors gathered at a meeting at which I presided . . . to name the citizens who will serve on this city council the coming year of 1824 . . . and having talked together as is the custom they proceeded immediately to the voting which resulted in the names of citizens Francisco de la Garza for Mayor

and Guadalupe Arambura for Alderman and Florencio Villarreal for Solicitor, alternating with José María González who is the present second Alderman . . . José María Tovar<sup>24</sup>

There are two interesting elements here. Tovar asks whether anyone knows if any of the electors have been bribed to vote for a certain individual. It might have been difficult to speak up in a crowd and say something, but at least the question was asked, which indicates a desire for honesty. The other thing is that he openly states that there was a kind of caucus among the electors before they voted. In a sense the vote was by consensus rather than by individual preference. No one after this mentions these two things.

Laredo, December 21st, 1824, I citizen José Francisco de la Garza, constitutional Mayor convoked the residents present to name nine electors to choose a city council next Sunday for the coming year of 1825 . . . those with the greatest number of votes by absolute plurality were José Lázaro Benavides, Teodocio Treviño, Yldefonso Ramón, José María Tovar, José de Jesús Sánchez, Blas María Díaz, Lino Villarreal, Miguel Gil and Polonio Garcia . . .

On the 26th day of December, 1824 . . . the nine electors gathered at a meeting at which I presided . . . to name the citizens who will serve as city council for the coming year of 1825 . . . and proceeding to the voting which resulted in naming citizens José Lázaro Benavides for Mayor, Manuel Sánchez for 1st Alderman, Rafael Lopez de Oropesa for second, and for Solicitor Lino Villarreal . . .

(signed) José Francisco de la Garza (and the electors).<sup>25</sup>

Following the decree of last November 30 of the Honorable Congress of this State, the undersigned was elected as Mayor and Yldefonso Ramón as Solicitor. They took possession of their

offices today . . .

Laredo, January 27, 1825. Fernando García Dávila

On July 9, 1825, José Lázaro Benavides and Manuel Sánchez were elected district electors for the election of representatives to the state legislature.<sup>26</sup>

Laredo, the tenth day of the month of December of 1826 . . . the citizens present proceeded to the election of a secretary and scrutators to be present for the voting for the electors. The persons named by a plurality of votes were Teodocio Treviño for Secretary, and Francisco de la Garza and Guadalupe Arambura as scrutators, and immediately the election of the electors took place according to the law. Those having the greatest number of votes by absolute plurality were citizens José Lázaro Benavides, Guadalupe Arambura, Francisco de la Garza, Basilio Benavides, José María González, Teodocio Treviño, and Fernando García Dávila.

(signed) Rafael López de Oropeza    Guadalupe Arambura

Laredo, the 17th day of December of 1826 . . . the electors met to choose the city council . . . which resulted in José Lázaro Benavides for Mayor, Manuel Sánchez for 1st Alderman, Juan Treviño for second, and Juan José Salinas as Solicitor . . . (signed by all of the above)<sup>27</sup>

Laredo, the ninth day of the month of December of 1827, [there was] the election of scrutators and a secretary for the naming of electors who have to choose a city council for the coming year: elected in this process were citizen Teodocio Treviño as secretary and citizens José Francisco de la Garza and José María González as scrutators who, seated at the table with the President, received the votes of all the citizens who



came to the meeting, which resulted by a plurality of votes in the election of citizens Rafael López de Oropeza, Faustino Ramirez, José Francisco de la Garza, José María González, Basilio Benavides, Tomás Flores and Teodocio Treviño. The results were made public and nobody present had any complaint about the election . . . José Lázaro Benavides Laredo, the sixteenth day of December of 1827 . . . the electors gathered for the choosing of a city council for this town according to the decrees of the Honorable Congress of November 30, 1824 and November 10, 1826 . . . which resulted in the election of José Manuel de los Santos as Mayor, José María Ramón as 2nd alderman [there is no mention of a 1st alderman], and José Lorenzo de la Peña as Solicitor. The election was made public and the minutes signed by the President and electors, in spite of the fact that Rafael López de Oropeza had a complaint about the election of Manuel de los Santos which was resolved by a majority of the electors who said he had a right to the office conferred on him, leaving the accuser the right to express his reasons to the government as the law states. José Francisco de la Garza (and the electors)<sup>28</sup>

Following the exact formula of the previous year, elections for scrutators and a secretary took place on December 9, 1828. Teodocio Treviño was elected secretary, and José Francisco de la Garza and José María González scrutators. The citizens then voted for electors. The seven chosen were José Lázaro Benavides, José Francisco de la Garza, Basilio Benavides, José María Gonzáles, Tomás Flores, Gregorio García, and Juan Nepomuceno Ramos. On December 16 the electors met and chose José María González as mayor, Andrés Martínez as second alderman and Faustino Ramírez as solicitor. The minutes are signed by José Manuel de los Santos Coy and the electors.<sup>29</sup>

On May 3, 1829, the citizens met to choose electors for the state congress. Basilio Benavides and José Lázaro Benavides had the highest

number of votes (fifty-two and forty-eight). However, on December 2, the head of the department, in consequence of the then-current political turmoil (see the next Chapter), ordered the elections to be done again. They took place on December 6 and Manuel de los Santos Coy and Juan José Treviño were elected.<sup>30</sup> The regular municipal elections took place at the end of the year.

Laredo, the thirteenth day of December of 1829 . . . the election of scrutators and a secretary took place for the naming of electors who must choose the city council for the coming year; elected were Tomás Flores as secretary and José Lázaro Benavides and Fernando García Dávila as scrutators, who placed at the table with the President received the votes of all the Citizens who came to the meeting, resulting elected by a plurality of votes Citizens Manuel Sánchez, José Lázaro Benavides, Fernando García Dávila, Gregorio García, Teodocio Treviño, Francisco de la Garza and Lorenzo de la Peña. José María González (and electors)

Laredo, the twentieth day of the month of December, 1829, the electors met in the hall which serves as a voting place and proceeded to the election of scrutators and a secretary, the undersigned mayor presiding. The scrutators chosen were Francisco de la Garza and Manuel Sánchez, and Teodocio Treviño as secretary, then . . . the election of the city council for the coming year of 1830 took place, with Yldefonso Ramón elected as Mayor, Florencio Villarreal 1st alderman, Salvador Cuellar second alderman and Manuel Francisco Pérez as Solicitor . . .<sup>31</sup>

In this same December of 1829, Anastasio Bustamante and Antonio López de Santa Anna promulgated the Plan of Jalapa against the government of Vicente Guerrero. After some skirmishes, Bustamante assumed the presidency. Because of possible political affiliations, all state and municipal authorities had to be reelected. The elections were

held in Laredo on April 4, 1830. The same people were chosen for office except that Domingo Dovalina replaced Pérez as solicitor.<sup>32</sup>

There are no minutes for the elections in December 1830, but there is a record of the tabulation of votes. The results were José Juan Treviño for president, Manuel Sánchez for first alderman, Victorino Vela for second alderman, and José María García Dávila as solicitor.<sup>33</sup>

By mid-1831, the Conservatives who were now in power were calling for new state officials and members of Congress. In Laredo ninety-three citizens met to choose electors and the process proved to be an interesting indication of the following that the most popular men had.

In the town of Laredo, the first of May of 1831 and eighth of the installation of the Congress of this State, all of the citizens present proceeded to the election of scrutators and a secretary according to article 55 of the state constitution, resulting elected the undersigned who, along with me the constitutional Mayor of this town and president of the meeting, continued with the naming of the electors of the district according to the article and paragraph 1 of the same [constitution] with the result of 33 votes for Teodocio Treviño, 15 for Lázaro Benavides and Francisco de la Garza, 9 for Basilio Benavides, 5 for Manuel de los Santos, José María González and Tomás Flores, four for Florencio Villarreal, and two for Victorino Dovalina. The voting having no results [because there was no majority] it was repeated between Lázaro Benavides and Francisco de la Garza who were tied and resulted in a majority for citizen Benavides who then competed with Teodocio Treviño, with José Lázaro Benavides winning as first elector. The voting then was done for second elector which resulted in Francisco de la Garza with 33 votes, Teodocio Treviño with 28, José María González with 20, Manuel de los Santos five, Basilio Benavides four, Tomás Flores, Victorino Dovalina and Víctorino Vela one each. With

no clear result the election was repeated between the first two who had received the greatest number of votes and Francisco de la Garza was chosen as second elector. The choosing of a third elector took place and Teodocio Treviño was elected with a majority of the votes which was 52. The rest were distributed among José María González, 21; Basilio Benavides, 16; Manuel de los Santos, 3; and one for Victorino Dovalina. The voting continued for a fourth elector which resulted in 42 votes for José María González, Basilio Benavides 36, Manuel de los Santos 10, Tomás Flores three and Víctor Vela two. With no clear result the voting was repeated between the two who had the greatest number of votes with José María González receiving a majority, and so that those chosen will have their place and representation in the elections for Representatives in the future Congress of the State and for governor and Assistant governor which will take place in the capital of the district, they were given the corresponding official documents as the law requires.

Juan José Treviño   José Francisco de la Garza  
Teodocio Treviño   Basilio Benavides, secretary.<sup>34</sup>

In the town of Laredo on the 11th of December, 1831 . . . José Francisco de la Garza and José María González were elected as scrutators, and José Basilio Benavides as secretary for the choosing of electors, resulting elected . . . Lázaro Benavides, José María González, Teodocio Treviño, Victorino Vela, Manuel Sánchez, Francisco de la Garza and Basilio Benavides. . . .

In the town of Laredo on the eighteenth day of December, 1831, the electors came together for choosing a city council for the town first designating Basilio Benavides as secretary and José Francisco de la Garza and José María González as scrutators, they proceeded immediately to the election of a Mayor, a 1st alderman, a second and a solicitor which resulted

in naming José Lázaro Benavides as mayor, Victorino Vela as 1st Alderman, Juan Francisco Farías as 2nd, and Agustín Dovalina as Solicitor. . . . Juan José Treviño (and electors)<sup>35</sup>

The choosing of a mayor in 1831 had a special significance. Just a month before, a decree from the governor announced that the elected mayors would also act as justices of the peace.<sup>36</sup> In effect, this meant that the mayor would wear two hats. This situation was short-lived, however, and new laws in 1832 called for a separate election of a justice of the peace and a substitute in each municipality. In Laredo, on March 11, Faustino Ramírez was elected with José María Ramón as substitute.<sup>37</sup>

In the town of Laredo on the ninth day of the month of December of 1832 . . . the election of scrutators and a secretary for choosing the electors . . . resulted in Teodocio Treviño and José María González as scrutators and Victorino Vela as secretary who, seated at the table with the President received the votes of the citizens who came to the meeting, resulting as elected . . . Teodocio Treviño, José María González, Yldefonso Ramón, Juan José Treviño, José María Dávila, Juan Francisco Farías, and Bartolo M. García. . . . José Lázaro Benavides (scrutators and secretary)

Laredo, the sixteenth of December, 1832 . . . the electors came together in the room that serves as a voting place. . . . they began the election of scrutators and a secretary, and the persons elected for the first were Teodocio Treviño and José María González, and for the second, Juan Francisco Farías. There followed immediately the election of a Mayor, a second Alderman and a Solicitor, the first Alderman being the one who was the second during the present year. Those chosen were José María González for Mayor, Juan Francisco Farías for 1st Alderman, José Andrés Martínez for second alderman, and

Francisco Paredes for solicitor. . . . José Lázaro Benavides (scrutators and secretary)<sup>38</sup>

The mayor's authority did not always go unquestioned or unchallenged. During this period, particularly the military commander, Captain Manuel Lafuente, was giving orders and taking actions which were out of his sphere of authority. The mayor complained to the governor who in turn had recourse to the commanding general. The result was that Lafuente was called on the carpet and in military terms told to mind his own business.<sup>39</sup> Evidently he changed his ways and later documents are evidence of his good standing in the community. It was a victory for civil authority.

The elections of the following year are interesting because some new names move into the Laredo "oligarchy."<sup>40</sup>

In the town of Laredo on the fifteenth of December of 1833 . . . the Electors met . . . and proceeded to the election of scrutators and a secretary which resulted in Francisco de la Garza and Yldefonso Ramón for the first, and Victorino Vela for the second. The elections followed . . . with Juan José Treviño as mayor, Andrés Martínez as 1st Alderman, Agapito Galván as second Alderman and Elisario Pisaña as Solicitor. At the same time the election of a Justice of the Peace and a substitute took place . . . with Florencio Villarreal chosen as Justice of the Peace and Domingo Dovalina as substitute . . .

José María González (scrutators and secretary)

In 1834, when the very anti-clerical government of Vicente Gómez Farías was overturned, the bishop of Michoacán was named minister of justice and religious affairs. He immediately revoked the laws against ecclesiastics. This is reflected in the following Laredo elections in which the parish priest, Trinidad García, was chosen as one of the electors.<sup>41</sup>

In the town of Laredo on the fourteenth day of December of 1834 . . . the election of scrutators and a secretary . . . resulted in Domingo Dovalina and Victorino Vela as scrutators and Basilio Benavides as secretary who with the President received the votes of the citizens who came to the meeting. . . . with the elected being Basilio Benavides, Victorino Vela, Francisco de la Garza, Domingo Dovalina, Manuel Lafuente, Trinidad García and José María Sánchez. . . .

Laredo on the 21<sup>st</sup> of December of 1834 . . . the election of scrutators and a secretary resulted in Trinidad García and Manuel Lafuente for the first, and Basilio Benavides for the second; the election [for officials] immediately followed with the chosen being Yldefonso Ramón for Mayor, José de Jesús de la Garza for second Alderman, and Bartolomé García Dávila as Solicitor.

Juan José Treviño (and secretary)

The years 1835 and 1836 saw the Mexican government and army engaged in the difficult task of trying to suppress the rebellion in Texas. Troop movements and uncertain communications disrupted the normal course of things and it wasn't until late January 1836 that elections for that year took place.

In the town of Laredo on the 30th of January, 1836 . . . the election of scrutators and a secretary took place for the choosing of electors. . . . the scrutators are citizens Manuel Lafuente and José Francisco de la Garza, and the secretary, Tomás Flores who with the President received the votes of the citizens who came to the meeting. . . . the elected are José María González, Juan José Treviño, Víctor Vela, Gregorio García, Juan Francisco Farías, Florencio Villarreal and Faustino Ramírez. . . .

Yldefonso Ramón (scrutators and secretary)

Laredo on the 2nd of February, 1836 . . . the electors pro-

ceeded to choose scrutators and a secretary, and those elected were Juan José Treviño and Victorino Vela for the first, and Juan F. Farías for the second . . . continuing immediately to the election . . . with those chosen being Basilio Benavides for Mayor, Jesús Garza for 1st Alderman, Eugenio Garza for second Alderman and Gregorio Vargas for Solicitor. . . .<sup>42</sup>

Elections for 1837 were held as usual in Laredo on December 20, 1836. They did not take effect, however, as the following letter shows:

The notarized copy of the minutes you sent with your official letter of last December 20 informs me of the elections for city council which took place in that town. But since the law of the general congress of last November 28 calls for something else in this respect, I must reply that if you have received the said law the city council of last year should continue exercising its functions until, as the law states, the form and method for naming the new city councils in the future has been established.

God and liberty. Ciudad Victoria, January 7, 1837.

José Antonio Fernández<sup>43</sup>

What had taken place was the defeat of the Mexicans by the Texas forces at San Jacinto with the consequent disgrace of Santa Anna. A new government was called for and this invariably meant new laws and often new administrators, as had happened in 1830. In this case, however, the municipalities had been advised to continue with the same officials, so Basilio Benavides remained as mayor during 1837.<sup>44</sup> There is no record of elections at the end of that year but a communication from the governor dated December 16 states that “the citizens approved by the prefecture of the District of the North as Justices of the Peace who should hold office in the municipality of Laredo in the coming year of 1838: Don José María Ramón as principal and Don José Angel Benavides, substitute.”<sup>45</sup> Again there is no record of elec-



tions at the end of 1838, but on January 10, 1839, Yldefonso Ramón was an official witness as “constitutional Mayor of the said town [of Laredo].”<sup>46</sup> However, his term was cut short.

In late 1838 and early 1839 the Mexican government was again in a state of turmoil with the Federalists gaining adherence all over the country. As we will see in the next chapter, Laredo opted to join in the Federalist movement. Yldefonso Ramón had always been a conservative, and therefore a Centralist, and the town council wrote to Jesús Cárdenas, who had taken over as governor asking that he be replaced as mayor. Perhaps they were expecting to elect someone in his place, but Cárdenas saved them the trouble.<sup>47</sup>

In view of the reasons expressed in the resolution of your Illustrious Council in which you ask that D. Yldefonso Ramon be relieved of the office of Mayor which he presently holds, this government office agrees to concede to it, and to fill that vacancy and that of 1st Alderman of the 3rd Division I am appointing D. Gregorio García as Mayor and José María Ramón as Alderman, informing them of these appointments today, and I inform you so that the people will acknowledge them as official. This procedure is extraordinary in normal times, but in the extraordinary circumstances in which we find ourselves it is routine because it is conformable to the good interests of the revolution whose exigencies form the laws to which we must subject all of our present dealings without offending justice. I tell you this to satisfy any scruples you might have regarding the manner of appointment, expressing at the same time my highest respects.

God and liberty. Ciudad Guerrero, May 6, 1839.

Jesús Cárdenas.

By the end of 1839, the question of forming a new republic was in the works and Cárdenas himself was in Laredo. There may have been

some conflict of authority since he was chosen as president of the newly-proclaimed republic. In any case, in March 1840, Dolores García was appointed interim mayor but two weeks later he was asking to resign. He was apparently convinced to stay on the job and a month later asked Eugenio Garza to be the substitute or alternate mayor.<sup>48</sup> He accepted and between the two of them the affairs of Laredo were taken care of during that year.

On January 14, 1841, José María Ramón was approved as justice of the peace for the year. He assumed the title of mayor in October.<sup>49</sup> Two months later regular elections took place again.

In the town of San Agustín de Laredo . . . on the fifth day of December of 1841, according to the laws of November 30, 1836 and April 27, 1837, there was the election of a President and four secretaries who have to choose the electors of the city council for the coming year of 1842. Those elected for President and secretaries were citizens José María González for the first, and for the second Estevan Moreno, Tomás Flores, Gregorio Soto and Juan de la Garza Pérez who, placed at the table with the President, received the ballots of the citizens who came to the meeting, resulting by plurality of vote citizens Domingo Dovalina, Bartolomé García, Agustín Dovalina, Florencio Villarreal, Gregorio Soto, Elijio Garza, Gregorio García, José María González, Militón González, Tomás Flores and Miguel Dovalina whose election was made public without any of the persons attending offering any complaint, all of which was put into minutes which the said secretaries signed with me.

In the town of San Agustín de Laredo on the twelfth day of the month of December of 1841, the electors gathered in the room which serves as a voting place to choose the city council of this town . . . they proceeded to elect a president, a vice president and two Secretaries, and those elected were Florencio Villarreal and Gregorio García, and for Secretaries Tomás Flores

and Gregorio Soto. This was immediately followed by the election of a Mayor, 1st and 2nd Aldermen, and a Solicitor, those named being Florencio Villarreal for Mayor, Reyes Ortiz for 1st Alderman, Miguel Dovalina for 2nd Alderman and Faustino Ramírez as Solicitor. . . . (signed by the officers and Secretaries)<sup>50</sup>

Twenty years after independence many of the same citizens were still part of a select circle of individuals who governed the lives of the Laredoans. From time to time a few new faces appeared, but the old stand-bys always seemed to be present. They were not always in agreement with the federal government if their political views were different. In 1842, Basilio Benavides was elected for the coming year but precisely at that time the Conservatives were once again in control. Benavides had been an outspoken and active Federalist and he declined to accept the position.<sup>51</sup> Probably without much reluctance the subprefect in Ciudad Guerrero wrote to the town council: “By superior orders of the Prefecture which I am sending you, you will see that D. Basilio Benavides has been relieved of the Presidency of your illustrious group and consequently you will have to arrange a meeting of the electors to choose a new president according to article 129 of the Law of March of ’37.”<sup>52</sup> There is no record of the new election, but subsequent documents show that Bartolomé García Dávila was chosen to replace Benavides. When Santa Anna came back as a Liberal in 1843 the political scene changed again and at the end of that year Benavides was elected once more and served throughout 1844. Agustín Dovalina was chosen as mayor for 1845 but in April he resigned and “on the twenty-seventh of the month of April, 1845 . . . in the second round of votes José María Ramón was elected by six votes to five obtained by Dolores García . . .”<sup>53</sup>

During the first half of the 1840s Mexico had made several attempts to put down the revolt in Texas, which had declared itself a Republic. This came to a crisis stage in 1845 with the annexation of

Texas to the United States. Military preparations were being made throughout Mexico and the military commanders considered themselves the real leaders. No details are given, but there was open conflict in Laredo between Mayor Ramón and the military commander Colonel Calixto Bravo to the point that the commander in chief, General Mariano Arista, had to intervene.<sup>54</sup> Ramón's name appears on documents until October, but in November Reyes Ortiz was acting as mayor. There are no documents relative to elections at the end of 1845, but there is an inventory of archives given by Ramón to Dolores García as the new mayor for the following year.<sup>55</sup>

The political situation changed in November 1846, when American troops took over Laredo, and it was somewhat ambiguous. In informing the authorities that all strangers arriving in the town had to report to him, Mirabeau Lamar addressed his message to "Don Andrés Martínez, Mayor of Laredo."<sup>56</sup> Actually, Martínez had been appointed mayor of the part of Laredo on the other side of the river. Dolores García continued in office on the north side, though somewhat restricted by the presence of Lamar. In December, as his predecessor had done, he surrendered the archives to the next mayor, Francisco Villarreal, who had been elected for the year 1847.<sup>57</sup>

Lamar remained in Laredo until July 1848. While there, he let things follow their customary routine as much as possible. Considering Laredo as part of Texas now, he called for elections to state offices in July 1847, warning the governor that many people were unhappy with the current situation and that there would probably be a low turnout at the polls. He was right. Only forty voted to fill the four offices, but oddly enough they chose three Anglos and one Hispanic.<sup>58</sup> Language may have been a factor in the choice.

The discontent Lamar spoke of came to something of a head in April 1848. Three of the longtime leaders in Laredo, José María González, José María Ramón, and Basilio Benavides, presented a petition to Lamar asking that Laredo be reincorporated into Mexico, or at least he allowed to follow Mexican laws. Lamar's answer was polite but

cuttingly clear: Laredo was now a part of the United States and would never return to Mexico.<sup>59</sup>

Other events in 1848 also affected the political scene. Webb County was created and steps were taken to incorporate the city of Laredo. That did not happen immediately, however. The act or law of incorporation was amended in February of 1850 and finally passed and made effective in 1852.<sup>60</sup>

From 1848 on, the electoral system in Laredo changed radically. Following the United States' pattern, Laredo was divided into wards or precincts. The documents extant in the Laredo Archives record the election results in only one or the other of the precincts, and for only three years. Names of some of the succeeding mayors have come down to us from other sources, but there are no documents in the archives to corroborate them. William Franklin Alexander was the first elected mayor when Laredo was officially a part of the United States.<sup>61</sup> He was in office during 1848 and was succeeded by Basilio Benavides, who held the office for two years, turning it over to José María González in 1851. Alexander was reelected for 1852 and Benavides for 1854. The mayor for 1853 is unknown, but Bartolomé García was in office when Laredo celebrated its first centenary in 1855.<sup>62</sup>

## ENDNOTES

1. F 32, D 11; F 51, D 8.

2. The official to be elected, the *síndico procurador*, is sometimes translated "attorney" or even "attorney general," but this is much too pretentious for a small village or town. The *Enciclopedia Sopena* defines him as "a person elected by the community to take care of and defend their interests." Martínez Amador's *Standard Spanish Dictionary* defines *procurador* as attorney-at-law or solicitor. Webster defines a solicitor as "the chief law officer of a municipality." This is the term I have chosen to use. The person in charge was given the title *Justicia*, literally "Justice," which was the term used in Castille and Aragón in Spain, where the local magistrate did sometimes mete out justice, as was the case later on also under Mexican rule. When the mayor had an assistant,

he was then considered the *alcalde mayor*, the main or principal mayor.

3. The Spanish term is *regidor*, and this is the term that appears in the documents referred to below on Campos Castellanos and González Hidalgo.

4. F 11, D 6.

5. F 12, D 8.

6. F 12, D 1, 2, 3, 4.

7. F 12, D 5, 6, 9, 10, 13.

8. AGN, Provincias Internas, volume and page not indicated. This document is in the St. Mary's University archives but is not a part of the Laredo Archives.

9. F 15, D 2, 6; F 17, D 6; F 24, D 1.

10. Archives of the town of Mier, box 1798-1811, folio 1797.

11. F 35, D 13.

12. F 22, D 3.

13. Sebron Wilcox made a list of *Alcaldes and Regidores of Laredo*, but his list from 1787 to 1790 does not coincide with signatures on the documents of this period. On December 14, 1846, Andrés Martínez gave Mirabeau Lamar a list of the municipal officers from 1766–1846, countersigned by Tomás Flores. Cf. Gulick and Allen, *The Papers of Mirabeau Buonaparte Lamar* (Austin: Von-Boeckmann-Jones, 1924), Vol. 4, Part 1, p. 154.

14. The three documents referred to are in F 32, D 5, 6, and F 33, D 11.

15. F 34, D 8.

16. Archivo Histórico del Estado de Tamaulipas, *Documentos de Independencia I*, pp. 395–97.

17. F 58a, D 7; F 58b, D 11.

18. The mayors for the years 1814–1817 were successively José Antonio García Dávila, José María Tovar, José Andrés Farías, and José Tomás García Dávila.

19. F63, D 29.

20. F 64, D 18.

21. F 65, D 7, 8.

22. F 66, D 4.

23. F 68b, D 12.

24. F 69, D 35.

25. F 74, D 31.

26. F 75, D 17-1, 11.

27. F 77, D 66.

28. F 79, D 45. There is nothing in the archives to indicate what López de Oropeza's complaint was. It may have been something personal between him and de los Santos Coy during López' presidency in 1826.

29. F 83, D19, 20, 22. Document 22 has the actual tabulation of votes.

30. F 86, D 8g, 17.

31. F 86, D 18, 19.

32. F 87, D 6.

33. F 87, D 24.

34. F 91, D 1-1.

35. F 91, D 1-2,3.

36. F 94, D 32.

37. F 95, D 103-1.

38. F 95, D 103-2, 3; F 98, D 10.

39. F 98, D 92, 96.

40. F 98, D 123; F 102, D 4.

41. F 110, D 1.

42. F 122, D 1.

43. F 128, D 1.

44. F 129, D 1.

45. F 129, D 75.

46. F 140, D 6.

47. F 140, D 28.

48. F 142, D 1, 4, 7.

49. F 144, D 4. With the Centralists gaining strength, the laws of 1837 were still in effect, which meant that the justice of the peace was also the mayor. The Liberals restored the Constitution of 1824 and the office of mayor as such.

50. F 148, D 4, 15.

51. F 159, D 1.

52. F 161, D 1, 26.

53. F 171, D 18.

54. F 174, D 13.

55. F 176, D 4.

56. F 180, D 2.

57. F 179, D 35, 37.

58. *The Papers of Mirabeau Buonaparte Lamar*, Vol. IV, p. 172, No. 2335. Check Data 250, 251, and Webb Co. Hist. p. 52 The Hispanic was Agustín Soto, a lifetime resident of Laredo.

59. *Ibid.*, p. 196, No. 2382. In February of this year the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo had been signed, making the Rio Grande the boundary between Mexico and the United States.

60. See *Laws of Texas*, Vol. 3, pp. 343 ff. Data 263, Webb Co. 57.

61. There are documents for November of 1849 from the district court that have Alexander's signature on them as mayor. Louis J. Wortham, *A History of Texas* (Fort Worth: Wortham-Molyneaux, 1924), 5: 258, also states that Alexander was the first mayor of Laredo as part of the United States.

62. Alexander appears for the second time on a list compiled by Sebron Wilcox, but he does not give the source of his information. The signatures of Benavides and García appear on documents of 1854 and 1855 respectively. There are only four documents from 1853, all of them election results from precincts.



### 3. Changing Allegiances

By the very fact that a person is born in a given place, that individual knowingly or unknowingly assumes an obligation of loyalty to the government and of responsibility to observe its laws, which are meant to protect the people and keep things functioning smoothly. How people view a government is often based on how effectively they think it is serving them. Sometimes citizens will feel that the government is incompetent or uncooperative, or worse, oppressive, and this can lead to rebellion or the desire to change the system or those who are exercising authority. The story of Mexico, particularly in the first half of the nineteenth century, is one of political turbulence, and even the most remote areas eventually became involved in the constantly changing situation. Political authority went from “I, the King” to “The Honorable Congress,” with various personalities taking the leadership or being deprived of it according to the acceptability of their actions. Some survived the storms better than others. Antonio López de Santa Anna managed to take over the presidency eleven times by changing from conservative to liberal as circumstances warranted. No one really ever knew what he stood for except desire for power. In that, he was not alone. Much of Mexico’s history revolves precisely around the fact that local leaders, *caudillos*, wanted to extend their authority and territory

and became rivals of one another and of the established government, and the country became embroiled in a cauldron of revolutions and counter-revolutions.

Long before these events, however, Laredoans lived under the Spanish flag for sixty-six years and decrees promulgated in Spain and by the viceroy in Mexico City found their way into the local archives even though many of them had little to do with the daily life of the town. Rules regarding the growing and selling of tobacco, gun powder, coinage, the sale of mines, and making cigarettes were of little interest to people with more immediate problems.<sup>1</sup> But the multiple decrees on taxation, land use and sale, production and use of liquors, and gathering of salt and firewood had to be observed.<sup>2</sup>

There are other documents in the archives that reflect Laredo's connection with the Spanish empire. The people were informed of the death of Charles III in 1789, the births of royal heirs in 1781 and 1792, the marriage of the Prince of Asturias in 1803, the declarations of war against England in 1807, France in 1808, and Denmark in 1810. All of the laws promulgated by the legislature in Cádiz during Ferdinand VII's captivity were accepted in America and Mexicans were informed of the activities of Napoleon in 1815.<sup>3</sup> It is probably safe to say that the majority of the people in Laredo didn't know who the Prince of Asturias was, where Denmark might be located, or why everyone was so concerned about Napoleon. If nothing else, these communications were simply reminders that they owed allegiance to this European nation, which in some indistinct way controlled their lives.

The test of their loyalty came in a very real way starting in 1810. Toward the end of the eighteenth century there was growing unrest in Spain's American colonies. They had been dominated and governed for nearly three centuries by a political entity that was scarcely known to them. Nationalistic feelings had developed and these were heightened by the events that took place in the neighboring English colonies and in France. The upshot of this was that independence movements—considered rebellions by the Spanish crown—began springing up in

many of the American regions. The native-born people seldom had the same rights and privileges as those born in Spain. Resentment grew and revolutionary embers began to smolder. They broke into flame in the early nineteenth century and Mexico was no exception. The story of the revolutionary movement begun by the parish priest Miguel Hidalgo in the town of Dolores is well known. The situation became one of Spanish loyalists (and the Mexicans who sided with them) against the rebels. The rebellion spread to areas distant from Dolores, especially to the north, and had far-reaching effects. Less than two months after the insurgence began, the governor of Nuevo Santander sent out the following communication:<sup>4</sup>

All of my desires and directives are and have been directed solely to the goal that this Province, which the kindness of the Sovereign has deigned to confide to me, remain always in the firm recognition and love that it should have for the fatherland, maintaining intact the sacred rites of our Religion and keeping the laws and precepts which preserve us in the great and distinguished honor of being vassals of Our Beloved King and Lord Ferdinand VII who now sees himself free from the pernicious and unprecedented contagion of the insurrection which unfortunately began to spread with some rapidity to various places by some denatured Spaniards who, seduced and deceived by vile ideas and a false happiness painted by the principal author of the revolution, the parish priest of Dolores, Don Miguel Hidalgo (who is now excommunicated with all of his followers and declared a Heretic by the Holy Tribunal of the Inquisition as will be seen in a few days), and have followed this new Napoleon who seeks the destruction of this Kingdom. Finally, so that all of the faithful inhabitants may enjoy the peace and tranquility that they have had up to now and which delights me, I can not nor should not overlook any means which in any way can contribute to the happy achieving of those

most interesting goals. And since, to see them realized, it is necessary that we live with all the precautions which the actual critical circumstances demand, I am ordering each of you to take special care to investigate with the greatest scrupulosity any foreigners who might be in your respective jurisdictions, examining astutely from where they have come, and all their dealings, understood that in case of finding something suspicious, to take them into custody and send them immediately to this government with information of what it is about and with the corresponding guard in order to do what seems opportune; and those in whom no malice is found should be advised to leave the limits of this Province immediately because this is necessary for its peace, with the warning that if they do not do so other more efficacious means will be taken.

Likewise I especially recommend to you that all of the unhappy Europeans who come through these territories, since all or most of them come fleeing the evils they have experienced from the rebels and are looking for refuge, should be helped and attended as much as possible, even though it be simply with hospitality as a sign of humanity which I have no doubt you will show as fruits of your own good and noble sentiments which you all have deep within you. God keep you many years.

San Carlos, November 5, 1810. Manuel de Yturbe e Yraeta

The call to loyalty to Spain is evident. The concern for foreigners had to do particularly with the province of Texas, which we will consider in the next chapter. Meanwhile, how did this affect Laredo?

A few days after the previous document, the mayor of Laredo wrote to various other authorities:<sup>5</sup>

The critical circumstances of the times require an appeal to everyone and all possible resources to arm the people and form respectable groups which can come to the defense of the Prov-

ince and maintain the sacred rights of Religion, the King and the Fatherland which are menaced by the insurrection taking place in the Kingdom. As soon as you leaders receive this you should call together all of the settled Indians, making a list with their names and numbers, and having them with no excuses make good bows and fifty arrows for each one. The same is true for the male residents in good health and fit young men who have no other kinds of weapons, sending me their numbers and names, keeping them ready for the first orders I may give about this matter.

If this procedure is done efficiently and well it will result in making a large number of people useful who at first glance are separated from society. For this reason, I hope that, inspired by sentiments of honor which you have and attentive to the important purpose for making these provisions, you will take great care and leave no stone unturned so that this may be carried out successfully and with the promptness that the situation demands. God keep you many years.

Laredo, November 21, 1810.

Joseph Ramón Díaz de Bustamante

As things evolved, even though the revolution ignited sparks in surrounding regions and there were temptations to join the insurgents, Laredo itself remained loyal to the Crown. According to one historian of this period, the citizens of Laredo were “indifferent” to the ongoing rebellion against Spain.<sup>6</sup> However, a letter from the parish priest José Manuel Pérez to Díaz de Bustamante, who was then in Nuevo León, tells a somewhat different story.<sup>7</sup>

I am grateful for the news that you send because we are absolutely without any correspondence here . . . everything has been to pretend to favor the Insurgents. . . . such people don't consider the injustice done to good patriots proven in the crucible

of the Insurrection, and much less the harm that this brings to Religion, the Fatherland and the King . . . I fear, and not without reason, that some here will relapse, because any time there is outside news of the Insurgents, they jump for joy and publicly announce that they [the insurgents] are coming. . . . Here the storm is swallowing us up. We lack everything: no soap, no sugar, no blankets, no fur skins, not even a fair in Saltillo this year. The worst for the people is the lack of tobacco. You can't get a cigarette even for a peso and there are those who pay a *real* for a cigar. What usury! But I won't say anything more about that . . . God give you good health!

Laredo, September 10, 1811.

The revolutionary fire ignited by Hidalgo had spread all the way into the province of Texas and in January of 1811 rebellion broke out in Béjar with Juan Bautista Casas as the leader. The Spanish authorities were seized and sent in chains to Coahuila. For the next two and a half years attacks and counterattacks took place while the rebels tried to set up the Republic of Texas. Meanwhile, the victor over the Texas rebels, Gen. José Joaquín Arredondo, based himself in Laredo for a time in June 1813. Even had the Laredoans been enthusiastic for the cause, the presence of the Spanish troops would have precluded any activity on their part. Earlier that year the mayor of Laredo, Joseph González, had issued a decree meant to strengthen support for Spain and deter anyone from rebellious activity.<sup>8</sup>

Because a general gathering of the residents and families is very important for the preservation and defense of this town and the organizing of it will benefit the service of God, the King and the Fatherland, as well as the honor of the Spanish Army, I have decided to order the observance (in view of superior decrees and royal orders) of the following articles:

1. When these orders are publicly proclaimed, everyone from

fifteen to sixty years old should go to the barracks with fire-arms or weapons he has, not hiding any, because he who has done so maliciously will be treated as a traitor to the Spanish Monarchy and sent to the governor who will mete out the deserved punishment.

2. Whoever disobeys a superior, or turns his back to an enemy, or joins them will be punished with death if it is proved that he has done so willingly.

3. The person guilty of rebellion (without exception of persons) will be put in chains to be sent to the government, or if there is urgent need be immediately executed, depending on the decisions and rights of the Commanders of the troops which guard the frontier.

4. Anyone who has dealings with the traitor insurgents or their Indian allies either verbally or in writing will suffer the death penalty; the same goes, without distinction of persons, for the person who supplies food, horses, money, or jewelry which they have in their houses.

5. The same death penalty will fall on anyone who harbors any of the bandits in his house or knows where some of them are and does not immediately inform the Commander or someone who can inform the leaders to avoid the harm that can befall the Fatherland; the one who does so will deserve the reward that his fidelity and patriotism merit.

And so that everyone knows, I order this published in this town and all the ranches which belong to this jurisdiction for its compliance.

Laredo, March 9, 1813. Jph. Gonsales

Whether it was from fidelity or fear, the important thing is that Laredo remained loyal to the Crown. In 1816 the viceroy sent his thanks to all those who had expressed their fidelity to King Ferdinand VII, who had been reinstated on the Spanish throne, but as late as

1820 there were still exhortations to recognize the authority of Spain.<sup>9</sup> The archival documents for these years reflect the laws and regulations both directly from Spain and from the viceroy in Mexico City as well as the governor of Nuevo Santander. They also show that the citizens in Laredo dutifully paid their taxes both on their houses and their animals.<sup>10</sup>

The geopolitical situation of Laredo deserves some mention, without entering into great detail. The vast territory claimed by Spain in what is now northern Mexico and the southwestern United States had been divided into Internal or Interior Provinces. We've already seen how the northeastern part of Mexico was eventually colonized with the name Nuevo Santander. The province was under the jurisdiction of a governor who resided in the town of San Carlos and who also had a military title. Under him were lieutenant governors who were the equivalent of mayors in each town and who also were in charge of the militia. Tomás Sánchez never referred to himself as lieutenant governor but rather as captain.

In succeeding decades the situation changed several times. At one point Laredo was under the jurisdiction of San Luis Potosí.<sup>11</sup> Even though it continued to belong to Nuevo Santander, until independence it was often more closely associated with Texas and Coahuila. After independence allegiance passed to the new nation of the United States of Mexico (the official name) and the constitution of 1824 created new states, among them Tamaulipas, which was announced by the following document:<sup>12</sup>

The Delegates of the previously-called Province of Santander and now State of Tamaulipas to its inhabitants—

Citizens: We have finally come to the moment in which your Representatives can announce to you the most joyful event to be registered in your annals. The supreme authorities in publishing the great charter of the Mexican Federation have placed this Province on the same level as others said to be more note-



worthy and wealthy. You have been raised to the rank which your learning and virtues merit. You are going to have a very distinguished place in the political world. Without having to have recourse to outside sources, those who are going to make, apply, and execute the laws which you will follow will be taken from among you yourselves within the confines of the State. You no longer belong to a Colony which is like a protectorate. You now make up the free state of Tamaulipas with its own rights the same as other states on the continent. . . . Very soon you will have your legislature. . . . Let us consider ourselves as part of a free state and work toward the same goals. Forget rivalries. Think no more of differences which may simply be of opinion, and we will be happy. This is what your delegation asks of you and confidently hopes that docile to its voice, you will work in such a way as to be worthy of belonging to the great Mexican federation and be part of the free State of Tamaulipas.

Aguayo, February 14, 1824. Juan Francisco  
Gutiérrez, President José Ignacio Gil, Sec.

Laredo celebrated this event with the ringing of bells, offering a Mass of thanksgiving, and having the officials take a public oath of allegiance to the new state and Congress. There was rejoicing in the streets, which were illuminated for three nights.<sup>13</sup>

Over the next thirty years, states would alternately be called “provinces” or “departments,” depending on the political group in power. In 1837, the departments were divided into prefectures and subprefectures and Laredo came under the direct influence of the towns of Matamoros (mainly for military considerations), Guerrero, and Mier.<sup>14</sup>

It was the changing political situation, however, that further challenged the allegiance of the citizens of Laredo. The main struggle in the first three decades of independence was between the Centralists

(Conservatives) and the Federalists (Liberals). While most of the military activity took place in the center of the country, the frontier towns were often affected in one way or another and the people of Laredo were forced to take sides. Not every revolutionary movement or change of government is reflected in the archives, but those that are show how the Laredoans tried to accommodate themselves to new situations.

Once independence was achieved, a triumvirate was formed and a constitutional assembly called to determine a government. With no experience other than that of kingdom or empire, the delegates finally agreed in 1822 to name Agustín Iturbide emperor of Mexico.<sup>15</sup> His autocratic and self-aggrandizing ways soon aroused opposition and in February of 1823 the first of many Plans was proclaimed in Casa Mata.<sup>16</sup> It called for the removal of Iturbide and the forming of a Federal Republic. The military commander in Monterrey backed the plan and in March the town council of Laredo met to decide what to do.<sup>17</sup>

In the town of Laredo on the thirty-first day of March, 1823: in the home of the Military Commander of this frontier, Lt. Colonel D. Ventura Ramón, the Constitutional Town Council, officials, parish priest and other persons who signed below came together as they agreed to consider carefully the fate of the fatherland and the decision taken by the army under the command of Captain General D. José Antonio Echavarrí made in Casa Mata last February 1st and the agreement made in Monterrey by the Adjutant Inspector Lt. Colonel D. Pedro Lemus whose testimonies were discussed with much reflection, with this Council in agreement with the imperative necessity of carrying out such logical and praiseworthy ideas which up to now have not been communicated to the authorities by the proper entity, probably because the General Headquarters is engaged in activity and the fact that there is no governor of the Province right now since he left it, perhaps without a resignation of his position as Sr. López did. These events, which offer

the joy of expressing the political sentiments of this town, always in agreement with those of the army, the preserver of the only source capable of offering complete happiness to the Nation, have led us to deliberate the situation, using the natural, inalienable right of every Nation, Province or town, joining therefore wholeheartedly the number of those who agree with this right, preferring it to their own existence if it were necessary to sacrifice it in order to preserve the National Sovereignty which determines their fate, and desiring that tomorrow, after Mass, the whole town be convoked to inform them of the plan and by agreement publicly proclaim it in whatever way they think best, informing the Representatives in Monterrey as the Superior Tribunal which these Provinces recognize since they have none of their own which were given by the extinct Congress, and the said Commander General is gone.

|   |  |   |   |
|---|--|---|---|
| José María García<br>Parish Priest      | José María de Tovar<br>Mayor                           | José Ventura Ramón<br>Military Commander        | José de Jesús Sánchez<br>First Alderman             |
| Nicasio Sánchez<br>Commander of the 3rd | José María González<br>Second Alderman                 | José Lázaro Benavides<br>Captain of the Militia | José Francisco de la Garza<br>resident of this town |
| Juan José Galán<br>2nd Sgt. of the 3rd  | José Manuel de los Santos Coy<br>resident of this town | Teodosio Treviño                                | Guadalupe Arambura<br>resident of this town         |
| Rafael López de Oropesa                 |  |   |   |

\*

In the said town, since all of the residents were not present for the preceding Proclamation and the news about Texas, all the undersigned gathered again to ratify it, and those who weren't present now express their support for the said Proclamation, some having others sign for them.

José Lázaro Benavides, José Ventura Ramón, Teodosio Treviño (also for Francisco Juárez), Juan José Galán, Victorino Dovalina, José Manuel de los Santos Coy, José Basilio Benavides, Manuel Francisco Pérez, José de Jesús Benavides, Fernando García Dávila (also for Mónico Cuellar), Marcos Vargas, José Esteban

del Castillo (also for D. Felipe Camacho), Guadalupe Arambura, Juan José Soto, Francisco Treviño, Victorino Vela (also for Polonio García), Francisco Fernández, Benito Ochoa, José Francisco de la Garza, Yldefonso Ramón, Rafael López de Oropesa, José Antonio Benavides, José Basilio Benavides (also for Enrique García), Rivera, José María Ramón, Tomás Flores, Guadalupe Arambura, Juan Ramos, Solicitor, José María Tovar, Mayor, José González, Second Alderman.

The plan gained momentum but it was necessary for all of the provincial legislatures to approve it. By December those in Nuevo Santander had climbed on the bandwagon and announced this to all the inhabitants. The town council of Laredo met once again to declare its adherence.<sup>18</sup>

In the town of Laredo, December 26, 1823.

This town council . . . held a meeting of its residents to inform them of the measures dictated by our magistrates in Aguayo . . . with the document in hand and following the wholesome and righteous spirit of the honorable Committee, in the simplest and most intelligible terms, spoke to the less educated people explaining the reasons for the meeting, and that the time had come for the towns of Santander and especially their residents to fearlessly use their natural right to choose a government most pleasing to them, and that in spite of the fact there was not time to present the prevailing sentiments of this town in the general meeting of the province (because we didn't receive the circular until last night), we nevertheless made the necessary inquiries so that, even though late, the free vote of Laredo would arrive at the tribunal which asked for it, and we likewise named a representative so that if circumstances change and he might need to be present later on, he is already chosen. In view of all this the residents one by one expressed their opin-

ions as to what they would like to have and the unanimous result was a vote for the Federal Republic without anyone having any reservations. Here, filled with joy and happiness, there were shouts of “Long live the Federal Republic!” When the rejoicing was finished, with the same order and form as the first voting, that of the representative took place with citizen Teodocio Treviño being elected and power delegated to him as is prescribed, and he will be given suitable instructions in case he has to go to the capital. This document is signed by the town council and the residents who are in agreement and were present at the meeting.

In 1824, a constitution for the new Federal Republic was completed and promulgated with orders to have it solemnly celebrated everywhere.<sup>19</sup> At the same time, as noted above, Tamaulipas became a state and most of the laws Laredoans would have to observe would come from Aguayo and later from Ciudad Victoria.

Not everyone was happy with the new system or the constitution. Wealthy landowners, the Church, and even some of the military found the liberal leanings of the Federalists counterproductive to their own interests. There was enough groundswell for the Conservatives to win the election of 1828. This was tantamount to a declaration of war. Enter Santa Anna once again and in a short time Vicente Guerrero, a Liberal, was sitting in the president’s office, but a compromise kept Anastasio Bustamante, the ousted president and a Conservative, as vice president. Bustamante felt that he had been fairly elected in 1828 and should have held the highest office. As a result, he formulated his Plan of Jalapa to gain support and regain the presidency. The commanding general of the north agreed with it and ordered all of the officials subject to him to follow suit. So Laredoans who six years earlier were shouting, “Long live the Federal Republic!” were now being asked to support a Conservative regime. They did so.<sup>20</sup>

In the town of Laredo, the twenty-eighth day of January, 1830, with the President of the council, the parish priest, the military commander and the undersigned private and military citizens gathered in the council chamber, the Commander read the official communication sent to me by His Excellency the Commanding General in which he orders that the Pronouncement made in Jalapa by the Vice President of the Republic, General D. Anastasio Bustamante, should be adhered to in this town. This was sent with other related documents which were also read. In total agreement with the announced plan because they were completely convinced it is based on justice, they unanimously resolved to support it and send the General and the governor of the State a copy of this act, assuring them that both the barracks of this town and the citizens who reside in it are completely ready to sacrifice themselves for the pronounced plan, the fatherland and the religious compliance with the law.

Nicasio Sánchez José María García, parish priest José Lázaro Benavides Fernando Treviño  
 José Andrés Farías Lorenzo de la Peña Francisco Paredes Victorino Dovalina Juan Salinas  
 José María González José Francisco de la Garza Elisario Pisaña Domingo Moro  
 José Ma. Ramón 1st Lt. Ignacio Rodríguez José de Jesús Benavides Teodoro Jiménez  
 2nd Lt. Antonio Prada Juan Flores for the corporals 1st Lt. Francisco de Porras for the sergeants  
 Leandro Treviño for the soldiers Isidoro Juárez Manuel Francisco Pérez, Procurator  
 Salvador Cuellar Esteben Telles

Ildefonso Ramón, President

Tomás Flores, Secretary

Bustamante was able to hold office less than two years before the opposition struck again, led this time by Santa Anna who declared himself to be a Liberal. He did not assume the presidency, however, but chose General Manuel Gómez Pedraza. So once again the citizens of Laredo were Federalists.<sup>21</sup>

The copy of the Proceedings which I am sending you will inform you that this morning I have made a pronouncement

with the individuals of my military jurisdiction recognizing His Excellency General Don Manuel Gómez Pedraza as legitimate President of the Mexican Republic, and to support at all costs the inalienable rights of the legitimate Federal Government, the general Constitution and that of the State. God and Liberty. Laredo, September 3, 1832. José Andrés de Sobrevilla

If nothing else, the Conservatives were diehards. A series of “pronouncements” in military barracks in various places during 1833 led them to believe the time was ripe to try to regain power.<sup>22</sup> They appealed to Santa Anna to lead a revolt, which he did—as a Conservative! The incumbents in Mexico City were all exiled and Santa Anna took over an interim presidency. Once again the Laredoans switched sides.<sup>23</sup>

In the town of San Agustín de Laredo on the 22nd of June of 1835, the illustrious town council, gathered in an extraordinary meeting called by its President D. Ildefonso Ramón, he took the floor and having made a brief speech about the present state of our country, stated that it was extremely necessary in such circumstances to avoid public calamity by putting the national destiny into the pure hands of the liberator of the country, the Illustrious Victor of Tampico, the immortal Santa Anna, and send to the Sovereign General Congress through the proper document the following articles which he submitted to the deliberation of this Illustrious Town Council.

Art. 1 The Mexican nation adopts as its government a Centralized form of popular representation.

Art. 2 The present Sovereign Congress be declared constituent and form a new code to govern us according to the form of government the nation desires.

Art. 3 The Most Excellent General Liberator D. Antonio López

de Santa Anna will continue exercising the highest authority of the Republic for life, and of course will dictate the measures of security and public order that are most appropriate.

Art.4 For the purpose of continuing the public peace and individual guarantees, the present authorities will remain in office, submitting to the administrative laws which have those purposes.

Art. 5 Authorized copies of this document will be sent to His Excellency the General Liberator, asking him to pass them on to the Sovereign Congress, His Excellency the interim President, His Excellency the Governor of this State, and the Commander General of these States D. Martin Perfecto de Cos.

And these articles having been carefully heard and discussed by the council members, they unanimously expressed their conviction of the necessity and usefulness of adopting them, and in fact they were approved in November by the people they represent as directed to their well being and future happiness. And in proper witness the gentlemen signed before me, the undersigned secretary. I testify to this.

|            |                |             |                  |              |
|------------|----------------|-------------|------------------|--------------|
| Ylde Ramón | Agapito Galván | Jesús Garza | Bartolomé García | Tomás Flores |
| President  | 1st Alderman   | Solicitor   |                  | secretary    |

Meanwhile, a rebellion was brewing in Texas. We will look at this whole story more in detail in the next chapter. Santa Anna sent General Cos to crush the uprising, but he was defeated in December 1835. Confident in his own leadership, Santa Anna decided to take the troops himself and the congress chose Miguel Barragán as interim President.<sup>24</sup>

With the debacle in Texas and the disgrace of Santa Anna, the country turned once again to Bustamante and a new Centralist constitution resulted. In May 1837, the governor of Tamaulipas acknowledged receiving Laredo's allegiance to it.<sup>25</sup> But the seesawing was to continue. In 1838 a Federalist movement began with an insurrection in the barracks in Tampico.<sup>26</sup> The fires of revolution spread rapidly and





2. From today the only legitimate authorities to be recognized are those who were [in office] in 1835 and those who are in accord with the previously mentioned laws.

3. We the undersigned swear to uphold at all costs the said Federal Constitution and the integrity of our territory.

José María Ramon, Justice of the Peace  
Francisco de la Garza      Augustín Soto

For almost two more years the Centralist-Federalist civil war waged on with victories and defeats on both sides, but with the Centralists for the most part prevailing. By midsummer of 1839 most of Tamaulipas was in their hands. Federalists fleeing northward with 400 troops under Juan Pablo Anaya and Colonel Macedonio Capistrán arrived in Laredo in August but soon retreated with the news of an advancing Centralist army. In spite of its declaration a few months before Laredo was once again in the hands of the Centralists. The Federalists, under General Antonio Canales, refused to capitulate and regrouped in the new Republic of Texas where the army was increased by Texas volunteers. In November, Canales called on “the inhabitants of the three frontier States” to support the Federalist cause.<sup>29</sup> In January 1840, he went even further and attempted to create a new political entity called the Republic of the Rio Grande, designating Laredo as its capital.<sup>30</sup> He and his army passed through Laredo at the beginning of March. Meanwhile, the Centralist General Mariano Arista, who had been marching up the southern side of the river, crossed over and entered Laredo on March 19. Shortly afterward most of the Rio Grande towns gave their support to the Centralist government.<sup>31</sup>

Refusing to surrender, Canales went once again into Texas and managed to bring together another small force of fifty Texans and one hundred Mexicans. His objective was to retake the capital of the floundering Republic of the Rio Grande. Moving secretly and stealthily, he reached the outskirts of the town on July 25. Although his presence was discovered, he managed to take the town the following day. Two

of the citizens, Matías Sartuche and Ramón Botello were executed as spies. Once again the citizens of Laredo changed allegiance and accepted the Federalist cause, which began to look promising with a series of successful skirmishes until a disastrous defeat near Saltillo.<sup>32</sup> Fleeing Texans stayed in Laredo for two days on their way home at the end of October. On November 6, across the river from Camargo, Canales surrendered to the Centralists. The Federalists deposited their weapons in Laredo, which succumbed to the Centralist regime for the third time.

The instability of the Mexican government continued through the next six years. The archives show that Laredo was kept informed of all the changes. Three more Plans would be promulgated in efforts to overthrow the incumbent regime which continued to ping-pong back and forth between the Conservatives and Liberals.<sup>33</sup> Santa Anna declared himself a Liberal to regain office but was finally overthrown by General Mariano Paredes in his second attempt to foment a revolution beginning in Guadalajara.<sup>34</sup> Paredes gave the presidency to José Joaquín Herrera but took it away from him when it seemed that Herrera was willing to negotiate with the United States over Texas. As a Liberal, Paredes likewise brought the country back to the Constitution of 1824.<sup>35</sup> At the same time Tamaulipas was redistricted into three major regions. The centers of the northern district were Matamoros and Mier, with Laredo coming under the jurisdiction of Mier.<sup>36</sup> This accounts for the signature of Policarpio Martínez on so many of the documents from this period.

The final change of allegiance came when the Americans entered Laredo and the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was signed. Though many Laredoans moved across the Rio Grande into Mexico, perhaps those who remained were glad to have finally found a form of federalism which promised some permanence.

## ENDNOTES

1. These decrees are found in F 3, D 1; F 9, D 1; F 13, D 1; F 35, D 4; F 24, D 12; F 35, D 4.

2. There are some thirty decrees on taxes, and more than twenty on land. Decrees on liquor are in F 24, D 7; F 35, D 9; F 40, D 1, 7; F 51, D 3; F 56, D 18; F 60, D 35, 50; F 68b, D 23. Decrees on salt and firewood are in F 12, D 12; F 29, D 6; F 51, D 9; F 59, D 17; F 65, D 11.

3. In order of the events listed, the documents are found in F 33, D 3; F 24, D 13; F 36, D 3; F 45, D 28; F 23, D 1; F 51, D 16; F 52, D 17; F 54, D 2; F 58a, D 7; F 60, D 1, 2.

4. F 54, D 25. There are a number of documents from this period, some of which were published in Volume 4 of the Laredo Archives Series.

5. F 54, D 27.

6. Julia K. Garrett, *Green Flag Over Texas* (New York: Cordova Press, 1939). See especially pages 41, 44, 53, and 210.

7. F 55, D 13.

8. F 57, D 3.

9. F 60, D 48. Ferdinand had been captured by Napoleon's troops and imprisoned in Bayonne. He was reinstated after Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo. The 1820 document is in F 65, D 34.

10. Tax lists from 1814 (F 58a, D 10) and 1815 (F 59, 15 documents) are included in Vol. 6 of the Laredo Archives Series.

11. There are six documents of decrees from the Intendant in F 33, D 12 (1789).

12. F 71, D 27.

13. F 74, D 13.

14. *La Ancla* [*sic*], Tomo I, No. 1, p. 4. Matamoros, Oct. 18, 1837.

15. Announcement of this is found in F 67, D 55.

16. Most revolutions began by someone pronouncing a "plan" which outlined why the current government should end and what the revolutionaries would do to remedy the political and social ills. If enough military and political leaders backed the plan, a change in government generally resulted.

17. F 69, D 11. Ed.—I have corrected the spelling of names and accented them where necessary.

18. F 69, D 36. Thirty-three people signed the document, including the

mayor, José María Tovar. F 69, D 21 has the acceptance of the Federal form of government by the legislators in Tamaulipas.

19. F 73, D 4, 28.

20. F 87, D 1.

21. F 95, D 72; F 98, D 6 confirms Gómez Pedraza in the presidency and the reestablishment of Federalism.

22. One of these was the barracks in Matamoros. F 98, D 74 indicates that the garrison in Laredo supported it.

23. F 119, D 8.

24. F 111, D 27.

25. F 128, D 44.

26. F 139, D 57.

27. Lists of the various places are found in F 139, D 61, 64 and F 140, D 19.

28. F 140, D 2.

29. F 141, D 1.

30. For detailed accounts of the Republic of the Rio Grande see *The New Handbook of Texas* (Austin: TSHA, 1996), 5: 537; Jerry Thompson, *Sabers on the Rio Grande*, 88–95; Joseph Nance, *Attack and Counterattack* (Austin, University of Texas Press, 1964).

31. F 142, D 13.

32. F 142, D 24.

33. F 147, D 1, 2 (Plan of Guadalajara), F 161, D 7 (Plan of San Luis Potosí). The Plan of Tacubaya put Santa Anna in the presidency in 1841.

34. F 166, D 40, 41, 42; F 168, D 19, 23; F 170, D 14.

35. F 179, D 29.

36. Archivo Histórico de Matamoros, *La Gaceta de Tamaulipas*, Vol. 5, No. 58.

## 4. A World of Enemies

Laredo had been in existence for twenty-eight years before the rebellion of the English colonies in North America resulted in the Treaty of Paris and the recognition of the new nation of the United States of America. Even before this, however, the English colonists had begun to look westward for land, impervious to the fact that this “wilderness” had been claimed by others long before. All kinds of arguments were used to justify the incursion into Indian lands. When the Indians resisted, the bow and arrow were no match for the rifle, and little by little the various Indian groups were displaced and pushed farther west and south. Within half a century the lands claimed by Spain had been infiltrated by new tribes which in turn were often enemies of one another. Having lost their agricultural and hunting grounds the Indians logically turned to raiding the pioneer settlements to exterminate the invaders when possible, but especially to steal animals for food and transportation.

The same situation had existed in Mexico much earlier and the northern nomadic tribes, often referred to as Chichimecas (“the dog people”), had engaged in the same kind of pillage. This was, as we have seen, one of the main reasons for Spain’s colonization of this territory. South Texas had been the home to various tribes long before

the domino effect of invasion-migration began. While the Spaniards also considered the Indians “uncivilized,” their initial reactions to them were different. In both areas efforts were made to bring the Indians together into protected settlements, usually at missions, and in some sense incorporate them into the Spanish empire. But there were those who refused to be subjugated and maintained a fierce independence. Some, like the Lipan Apaches, sided with the settlers or plundered them according to the convenience of circumstances. The greatest threat came from the Comanches who had been driven from the northwest into the central plains and down into Texas where they in turn dislodged a number of smaller tribes that headed for the coast or across into Mexico. Nomads, superb horsemen, and fierce warriors, the Comanches replaced the buffalo of the plains with the herds of animals raised by the frontier settlers. The Laredo documents clearly show that they were the most feared enemies and they continued to be well into the mid-1800s.

What this meant for the colonizers in Laredo is that they were in effect caught between two worlds in which the native peoples could easily turn hostile and the threat of attack was always present. There is a constant plea running through the documents of the frontier settlers asking the government for help to defend and protect themselves and their property. The government always assured the people that it would try to find the best way to deter the Indians and solve the problem, but it seldom ever did. Both Spain and Mexico tried to have some kind of garrison in what they considered strategic spots. Some were *presidios*, or fairly well-equipped forts, and some, like Laredo, had redoubts and a simple barracks. The number of officers and soldiers in these places varied considerably according to the political situation. When outsiders threatened (e.g., the Spaniards in Tampico in 1829 and the French at Veracruz in 1838), the soldiers were withdrawn from the northern outposts, which were left to protect themselves. The same is true for the times of internal turmoil (the rebels in Mexico in 1810 and in Texas in 1835). As a result, two kinds of armies existed. There was the “regular army” of national troops who were considered “permanent

defenders,” but who were few and couldn’t protect the convoys on the roads, scout for roaming Indians, and defend the towns at the same time. So the citizens of the towns themselves organized groups of volunteers, civil militias under the leadership of an officially recognized person, to protect the town and pursue the Indians, but almost always in an “after the fact” situation. Someone had been killed; a ranch had been raided; travelers had been attacked.

Twenty years after the founding of Laredo the king’s representative wasn’t too sympathetic but did encourage the local defenders.

You say the ten civil militia men in Laredo can’t take care of all the territory and haven’t sufficient weapons. I have told the Viceroy about this but have no answer. In any case if anything happens it is your fault because you can not say you have not had the opportunities to get weapons, and since Laredo is one of the best and most populated villages with the obligation of resisting invasions of the common enemy, you would have them if you had not been so negligent.<sup>1</sup> Over a year ago both the Viceroy and I told you to get the necessary weapons and horses and I am telling you once again to take all the means necessary to defend the frontier by frequently patrolling the areas near the ranches and the places they [the Indians] come from. . . . Do your job and do it well. I will do whatever I can to help you. Vicente Gonzalez de Santianes, July 21, 1775<sup>2</sup>

Six years later Gonzalez’ successor urged the same thing:

One of my principal concerns as Governor is to see to the safety of the lives and possessions of the inhabitants of this region by preventing and repairing the hostility of the Gentile Indians who frequently fight them, and maintaining a lively warfare against them to keep peace and free movement on the roads and make the Indians respect and fear the arms of the King. Experience



shows that the worst offenses of these Gentiles—killing people and robbing them—comes from the fact that there are too few firearms, horses, and other equipment necessary to guard the cattle and travel safely, allowing the Indian offenses to grow.

I hereby order all inhabitants and land tenants to arm themselves within one month of the publication of this letter with guns, blunderbusses, swords, sabers, leather jackets and shields and at least six healthy and strong horses. The person who fails to do this will lose his rights, except that of settler, and any privileges the King may have given him.

The Justices are to verify this and send me a report.

Diego de Lasagra, San Carlos, August 6, 1781<sup>3</sup>

It seemed obvious to the people on the frontier that the provincial authorities did not really understand the situation or the problems. Two years later, in an impressive display of unity, the mayors of five of the towns along the Rio Grande wrote directly to the viceroy. The communication, somewhat lengthy, is worth reading because of the interesting details it offers about life on the frontier, which Laredo also shared.<sup>4</sup>

The mayors of the villages of Camargo, Mier, Reynosa, Revilla and Laredo individually and on behalf of the inhabitants of the villages which comprise the northern frontier which they guard and defend against the Indians living to the north.

There are only twenty-five soldiers to defend the frontier together with the inhabitants. In the past this was thought a sufficient number, but we can no longer repel the constant hostilities and the dangers which inevitably will reach into the rest of the Province and even Nuevo León. The situation now forces us to appeal to Your Excellency to help us defend this territory of more than 100 leagues from Laredo to Reynosa which we can't do with just twenty-five soldiers and the inhabitants. We are constantly at war with the Indians which is why we haven't been

able to progress.

Secondly, we have not been able to irrigate the land so we can not sow crops or raise cattle which is what most of us do and are having to give up because of the situation. Nobody dares go even five leagues from the village any more, and the animals are in danger of theft which the Indians frequently do, and others escape and join the wild herds.

Thirdly, these Indian hostilities cause a serious problem for supplies because the merchants don't want to risk traveling the roads. We barely have the basic necessities. These villages will soon be abandoned because people will have to go elsewhere to get what they need to live.

Fourthly, we ask you to realize the weakness of our defense and the urgency of getting help, first because the inhabitants will have to abandon everything because we can not resist even the smallest attacks. Secondly, the Lipan Indians (who are the ones who most threaten these inhabitants) can easily make an alliance with other Indians in the interior, which they regularly do, and since some of them have been killed in a just war for the purpose of opening passes for Coahuila and Texas they will try to get revenge. They inhabit the whole area between the islands along the coast and the Bahía del Espíritu Santo which isn't far from Reynosa, and the vast open territory from the fort in San Antonio to the Rio Grande river makes it easy for them to enter even the most populated parts of the Province.

Fifth and lastly, in this deplorable situation we can't even count on help from places like Coahuila, Texas or Nuevo León. The closest place is fifty leagues away; the capital, San Carlos, is seventy. Even there the troops are on the lookout for the Indians who commit the same hostilities, so they can't offer even the least bit of help.

The Governor of this Province can verify all that we have written. We appeal to you to send us troops or help us in whatever

way seems best to you to overcome the dire consequences the inhabitants fear. We are ready to sacrifice ourselves for defense, which we have done up to now without asking for the least bit of assistance, but because of the circumstances we have explained and the few people we have who are already poor, we need some strength for defense to free us from the incursions of the enemy which will only lead to abandonment of these places and danger for the other towns and villages.

We ask you to excuse our petitioning and count on your generous spirit to satisfy the needs which have led us to write to you. We ask God to keep your important life for many years.

Revilla, March 30, 1783.

Apparently there was a period of peace for a time. At least, the succeeding documents in the archives make no mention of Indian incursions. On the contrary, a census taken in 1788 shows that there were twenty Indian families and five unmarried male Indians living in Laredo.<sup>5</sup> They had all been baptized and most of them given the family name de la Cruz. Any hope for a truce or permanent peace was shattered, however, in the spring of 1790 when the town itself was attacked by a relatively small group of Indians who succeeded in entering the powder magazine and stealing from it. This was all the more embarrassing since the Indians had been spotted the day before but the officer in charge, 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. Manuel Galván, had ignored the suggestions of other officers and the parish priest to move the powder into the town, safe from the vulnerable magazine. When higher officials demanded an account and explanation of what had happened, the mayor took depositions from five of the participants. The following is an excerpt from that of Sgt. Manuel Dovalina.<sup>6</sup>

About a half hour later the sentinel, Santiago Sánchez, shouted that the Indians were coming. Dovalina and the four soldiers mounted and the drummer was ordered to beat the call to

arms. Galván arrived and the men assembled behind the parapet, then rode out against the Indians who were heading for the magazine. Dovalina ordered the men there to open fire, but Galván countermanded his order. The group attacked the Indians and surrounded the magazine, forcing them to withdraw temporarily and take refuge in the tall grass by the river from which they threw a lance which imbedded itself in the wall of the magazine. Galván went into the village to get reinforcements but came back without them.<sup>7</sup> Dovalina meanwhile kept firing at the Indians with his four soldiers and two civilians, Soto and Quintana. In one volley from the Indians Dovalina's horse was shot and fell, pinning the rider's left leg under it. Soto and Quintana came to his aid but Galván ordered them to return to their posts. The two returned later and dragged the horse away. Dovalina managed to climb into the parapet only to discover they were practically out of ammunition. Galván was called and asked to give them 100 cartridges which he did. Toward evening Tomás García was killed by a bullet. Galván ordered the horses turned loose and the men took refuge in the parapet continuing the fight with the Indians until about 9:00 p.m. The Indians meanwhile had entered the magazine and were taking the powder. Some did a war dance which lasted about an hour. The defenders were now without any ammunition and decided to retreat to the barracks where they found Galván and told him the Indians had stolen the powder and they themselves were out of ammunition.

Fortunately the Indians did not press their advantage and by the next morning had disappeared. Dovalina's account ends with:

Only five days later did Galván send a scouting party under Dovalina and Miguel García to check on the Indians. When

the group got to Arroyo del Coyote they found some dead horses, the equipment the Indians had stolen from Dovalina's horse burned, two dead Indians (one covered with a buffalo hide) and several other persons whom the Indians had killed. There was no trace of the Indians themselves.

An uneasy peace and a neverending tenseness surrounded the lives of the Laredoans. Several official attempts at peace treaties were made, none of them really successful. Sometimes there were strange alliances such as the one reported in 1804 to Viceroy Iturrigaray by the governor in Chihuahua.<sup>8</sup>

I have news that a group of soldiers from the Company in Laredo, together with a group of Lipan Indians, toward the end of last winter attacked a group of eastern Comanches which had come near a ranch in that jurisdiction, and that the Corporal in command, Jose Maria Nabayra, committed the atrocity of selling to the Lipans the ears, hair and part of the skin of three Comanches who had been killed at Chopec. I ask Your Excellency to take whatever measures your noteworthy zeal sees fit so that something like this does not happen again because it is important to the tranquility of the provinces under my care to have continued peace with the numerous Comanche nation whose Chief just complained to the Governor of Coahuila through Don Manuel de León.

I told your predecessor about the care and good directives given to prevent the Comanches from declaring open warfare like the bad situation which existed when I took over this job. Nothing will incite them to renewed hostility such as Texas is beginning to experience except seeing themselves offended without cause or motive, or helping their bitter enemies the Lipans. Nothing should be done to alienate either group.

The continuance of problems and the lack of response to them runs through the succeeding documents. The following, from 1819, is a good example:

Your report of September 18 informs me of the deaths of a soldier and two civilians caused by the enemy Indians on the previous day, this unfortunate event worsened by their having carried off six minor youths. At the same time you tell me that the repetition of these evils has put the inhabitants in the serious situation of not having the means of subsistence which often causes them to ask for permission to move elsewhere, something which you tell me you informed my predecessor who in turn informed the higher authorities who did not respond, and consequently nothing has been done.<sup>9</sup>

One of the reasons for the apparent disinterest of the authorities during the previous decade is the fact that they were far more concerned with the rebellious independence movement which had begun in 1810 and continued in sporadic fashion during this whole time. When independence became a fact in 1821, much of the responsibility for resolving the Indian problems was placed in the hands of the provincial or state authorities, both civil and military. By August 1822 the commanding general of the north had succeeded in working out a treaty with the Lipan Indians.<sup>10</sup> Some of them asked to settle in or near the established towns.<sup>11</sup> A tenuous treaty had also been made with the Comanches but they soon broke it and continued to cause serious problems. Excerpts from a report from Laredo in 1825 show how they continued to terrorize the region.<sup>12</sup>

The Comanches have broken the peace which they had more or less kept with the usual rapaciousness inseparable from their conduct. Not content with our tolerating their thefts and provocations they have decided on all-out war in their ferocious and

horrible fashion. On the 23rd of last month they attacked five ranches in this jurisdiction, sacked what they could find, killed three men, two women and two children, carried off some men and women and left one man wounded. They took off in various directions and I have news that they robbed horses and mules.

On the 24th 60 troops and 50 Lipans went after them and on the 26th attacked them killing a warrior and a woman; the rest fled. 72 animals, 30 saddles and some booty were recovered and given to the Lipans, except the animals which had been taken from the ranches and were returned to their owners.

On the 28th a group of 18 soldiers attacked some Comanches who had robbed but could not take anything because the troops and horses were too few and they were poorly armed. They lost one man in action.

The Comanches are numerous and daring. They have the greatest advantages in waging war. They have better mounts and arms and are well versed in when to attack and flee as they wish; they know the land thoroughly. They carry on long campaigns with nothing more than horses and weapons because they don't need anything else; they are used to roughing it. The troops are different. They don't have horses or good weapons, nor the necessary experience since most are from the interior. They do not know the enemy they are fighting, the territory, the way of attacking and pursuing them, their customs and identifying signs. If the precautions taken are only to reenforce frontier towns with the idea that the troops can defend them and chastise the enemy it would be a miserable waste of time no matter how much effort is made and it would not avoid problems nor quiet the enemy. This can not be achieved through small campaigns because the Indians disperse in the fields and underbrush where it is impossible to follow them. A campaign of 800 or 1000 men from the three states under the command of a good leader and aimed

at the enemy towns is the only way that we can defeat them and obtain useful results.

God and Liberty. Laredo, Aug. 8, 1825, 2nd of the  
Installation of the Congress of this State.

In the last analysis, the fledgling Mexican nation was in no better position to deal with the frontier Indian problems than the preceding government had been. In fact, the situation became even more complicated because the provinces frequently did not have the necessary resources and when they turned to the national government, it was equally unable to help. However, some progress was made in the summer of 1827 when Anastasio Bustamante, the commanding general of the eastern interior states, managed to arrange a truce with the Comanches in Béjar (San Antonio).<sup>13</sup> The truce was brief, and the correspondence from Laredo in 1832 shows that the Comanches were once again on the warpath, and plans were being made to mount a major campaign against them.<sup>14</sup> It did in fact take place during January and February of 1833. It set out from Laredo under Captain Manuel Lafuente who on his return had to report: "The results of the campaign against the Comanches did not measure up to the expectations I had since we lost half of the horses and after 72 days of weariness and lack of sleep we did not find the Indian villages we so anxiously looked for."<sup>15</sup> Undiscouraged, Lafuente in August of the same year suggested another campaign because "the Lipan chiefs El Cojo and Morrongo with their respective tribes have joined the Mescaleros and rebelled, or tried to rebel, and together with the Comanches want to attack us, as they always do." He assured the town council that "we have 130 men in the best disposition to wage a campaign against the rebellious Comanches or Lipans" and they could "prevent the Lipans from joining the Comanches."<sup>16</sup>

We will shortly turn to events within Mexico itself and in Texas that prevented the suggested campaign. The commanding general of the northern forces asked the governor of Tamaulipas "to advise the



councils of the frontier towns that they will have to look to the defense of their interests and their families on their own if for some reason it is necessary to withdraw the troops in Laredo.”<sup>17</sup> That necessity arose and the Indians were quick to take advantage of it. In 1836 the mayor of Laredo, Basilio Benavides, wrote to the governor:

The hostilities of the barbarians are increasing day by day in a horrible way, and I am giving you only the most essential details of their severity, telling you that on the 24th of last month they attacked the pasture lands of this town and killed three citizens and captured a lad of 12 or 13. All these individuals were working in the field, sent there by their masters to guard the horses and goats. The Indians took the horses with them and left the other animals abandoned for some days to the point that they nearly died. On the 5th of this month a group of forty men made up of soldiers and residents went out to inspect the lands of this jurisdiction where the barbarians usually enter and leave and on the 7th they fought a group of them. In spite of the effort made to chastise them and having killed one savage and recovered four horses, the honorable citizen Cesario Gil lost his life. I am afraid that these evils are almost irreparable because the troops which guard this village are destitute of resources and most of what is spent is in escorting convoys to Béjar with food for their expedition, and on the mail that comes from the interior. What is left most often is insignificant, especially when the enemy makes its raid in considerable numbers.<sup>18</sup>

A month later Benavides reported that the Comanche Indian attacks had “resulted in the assassination of more than forty citizens; almost all of the horse and mule herds have been stolen and the cattle and other animals absolutely destroyed.”<sup>19</sup> Reports like this can be found all the way to 1845. In March of that year Col. Calixto Bravo, who was stationed in Laredo, warned the mayor that “at the headwaters of the

Colorado there is a gathering of more than 1500 Indians for the purpose of invading these Departments” and urged him “to fortify the plaza in which the residents have to defend themselves in case the enemy tries to overwhelm us and destroy the town by fire which is likely because of the kind of houses it has.”<sup>20</sup> In a somewhat startling summary of the whole situation, Mirabeau Lamar wrote from Laredo in November of 1846: “It is an isolated town much exposed to the ravages of the Indians and has suffered greatly from that source; seven hundred of its inhabitants have been killed within the last twenty years.”<sup>21</sup> Unquestionably the Laredoans lived in a hostile world and it was only the staunch and solid character of the inhabitants that kept them from abandoning the place altogether.

As if the Indians weren’t enough, there were other enemies who equally caused concern. We have already spoken of what might be termed “the enemy within” during both the Spanish and Mexican periods, those who rebelled against the existing government in various kinds of revolutions. Yet, while Indians and insurgents always caused concern, for both Spain and Mexico there was a more dreaded enemy. The Mexican historian Lucas Alamán wrote: “Poor Mexico! So far from God and so near to the United States.” The growing nation and its land-seeking population would both eventually prove to be disastrous to the southern neighbor. With a careful eye on the westward movement, Spain managed to define its boundaries with the Adams-Onís treaty of 1819, and although a certain amount of travel through Spanish territory was permitted to the Americans, settling was not at first encouraged. At the same time it was clear that this vast territory could be productive and contribute to the economy only if it was populated. Spaniards already settled in New Spain were not interested in moving north into some “wasteland,” and Mexicans always preferred their native environment. Perhaps with some reluctance, in 1820 the Spanish governor of Texas, Antonio María Martínez, with the permission of General Arredondo allowed Moses Austin to settle 300 families in the province, possibly because he had already lived in Spanish territory

(southeastern Missouri) since 1798. Before this happened, however, Austin died and Mexico declared its independence from Spain. The first colonists arrived in December 1821, but it was not until 1823 that the new government gave Stephen F. Austin the necessary permission.<sup>22</sup> As the years went by, it became more and more evident that life under Mexican rule was different from what the pioneers had lived previously. One sore point was the abolition of the slave trade in 1824, although the colonists felt slavery was necessary.<sup>23</sup> All of these differences led eventually to the uprisings of the immigrant settlers in Texas and their declaration of independence from Mexico in 1836.

How did all of this affect Laredo, well within Mexican territory? That very fact was part of the problem. Almost since its foundation Laredo was a vital link between the interior of Mexico and its northern frontier province of Texas and especially the town of San Fernando de Béjar with its fort and mission of San Antonio de Valero. The people of Laredo might not have cared too much about what was going on at either end of the road, but their world was influenced by what was happening in both places. Except for the constant Indian menace, perhaps the sense of peaceful isolation was strengthened by the fact that for the first dozen or so years the immigrant colonists in Texas seemed to be no different from other law-abiding Mexican citizens. In fact, their presence was beneficial since it sparked a certain amount of trade and made new and different products available while also serving as an outlet for the animal products of many of the Laredo inhabitants.

When the rumblings of unrest caused by discontentment and disagreement with the Mexican government began in Texas, the border towns had reason to fear for their safety. There had never been really adequate protection, and for the decade beginning in 1835 this region would be constantly involved in the turmoil over Texas. A good indication of what they could expect came from the governor of Tamaulipas in that very year:<sup>24</sup>

Esteemed sir: I am answering your note of the 7th of this month by telling you that I am very willing to provide all the security necessary for both the inhabitants of Laredo as well as the whole frontier, and Your Excellency may be sure that I will not lose sight of your worthy suggestions. However, while up to now I have tried to assure that there would not be any complaints from the residents of the towns in spite of the scarcity of troops and the innumerable demands of service which clamor for the attention of this general headquarters, I must ask Your Excellency to advise the councils of the frontier towns that they will have to look to the defense of their interests and their families on their own if for some reason it is necessary to withdraw the troops in Laredo and other places, because as you well know there are times when this is necessary as is actually the case with Coahuila and Texas. Nevertheless I repeat that I will always try to balance the safety of the frontier with the other demands which arise. . . . Ciudad Victoria, May 29, 1835  
Franciso V. Fernández

Less than five months later the situation had become more serious:<sup>25</sup>

[T]he troops are occupied with the defense of territorial integrity which the Texas colonists are brazenly attempting to usurp by arms and it is not easy now to offer the help which the frontier needs against the aggressions of the barbarians. . . . I learned this evening that the Texas rebels took Bahía del Espíritu Santo at one in the morning. With this news I re-urge your vigilance and ask you to alert the residents to the defense of the integrity of the national territory.

God and Liberty. Matamoros.  
October 12, 1835. Y. M.o [Mariano] Guerra

Communications came to Laredo in rapid succession warning the mayor to watch for weapons and supplies going to Texas and to arm the ranchers against a possible invasion by the Texas rebels, insisting again that the citizens must defend Laredo.<sup>26</sup> Direct involvement in the Mexican struggle to maintain its territory came a month later when the town was chosen as the starting point for the campaign against the rebels and the people were advised that the troops arriving would need lodging, horses, and supplies before heading for Béjar. It was a lot to expect from the citizens of a town who were scraping to make ends meet, yet later on a list of those who helped was sent to the government in the hope of some reimbursement.<sup>27</sup>

The siege of Béjar under the commander of the interior provinces, General Martín Perfecto de Cos, proved disastrous for the Mexicans and Cos returned to Laredo with his bedraggled army. He arrived on Christmas Day.<sup>28</sup> Two days later another battalion under Gen. Joaquín Ramírez y Sesma with men from Zacatecas and San Luis Potosí arrived in Laredo as reinforcements for Cos and had tried to conscript all of the rafts and boats possible to cross the Río Bravo.<sup>29</sup> Major General Vicente Filisola also arrived from San Luis Potosí with orders from President Santa Anna to get men from Laredo for the Béjar campaign. The commander of the Laredo garrison, Juan José Sánchez, was reluctant to surrender the men who were needed to defend the town in case of more Indian attacks. The return of Cos changed everything. While new plans were being made, the Laredoans had to find ways to take care of more than 1,000 Mexican soldiers and officers. It must have been an extremely difficult time. With Santa Anna agreeing to abandon Laredo as a base of operations, the armies left in early January. Two documents from this period offer a vivid picture of life in Laredo at the time. The first comes from the *Recollections for the History of the Texas War* written by General Filisola during his Christmas season stay in Laredo in 1835.

Militarily speaking it could not be a worse outpost. It is located along the left bank of the Rio Grande which runs along the

back of the settlement. In case of an attack, only the plaza offers protection. That is, a few buildings of rock and mud and a few others made of adobe and rather lacking in sturdiness. This can also be said of the church. The square formed by the plaza is enclosed on the east side. Yet nowhere within the plaza could even fifty soldiers be quartered comfortably. The rest of the houses are but sad looking wooden huts with thatched roofs and are so scattered in distance without order or direction that even though they occupy a rather large area which could be surrounded with a wall, ditch, or even a staked or wooden fence, it would be necessary to enclose only the plaza in the necessity of fortifying the town. This can be done at the entrances of the four streets and the houses around them. The town's firewood supply is too distant. The water has to be drawn from the river and it can be shut off very easily from the right bank of the river. The town is in total lack of all resources for maintaining a garrison except that it does not lack meat due to the abundance of livestock in its environs. [Here distances to various places are given, and he concludes.] all the intermediate areas between these places are composed of a desert frequented year round by only the Comanche Indians and other warring tribes.<sup>30</sup>

The second document is from the mayor of Laredo for the year 1836, Basilio Benavides. The word had spread that Gen. Antonio López de Santa Anna was going to lead the campaign against Texas personally. Benavides wrote to the Matamoros newspaper, the *Mercurio*, asking that a rather long letter to the governor be published because of the proximity of Santa Anna. His letter is a long lamentation on all the trials and tribulations of a frontier town that is asking to be recognized and helped. It was published on April 22, 1836.<sup>31</sup> An excerpt is given below mainly because it contradicts what Filisola said.

Gentlemen: The unexpected good fortune we have of finding

in our region the Illustrious Dignitary of the Fatherland and worthy President of it, D. Antonio López de Santa Anna, obliges me to intrude upon you to ask you to deign to place in your esteemed newspaper the following manifest which I am writing to His Excellency the Governor of the Department today. It does not have elegant phrases, but shows clearly and truly the sad situation in which the inhabitants of this unfortunate town find themselves, and since the remedy for so many ills can not be found from anyone other than the powerful Hero of Pánuco, I have decided to present them publicly through the press so that when the war with Texas is over, which I don't think will last very long, he may turn his paternal eyes on these unhappy Mexicans who populate the frontier. . . .

Since 1813 the savages have declared war and up to the present there have been only three years of peace, and those not entirely, and the rest of the time has been a perpetual hostility which has destroyed not only capital which for most is in the countryside, but also innumerable persons of both sexes and all ages. . . . the only income the inhabitants had was raising cattle and horses. The smaller animals have disappeared completely and there are only a few beef cattle abandoned in the fields which will soon be taken for lack of cowboys. Most of the people are reduced to eating only meat because for the flour and corn which must necessarily be brought from elsewhere there is neither security to go for them nor even any animals left to bring them. . . . Your Excellency could reward the help which in spite of their own scarcity these residents have given for the current war in Texas, even though they are convinced that in giving it they have done nothing more than fulfill the duty their Fatherland demands. . . .  
Laredo, April 10, 1836 Basilio Benavides

Between the raiding Comanches and the Texas rebels, periods of peace were never very prolonged even though the garrison in Laredo

had been increased to 100 men. In March 1837 in a maverick operation, Erastus “Deaf” Smith and John C. Hays, with a group of twenty-one men, decided to attack Laredo. They reached the outskirts of the town but were discovered and after some skirmishing Smith was forced to withdraw and return to San Antonio. Only two months later the garrison commander Juan José Sánchez sent an urgent note to the mayor and members of the town council:<sup>32</sup>

Last night at eight o'clock I received news from the military commander that he has certain news that the colonial traitors who occupy the city of Béjar are coming to attack, and I immediately returned because I want to fulfill my obligation and comply with superior orders and have the same opportunity as my worthy companions in arms to help and defend the honor, lives, and property of the good citizens in this fortification. But since in order to carry out such just objectives I will need their cooperation and that of the Illustrious Town Council, I ask you to meet today and to gather in a general meeting all of the residents, having all of the men between the ages of sixteen and fifty who are capable of bearing arms go the barracks, without distinction of classes or persons, and bring with them whatever arms and munitions they have.

. . . I don't believe that men who tried to avenge the outrages of the savages want to submit without a fight to those who attempt to suppress them, ungrateful traitors who will try to deprive them of life and of their native soil where we first saw the light of day, we who are still proud to call ourselves Mexicans.

At least two more times in this same year there were warnings of impending attacks by the Texas rebels.<sup>33</sup> Part of the problem is that the hostility was reciprocal. Mexico never recognized the Republic of Texas and Mexicans invaded the Texas territory both officially, as in the case of



the Cos expedition, and unofficially, mainly through cattle raids and the bandit activity of men like Agatón Quiñones.<sup>34</sup> There was a sort of perpetual retaliation going on. The Mexicans were determined to recover their territory, and the Texans were equally determined to incorporate all of the territory north of the Rio Grande into the Republic of Texas.

Beginning in 1840, the difficulties escalated. There were enormous internal problems looming at this same time with the aborted attempt to form the Republic of the Rio Grande with Laredo as its capital. This was already mentioned in Chapter 3 but it is important to note that the Centralist army under Gen. Mariano Arista occupied Laredo in March of 1840 and it was months before the town returned to a quasi-normal situation only to be subjected to invasion once again by Capt. John Hays and the Texas Rangers in January of 1841.<sup>35</sup> Two communications in the summer of that year from the Captain Lafuente in Mier show that the townsfolk were still living under the tension of possible invasion.<sup>36</sup>

We know from the woman Comanche prisoner in Béjar that eighty Indians of that tribe were preparing a campaign against us to begin today. We know from the commander in chief that fifty Lipans in Béjar were preparing to raid this frontier. We know from those who have recently come from Texas that the gang of Antonio Pérez is preparing to come and attack on the feast of St. John (24th of this month). Finally, we know that the Pérez gang and the Lipans are still dismounted but are ready to mount (I think one of that gang was the one who came and stole the mules and other animals from D. Eduardo Flores). Knowing we are threatened by so many enemies, not to mention the occasional thieves of animals, and that they have already begun their raids, can we remain apathetic? Are we going to simply let ourselves be killed and robbed as has happened up to now? No. The natural law of self-preservation and the sacred duties of men in society oblige us to gather together and jointly procure our defense.

In view of this and in the light of these facts, I hope that this very day you will bring together and garrison all the residents, and will advise the commander of the defenders to bring together the horses, garrison his troops and place himself at my orders. Rancho de Monterrey, June 15, 1841

I have just received an official communication from General Rafael Vásquez in which he tells me that on the 2nd of this month Antonio Pérez left Béjar with about 200 men to search for the detachment of Quiñones, but if he comes to the town and finds it defenseless he would naturally be led to sack it, so sound the alarm, gather the people and the defenders and have them prepare to repel the attack. Tell Lieutenant D. José María Sánchez to gather all of the veterans and those on leave who belong to the company there, and taking command of the place prepare with you the defense of the town. Monterrey, July 5, 1841

Pérez never got to Laredo but the people were kept on constant alert. When they were not being threatened themselves, the Laredoans were being asked to serve elsewhere in the seemingly endless military campaigns or contribute material resources, especially horses. Twice in 1842 men from Laredo formed part of the Mexican invasion forces, one of them eventually taking San Antonio under General Woll. For that ephemeral victory Laredo again paid the price of retaliation by the Texans. In November, the council in Laredo received word that 1,600 “robber adventurers” were gathering in Béjar and planning an attack on Laredo.<sup>37</sup> A much smaller force under General Somervell invaded and sacked the town on December 8 and 9 in the absence of the military commander Calixto Bravo who had gone to Guerrero with eighty men.<sup>38</sup> The fact that a scapegoat had been found wasn’t of much consolation to the town’s citizens.

His Excellency the Interim President has learned with deepest regret about your message No. 29 of last December 28th and the copy which accompanied it relating the horrors committed in Laredo by the Texas bandits, and he has ordered me to tell you that you may assure the northern towns that this lamentable misfortune they have suffered is due to the disobedience of General D. Isidro Reyes whom the supreme government has repeatedly advised to locate himself in the general barracks in Ciudad Guerrero. He has been removed from command of the army and ordered to appear before a war council to answer for this. The President also told me to inform you that these orders have been repeated and that in the towns of that Department there will be a very respectable force which will make a misfortune similar to that which occurred in Laredo and Ciudad Guerrero impossible.<sup>39</sup>

God and Liberty. Ciudad Guerrero,  
February 8, 1843 Rafael Uribe

Years later the citizens of Laredo tried to recover some of their losses and sent to the State of Texas a list of thirty-eight pages of items that had disappeared during the raid.<sup>40</sup>

It was bad enough to be under the constant threat from Indians, Texans, and fellow Mexicans, but even nature dealt a severe blow in the spring of 1842 when “unprecedented rains” fell over the Laredo area and the Rio Grande rose to extreme flood stage, inundating most of the city and leaving it “very little more than a heap of ruins.”<sup>41</sup> This may be somewhat exaggerated and it seems strange that there is no reference to it in the archives, which are fairly complete for this year. In any case it would have only aggravated an already complicated situation which grew steadily worse. The government did make some effort to give Laredo better protection by sending the 1<sup>st</sup> Tamaulipas Auxiliary Company of seventy-eight men to join the forty-six in Laredo under the command of Calixto Bravo.

The storm clouds began gathering in 1844 when the already strained relations became even more severe. A communication from General Woll indicates how serious Mexico considered the situation.<sup>42</sup>

1) the armistice made with the Department of Texas having ended and in consequence a war against its inhabitants having been renewed, all communication should cease; 2) any individual of whatever state or condition who violates the previous article will be considered a traitor, receiving the punishment indicated in Article 45, Title 10, section 8 of the general ordinances of the army; 3) every individual who is found at a distance of one league from the left bank of the Río Bravo will be held as a supporter and accomplice of the usurpers of that territory of the Nation and a traitor to his country and be judged militarily preceded by a brief prosecution with the same penalty applied; 4) any individual who is found as in the previous article and in fear flees from any troops of the Supreme Government will be pursued until he is arrested or shot on the spot. In consideration of the location of the town of Laredo and Santa Rita de Ampudia, as well as all the other ranches situated on the other side of the Río Bravo where most or all of the investments of the inhabitants of the line under my command are, today I will ask the Supreme Government for the necessary orders to decide what should be done in the future for the preservation or saving of said interests. . . .

How were the Laredoans supposed to take care of their “investments” when they were confined to within one league of the town? Most of the larger land grants went well beyond that. There could be little satisfaction in being told once again that efforts would be made to find a solution to preserving and saving their “said interests.” The truth is that there was so much political turmoil in Mexico and relations with the United States had so totally deteriorated that places that were not

considered to be in immediate danger had little chance of getting much attention.

As 1845 progressed the storm grew in intensity and broke out in fury. On March 3 President Tyler signed the Texas Annexation Act, incorporating the Republic of Texas into the United States. The news of this didn't reach the Mexican frontier until three months later. Meanwhile, the Laredoans had been allowed to go out to their fields and pasture lands but not beyond that, and especially not to the Nueces River to gather wood as they had been accustomed to doing.<sup>43</sup>

The first rumblings of thunder came in July with a communication that 2,000 Americans had gathered in Victoria and 300 Comanches in Béjar.<sup>44</sup> It was an ominous double threat. Ten days later there was more bad news, this time from General Arista:<sup>45</sup>

From totally reliable sources I have learned that troops of the United States crossed the Sabine river on the 14th of last month and number 3,000 in the Texas territory with the intention of extending to the Río Bravo as soon as the incorporation of Texas into that Republic is announced. Therefore it is very necessary that the troops under your orders be constantly ready for combat and that you review your munitions with all speed, and if you do not have supplies consider it of utmost importance to let me know by special courier that this is the case. Any surplus weapons should be immediately made ready, obtaining the resources by rank or by force. Together with the civil authorities whom I today invite to prepare the Defense troops and the residents that the towns can muster up, form companies, and if danger threatens, distribute the weapons that are being repaired. Fortifications should be made as soon as possible for the defense of the town. So that the places along the line are not surprised, some temporary defense measures should be made and they should be on constant alert as if they had already seen the enemy, sending out spies and scouts to

the surrounding areas where they can see what is happening and communicate certain news and not alarm with rumors. . . . So, I recommend that the inhabitants within your jurisdiction know that danger is near and it is time to come to the defense of the fatherland. Order the commander of the troops in Laredo to be extremely watchful so as not to be surprised, and if he has positive news to form a war council which all of the civil authorities will attend, and only in case of immediate danger or an irresistible enemy force should the troops cross to this side of the river, returning to Laredo as soon as the usurpers withdraw.

Laredo, July 14, 1845 Calixto Bravo

The communication makes clear that Mexico was not prepared and that Laredo was open to attack and even capture. Colonel Bravo sadly reported on July 26 that he could muster up only four persons with horses to go to Béjar to spy on the enemy.<sup>46</sup> Lightning struck just six days later.

From official communications that I have received today the Supreme Government has found out that the United States has consummated its perfidious conduct declaring the annexation of the Department of Texas to that Republic. The interim President is indignant over such a vile procedure and has resolved to urge both Chambers to a declaration of war against that Power . . . In general, the troops will move to the strategic points and you can be sure that the Infantry and Cavalry troops you asked for will be there, and in fact no means will be overlooked to preserve the honor of the country which is not without good and loyal servants. You and the valiant men under you are among that number and because of that I hope you will be among the first to make the Americans see that this Mexican Republic is determined to punish their perfidious con-

duct. I send this for your information noting that in virtue of the actual circumstances your place is undoubtedly at great risk. In the light of this you will keep the strictest vigilance and not be disunited even an instant and carry out the orders which I will send you in advance, understanding that if the enemy forces which threaten are irresistible you will try to save everything in agreement with the residents whom you will protect as much as you can. If in the event you feel obligated to cross the river, you should go to the Monterrey Ranch, keeping an eye on the usurpers and using the means of precaution you can to avoid an attack and try to give a warning lesson to any small force that approaches. Do not leave the town out of fear. Show great dignity and resolve so that the honor of the National arms is maintained. Communicate all certain news that you have and keep the vigilance that is customary in war and especially the one which will now take place.<sup>47</sup>

In a message animating the troops and citizens in Laredo, General Arista wrote:<sup>48</sup>

The war which the United States has provoked and which Mexico will undoubtedly carry on with all the force and dignity of a powerful nation is one of usurpation because it deals with nothing less than robbing us of territory and even some investments we have. . . . Because of this every citizen, and especially the respective authorities, is obliged to help in the common defense with every effort until we shake off an ignominious yoke and throw the usurpers back beyond the Sabine. . . . I limit myself to recommending extreme vigilance that you should have in that town, perhaps the most exposed along the line. In order to avoid being surprised by the enemy, offer to help the military commander with those individuals who know the land and whom he asks for to act as spies who can bring us

certain news which in these circumstances we need. . . . This does not mean that Laredo will be abandoned. There are three thousand men coming to join my Division and a great force under the orders of General Mariano Paredes y Arillaga, so that if it happens that the despicable Americans dare to approach the line I will come personally with numerous troops and teach them a terrible lesson.

Arouse the enthusiasm of those good citizens assuring them that we will triumph over the Anglo-Saxon race and will leave to future generations a country which the perfidious Cabinet in Washington is attempting to take from us to leave us reduced to the state of miserable slaves.

God and Liberty. General Barracks in Monterrey,  
August 11, 1845. M. Arista

In the following months, Laredo was asked to send spies to both Béjar and Corpus Christi. It also found itself in the curious position of having to support deserters from the American army who had been sent to Laredo, destined for Monterrey. They arrived in December and shortly after rifles taken from the Americans were sold to the townsmen.<sup>49</sup>

As the war progressed in 1846 Laredo received bits of news on the developments. On March 31 the prefect in Mier sent the news that General Taylor was in Corpus Christi and planned to move toward the Rio Grande. He added:

Your anxiety over the lack of protection for that town is justified. Mine is no less, but you should know that with the top priority of our troops being Matamoros, because of the superiority of the enemy forces that have invaded that part of our Department, it is not possible for the commander in chief to cover such an extensive line when the troops he has aren't sufficient. However, a large number of troops will be arriving



shortly to join the army here and in that case I hope all of the difficulties we are experiencing now will be resolved.<sup>50</sup>

Policarpio Martínez

Only three days later he wrote again:<sup>51</sup>

It makes me sad to tell you that the invading army has finally achieved their vile intention of advancing to across from this city and last Saturday unfurled their flag on the left bank of the Bravo. But we have gathered some forces and others are coming soon, and when that happens the usurpers will be duly chastised.

When you receive this note call up the militia recently decreed by the supreme powers of the department, organizing it immediately and proceeding with a general conscription of all individuals in that jurisdiction who are capable of bearing arms. At the same time I call on your well-known patriotism, your resources, all possible assistance of every kind, your encouragement, and all the influence of your municipal position to cooperate in repelling the blackest aggression the world has seen and sacrifice if necessary on the altars of the Fatherland and its sovereignty and independence your rest, interests, and life itself since nothing of this is costly for an objective which involves nationality, duty, and necessity to preserve unharmed the good name and rights of our dear homeland.

Unknown to the Mexican authorities, a company of Texas Rangers under Capt. Richard Addison Gillespie had already passed through Laredo on its way south. He raised the American flag, a portent of what would happen again on a permanent basis a few months later, and continued on his journey.<sup>52</sup> It is clear once again that it was far too late for “get ready” messages and that the optimism that troops would come to repel the invader was unfounded in spite of the encouraging

news that “a detachment of seventy American Dragoons was defeated, with a Captain, a Lieutenant and forty-eight soldiers being taken prisoners, and the rest being left dead on the battlefield.”<sup>53</sup> As far as Laredo was concerned, the real threat came from the north and this was confirmed in a message the mayor received dated May 21: “I have news that three hundred soldiers of the United States and two hundred volunteers left Béjar at the beginning of this month headed for Laredo.”<sup>54</sup> General Antonio Canales, who was in Camargo, was ordered to move to Laredo and expect the battalion from Zacatecas to join him. The battalion should have been there long before. The reactionary mentality and the slowness of communications both certainly contributed to Mexico’s undoing and to the final fate of Laredo. For a time it looked as though Laredo might be bypassed with the news that the American troops were heading for Monterrey.<sup>55</sup> The Laredoans were not aware of the fact that the U.S. steamship *Major Brown* was already in Camargo. Four months later it anchored in front of Laredo with Lt. Bryan Tilden and twenty soldiers aboard. The lieutenant later reported that the town was on both sides of the river with some 1,500 inhabitants, most of them on the north side which had houses of stone in contrast to those on the south side which were “mostly of cane.”<sup>56</sup>

On November 8 Mirabeau Lamar and sixty-seven soldiers marching from Camargo arrived in Laredo.<sup>57</sup> A new era had begun. Ironically, in the world of enemies, the victorious ones were instrumental in eliminating the other two. The presence of U.S. troops greatly curtailed the Indian raids and activity, and the political struggles that continued in Mexico no longer affected a town now in the United States.<sup>58</sup>

### Special note

The victorious Americans leased 2,500 acres from the town of Laredo and in 1849 constructed Camp Crawford, shortly afterward renamed Fort McIntosh. It was in use during the period of this history but, except for one, the references to Fort McIntosh in the Laredo Archives are from a later period when residents of Laredo tried to pur-

chase houses there since the fort had been abandoned by the army. In 1851 the town council decided that it would ask for the help of soldiers from Fort McIntosh to round up hobos and vagrants in the city.<sup>59</sup>

### ENDNOTES

1. This is somewhat of an exaggeration. Camargo, Mier, Revilla, and Reynosa all had larger populations.

2. F 17, D 2.

3. F 24, D 11.

4. F 27, D 4.

5. F 32, D 7.

6. F 34, D 7. This document is a thirty-eight-page transcription of the five statements under oath taken by Mayor José González between June 14 and 17, 1790, from the following persons: José de Jesús Sánchez, Guadalupe Flores, Juan Soto, Sgt. Manuel Dovalina, and Cristóbal Rodríguez, each of whom narrated his account of the Indian attack on Laredo on the preceding April 7th.

7. Sánchez reported that when Galván asked the mayor for help he replied that the men available had to stay in the village to protect the women and children.

8. F 48, D 4.

9. F 64, D 35.

10. F 68b, D 21.

11. F 170, D 73.

12. F 75, D 17 no.14.

13. F 79, D 12. Bustamante became president of Mexico in 1830.

14. F 120. See the letter of Basilio Benavides on pages 42–43; F 95, D 88, 89, 91, 93, 98, 100b; F 98, D 1. See also endnote #31 of this chapter.

15. F 98, D 26.

16. F 98, D 79. Even though the Lipans and Comanches were bitter enemies, they were willing to cooperate to exterminate another group they considered a common enemy.

17. F 111, D 75.

18. F 121, D 1-21.

19. F 121, D 1-28.
20. F 170, D 37.
21. J. Thompson, *Sabers on the Rio Grande*, 146.
22. The whole question of the Texas colonization and the subsequent rebellion is succinctly and well presented in *The New Handbook of Texas*, 1: 293–97. F 70, D 178 contains the decree stating that all immigrants from the United States must follow the laws of Mexico.
23. F 70, D 135. “1. The commerce or traffic of slaves, coming from whatever country or under whatever flag is forever forbidden in the territory of the United Mexican States. 2. Slaves imported contrary to the previous article are free by the very fact they step on Mexican soil. 3. Any ship, national or foreign which transports or introduces slaves to Mexican territory will be irrevocably confiscated with its cargo and the owner, the buyer, the Captain, the Master and the pilot will suffer the penalty of ten years imprisonment. . . . Mexico, July 13, 1824.”
24. F 111, D 75.
25. F 119, D 40.
26. F 119, D 41, 44, 47.
27. F 119, D 54, 55, 56. The list is found in F 125, D 15.
28. There is an excellent description of this whole campaign in Thompson, *Sabers*, 68-72.
29. F 119, D 64, 66.
30. Translated by La Posada Motor Hotels and published in 1969. The original title is *Memorias para la Historia de la Guerra de Texas*.
31. F 120, D 1.
32. F 128, D 42.
33. F 129, D 38, 40. Thompson, *Sabers*, 76–79 details these attempted raids.
34. Besides his river raiding, Quiñones also joined in the Valera expedition into Texas. Cf. Thompson, *Sabers*, 106.
35. Thompson, *Sabers*, 98.
36. F 145, D 20, 28.
37. F 158, D 8.
38. There is nothing in the Laredo Archives on the sacking of the city that took place on December 9, 1842. John Henry Brown in *A History of Texas 1685–1892* (St. Louis: L. E. Daniell, 1892), 2: 237, says that all the spoils

taken were returned to the town on General Somervell's orders. Brown was a participant in this expedition. Gen. Thomas J. Green, who was with the Somervell expedition, concurs that about 300 of the 760 soldiers actually plundered the town, and that most of the men returned the spoils they had taken. See his *Journal of the Texian Expedition Against Mier* (Austin: The Stack Co., 1935), 58, published three years later. See also Thompson, *Sabers*, 117–27, and Stan Green, *The Sacking of Laredo 1842*, no. 10 in the Story of Laredo Series (Laredo: Border Studies Center, 1990). Original documentation on “the pillage of Laredo” is in the Archivo de Guerra y Marina in Mexico City, Legajo 6, No. 4.

39. F 162, D 4.

40. F 183, D 2. See footnote 41 of chapter 5.

41. The quotations come from a letter of Mirabeau Lamar written to Gen. Zachary Taylor shortly after his arrival in Laredo. See *Papers of Mirabeau Buonaparte Lamar*, Vol. VI, p. 69, No. 2297. Strangely enough, there is no mention of this flood in the very detailed work on the Rio Grande by Paul Horgan.

42. F 166, D 8.

43. F 171, D 27; F 172, D 17.

44. F 173, D 5.

45. F 173, D 9.

46. F 173, D 15b. This seems odd since he had reported a total of 126 troops in Laredo in May. F 171, D 30.

47. F 173, D 16.

48. F 173, D 25.

49. F 173, D 28, 36; F 174, D 29, 53, 60, 62; F 175, D 1, 5, 19; F 181, D 5.

50. F179, D 9.

51. F 179, D 11.

52. Stan Green, *A Changing of Flags: Mirabeau B. Lamar at Laredo*, no. 5 in the Story of Laredo Series (Laredo: Border Studies Center, 1990), 3.

53. F 179, D 14. Sent by General Arista from Matamoros on April 26.

54. F 179, D 20. Sent by Policarpio Martínez from Mier.

55. F 179, D 23.

56. For Tilden's account of the activity of the vessel see Stan Green, *Tilden's Voyage to Laredo in 1846*, no. 14 in the Story of Laredo Series (Laredo: Bor-

der Studies Center, 1991). Other sources give a much higher population. Cf. Chapter 5.

57. *Papers of Mirabeau Buonapate Lamar*, Vol. IV, pp. 141–42, No. 2228 lists the muster roll of Lamar’s company as numbering sixty-seven.

58. *Ibid*, p. 159, No. 2319; p. 172, No. 2336. “The Indians are giving us but little or no trouble.”

59. F 199, D 1, 6, 7, 28; F 201, D 2; F 185, D 1.

## 5. Sociological Aspects

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.”<sup>1</sup> The “born greats” who came to America were few and for the first century at least were generally viceroys 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”).<sup>2</sup> 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:<sup>3</sup>

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.”<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> In the last census under Spain in 1820, the results were the same, with one person less.<sup>6</sup>

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.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup>

|            |            |            |            |            |
|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|
| 1823—1,402 | 1824—1,570 | 1828—2,054 | 1831—1,698 |            |
| 1833—1,734 | 1835—1,979 | 1837—1,736 | 1845—2,011 | 1853—1,437 |

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.<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup> 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."<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup>

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.<sup>14</sup>

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.<sup>15</sup>

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.<sup>16</sup>

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.<sup>17</sup> But some things seldom change. In 1845 Mayor Agustín Dovalina found it necessary to appoint someone to check on the ownership of stray animals.<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup>

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.”<sup>20</sup> 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.<sup>21</sup>

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.<sup>22</sup>

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.<sup>23</sup>

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.<sup>24</sup>



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.<sup>25</sup>

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.<sup>26</sup>

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.<sup>27</sup>

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.<sup>28</sup>

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.<sup>29</sup>

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.<sup>30</sup>

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.<sup>31</sup>

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.<sup>32</sup>

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.<sup>33</sup>

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.<sup>34</sup>

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 one 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.<sup>35</sup>

[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.<sup>36</sup>

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.<sup>37</sup>

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.<sup>38</sup>

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.<sup>39</sup>

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.<sup>40</sup>

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.<sup>41</sup>

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.<sup>42</sup>

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.<sup>43</sup> 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.<sup>44</sup> Even, and perhaps more importantly, at the local level this kind of diversion was censured. The magistrate in Laredo in 1783 issued the following:<sup>45</sup>

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.<sup>46</sup> 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.”<sup>47</sup> 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.<sup>48</sup> 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.<sup>49</sup>

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.”<sup>50</sup> 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.”<sup>51</sup> 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.”<sup>52</sup> 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.<sup>53</sup> 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.<sup>54</sup>

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.”<sup>55</sup> 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.<sup>56</sup> 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.<sup>57</sup>

Laredoans didn’t always have to rely on entertainment and diversion at home. Especialy 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.<sup>58</sup>

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.<sup>59</sup> 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.”<sup>60</sup> 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.<sup>61</sup>

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.<sup>62</sup>

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

1. *Twelfth Night*, Act. II, scene 5, lines 126–27.
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.
11. J. B. Wilkinson, *Laredo and the Rio Grande Frontier* (Austin: Jenkins Pub., 1975), 234.
12. Louis J. Wortham, *A History of Texas* (Ft. Worth: Wortham-Molyneaux Co., 1924), 5: 258.
13. Leyendecker's arrival is noted in *The New Handbook of Texas*, 2: 53. The census is found in F 189, D 5.
14. F 40, D 4.
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.
20. F 61, D 6. For the development of social life in Laredo see Gilberto Hinojosa, *A Borderlands Town in Transition* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1983).
21. F 97, no. 10.
22. F 105, no. 2.
23. F 105, no. 26.

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.
33. F 132, no. 14.
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.
50. F 153, D 13.
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.

60. *Papers of Mirabeau Buonaparte Lamar*, Vol. IV, p. 169, No. 2330.

61. F 28, D 1.

62 F 32, D 13.



## 6. Faith and Culture

**E**ven in the most primitive of cultures, religious belief has always been central to the way of life. The major feasts and celebrations were times of petition and appeasement to the god or gods who were believed to control things. Prayer and ritual accompanied the most mundane of activities, changes in status, sowing and harvesting, healing and health. Often, ways of doing things, the components of culture, were determined by belief. Faith and culture have always been closely combined.<sup>1</sup>

At the beginning of the sixteenth century, all of western Europe was Catholic. When some of the nations broke away, Spain remained staunchly firm in the faith and thereafter assumed as its right and responsibility the preservation and spread of Catholicism, especially in its colonies in the New World. At the same time, Spain saw itself as an instrument of bringing civilization to the native peoples whom it qualified with such terms as barbarian, savage, and pagan. Spain was absolutely convinced that these people would be far better off learning the ways of the western world and the truths of the Catholic faith than they could possibly have been otherwise. Much has been written about the mixed motivations of glory, God, and gold, but the fact is that religious ideas continued to permeate practices and policies even into the nineteenth century.

It is not surprising, then, that there were so many laws about activities that were considered immoral, as we saw in the last chapter. Nor is it surprising that efforts at evangelization were in the forefront of establishing new settlements. We saw in the first chapter that in colonizing Nuevo Santander, Escandón set up a series of missions, which were entrusted to the Franciscans, and that San Agustín de Laredo was one of them. While it never became an established mission as such, the Indians settled in the surrounding area fell under the influence of the missionary from Revilla who wrote that they were “very backward but good natured and go to catechism classes and are very obedient to the priest,” noting at the same time that “most of these are baptized Christians now and married by the priest without mixing with apostates.”<sup>2</sup> The parish priest in 1788, Fr. Joel Sánchez Miguel, in sending parish statistics, said that “of the eighteen marriages registered all of them were done by the Church, and the 109 souls which make up this [Indian] nation are all baptized.”<sup>3</sup> The benefits of baptism were cultural as well as spiritual. A decree of 1769 ordered that the Indians should learn doctrine in Spanish in the belief that language, an essential vehicle for inculturation, would make a difference. A year later it was further decreed that Indians who hold official positions should know Spanish.<sup>4</sup> The Christian Indians were allowed to engage in commerce with the Spaniards and eventually there were marriages between the two groups.

We have already seen that the original colony of Laredo had to depend on the services of a priest from Revilla and that his services were sporadic at best. The report from the Visit of 1757 noted that the settlers in Laredo wanted their own priest, though they had no special place for religious services. The bishop of Guadalajara tried to remedy the situation in 1759 by sending Fr. Joseph Lafita y Verri, a native of Nuevo León, as a resident pastor. This did not work out for two reasons: money and status. As Escandón pointed out in his report to the viceroy, the “poor families” in Laredo were in no position to support a priest, something they would not have had to do had a member of a

religious order been assigned there, since his own order would have taken care of him. Actually, it should not have been necessary. When arrangements were made to provide a priest, the bishop also arranged for him to receive a salary of 150 pesos a year. Sánchez himself offered to pay this amount. Most of the Laredoans were living on less. It should have been enough, but because the priests were considered superior in several ways, they wanted to live a lifestyle which was also “superior.” Even among officials there was a sense of deference to the clergy, and in 1774 orders were sent out to confiscate any writings or publications offensive to priests and religious.<sup>5</sup> While most of the faithful believed in the dignity of the priesthood, they could not see why a priest’s life should be very different from their own, or that of Jesus who had no place to lay his head. As a result, in the first ten years of Laredo’s existence several priests came and went, something the faithful must certainly have found frustrating. In 1769, Vázquez Borrego, who still considered himself the governor of his district, wrote to the bishop asking for an assistant pastor since the one appointed for Laredo “has resisted going to the parish.”<sup>6</sup>

If they could not afford to support a priest, much less could the Laredoans afford to build a church. They did set aside a small *jacal* for the purpose but with only intermittent use it was little more than an abandoned hut. Still, the presence of a church building was a “given” in the planning of a Spanish town, and during the Visit of 1767 Governor Palacio and his assistant marked off a place for a plaza with a specific area for a church and reminded Sánchez that it was the first duty of the leading official to see to its construction and maintenance. They even suggested ways of providing funds from the communal lands and transportation across the river. A year later the governor followed up on this idea and wrote to the mayor:<sup>7</sup>

Promote as much as you can the building of a church, letting us know how it’s going and what you are doing, because even though God is being served in every way that is just, this will

be more the case with the building of his Temple in which that Christian village can adore him since it is not enough to do so in the heart while this work is left undone.

Building a church was a challenge in itself, but it was compounded by the continuing difficulties with some of the priests. Perhaps it was a clash of wills or of points of view, but Sánchez wrote to the governor several times to complain about the parish priest who was crossing the lines of jurisdiction as Sánchez saw them.<sup>8</sup> He had apparently tried to clarify this with the priest but without success. The last straw came after elections had taken place and the parish priest refused to receive the new council at the door of the church, probably because of the previous disputes. Sánchez complained to the governor, and received this reply:<sup>9</sup>

The message that you sent to the parish priest should have explained the different cases of jurisdiction and the reasons for them, more so since in his reply he asked for them. Otherwise whoever sees it is going to say he is right. I will write to the parish priest about this and according to what he replies, and the solution which can be found, some decision will be made.

The fact that the Council was not received at the door of the church has nothing to do with the elections having been well done, so you can send the minutes and those elected can take office even before my approval. Then I think the priest will receive them at the door of the church since this is nothing more than a formality in honor of the Council, and if he doesn't do so just explain that in the minutes.

I am aware of the past disputes you have had with the parish priest, and regarding the agreement made with His Excellency at the time of asking for a minister for the town, when he obligated himself to provide some of the sustenance until there are more residents, and the other things you write about this mat-

ter. It is up to me, in a separate document which treats of nothing else, to ask for relief for all the residents in view of the reasons presented and send it to the bishop.

Evidently Sánchez tried to smooth things over and went so far as to order that “everyone should help build a house for the parish priest wherever he wishes, with the warning that whoever does not do so out of disobedience will be punished with eight days in the public jail of the town.”<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps these problems would have been more easily resolved if Laredo had not been so far from the diocesan center. From its foundation until 1779, Laredo belonged to the diocese of Guadalajara. Distance alone would have been an obstacle to any frequent or constant communications. In 1779 the diocese of Nuevo León was created with its see in Linares, later moved to Monterrey. This was certainly closer, but in wranglings over authority the bishops preferred to defer to the political leaders. As for official visitations, they seem to have been few and far between. In 1791, the governor announced to all of the towns along the Rio Grande that the bishop would visit them, but there is nothing in the archives to prove whether he actually got to Laredo.<sup>11</sup>

The mention of a church door in the governor’s reply seems to imply that some sort of structure other than a simple hut existed. What is certain is that by 1789 there was a recently-constructed church and sacristy of stone, and Juan José de la Garza was the parish priest.<sup>12</sup> In that same year, however, he was replaced by José Manuel Pérez Flores who remained as pastor until 1808.<sup>13</sup> Even though recently built, the church was apparently inadequate and in 1795 “permission was given to rebuild the parish church in the town of Laredo, His Excellency also granting forty days indulgence for every half hour to those who work without wages.”<sup>14</sup> Further encouragement came from the commander of the troops in Laredo who said that fines levied for infractions against the laws forbidding gambling, games of chance, and usury would be used for the building material of the church. He added: “I hope that

each and every person will prove his Christianity and love for Heaven more than is necessary and decide together what can be done to bring about this holy and most interesting work.”<sup>15</sup> Whether it was a shortage of manpower, materials, or funds, or possibly a combination of these things, twenty years later, the commanding general of the north, José Joaquín Arredondo, wrote to the mayor: “So that the construction of the Church in that town, under the responsibility of Captain Don José Lázaro Báez Benavides, be realized as soon as possible, I hope you will take all the means available to you to help with people for the work and everything else possible to achieve this goal.”<sup>16</sup> Whatever efforts were made they were still insufficient. Meanwhile the church in use had deteriorated with time and the town council appealed to the diocese for permission to repair it. The response from Monterrey was dated May 26, 1824.<sup>17</sup>

Informed by your official letter of the 8th of this month of the bad condition of the temple which serves the parish in that town and of the impossibility to continue the new one which has just the foundations because of the difficult times, the poverty of the residents and the lack of other resources, we have thought it well to accede to your request, and to that effect we have given orders on this date to the parish priest of the town, Don José María García, to use all the funds the parish has, whether in cash or in debts, to restore the old church. If this is not enough he should exhort the faithful and stimulate their generosity in his sermons on festive days to contribute with money, materials or personal labor, each in the measure possible, to the rebuilding of the said temple, promising at the same time from our zeal and good will toward your council to also help so that your pious desires may be realized.

The “pious desires” of the people were not realized during the time of this history, but in 1866 a new church was finally begun and six

years later it was consecrated.<sup>18</sup> It still stands, an enduring monument to perseverance and faith.

Because faith and culture come together in people, the local church leadership is an important influence in the lives of the faithful. The presence of Fr. Pérez for twenty-three years (he remained in Laredo four years after he retired) certainly set a tone of conservatism and loyalty to Spain. He would gladly have complied with the royal decrees exhorting priests to preach respect for the king.<sup>19</sup> Conversely, he would not have been found among those priests who joined the rebel cause, even though they would later receive government pensions.<sup>20</sup> He found a soul mate in José María Ramón who rejected the rebel cause during the difficult years between 1810 and 1820 and they became fast friends.

His successor, Fr. José María García Panao, who remained in Laredo for twenty years, was of a much different character. When applying for a pension given to “those who helped in the revolution,” he admitted having been outspoken in favor of independence. His report on his own activities which accompanied his request is worth reproducing here.<sup>21</sup>

Report on the services rendered by citizen José María García, clergyman belonging to the diocese of Nuevo León and presently interim parish priest of the town of Laredo in the free state of Tamaulipas, and by competent designation military chaplain of the barracks of the troops in the fort of Laredo:

It is a fact that since the year seven [1807], having received the sacred orders of priesthood, he was sent as Vicar to the city of Victoria (Tamps.) under the orders of the parish priest Don Miguel Ramos de Arispe; that he took part in the competition for parishes which took place in eight [1808], passed the synod and other forms of competition which were numerous; that for four years that he worked in that position maintained himself several times and carried out the canonical duties of that parish in absence of the appointed authority; that during that same

time and for the same reason I helped out in the parishes of Cerro de Santiago, Padilla and Guemes from which, in critical circumstances, I was taken by a corporal and four soldiers to the general barracks in Aguayo by order of the aide-de-camp Don Francisco Cao, captain of the army of General Arredondo, for having spoken in favor of our Independence and Liberty; that from eleven to twelve [1811-1812] he served as pastor of the Sagrario in the capital of Monterrey (N.L.); that for 19 years and some months he has been the interim parish priest of the town of Laredo, ecclesiastical judge of his district and by competent designation military chaplain of the Third Company of the northern Frontier, also serving as Auxiliary to the troops destined to the same fort, the administration of which in a place so poor and frequently invaded by the barbarian Indians has been carried out at much cost and risk within the precinct and with more obvious danger to life away from it.

These are the brief services carried out in my ministry and in the proper form and with the greatest respect I present to the Secretary of the Venerable Dean and Chapter of the holy church cathedral of Monterrey so that if the kindness of his illustrious Lordship sees fit to qualify them as services worthy of merit, he will keep me in mind when fulfilling the Federal Law of last May 16 on providing benefices. I sign this testament in the parish of the town of Laredo on the 20th of September, 1831. J.M.G.

Fr. García was able to weather the changes brought about by the independence movement and the fluctuating political circumstances seen in Chapter 3. That he was a man of service is shown in a communication to him from the mayor in Lent of 1819.<sup>22</sup>

Your good dispositions toward this town as you show in your official communication with yesterday's date (and received here)



in making yourself available with pleasure for the solemn ceremonies during Holy Week are commendable sentiments for which I give repeated thanks. In the meeting which took place on the 28th of this month the residents of my jurisdiction offered forty two pesos as alms for these activities. At the moment they still have the money. However, if you think this is enough money and let me know, I will begin to collect it and place it into your hands. . . .

Laredo, March 30, 1819. Yldefonso Ramón

About a year after he filed his report, Fr. García died. The mayor of Laredo received the following communication:<sup>23</sup>

Today I received the sad news of the death of the parish priest D. José María García, sent by you in the official communication of the 3rd of this month, and immediately I ordered the position of interim parish priest be given to Bachelor [Rev.] Don Juan Valdés. Your religious good wishes and those of the good people there are gratefully received, and I thank them and you for your great zeal for your spiritual administration.

Monterrey, September 11, 1832.

José María de Jesús, Bishop of Monterrey

Fr. Valdés was in Laredo less than three months. In December, Fr. José Trinidad García took over as pastor and like the previous Fr. García, he would remain almost twenty years. In that time he gained the admiration and respect of the people to the point that he was chosen as one of the seven electors and was the president of them in the difficult year of 1846 right after the takeover by the Americans.<sup>24</sup> In August of 1845 the mayor informed the subprefect in Mier that Fr. García was going to leave for Monterrey, but gave no reason why. Concerned, the subprefect asked for an explanation and especially wanted to know if he should ask for a replacement. He got the answer from the prefect,

who relayed a message from the bishop in which he said that “The priest D. Trinidad García in charge of the parish of Laredo came to me in a miserable state and in need of recuperating and restoring his poor health. I have already told him he should plan his return to serve the parish in Laredo and should do so as quickly as possible so that the people there will not be lacking spiritual help.”<sup>25</sup> He did return and remained until 1851 when he turned the parish over to Fr. Timoteo Frías.<sup>26</sup>

What surfaces clearly throughout the documents is a deep concern for the spiritual welfare of the Laredoans. They, in turn, expressed their faith through the various cultural forms of the time. The most notable is the writing of a last will and testament. It invariably begins in the name of God and frequently the Blessed Virgin or other saints, and is followed by a confession of faith. The writer’s soul is commended to God who created and redeemed it, and a directive is given for burial in a religious habit, usually that of “our seraphic Father,” St. Francis. Many ask to be buried in the parish church with the proper ritual and prayers, and indicate that the obligatory fees should be paid and that money should be set aside for Masses to be said “for the repose of my soul.” The following example is from 1777 and is that of the first alderman for Laredo.<sup>27</sup>

In the name of Our Lord God and of the Most Holy Virgin, his blessed Mother who intercedes for all sinners, conceived without stain or shadow of original sin from the first instant of her most pure natural existence, let this be publicly written as a last will and testament. I, Salvador González Hidalgo, resident of this town, being sick in bed with some infirmity and fearful of death as is natural, but through the divine mercy with sound judgment, full will and good memory and with all my senses, believing as I firmly and truly do in the most holy mystery of the Most Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, three distinct persons and one only true God, as well as in all of the

things that our Holy Mother the Catholic Church believes and confesses and of which I, though an unworthy son, believe and in which faith and belief I have lived and hope to die, desiring to save my soul, I give my testament in the following manner:

First of all I commend my soul to Our Lord God who created it and redeemed it with the inestimable price of his Blood, begging his divine Majesty to take it to himself into his glory for which it was created, and I commend my body to the earth from which it was formed.

I order that when it is God's will that I leave the present life, my body be buried in a tomb in the parish church of this town next to that of my deceased son Joseph, and my body be clothed in the habit of my Father St. Francis, with the customary offering being made, and my funeral be simple, and my body be present the day of my funeral if there is time, and there be a sung mass and vigil, and if not, the following day.

I order that this be followed by a novena of solemn masses.

I order that six masses be said for incomplete penances or those I forgot.

I order that two masses be said in restitution that I should make, that I don't remember or which I don't know about.

I order that two reales be given for each of the obligatory fees, which is 6 reales.

I state that I was married according to Holy Mother Church to Da.[Doña] Anna María Lozano with whom we had as legitimate children María Eulalia, Joseph, María Manuela, Salvador, Joseph Luis, Juan Joseph, María Gertrudis, María Josepha, María de la Trinidad and Joseph Alexander, and of these there are three men and five women, four of them married and one single all of whom have their dowry certificates made and signed and which will be in possession of my executors whom I will choose later.

Forty-five years later, the daughter of Salvador González made her will which reveals first of all that the basic formula and faith still existed. Secondly, it offers important genealogical information on the descendents of the founder of Laredo since she was married to Tomás Sánchez' son.<sup>28</sup>

In the name of the All-Powerful God and the ever Virgin Mary and all the saints of the celestial court, I, María Gertrudis González, resident of this town of San Agustín de Laredo, state that I am a Roman, Apostolic, Catholic Christian and I believe in the Most Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, one only true God, and in everything that our holy Mother Church believes and confesses, and in which faith and belief it is my will to live and die if our Lord God does not deign to free me from the sickness I am suffering, and if I die it is my will that my body be buried in the parish church of this town with simple burial in the fourth row and my body be enshrouded with the habit of our Father St. Francis.

I state that I was married according to the rules of our Mother the Church to Sergeant D. José Antonio Sánchez of this same town, from which marriage we had as children D. María Petra Sánchez, deceased, who left for children of her marriage María Tomasa, María de Jesús, José Cristóbal, María Rita, José de Jesús, José Felipe, José Basilio, María del Patrocinio, all of whom I declare my heirs.

I state that whatever comes from 1/5 of my possessions, I order my executors that after paying for my funeral and the obligatory fees and the things of this nature that my spouse ordained, what is left should be used for masses for the good of my soul and that of my spouse.

As is the case with these two wills, the testator always made it a point to assure that he/she was married in the Church, a fact which

showed both adherence and legitimacy for the children. Two other cultural formats also reveal the inherent presence of faith. Any time a legal deposition was made the witness had to swear “before God and with the sign of the Holy Cross” that he would speak the truth. From the time of independence, all official correspondence ended with the words “God and liberty.” These are acknowledgments of God’s presence and importance.

The ongoing desire for a church building is another indication of the piety of the people, as is the wish of the faithful to be buried inside the church. This happened in Laredo even after 1814 when a decree ordered that burials should take place outside the city, a decree which was repeated in 1842 and 1845.<sup>29</sup> Without any explanation for his reply, the governor in 1833 informed the city council that he would not order the priest to accompany bodies to the cemetery. Undoubtedly it was to protect him from possible contamination. Statistics show that ninety people died from cholera during this year.<sup>30</sup> The following year the council presented a request to make another cemetery, and the governor replied asking what it would cost.<sup>31</sup> The archives don’t reveal a figure, or if this ever happened. What is important to stress here is that funerals and the way they were conducted were also an expression of faith.

Even civil occasions were tied in with religious practices. Decrees called for Masses to celebrate the treaty with England (1802) and the victory of the Spanish forces in Buenos Aires and Montevideo (1808). Prayers were requested for the new Junta right after independence, and for the emperor and empress as the first sovereigns of Mexico.<sup>32</sup> The new government established religious holidays and Laredoans were invited to participate in the feast of Our Lady of Refuge at the end of the month of January in Ciudad Guerrero and that of the Immaculate Conception in Mier, these last two in 1837 and 1845 respectively, proof that the Catholic traditions continued.<sup>33</sup>

The separation of the American colonies from the mother country brought a number of religious problems, among them a shortage of

bishops due to the expulsion of the Spaniards from Mexico. It was many years before some of the countries reestablished ties with the Vatican. Nevertheless, when Pope Leo XII was elected in 1824, the government called for a national celebration, and made provisions for a salary to pay an emissary to the Vatican.<sup>34</sup> Ironically, a year later there was a circular decrying the Pope's letter to the bishops of America urging them to support Spain in its struggle to regain its colonies. Mexico's staunch Catholicism comes through clearly.

Through the secretariat of foreign relations His Excellency the President has learned of a circular printed in Madrid February 10 of this year, given in Rome the 24th of November of last year and addressed it seems by His Holiness Leo XII to the very reverend Archbishops and reverend bishops of America with the object of urging them to support on their vast continent the domination of the King of Spain from whom, with immense sacrifices and heroic efforts prolonged for fifteen years, it has been freed forever. His Excellency, on learning of the contents of the said encyclical, could do no less than point out the deception and maliciousness with which the Spanish government has managed to arouse the interest of His Holiness presenting the Catholic religion in these countries in such a decadent state as you would scarcely find today. To Spain's disgrace, no Catholic nation can present to the world in its institutions or manner of governance more brilliant examples of respect and consideration for not only the sacred dogmas and the wholesome morality of our holy religion, but also for the persons of the ministers. But as a last resort for an ambitious, impotent, and obstinate government, it appealed to the Roman Pontiff confusing the spiritual power which His Holiness should exercise throughout the Church with his temporal authority, and mixing religious interests with its supposed legitimate rights to destroy the independence and liberty of the

nations. His Excellency . . . is sending you copies of the aforementioned encyclical and notes from our Envoy in London about its contents . . . God etc. Mexico, July 6, 1825  
Miguel Ramos Arispe<sup>35</sup>

It would be interesting to know what the parish life of Laredo was like. Unfortunately there are only a few reports of parish statistics, scattered over many years. What they do indicate, however, is that baptisms and marriages in and by the Catholic Church were a constant in Laredo's history.

"Faith comes through hearing," as St. Paul reminds us.<sup>36</sup> The first concern of the early Spanish missionaries was indoctrination of the faith but it was not always available to everyone. Recall the bishop's concern when he visited Laredo and found that the people were ignorant of even the most fundamental teachings of the Church. The presence of a priest was necessary if for no other reason than to instruct in doctrine. This would happen once a week at best and was only one facet of knowledge and learning. What began as simple catechism lessons in the course of time blossomed into an educational system, the real vehicle of culture, which comes mostly from hearing.

When Tienda de Cuervo apportioned the lots in the center of Laredo, he provided for a church, a rectory, a city hall, a mayor's residence, and a jail. There was no thought of a school. This was the case for another sixteen years until 1783 when the governor issued orders for school attendance. The mayor, in relaying the decree, reveals some interesting details.<sup>37</sup>

In compliance with the royal decree and the superior order of the Governor which precedes it, I should and do order that within a period of eight days from today, all of the residents who have children capable of entering the school to read and have not been there should send them to learn Christian doctrine, without exception of persons; and I order the owners of

cultivated fields and cattle who have children in their service up to twelve years old and who are not well instructed in doctrine that within the same time frame they send them to school under the penalty that if they do not do so they will be fined six pesos from now on, as well as the twenty-five pesos that the Governor imposes on those who hide anyone; and for the salary that should be given to the teacher, each one will make a corresponding arrangement with the teacher according to the children he has and whether they are going to read or just pray while they are well disposed so that little by little they can do both. And the teacher whom the parish priest has seen fit to recommend especially to the Governor for this task is Don Manuel de Aceves and I am in agreement with this decision. Thus I have decreed, ordered, and signed, as acting Judge with attending witnesses for lack of a public or royal scribe which we don't have as the law prescribes, and on common paper which is officialized without prejudice to the king. I testify to all this.                      Santiago de Jesús Sánchez

The original reason for instruction is emphasized: to learn doctrine. The parish priest who would ordinarily do this is the one who recommends the teacher. But at the same time in order to learn it is necessary to know how to read, so the education at first was basically these two things. The teacher's salary is negotiated with the parents to whom the decree was really addressed, and who are threatened with severe fines if they fail to comply. They would be reluctant, of course, since they depended on the children to help with various chores, specifically working in the fields and tending animals. This is still the case in rural Mexico today.

Another decree two years later seems to imply that there hadn't been full compliance with the previous one.<sup>38</sup> The same mayor again passes on the reiterated orders for school attendance, adding some details pertinent to Laredo.



Because our Lord, the King (whom God guard) desires that all young children have an education corresponding to their age, and know the law of God by being placed in schools which should be everywhere within his dominions . . . the Viceroy Don Martin de Mayor has ordered . . . the Governor of this colony to make it known throughout the province in order for the magistrates to carry it out so that no child be without an education, whatever class he belongs to . . . and not having found in this town a person with all of the qualifications that the laws state, it was decided (so that the children do not lose any time) to name Don Leandro Chavira as teacher for the school that now exists. Now that Don Juan Andrés de Islas has all of the necessary qualities as required, I order all of my residents to take all of their children to the school immediately without any exceptions . . . and I ask the Commander of the troops, Don José Manuel Galván, to order the soldiers under his charge who have children to send them to school so that they may fulfill the holy desires of Our Sovereign; and those persons who have previously paid the teacher may keep their children there until he gets a salary. . . .

The mention of a school in both decrees seems to indicate that some house or building had been designated for that purpose. It may not have lasted very long. Juan de Islas does not appear in the census of 1789 nor is there any further mention of a school or education until 1807 when the governor issued a communication encouraging the mayors in the various towns to look for intelligent boys and send them to Spain for education.<sup>39</sup> Few residents in Laredo could have afforded such an expense.

The impetus for establishing a school came from the parish priest, Fr. José María García, in 1818. While the mayor was in favor, when he sent the request to the governor he indicated a number of reasons why this might be difficult.<sup>40</sup>

I am sending to Your Lordship the accompanying proposal which I think is just and truly sensible for the benefit and bringing together of so many children dispersed in this place, learning by simply imitating their parents and alien to all teaching and education which can only bring about pernicious results in the future.

I must necessarily communicate to Your Lordship some difficulties which might occur regarding certain things, the first being that the teacher we have in mind for this public service, D. Elías Sánchez, very capable and with good qualities, is a retired soldier, an invalid pensioner; the second is that several individuals of regular means who are disinterested in such a public benefit don't seem willing to contribute to the annual commitment of a certain amount to serve as a fund for the teacher, excusing themselves due to the circumstances of the times; thirdly, others can not only refuse to send their children to school saying that they themselves are capable of teaching their children, or that they are not under royal jurisdiction, but they can give bad example to others, with the lack of just payment which they should give according to the classes in which the children are (reading, spelling, etc.), resulting in innumerable complaints from the teacher which take up the time of this office. I communicate all of this to Your Lordship and await the orders you deign to send, based on your knowledge and best judgment in order to comply with them. God keep Your Lordship many years. Laredo, January 19, 1818. José Francisco de la Garza

The arguments against the school were apparently more forceful than those in favor of it, and as a result nothing was done until three years later when a volunteer came forward with an interesting proposition, which the town council accepted a week later.<sup>41</sup>

Illustrious Town Council—D. Francisco Fernández, resident of this town, comes before you with due respect and says: in view of having taken on the task of teaching some children of honorable persons of this town to read, it seems fitting to him to place into your hands the following: if you think it appropriate, to allow him to have in this town a general school for children, which he commits and obliges himself to maintain for a period of five years starting from the date of its establishment, during which time it will have no other purpose nor be used for anything else, being paid at the end of each month for each child learning A,B,C's two *reales*, those with readers, four; those for catechism, prayers, and A,B,C's, 6; and those beginning to write, one peso, the most they will pay until the end of their teaching. He obligates himself of his own free will and in recognition of the public purpose for which he is employed to give free instruction to all orphans and poor children who have no way for their parents to pay, providing them with the spellers, readers and other things necessary for their advancement. With regard to the salary which the parents should give for their children each month, seconded by you he hopes it will be in cash from the persons of regular income or work and those who can be verified, agreeing that the parents without income can pay in corn, meat, etc. as long as they are at the same prices for which they are sold for cash. He leaves it up to you to choose the house which will be used for the said school with whatever orders you find appropriate and to which he subjects himself. Therefore, I ask and beg that my petition be carried out, and I will be justly pleased with its decree.

Town of Laredo, November 5, 1821.

Francisco Fernández

Laredo, November 12, 1821.

Presented to and accepted by the Town Council, the presenter,

seeming qualified, is approved for the public employment he asks for, guided from the time of its creation by the regulations in the following articles:

1. He should put the school in the house designated by this Town Council which will watch over its procedures and the progress of the children.

2. Since the principal goal of the Christian is the Catholic Religion, he will make sure that the children first of all learn and understand the most necessary mysteries and the most important precepts, having them assist as a group over which he should preside at Mass on all festive days, solemnities, and church functions, and have them serve in church.

3. He should watch over the manners of the children both within and outside of the school, having them understand in a lively way the esteem and respect they should have for public authorities, their parents, the elderly and adults, as well as proper language, fraternity, and the good conduct they should show toward one another.

4. In view of the fact that motivation of the children in their studies and education is basic to their progress, he should obtain it through whatever means his prudence and moderation suggest, as well as in correction accompanied by love and interest in their progress which he should have equally for all of them.

Therefore, the postulator is ordered to appear before us so that being informed of the contents of this document he can contract with this council which signs with witnesses for lack of a secretary.

Yldefonso Ramón    José Francisco de la Garza

Fernando García Dávila    Francisco Fernández

Witness Guadalupe Arambura    Witness Teodosio Treviño

True to his contract, Fernández stayed on the job until March 1827. During those years he sent reports to the town council indicating the

number of students and the level of each one in reading and writing.<sup>42</sup> In his report of April 1826, he noted that “Everyone receives instruction in the catechism of Fr. Rigalda . . . or from other books which instruct them in the principal truths of religion, the Gospels and charity.”<sup>43</sup> In reporting the statistics over the years, there is the constant refrain of the lack of funds on the part of the parents which accounts for the decreases in enrollment. In 1822 there were sixty-six pupils. By June 1826, the number had risen to 117, but in December of that same year it was seventy-nine. Considering the fact that the population in Laredo at that time was nearing 1,800, there would have been several hundred children, so the number of those attending school must have been around ten percent at best. The mayor in an earlier report to the governor offered two reasons for the low attendance:<sup>44</sup>

I am sending Your Excellency a report of the elementary school we have here so you can see how few children there are due to the *lack of interest of their parents* to educate them, even when the results should lead them to do their duty, so it would be very good if Your Excellency would indicate what penalty could be imposed on the negligent parents. There are *no funds* from which to pay the teacher for the education of the orphan and indigent children and this prevents a lot of good from being done. If it would please Your Excellency, you could decree that this municipality can use the income from the [sale of] wild horses for such a worthy purpose since it is the only fund, scarce as it is, that we have on hand. . . . Laredo, December 10, 1825.  
J.[osé] G.[arcía] D.[ávila]

The government fostered education to the best of its ability, supporting the penalizing of parents who did not send their children to school, exempting teachers from military service and insisting on education even for the Indians.<sup>45</sup> What it was not able to do was provide funds. When Fernández’ term finished, the town council made an ap-

peal to the citizens for voluntary contributions to pay the teacher and maintain the school. Promises were made for 239 pesos for the year, plus fifteen pesos from the military personnel. On May 13 the council met and decided to go ahead and the following day contracted a new teacher.<sup>46</sup>

The town council met to proceed with the contract which is spoken of, summoned the school teacher Juan José Salinas who had been spoken to about the matter and who agreed to serve in the expressed capacity for twenty pesos a month until the school is organized and what was offered by the 1st Permanent Company is given, and from that time on he will serve for twenty-five pesos a month which will be given by the town council, offering to work for a period of four years from this date to the satisfaction of the council, and the instruction will be to read and count. For this payment he must receive up to one hundred boys not counting the very small children who still do not have the basics of reading whether they are children of the contributors or not, and orphans and the poor on the understanding that if they surpass the said number, he will be paid accordingly for the additional ones. He will carry out his job faithfully and will not take on any other employment. If illness prevents his working he will inform the council so it can find a replacement until he recovers. Every month he will give a report in duplicate on the number of boys in the school, in what class they are and their progress, and additions and dismissals on the understanding that the latter may be done only with the knowledge of the council when they are considered just. And so that this contract may be strictly adhered to, the members of the council sign the present document together with the person contracted.

José Lázaro Benavides    Juan José Treviño    Juan José Salinas  
 President                      2nd Alderman

What is most notable here is the absence of any mention of religious instruction. Education was becoming more secularized. The Liberal political climate at the time, which stressed the separation of Church and state, may have had something to do with it. In August 1827, Salinas reported eighty-three children in the school. The number continued to fluctuate constantly from month to month, reaching 106 in February of 1828 and dropping to sixty-seven in October of 1829.<sup>47</sup> During this time the voluntary contributions continued to come in each month.<sup>48</sup> When Salinas' contract expired in the summer of 1830, the contributions ceased and so did the school attendance. It wasn't until a year later that classes were able to resume again.<sup>49</sup>

In the town of Laredo, the twenty-ninth of June of 1831, the town council gathered to discuss the establishment of an elementary school as is re-decreed by the Honorable Congress of the State and in the orders of the government of the 11th of this month that up to 100 pesos should be taken by this administration to help with the expenses of the said establishment, and the residents were called together to begin a subscription for what is lacking and have in fact offered to provide what is needed until the Honorable Congress approves the proposed budget for this, and citizen Miguel Cameros who was present was asked to take over the said school and has accepted with the permission of his father for a period of two years without absences, except for a legal cause of illness, for the sum of two hundred and fifty-two pesos yearly which he will receive monthly, with the payment of the locale which will serve as the said establishment at his expense, and working to the satisfaction of the town council to instruct in reading, writing, and counting. And to this effect the said teacher signs with the town council.

Juan José Treviño   Miguel Cameros   José María García Dávila  
Victorino Vela   Tomás Flores

Like his predecessor, Cameros continued to send reports to the town council on the numbers of students and their progress. A report near the end of his two-year term indicates sixty-three boys in the school, six of them studying catechism. The teaching was more sophisticated, with five levels of writing and three of reading, and three basics of mathematics: addition, subtraction, and multiplication.<sup>50</sup> Preparation for participation in civic life was getting better.

There is no indication of when he was hired, but Sóstenes Carrasco was the schoolteacher in 1835. He reported 125 students in March of that year.<sup>51</sup> There was much insistence from the national and state governments at this time on the importance of education and the need to improve it, particularly by visitations from inspectors.<sup>52</sup> The progress of education in Laredo can be measured somewhat by a statistic from 1838. Of 255 men who had the right to vote, 122 of them could write, roughly fifty percent.<sup>53</sup> It's hard to determine exactly what happened after this time. A letter from the mayor to the subprefect in 1841 simply explains that some of the authorities did not appear on the list of those who were contributing to the school because they were not present when the subscriptions were made.<sup>54</sup> Some education was taking place, however, and an interesting letter to the town council in 1846 from the teacher at the time outlines what he intends to do. It also reveals that religion is still an important element of education.<sup>55</sup>

Because the council has desired to protect youth, that is, the really poor, I find my duties very complicated given the way the schools in this town have operated, but today, to help the youth and keep from doubling my efforts, I have decided to make some pasteboards for beginning readers and use them for the purposes of my work which will be carried out in this way: at eight in the morning they will begin their tasks and after an hour or so they will do some writing, making the letters in sand with their finger or some other instrument. After this writing exercise there will be arithmetic for the more ad-



vanced youth, and after that, Saturday's catechism. In the afternoon there will be the same tasks except for catechism which they will study just one hour a day.

Every Friday I will review the reading homework; on Saturday, doctrine, and after that I will explain the obligations they have for the worship of God, so that for these and other similar obligations they will follow the method explained in chapter 8 of the Catechism of Urbanity, and since in this arrangement the furnishings mentioned in the Regulations affixed to the door of the establishment in my care are not necessary and even less the prices, I will charge one fixed price of one peso a month for each student until they have learned or the school, because of circumstances of the times, is closed. On Sundays I will frequently attend the sacrifice of the Mass with the greatest respect. This system will begin from the 15th of this month of June.

Laredo, June 6, 1846    Quirino González

Things did not change a great deal under the American system. The *Texas Almanac*, in describing Laredo in 1853, notes that there was "a great reluctance with regard to schools."<sup>56</sup> That may have been the case, but education was not totally abandoned. An archival document from 1864 notes that a "school of elementary instruction" was opened in October of that year with Jesús Prado as the teacher. He was still there in December of 1866.<sup>57</sup>

One other cultural aspect deserves brief mention. Both the Spanish and Mexican governments were extremely solicitous about the printed media. In the last half of the eighteenth century and the first decades of the nineteenth, there were numerous decrees about books and periodical publications, mostly forbidding or condemning them. This was particularly true during the time of the revolutionary movements. In Mexico, the *Ilustrador Nacional* was outlawed in 1812. In the diocese of Monterrey, of which Laredo was a part, the bishop in

1824 published a list of “forbidden” books which were considered immoral or harmful to the faith. How much this would have affected the population in Laredo is hard to say. Certainly there were enough people who could read for whom the decree would be applicable. On the other hand, there was an encouragement to learn to read from the state government itself which, immediately after independence, required all of the municipalities to subscribe to the *Gazette* which was the official organ of communication of the state or department. This order was repeated in 1834 when all town councils were told to purchase the publication *Atalaya*.<sup>58</sup> Copies of the *Gazette* are in the archives, proving that Laredo complied with the decree. The *Atalaya* was either never ordered, or never got filed away. This is true, also, of the publication *Honor Nacional* which carried current decrees and news and which the subprefect in Mier sent to Laredo on various occasions.<sup>59</sup>

#### ENDNOTES

1. The noted anthropologist Mircea Eliade has written extensively on this. See especially *The Sacred and the Profane: The Meaning of Religion* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1959).

2. AGN, Provincias Internas, Vol. 179, pp. 302–3.

3. F 32, D 7.

4. F 10, D 8; F 11, D 8.

5. F 18, D 3.

6. AGN, Provincias Internas, Vol. 110, p. 72. Vásquez means, of course, his “parish” in Dolores.

7. F 8, D 1.

8. The pastor from 1767 to 1773 was Fr. Nicolás Gutiérrez de Mendoza. His successors were Fr. Leonardo Sánchez Navarro (1773–1782) and José Alejandro Lozano (1782–1789). Robert E. Wright, O.M.I., *The Parish of San Agustín, Laredo, 1760–1857*, quoted in Angel Sepulveda Brown and Gloria Villa Cadena, *San Agustín Parish of Laredo, Marriage Book I, 1790–1857* (Saltillo: Graficas Canepa, 1989), 4, 6.

9. F 12, D 7, dated March 10, 1771.

10. F 15, D 1.

11. F 35, D 5. Wright, *Parish of San Agustín*, 10, 37, states that Bishop Marín de Porras did visit in 1805 and signed the church registers.

12. F 33, D 1. Some archaeological work was done by James E. Warren, who discovered some of the remains of this church. His work is detailed in two reports titled *Archaeological Investigation at San Agustín Catholic Church in Laredo, Texas*. The first report is dated May 1991 and is eighty-six pages long. The second is dated July 2000 and contains 140 pages.

13. Wright, *Parish of San Agustín*, 8.

14. Archives of the Archdiocese of Monterrey, Libro de Gobernación II, p. 39.

15. F 40, D 1.

16. F 59, D 5.

17. F 71, D 57.

18. Stan Green, *A History of San Agustín Church of Laredo* (Laredo: Border Studies Center, 1991), 9.

19. F 6, D 3; F 10, D 1.

20. F 58a, D 2; F 60, D 51; F 73, D 9.

21. This document was copied by Fr. Florencio Andrés in 1936. The original is not in the Laredo Archives.

22. F 64, D 8.

23. F 95, D 79.

24. F 110, D 1; F 179, D 35.

25. F 173, D 31; F 174, D 31.

26. Wright, *Parish of San Agustín*, 17, 20, 42.

27. F 20, D 1. Ed.—This is a remarkable statement. The dogma of the Immaculate Conception was not proclaimed until 1854. This is seventy-four years earlier.

28. F 86, D 23.

29. F 58b, D 5; F 157, D 8; F 170, D 15.

30. F 98, D 117, 127.

31. F 98, D 103; F 102, D 24.

32. In order of the events mentioned the references are: F 45, D 17; F 52, D 3; F 67, D 8; F 68b, D 8, 9.

33. F 74, D 18; F 128, D 6; F 174, D 55.

34. F 70, D 118; F 73, D 33.

35. F 75, D 18-117.

36. Epistle to the Romans, 10:17.
37. F 27, D 3.
38. F 29, D 1.
39. F 51, D 21.
40. F 63, D 1.
41. F 66, D 2.
42. The reports are found in F 68, D 16; F 69, D 1; F 77, D 12 (nine months); F 78, D 23.
43. F 77, D 12.
44. F 75, D 17–23. Ed.—The italics are mine.
45. F 77, D 53; F 70, D 4; F 73, D 11.
46. F 78, D 43, 44.
47. F 83, D 1; F 86, D 79.
48. F 79, D 1, 11, 18, 26, 38, 44; F 83, D 1.
49. F 88, D 43b.
50. F 93, D 1; F 98, D 28.
51. F 112, D 1, 2.
52. F 137, D 14. See also *La Ancla*, Vol. 1, no. 4, pp. 14–15. These same ideas appear again in 1845. F 174, D 21.
53. F 136, D 1.
54. F 145, D 27.
55. F 181, D 4.
56. Quoted in J. B. Wilkinson, *Laredo and the Rio Grande Frontier* (Austin: Jenkins Pub., 1975), 244.
57. F 209, D 3; F 210, D 2.
58. Decrees on forbidden books are found in F 10, D 5; F 61, D 7; F 68b, D 20; F 74, D 18. The *Ilustrador Nacional* is forbidden in F 56, D 12. Orders to subscribe to the two papers mentioned are in F 67, D 62 and F 103, D 20. *Atalaya* means watchtower but has nothing to do with the religious publication with that name.
59. F 149, D 21; F 150, D 3.

## 7. Making a Living

Wordsworth wrote, “Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers.”<sup>1</sup> Most people have no trouble with spending. Getting is another matter. According to the reports from city officials over the years, it would seem that the Laredoans had a hard time earning a living and “wealth” was not a word applicable to most of them. Like anywhere else in the world, there were the few who were well off and had even abundant possessions, and the majority who struggled in various ways to survive and provide for themselves and their families. This was true from the beginning of Laredo. Tomás Sánchez started his settlement owning more horses and mules than all of the other residents put together.<sup>2</sup> This wealth was eventually shared by his descendants who were the “nobles” of the town. In a sense, everyone started out equally when the distribution of land was made in 1767, receiving sections of the same size, except that Sánchez received a section on each side of the river.<sup>3</sup> The common pasture lands were also open to everyone. As time went on and the colony expanded, more land became available, but not simply for the taking. The Spanish Crown and later the national and state (provincial, departmental) governments were always concerned about land. There are numerous decrees about ownership, registry, and payment for lands. All land and especially land in abeyance was considered Crown or state

property. In the course of time, however, some sections were divided and others were sold or rented as a means of obtaining money. This could be done only with permission but it was generally not hard to obtain and the mayor had the right to authorize deeds of sale or other contracts.<sup>4</sup> There are more than one hundred documents in the archives recording these transactions.<sup>5</sup> They also include the sale of houses and even the rental of rooms as a source of income. After the U.S. takeover in 1848, the residents of Laredo sent recommendations to both their representative and senator in the state legislature asking for “a law which declares the General Visit legal, juridical, and of sufficient proof of property for these inhabitants. Last year an original and a copy was sent to the secretary of the county which shows the land assigned to the town for the persons and for common lands; the portions granted to the settlers and those that remained vacant for their children or additional persons in the future.”<sup>6</sup> The question of land ownership remained a prime concern for the citizens of Laredo. In 1855, the city council passed an ordinance granting a preferential right to those who had occupied lots “within the city limits since 1848 to contract with the city council the purchase of said lots.”<sup>7</sup>

Land ownership was extremely important as the basis for another source of making a living. For the early settlers, and many who came afterwards, raising animals was the only means of livelihood. Not only did animals provide meat for immediate consumption and export, but they were a source of hides, skins, wool, and tallow, and in the case of cows, dairy products. Horses, too, were very valuable for a number of reasons and official communications deal frequently with ownership of horses found, stolen, or strayed, or wanted by the military, mainly for pursuing the Indians. The roundup of wild horses was carefully controlled and as early as 1769 forbidden in Texas.<sup>8</sup> However livestock was going to be used, grazing lands were needed and the communal ones were never sufficient. It was forbidden to move cattle without permission, so those who wanted new or more land had to petition for it.<sup>9</sup> The following are typical of the many requests made:<sup>10</sup>

Dn. José Jesús de la Garza, Captain of the Militia of the town of Laredo in the government of Nuevo Santander . . . I come before you and say that besides being the son of one of the first and principle settlers and grandson of Captain Don Thomas Sánchez, being as I am a settler and for this reason with residence, I need some pasture land for my possessions, both cattle and sheep and horses, and since there are sections of land on this side of the river which have not been given to anyone since the portioning of lands in this town and where I made at my own cost a corral from which the Indians took my horses in the year '90, I respectfully request because of what I have said and because the said land is for the residents of this town that you grant me in the name of His Majesty part of what belongs to this town as you see fit, indicating the boundaries from where the Santa Isabel creek enters the Rio Grande to where the place called Jáquima ends. . . . Laredo, January 22, 1797

José Jesús de la Garza

The Lieutenant Dn. José González will look in the Acts of the Visit for the section that Capt. Dn. José de Jesús Garza [same person as José Jesús de la Garza above] asks for and if it is vacant will give him formal possession with the proper title.

El Conde de la Sierra Gorda

To the Constitutional Mayor—

Citizen José Felipe Camacho of this town . . . says that finding some sections of land along the river marked out by the general visit now unoccupied and that the place called Chares de los Cristales is among them, and not having any pasture land of my own for my animals, he claims in proper form that from that land you grant him two pasture lands, one by the creek above and another down below with the necessary formalities of the law of colonization. Laredo, June 10, 1830

In spite of the Indian raids, which were mainly for horses, and the constant complaints about the lack of protection and support, the raising of livestock never ceased to be the most important occupation of Laredoans. A list of those with a right to vote from Section 1 of the city made in December 1845 and giving their occupations showed seventy-three out of a total of 211 dedicated to raising animals, or approximately one-third.<sup>11</sup> This also provided a living for those who took care of the animals. The census of 1831 lists fifty ranch hands.<sup>12</sup>

Land ownership was important also for agriculture. Although from the beginning it was recognized that because of climate and irrigation difficulties the land was not conducive to raising crops, some Laredoans did attempt to make a living this way. Agustín López who visited Laredo three years after its foundation said that it was the first year in which the settlers had attempted to sow corn.<sup>13</sup> Almost forty years later four citizens asked for official ownership of land they had been using for agricultural purposes.<sup>14</sup>

Colonel and Commander General, Conde de la Sierra Gorda,  
Dn. Manuel Ignacio de Escandón:

Blas María Díaz, resident of this town of Laredo in his own name and that of three residents in it with the greatest respect says . . . that from the Santa Isabel creek to the place called Las Islitas they have cleared three nice fields for cultivating where they have grown useful products for the maintenance and benefit of this place, and for this reason may you have the goodness to give them possession, either in common or individually, so that with greater dedication they can plow them and cultivate them . . . in view of the long possession they have had. . . .

Laredo, January 24, 1797

Blas María Díaz

In 1828 the mayor wrote that crops of corn, beans, and seasonal fruits were sown twice a year, but all the reports from other years list only corn.<sup>15</sup> As late as 1845, a group of residents drew up a contract



with the mayor as witness setting down conditions for the use of their contiguous lands.<sup>16</sup> Here are some of them:

no one may do or begin his sowing at the proper time without having repaired or fenced again if necessary the part of the enclosed area which he claims or which has been assigned to him. . . .

During the time of the crops, from the sowing to harvest, it is the responsibility of the owners to watch out for any damage caused by their renters or passers-by. . . .

During the time of crops and until the plants begin to die, no one may bring onto the tilled land a horse, mule, oxen or any other kind of harmful animal unless they will be tied up. . . .

For the period of time between the harvesting of corn and the 1st of February, the time in which it is the custom to go to the fields to prepare them and sow them, the cost which corresponds to the time each one has to take care of the ranch and the other things mentioned in the previous article will be distributed proportionately among the interested parties.

From the first of February the oxen, beasts, and other animals needed to do the work may be freely brought in, but no more than are necessary for the work. . . .

The document is obvious proof that agriculture had not been abandoned and is signed by some of Laredo's more prominent citizens: Bartolomé García (for his father-in-law Don Lázaro Benavides, Doña Benita, and himself), Basilio Benavides, José María Ramón, Gregorio García, and José María García.

As with the animal caretakers, those who worked and cared for the fields and did the harvesting earned a living this way. The records do not specify these people, but they are most likely included in the statistics for laborers who may have done a variety of things. A distinction was made for this group between those who were employed regularly,

and those who worked on a day-to-day basis. The latter group was always the larger of the two. Statistics for 1829, for instance, show 37 laborers and 162 day laborers.<sup>17</sup> Those who looked for work each day could well have been employed seasonally in the fields. These were men who never did have a permanent job and who for the most part were not skilled in some specific trade. Their numbers were certainly not disproportionate to the total male population. The other side of the coin is that they were probably the ones who most often went hungry. There simply was not all that much to do.

Professional people were relatively few. How health problems were handled is uncertain. If the statistics can be trusted, there were no doctors in Laredo before the American occupation, nor was there a hospital. Documents from 1824 and 1825 show a concern for getting people vaccinated due to a smallpox epidemic. Laredoans were advised to form a committee to raise funds to get the necessary vaccine and visit the sick.<sup>18</sup> Who administered this vaccine is uncertain. Fifteen years later the town council was advised to send someone to Matamoros to learn how to vaccinate.<sup>19</sup> A municipal ordinance published in 1850 begins, "Health is the first object that any political body should be concerned about and should protect by measures of cleanliness," and several directives on general sanitation are given, including the ordinances already mentioned on loose animals in the streets.<sup>20</sup> All of this is meant to be preventive, but curative measures are lacking. During the difficult times of the 1840s the subprefect in Mier sent out a notice that all *curanderos* should be considered idlers and conscripted for military service.<sup>21</sup> The only indications that there may have been such persons in Laredo come from complaints lodged against them. The first was by Urbano de la Garza against Juan Andrés, whom he had asked to cure his wife and who assured him that she would be well in nine days, taking ten pesos in advance payment. The accused "totally failed to keep his word" and was ordered to give back the ten pesos. In the second case, Andrés Loa claimed twenty pesos, which Urbano Mendoza refused to pay him for curing him of

a fever.<sup>22</sup> Both Juan and Andrés were obviously trying to make a living as doctors of some sort.

Laredo did have its lawyers. There are a number of documents giving power of attorney to someone. The two names which appear most frequently are those of José María González and Basilio Benavides. González particularly was constantly called on and consulted in legal matters and his name appears frequently in the verbal arbitrations that took place. This somewhat superior status explains why he was so often considered a candidate for various offices. Benavides, likewise, was repeatedly recognized as an influential citizen. Both of these men chose to remain in Laredo after the American occupation and were instrumental in smoothing over the transition period.

The previous chapter noted that there were at least five successive teachers in Laredo who had to depend on the good will of the citizens to make a living. How well they were prepared professionally is hard to say, but they were at least well enough prepared to have the backing of the parish priest (who was concerned mainly about the teaching of religion) and the town council. The same decree that ordered military conscription for *curanderos* also included teachers who did not have titles, so some effort was being made to prepare them.

Along with teachers, the public scribes could be considered professional men. They made a living as secretaries to the town council or witnesses to official documents, much like today's notary publics. Often people would ask them to write documents, especially wills or legal contracts or even personal letters. By law every town was supposed to have an official scribe, but very many of the Laredo documents end with the phrase "for lack of a scribe which the law requires"—a not-too-subtle reminder that the authorities were being a bit remiss in this matter. The man whose name most frequently appears as secretary and witness to documents, and for a rather long time, is Tomás Flores.

The priest would also be considered a professional person. These men were well prepared and usually had the title of *Bachiller* which was equivalent to more than our Bachelor. In colonial times secular

priests, that is those who were not members of religious orders, were often supported by the Crown, which endowed certain churches or parishes. Assignment to such a parish was assurance of an income. In the case of Laredo the diocese of Guadalajara gave a stipend to the priest which was increased by donations from the faithful. When the diocese of Linares (Monterrey) was created it assumed the same responsibility. After independence, the Mexican government continued the practice, but the parish priest had to send in a report periodically to prove that he deserved this financial support. Laredo was fortunate to have a priest during most of its first one hundred years.

In Chapter 4 it was noted that there were two kinds of military groups: the local militia and the “professional” military men. The military were always something of a class apart but serving in either group was definitely a source of income for many men. In his report in 1819, the mayor noted that many men had joined the army since it offered some assurance of a steady salary. The report of 1828 likewise includes military service as one of the main occupations. A report from the military commander in Laredo in 1845 shows that there were 126 men living in the barracks.<sup>23</sup>

Over the years an ever-increasing number of Laredoans made a living through what might be considered the middle-class occupations: crafts and trades. A comparison of the statistics of 1819, the end of the colonial period, and 1845, just before incorporation into the United States, gives some indication of how the population grew and what its demands were.<sup>24</sup> Artisans increased from nine to fifty-five. What this included may have depended on the judgment of the person doing the tallying, but since there are some things which were listed specifically, the trades not mentioned could well be in this group. From various documents we know, for instance, that there were silversmiths and jewelers, probably only one or two. There were people who made *piloncillo* (cones of dark sugar) and other kinds of sweets, and certainly *tortillas*. On the other hand, some trades were considered important enough to list separately. Tailors increased from one to seven; shoemakers from

one to ten, and hat makers from none to five, but carpenters (three) and masons (one) remained steady. In the mayor's report in 1824, however, he includes these trades under the term artisans.

While the sale of tobacco, salt, and liquor remained state monopolies, as they had been under Spain, free enterprise was encouraged but was also carefully controlled.<sup>25</sup> There was a tax on grocery stores and the butchering and sale of meat had various restrictions.<sup>26</sup> Each year some would bid for the right to control the river transportation service.<sup>27</sup> Land transportation, too, was a way of making a living. Muleteers would accompany convoys of merchandise from one town to another, particularly to Béjar, and in the mid-1830s there were fifteen officially listed. That number had dropped to seven in 1845 but those were difficult times and transportation was curtailed by the imminent conflict with the United States.

Servants form another group mentioned frequently in the documents and found especially in the later censuses. A list made in 1844 of 374 males over sixteen with their occupations indicates "servant" for seventy-five of them. The census of the following year gives forty-three men and thirteen women but this is from three sections of Laredo. Though slavery had been outlawed in the early years of independence, it was legal to buy and sell servants. Owners even had the right to punish them, but not by whipping.<sup>28</sup> Each servant and the owner kept an account book to keep track of how much had been given and what was still owed. There are several verbal arbitrations over the settling of accounts because of disagreements over the figures. Generally it was the servants who owed money that they had borrowed or asked for in advance and hadn't worked off yet. Chapter 5 cites an example of a servant who was trying to pay off a debt and switch masters at the same time. Even in their condition of servitude, however, servants were not without redress, as the following shows.<sup>29</sup>

María Antonia Martínez, with her owner Andrés Martínez present, said that her mistress had beat her excessively and she

considered it unjust that she be punished with such vehemence and violence because she earned her salary and justice demanded that she be paid for the punishment her mistress had given her, or whatever the court would determine. Andrés said that he was not present on the day this happened but was on the ranch, but his wife had told him that the servant had struck her because she was very impudent and would not keep quiet so it had been necessary to do the same thing to her since she lacked respect by grabbing her mistress' hands when she was being reproached. When the judge heard both sides he asked the plaintiff to prove her statement, and the defendant to do the same regarding what his wife had told him. Neither one could prove what they said because no one but the family was present at the time. Since neither could prove anything the judge urged them to come to terms, which they did, and backed by the law he fined D. Andrés Martínez ten pesos.

Servants were frequently sent on errands, and those who tried to run away were searched for and returned to their masters. In the long run they were probably better off than many others since they usually received room and board along with their salaries.

The selling of personal possessions was another way to obtain ready cash. The only thing prohibited by law was the sale of weapons.<sup>30</sup> The verbal arbitrations record disputes over the value or lack of payment for things bought or sold, but more frequently accusations of things stolen and sold. The master mason was accused three times in one week of having stolen objects and all of the accusations proved to be true. Agustín Garza had to admit he had stolen a mule from the brother of Manuel Porras and sold it in Camargo; Juana Díaz stole a gold coin and pawned it to Petra González; Fr. Trinidad García's servant stole a supply of soap and sold it to various individuals.<sup>31</sup> None of this could really be called earning a living but it is proof enough that like everywhere else there were Laredoans who

would do whatever they could to get the money they thought they needed.

A more direct and honest way is outright borrowing. The amount of this that went on in Laredo appears today to be absolutely astonishing, and equally surprising is the fact that so much of this was done with persons outside of Laredo, even at fairly great distances. A perusal of the various last wills and testaments shows that almost without exception there are long enumerations of "I owe" and "owes me." The will of José Domingo González made in June 1819 not only reveals many names of contemporary persons but also shows how much wealth went back and forth.<sup>32</sup>

I state that D. José Jesús Sánchez of this town owes me for 610 sheep, 100 goats and 400 lambs which I leased to him in December of 1813 to pay me the customary income except for the lambs less than a year old. In payment for these he gave me in 1817 185 sheep against the principal and 181 lambs as income. I order this to be collected.

I state that the same D. Jesús Sánchez owes me 97 pesos, 4 reales as the remainder of 170 pesos, 2 reales which I gave him of which he returned 72 pesos, 6 reales. I order the rest be collected.

I state that Alexandro Sánchez, son of the said D. Jesús, owes me 42 pesos which I gave him in Saltillo. I order that it be collected.

I state that Vicente Buentello owes me 150 pesos for the cost of cattle which I leased to him and he lost and which he must pay for according to his note. I order it be collected.

I state that D. Valentín Villarreal, resident of Vallecillo and presently in Salinas, owes me 100 pesos income from a larger amount that he was paying for cattle which I leased to him and he lost. This income should be collected.

I state that Juan Esteban de los Santos, resident of the town

of Tlaxcala, owes me 50 pesos for 100 sheep that I leased to him. I order that what he owes be collected.

I state that José María González, native of Palafox and resident here owes me 88 pesos for leased cattle. I order it be collected.

I state that D. Gregorio Vela, resident in Mier, owes me 80 pesos which he agreed to pay for mules for the young man Julián de la Cruz. I order it be collected.

I state that the soldier of the 3rd Company of Nuevo Santander, D. Francisco Fernández, owes me 100 pesos which I paid for him to Da. Brigida Sánchez in the store of D. Francisco de la Garza, of which amount I have received 7 pesos which Lt. D. José Antonio Benavides gave me. I order the rest be collected.

Pedro González, who was a resident of Palafox, owes me a saddle horse and I order that ten pesos be collected or he return the horse.

I state that the same Juan Esteban de los Santos, resident of Tlaxcala, in addition to the 50 pesos already mentioned owes me 20 pesos interest. I order it collected.

The patrol sergeant Vicente de Rivero owes me 4 pesos for scissors which I gave him to sharpen, 4 ounces of steel and 3 pesos given for his work. I order this be collected.

The soldier of the 3rd [Company] Manuel Peña owes me 6 pesos. Collect it.

I state that the estate of the deceased D. José Antonio Ramírez owes me 9 pesos which I order collected.

The deceased Francisco Flores owes me 10 pesos which I gave him for stone. It should be collected from his heirs.

Marcelo Vargas owes me 10 pesos, 8 reales. I order it collected.

I state that I owe D. José Lázaro Benavides 490 pesos which I order paid.



I state that I owe D. José Antonio García, resident in Mier, 95 pesos which I order paid.

I state that I owe D. Matías García, resident in Pesquería Grande, 30 pesos, 6 reales.

I state that I owe D. José Antonio Arispe, resident in Pesquería Grande, for three loads of corn. I order it paid.

I state that I owe D. Guadalupe Arambura 6 pesos. I order it paid.

I state that I owe D. Jesucito Treviño, resident of Vallecillo, 3 pesos. I order it paid.

A quick review of the statements in the will shows that González had borrowed 624 pesos from various individuals which he still owed. Fourteen individuals owed him a total of 762 pesos, leaving 138 pesos in his favor. This converts to approximately \$207, a fairly large sum at the time considering its purchasing power. A house could be rented for a year for fifteen pesos.<sup>33</sup> Perhaps more interesting is the fact that he claims over 1,200 animals. He was obviously among those who would have been considered well off, yet he apparently had to do a lot of borrowing to maintain a cash flow and make a living, and this was true of many other individuals.

Whether or not a person died having made a will, all of the individual's possessions had to be evaluated by appointed appraisers before they were distributed to the heirs. One of the main reasons for this was that persons who had claims against the deceased were almost always paid in goods valued to the amount of the claim rather than in cash. The inventories included everything from a fine horse to chipped dishes or nearly worn-out clothes. Like the wills, they offer insights into the tremendous amount of borrowing and lending that went on among the citizens of Laredo. José Trinidad Benavides had only one debtor when he died but owed money to thirty-four people. Only a few got the total amount that they claimed.<sup>34</sup> All of these transactions were part of the ways in which people managed to have money on

hand. For some it was for the period between sowing and reaping; for others, until animals could be sold or slaughtered; and for still others it was part of the hand-to-mouth existence which so many documents claim was the normal condition of daily life in Laredo.

### ENDNOTES

1. William Wordsworth, "The World Is Too Much with Us," line 2.
2. Statistics from the *Visita* of 1757.
3. See Appendix II.
4. F 21, D 5.
5. Many of these documents can be found in the Laredo Archives Series No. 3, *Documents for the History of Laredo*, 95–116.
6. F 183, D 5.
7. F 186, D 2.
8. F 10, D 18.
9. F 33, D 16.
10. F 41, D 2; F 87, D 13.
11. F 169, D 8. The Spanish term used is *criador*.
12. F 92, D 1. The term is *vaqueros*, which would mean cowboys, but young men or even children were employed to take care of other animals, such as sheep and goats.
13. AGN, Historia, Vol. 53, p. 162
14. This comes from a transcript made by Fr. Florencio Andrés. The original document is not in the archives.
15. F 83, D 18. See the full report in Section III. The reports are found in F 74, D 19 (1824); F 86, D 52 (1829); F 92, D 1 (1831); F 98, D 127 (1833); F 188, D 4 (1835); F 133, D 3 (1837).
16. F 168, D 10, no. 2.
17. F 86, D 52. In the report the day laborers are called *jornaleros*.
18. F 70, D 163; F 75, D 18–119.
19. F 142, D 9.
20. F 184, D 3.
21. F 150, D 3. For those who may not know, a *curandero* is a kind of pseudo-doctor who claims to be able to heal by the use of herbal medicines,

usually combined with some form of ritualistic prayer: the “medicine man” of Indian and later lore. One dictionary rather bluntly defines this person as “a quack, a charlatan.”

22. F 126, D 1, nos. 4 and 19.

23. The reports of the mayors are found in Section III. The barracks report of 1845 is in F 171, D 30.

24. The statistics are taken from F 64, D 22 and F 169, D 8.

25. F 65, D 38.

26. F 30, D 3 for grocery stores; F 58b, D 18, and F 68, D 2 are examples of butchering restrictions.

27. F 195, D 4.

28. The right to punish is in F 111, D 19; whipping is forbidden in F 65, D 37.

29. F 154, no. 46.

30. F 45, D 23.

31. F 132, nos. 2, 3, 4; F 126, nos. 2, 35; F 154, no. 21.

32. F 64, D 25.

33. See J. Villasana Haggard, *Handbook for Translators of Spanish Historical Documents* (Oklahoma City: Semco Color Press, 1941), 95ff, for an explanation of the conversion, and specifically pp. 106 for the peso value. The house rent comes from a list in F 58a, D 10.

34. F 102, D 14.

## 8. Communications

**T**he history of Laredo found in the archives exists first of all because there were continuous efforts to preserve the documents, including those mentioned at the beginning of this book. Secondly, it exists because there was reasonably good communication between the various towns and particularly with the capital of the department or province, which transmitted its own official documents and those that came from Mexico City. The local officials filed away the various contracts, deeds, wills, and other legal documents and each mayor passed these on to his successor. The vast majority of the documents, however, and especially in the earlier years, came from the Crown, federal, or state officials who also disseminated the decrees of the legislatures. The fact that they are still extant says something about the way in which they got from one place to another. People went from place to place, too, which is another kind of communication.

The Laredoans themselves did not live in a totally isolated world though they consistently complained of being neglected and forgotten. No one, of course, could move about freely in colonial times without permission. Those who came from Spain had to have permission to leave the country and the passenger lists provide wonderful genealogical information. But even in the American colonies it was necessary

to have a passport to go from one place to another, and all travelers on arriving at their destination had to appear before the local magistrate and make their presence known. As with so many other things, there was a constant control of traffic. During the years of the revolution sparked by Hidalgo, contact with Louisiana was forbidden, especially from Texas, for fear of the insurgents finding support from there.<sup>1</sup> After independence, the Mexican government continued many of the same customs. In an effort to organize a new nation, all passports for travel were suspended and new transportation regulations were issued.<sup>2</sup> Still, there is evidence that people did move about somewhat frequently and there are documents in the archives giving permission to individuals to absent themselves for determined periods of time. In 1838 authorities were informed that they could give passports only within their own jurisdictions, and the following year no one was allowed to give a passport to Matamoros where a revolt against the government was brewing. In 1841 there were specific instructions that there was to be no travel to or stay in Laredo without a passport.<sup>3</sup>

In an age of jet planes, swift automobiles, and organized inter-city transportation, it is difficult to imagine what travel must have been like without these things. Mexico is a mountainous country and in the interior, east-west travel is especially difficult. For the Laredoans the Rio Grande provided easier access to towns downriver, but any journey south or to the capital, or even parallel to the river, required using the roads. The road from Laredo to Matamoros was eighty-three leagues long and twenty varas wide. The trip took seven days by carriage and sixteen with mules.<sup>4</sup> The importance and necessity of good communication was always uppermost in the minds of the Spanish authorities, who insisted on having at least one official road, the *camino real*, or royal road or highway. Documents from 1788, 1802, 1814, 1835, and 1841 all call for cleaning and repairing the roads.<sup>5</sup> Laredo apparently did its part since there is a communication stating compliance with the 1835 order.<sup>6</sup> In 1843 Laredoans were informed that they were expected to help with work on the roads beginning July 4.<sup>7</sup> This was

during the period when the Mexican army was trying to suppress the revolt in Texas and wanted to be able to move the men and equipment more easily.

Road travel was anything but safe. In addition to the ever-present Indian problem, the authorities advised caution against robbers and thieves on the roads, asked for any news of them, and ordered the mayors to pursue them, reminding the local authorities of their responsibility to see that travelers were not molested or their baggage taken.<sup>8</sup> The archives contain multiple requests from the mayor to the garrison commander in Laredo for a military escort to accompany caravans of merchandise to other towns, to go and collect salt or firewood at the Nueces River, or to bring food to Laredo.<sup>9</sup> Generally this meant releasing two or three soldiers who were well equipped with weapons, but the request wasn't always graciously granted. This was, in fact, something of a bone of contention between the mayor and the military commander. A response to the mayor from Captain Lafuente in 1838 contains several of the elements previously mentioned.<sup>10</sup>

Since the troops are destined to do services of greater preference, I can't provide the escort which you asked Sergeant Esteban Telles for in your communication of the 15th of this month. But since there is no news of enemies, the town itself can make a convoy to go to the salt flats and has the permission of this headquarters. Make a list of the number of mules to carry the salt, the armed personnel that will accompany them and the number of muleteers to be used. Put some reliable citizen in charge of arranging and leading the convoy who should be told that any unknown person he meets or who joins the convoy without a proper passport should be arrested and brought here to avoid the evils that perturb the towns, knowing that for any deception or omission in this regard he will be responsible to this headquarters.

Laredo, August 17, 1838 Manuel Lafuente

Even with the protection, the Indians frequently attempted raids on these convoys, both coming to and going from Laredo.<sup>11</sup>

I am informing Your Excellency that on the 2nd of this month a convoy of carts and mules left here to bring corn from the villages farther up for this town and for the garrison, accompanied by 14 men from it and twelve or fifteen residents. On the 3rd this convoy was attacked by a large number of Comanche and Tahuacano Indians at the ranch of Blas María, six leagues from this town. In the attack the Indians killed the pensioner Estéban de León and also wounded the chief arms bearer of the company, Manuel Valle and a soldier, Florencio Basques. But when two of the Indians were killed they withdrew, leaving a gun of one of the dead they couldn't take with them.

God, etc. Laredo, February. J. Garza J. Flores

Ironically, the military commander, particularly of the local militia, at times had to ask the mayor for animals, especially to go in pursuit of the Indians.<sup>12</sup> Just before the war with the United States, the military leaders were requisitioning animals and carts from Laredo for the transportation of food and supplies.<sup>13</sup> Trade with or travel to Texas was expressly forbidden.<sup>14</sup>

Along with food and merchandise, the roads were especially important for communication by mail. The earliest reference to some kind of a system comes from 1793 when a schedule was announced mainly for the interior of Mexico.<sup>15</sup> Regulations on postage and mail were issued in 1815 and 1816 and some of these affected the northern part of the country.<sup>16</sup> During both the colonial and independence periods, a postmaster was one of two government-paid persons found in almost every sizable town. The reorganization of transportation after independence included the mail and by 1824 postal regulations and exemptions to them had been announced, though in 1827 the administrator in San Carlos told the mayor of Laredo he didn't know of any

law about postal service.<sup>17</sup> In 1833 José María Ramón asked the mayor for a copy of the state law on communications.<sup>18</sup> There had, in fact, been more regulations about mail and at the same time orders were given that the mail carrier should make the trip with or without mail from a given place.<sup>19</sup> Official correspondence was declared free, but users of official mail had to sign their names under the seals.<sup>20</sup> Not surprisingly, the subprefect eventually had to complain that too many private letters were being sent as official mail.<sup>21</sup>

The service wasn't without its problems. In addition to the ever-present dangers from the Indians and the weather, political upheavals often interrupted the mail service. During the attempt to establish the Republic of the Rio Grande, communication was disrupted in the attempt to establish a new system for the northern towns. Only in April 1840 was mail service with the capital of the department reestablished.<sup>22</sup> This accounts in part for the absence in the archives of documents from this period. Beginning in 1841, Agustín Soto was the administrator of the mail in Laredo.<sup>23</sup> One of his major concerns was finding a way to pay the mail carrier. A decree of 1834 stated that the mail should be paid for from municipal funds, but as so often happens there never seemed to be enough in the budget to cover this cost. As a result, voluntary contributions were asked for and as late as 1849 there is a list of persons who paid for the mail being taken to Béjar.<sup>24</sup> In this case there was a great deal of self-interest, since the correspondence had to do with retaining ownership of land under a new government. Mail that was destined for places at some distance was delivered by a relay system and the official in Camargo told the mayor of Laredo that mail for Mier should be left at the San Ignacio ranch.<sup>25</sup> At the same time, Laredo itself was the relay point for all mail going to Béjar.<sup>26</sup> The mail was transported by horse, and this was sometimes a problem, especially if the army decided to requisition all of the horses available. There were no municipally owned horses and those used for mail service had to be borrowed from private citizens. A communication from the mayor of Guerrero to the mayor of Laredo illustrates this nicely.<sup>27</sup>



The dark tan horse which brought the ordinary mail was received by D. Ignacio Villarreal to whom it belongs. As for the sorrel horse which you also spoke of I am told that it should be given to his brother, D. Ramón Martínez who lives there. The mail will come back on a honey-colored horse with an upside down brand mark of the Ramón brothers of your town so please see that it is given to whom it belongs.

Sometimes soldiers were asked to carry the mail since they could better defend themselves. This was no guarantee that they would have their own horses. Often the town council was asked to find a way to supply the horses needed for the mail service done or used by the military.<sup>28</sup> What follows illustrates the fact that this did not always go smoothly.<sup>29</sup>

Since the squad of Captain D. José María Peña arrived yesterday, the horse that you offered me yesterday to take the mail to Rio Grande isn't necessary and it can be used for something else. Since you haven't as yet given me the certification that I asked for four days ago, I must make an official request about this, asking you to subpoena the resident Antonio García and take a statement under oath as to what day and what time he left here for Rio Grande taking mail which contained military service papers, where he returned from and why, and what day and time he arrived here, hoping you will send me this information by way of reply. I would also like you to clarify what day I asked you for the use of a horse for the mail to Rio Grande, and until what day you would not be able to give it, and why.

Since this has to do with the military barracks in my care, I am addressing you as an authority and not simply as a personal matter, hoping to receive a reply from you by this evening or tomorrow noon at the latest. God and Liberty. Monterrey Ranch, July 19, 1841. Manuel Lafuente

I certify: that Leonardo [*sic*] García, having left here with mail for Rio Grande, sent by Captain D. Manuel Lafuente with military papers for General Vásquez, the said García having appeared before me and taken an oath said that he left here for Rio Grande with the military papers on July 10, 1841, about three o'clock in the afternoon, but returned from Las Iglesias because the barbarian Indians came after him on the 11<sup>th</sup> of July, and on the 12<sup>th</sup> of the same month he arrived here around the time of Vespers. He stated this before me and the witnesses with me to which I swear since there is no public scribe as the law requires, and send for the desired purposes.

Laredo, July 21, 1841      José María Ramón, Mayor

The other facet of communication important to Laredo was the river. We noted in Chapter 1 that even in the early stages of its foundation some of the town's citizens, much to the displeasure of Tomás Sánchez, had opted to move to the other side of the river. Even when they were ordered back they tried to hold possession of land there, and this was confirmed by the distribution of land in 1767. At that time Palacio noted that there was a canoe service to cross the river and ordered that the proceeds from the transportation should be used to help build a church, exempting the Laredo citizens themselves from payment. Travelers had to pay two *reales* as passage and one *real* for each package of freight. From early documents it is not clear who operated this service, but in 1824 Lázaro Benavides was the owner.<sup>30</sup> Three years later the town had its own boat and the position of manager was auctioned off to the highest bidder. This was still the practice as late as 1859.<sup>31</sup> Already in 1846 there were customs houses on both sides of the river, but no records were kept until 1857.<sup>32</sup>

That the river was navigable by larger boats was amply proved by the arrival of the *Major Brown* in Laredo (as noted toward the end of Chapter 4). The fact that it was stranded for some time also proved that commercial navigation would be difficult because of the fluctuat-

ing nature of the river. Communication by smaller craft was possible and undoubtedly took place since in the course of time various individuals owned canoes and the town had a docking area set aside for them.

As with the horses, in times of necessity the military also commandeered all craft capable of crossing the river. In 1835, General Ramírez advised Laredo that he wanted all the boats available to take his troops across the river for the campaign against the Texas rebels, and again in 1840 the mayor of Laredo was informed that the government wanted the use of all river transport.<sup>33</sup> This was the time when the Conservatives were busy trying to crush a Federalist movement. Threats of attack from the Texas rebels led the military commander to write to the mayor:<sup>34</sup>

Please order that the canoes of D. Fernando Vidaurre at the low water crossing of the Indians and others which are upstream be brought to the dock tomorrow evening where they will be given a guard to comply with the orders in the decree of His Excellency the Commander General of August 10, 1838, and posterior orders I have received.

God and Liberty. Laredo, August 17, 1838 Manuel Lafuente.

Perhaps the real and most meaningful communication in Laredo is what went on among neighbors, in the plaza, in the school, and in the houses. On these aspects of life in Laredo the documents in the archives are silent.

## ENDNOTES

1. F 54, D 5.
2. F 67, D 25; F 68b, D 24.
3. F 137, D 30 (1838); F 140, D 31 (1839); F 144, D 62 (1841).
4. Statistics on the distances differ. A report from 1787 gives the distance from Matamoros to Laredo as seventy leagues. AGN, Historia, Vol. 43, p.

115. Perhaps it depended on the route taken, though most distances were calculated along the official roads.

5. F 32, D 3; F 45, D 14; F 58b, D 7; F 111, D 38; F 144, D 7.
6. F 111, D 74.
7. F 162, D 36.
8. F 67, D 17; F 129, D 72; F 174, D 21; F 53, D 13.
9. F 158, D 21; F 170, D 32; F 175, D 4 are examples of this. There is a specific request in 1844 for protection for a convoy to Salinas in F 166, D 37.
10. F 139, D 15. Another refusal is found in F 78, D 4.
11. F 121, D 1–6.
12. F 78, D 21; F 95, D 91 are examples.
13. F 171, D 45.
14. F 174, D 1.
15. F 37, D 3.
16. F 58b, D 16; F 60, D 52.
17. F 68, D 3; F 71, D 12; F 79, D 48.
18. F 98, D 61.
19. F 86, D 91, 93.
20. F 95, D 20a; F 142, D 20.
21. F 156, D 12.
22. F 141, D 2; F 142, D 15.
23. F 144, D 6.
24. F 128, D 21; F 183, D 3.
25. F 157, D 7.
26. F 119, D 50.
27. F 161, D 19.
28. F 128, D 18.
29. F 145, D 31.
30. Leonor Brown, "How the Early Colonists Crossed the Rio Grande River," unpublished paper, no date, p. 4.
31. F 159, D 4.
32. Brown, "How the Early," 4.
33. F 119, D 66; F 142, D 27.
34. F 139, D 16.



Sebron Wilcox, who preserved the Laredo Archives. Courtesy of St. Mary's University archives.



Escandón viewing his colonies. Courtesy of Webb County Heritage Foundation, Laredo

Part of a 1792 map of Nuevo Santander. Courtesy of Archivo General de la Nación, Mexico City



Hoyona, en Año . día . mes . y año = Feby 1792  
 Fr. Agustin de Sandoval y Obispo  
 San Agustín de Sandoval, y Obispo  
 16 de 1792  
 El P. Fr. Juan Bautista García, mi  
 misero asignado para la C. de S. Pedro, vive  
 en esta Villa de Sta. Santa Ana de Chihuahua  
 en Casa Capán, y de su Iglesia lo mismo, y  
 en ella hacen el Sacramento, y Confesionario  
 muy bueno. Aquí aunque es lo material no  
 hai Misión; por que ni se le ha dado paraage  
 competente para su fundación; ni hai rca.  
 de agua, por poca, para su beneficio; pero en  
 lo formal si la hay, y será en mi concepto la  
 mejor, por que conseq. de rca. de agua que se  
 anela, el passage of arroyo, mis facil bue  
 nas rca. de rca. de agua, y demás de eso tiene  
 el Padre, para establecerlo en su Misión  
 de Tamaulipan, con 12 Caballos, Chico y grande  
 120 Ovejas, 6 Caballos, un macho, y requiero  
 una manada de Vacas con 22, su Caballo, y  
 otros 12 Buecos Mulatos, y todo  
 tiene 7 Naciones de Indios tan Valucida, y su  
 gente, que aun los mis vacas, y molinos

Laredo mission report of Fr. García. See footnote 6, Chapter 1

en forma, para que nos le hagan guardar y cumplir  
 flos, como y fuere por sentencia definitiva, par-  
 rada en autoridad de cosa juzgada: asy se e-  
 rogamos, y firmamos, viendo Ferrigo, Don  
 Luis de Euse, y con Fr. Leonardo Triviño,  
 Vecinos de esta dicha Villa, con los de mi acir-  
 tencia, de que soy fee= Thomas Sanchez=  
 Thomas de Cuellar.= a ruego de don marcos  
 mendota= Joseph Miguel Diaz.= Ferrigo ve  
 lleres Mayor.= de asistencia= Nicolás de Na-  
 rra, y Galindo.= de asistencia= Joseph Miguel  
 Diaz.=  
 acuerda con su Original, q queda en el archivo de mi cargo,  
 de donde se sacó un veinte y dos de octubre de ochocientos, setenta  
 y dos, y se registra en tres fechos reales, y legalm<sup>te</sup> concertados, ya  
 el Real Caxaca, caxaca, y concertas fue con Ferrigo, y con sus men-  
 tales de asistencia, Ferrigo, Leonardo Sanchez, y Juan de Villa-  
 real, amos de lo de mi acir. con quienes se avia por recep-  
 to de la falta de recib. y en el presente fecho, y no fia del  
 caxaca, y se quite soy fee=  
 Tomás Sánchez  
 Nicolás de Narra  
 y Galindo  
 Ferrigo  
 Juan de Villa-  
 real  
 José Miguel Díaz

Signature of Tomás Sánchez.  
 Courtesy of the Laredo  
 Archives



Jacales—the first Laredo homes. Courtesy of Webb County Heritage  
 Foundation, Laredo



The original (on the left) and later churches of San Agustín. Courtesy of St. Mary's University archives



The José Reyes Ortiz house, lower section from 1830. Courtesy of Webb County Heritage Foundation, Laredo





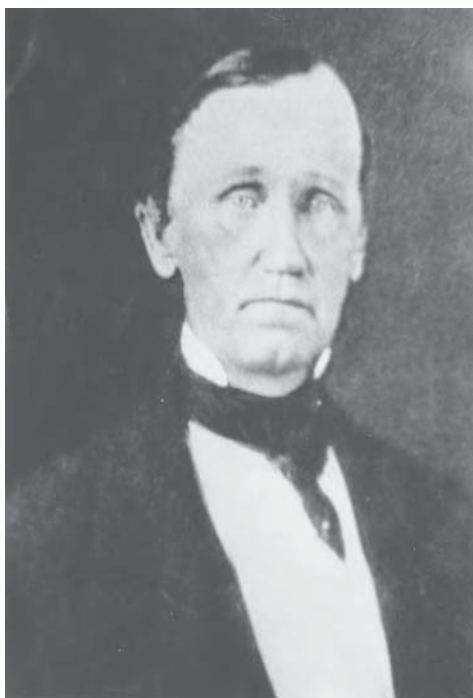
Early Laredo transportation. Courtesy of Webb County Heritage Foundation, Laredo



Flag of the Republic of the Rio Grande. Courtesy of Webb County Heritage Foundation, Laredo



Basilio Benavides. Courtesy of St. Mary's University archives



General James Webb, after whom the county is named. Courtesy of St. Mary's University archives



En la Villa de San Augustin de Laredo, en veinte, y dos  
 dias del mes de Octubre, de mil setecientos setenta y  
 dos años: Ante mi Don Thomas Sanchez de la Ba-  
 rera, Capitan reformado, y Justicia mayor de ella,  
 Ferrigor, con quienes antes se recepitoxia, y en  
 el presente papel comun a falta del cellado: parecio  
 el medio Cavildo de esta Villa, compuesto de Don

**III. Conditions in Laredo**

Thomas de Cuellar, Regidor de primer voto,  
 Don Marcos Mendiola de segundo voto, y el  
 Procurador General, Don Foxibio de Monte ma-  
 or, a quienes yo fee, conozco, y dipearon: que por  
 quanto en Cumplimiento de sus Obligaciones,  
 y representando en mi convocacio, voz, y caucion por  
 todos los Vecinos de que se compone esta precien-  
 cha Villa, respecto a vex este, el Ultimo año del  
 quinquenio, en que nos hallamos obligados,  
 a contribuir al Real derecho de Alcauala, con  
 la cantidad de doscientos y cincuenta pesos.

**A**t the end of four of the censuses the sender added some information on the current conditions in Laredo. These Notes provide additional insights into the daily life in Laredo at the time and complement much of what was said in the various chapters of this book.

## 1. 1789<sup>1</sup>

**N**ote: This town has a recently built church and sacristy of stone and a minister, the priest and vicar Bachelor Don Juan Josef de la Garza who has no income except from the alms given by the residents and the aforementioned Indians. This town has 48 residents with weapons, that is guns and some leather shields, 4 stone houses and 2 of adobe, 19 thatched huts (*jacales*) enclosed with stone walls, 18 enclosed with adobe, 5 with cut branches and 37 with plants, making a total of 85 dwellings, not counting those in which the soldiers live.

## 2. 1819<sup>2</sup>

**N**ote: Of the forty-four ranches mentioned, thirty-seven of them are deserted because of the devastating war that the barbarian nations to the north wage on us, and the seven remaining have people only at great cost and risk at the times of sowing, cleaning, and harvesting, which are unpredictable since the fields are on the banks of the Rio Grande whose unforeseen and excessive floods can ruin them, and this is one of the main occupations of most of the inhabitants who live here, even though before the revolution in the Kingdom and the barbarian Indians began their hostilities which they carry out so frequently, they were employed in taking care of their animals of all kinds. Since these have been exterminated many have no other means of livelihood than to join the troops which guard this place since their presence here brings some money. While the corral for horses has 150 tame harness mules which are not organized since they belong to many owners, they are useful for bringing seeds from the Province of Coahuila, which is done in convoys guarded by the troops and to which the inhabitants here owe their subsistence; nevertheless the hunger the troops and people have experienced has been severe, obliging me to call this to the attention of the Governor of this Province in a communication of January 21<sup>st</sup> of this year in the hopes that he will find means to remedy

such misfortune as we who live on this frontier are experiencing. The same barracks stable has thirty tame horses and scattered in the fields a large number of wild ones, and 160 mares not gathered into organized groups because there is no way to take care of them. Also, there are a lot of cattle which can't be numbered because they are widely dispersed and have gone wild. Among the residents who have herds of some size there are 1,000 sheep and goats which they have had difficulty keeping because some shepherds kill them and there are excessive expenses. They are sustained by the hope that if the barbarian nations will make peace these animals will be able to increase as happened in peaceful times when all of the residents here experienced extraordinary progress until the declaration of war with the barbarian Indians. Town of Laredo, April 30, 1819. Yldefonso Ramón.



### 3. 1824<sup>3</sup>

Notes: The type of business in which these residents are engaged is from products of the earth since their capital, which is no more than 400 to 600 pesos, does not permit them to do any more than sell wine, *piloncillo*, soap, and other such things, and this does not bring in more income than is barely necessary to subsist modestly with their families. Those who deal in clothing are foreigners. This town has only the sowing of corn which is a risk because of the lack of water for irrigation and they harvest seasonally along the banks of this river, but this is very erratic because sometimes it's too dry, and at other times the rising river sweeps it away, so every year they have to go to Coahuila and Nuevo León for maize for their subsistence. Even when the year is favorable the most they can harvest is 1,500 *fanegas* of corn.<sup>4</sup>

The manufacturing industry and trades have fourteen artisans: 2 masons, two carpenters, two ironsmiths, two butchers, two tailors and four shoemakers who live in the worst misery and are reduced to looking for other work to take care of their needs. There are 150 cargo mules distributed among 21 owners for bringing corn and flour here from the Province of Coahuila and making one or the other trip to the salt flats to exchange seeds. A conservative estimate of the cattle that exists in this jurisdiction would be about 2,000 including 700 calf-

bearing cows, and for sheep and goats for wool and skins 700 heads all belonging to one individual. There are 150 wild mares, 55 offspring of all ages, 115 tame horses and 60 mares. There are no mines of any kind in this jurisdiction since none have been found up to now.

The rest of the inhabitants live from their work serving those who employ them in these tasks. All of the day laborers at determined times such as the sowing, trips as muleteers, roundups of cattle are paid for their work as well as during the times that there are roundups of wild horses.

The war that these inhabitants have suffered from the Indians for more than ten years has despoiled them of goods of all kinds which they had previously and in which all of their capital was invested, leaving them in the greatest indigence that only one who has experienced it at first hand could believe. The few goods that are recorded in the previous notes are from just the past year to this date and for that reason haven't increased.

Town of Laredo, October 3, 1824, 1<sup>st</sup> year of the installation of the Honorable Congress of this State. José Francisco de la Garza. [José María González, Florencio Villarreal and Guadalupe Arambura also signed.]

#### 4. 1828<sup>5</sup>

The town of San Agustín de Laredo belongs to the State of Tamaulipas in the Mexican federation. It was founded the 25<sup>th</sup> of August, 1755 and in the twelfth year of its existence it was given the land for six leagues around it from the center in all directions, recognizing at the same time as its jurisdictional limit the open territory of some 20 leagues: to the North, up to the Nueces river; to the south, along the banks of the Rio Grande to the 75 sections granted to the deceased Citizen José Vásquez Borrego who at the time had three thriving ranches which today are deserted because of the devastation of the War. It [Laredo] is located on the north bank of the Rio Grande, distant from the capital to the south by some 150 leagues, and from the closest town Ciudad Guerrero, also to the south, by some 20 leagues. Going southwest it is 30 leagues to the town of Vallecillo; to the west there are 35 leagues to Lampasos in the state of Nuevo León. To the northwest it is 40 leagues to the town of Guerrero in the state of Coahuila. Going north-northwest Béxar is 80 leagues away. The climate is hot and dry. The prevailing winds are from the north and east. The former begin regularly in the month of October and end in the month of March. When storms come during these months the river floods. Early sowing on the river flats begins in the month of February and crops

result with little moisture. From May on the rains come and the late sowing takes place. When the midsummer isn't too dry, crops result. The land around this town is especially good for raising all kinds of animals, but neither this nor the sowing of crops has been very extensive for lack of laborers, and particularly because of the constant hostility of the barbarians to the north. The only plants which are cultivated with great difficulty are corn, beans and seasonal fruits due to lack of irrigation water everywhere. Wood for making things has to be brought from the State of Coahuila more than 60 leagues away since there is nothing here but mesquite and willows along the banks of the river. Physically speaking the inhabitants are robust and healthy. The average height is five feet. Most of them are white-skinned. The ordinary diet is corn and meat. They are occupied in military service and as cowboys, muleteers, and field laborers. The infirmities are pleurisy and especially wounds from guns, lances, and arrows caused by the Comanches which happens because they are not pursued or fought against until they are exterminated. The dwellings are of adobe and mostly thatched huts. This town has two plazas, the main one and the military one, each one hundred *varas* square, not counting the streets.<sup>6</sup> There is a Mayor with two Aldermen, a Solicitor and an ecclesiastic who has the parish as a benefice. The wealth or subsistence of these inhabitants consists in a little income from being middlemen and muleteers for the convoys which bring victuals both for here and for Bexar, and some raising of animals of all kinds which still does not supply enough. The consumption of this town in regard to cattle is about 365 beeves, and of smaller animals, 1,000 head. We consume 700 g.s of flour and about 6,500 *fanegas* of corn.<sup>7</sup>

#### ENDNOTES

1. F 33, D 1-2.
2. F 64, D 22.
3. F 74, D 19.
4. Emilio Martínez Amador's *Standard Spanish Dictionary*, 1584, says a

*fanega* is 1.60 bushels. J. V. Haggard's *Handbook for Translators of Spanish Historical Documents*, 76, states that a *fanega* in Mexico is 2.57 bushels.

5. F 83, D 186. The writer is probably confusing the dates of foundation and of official approbation by the viceroy, which was in August of the following year. In the Visit of 1757, Sánchez clearly states that the foundation was in May. Other documentation further clarifies that it was May 15, specifically. AGN, Historia, Vol. 5A, 210b. "Esta pequeña población se formó en 15 de mayo de 1755."

6. A *vara* equals 2.78 feet.

7. The consumption of flour is not clear. The abbreviation g.s. should mean grams, but 700 grams of flour would be only twenty-five pounds. With 2,000 people in Laredo at this time, this would almost have to be per person, or at best per family, but all the other figures are totals for everyone.

## Appendix I

### Names of the original settlers of the town of Laredo<sup>1</sup>

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Tomás Sánchez and Catarina Uribe, nine children,<br>seven servants and one couple | 20 |
| Juan García Saldívar and Catarina de las Casas, two servants                      | 4  |
| Prudencio García and Josefa Sánchez, five children                                | 7  |
| Joseph Leonardo Treviño and Ana Marino, six children                              | 8  |
| Juan Francisco García and María Reyes, seven children                             | 9  |
| Juan Baptista Sánchez and Juana Díaz, ten children                                | 12 |
| Agustín Sánchez and Francisca Rodríguez, two children                             | 4  |
| Leonardo Sánchez, bachelor, one servant   | 2  |
| Joseph Flores, wife and three children  | 5  |
| Joseph Díaz, bachelor, and his mother   | 2  |
| Joseph Ramón and María Gertrudis, two children                                    | 4  |
| Leonardo García, bachelor   | 1  |
| Joseph Salinas and Isabel, one child  | 3  |
| Pedro Salinas, bachelor, with his mother and one sister                           | 3  |
| Juan Diego, bachelor  | 1  |
| 11 families, 4 bachelors  | 85 |

1. AGN, Historia, v. 56, No. 284–285 or 270–271. The use of Joseph instead of José was from the French influence fairly common in the latter half of the eighteenth century.

## Appendix II

Note: Names are not accented because the source of this list was Fr. Andrés, and his typewriter did not allow the typing of accents.

### Land grants (sections) allotted during the Visit of 1767<sup>1</sup>

| Grantee                  | North side of the river | South side |
|--------------------------|-------------------------|------------|
| Badillo, Gervasio        |                         | 33         |
| Bosquez, Juan Esteban    |                         | 39         |
| Bustamante, Jose Onesimo | 61                      |            |
| Campos, Nicolas Antonio  |                         | 28         |
| Cavazos, Joaquin         |                         | 15         |
| Chapa, Bartolo           | 80                      |            |
| Cordova, Francisco       | 73                      |            |
| Cuellar, Tomas Jr.       |                         | 25         |
| Diaz, Antonio            | 77                      |            |
| Diaz, Miguel             | 78                      |            |
| Flores, Antonio          |                         | 1          |
| Garcia, Cristobal        | 60                      |            |
| Garcia, Domingo          | 59                      |            |
| Garcia, Juan Bautista    | 63                      |            |
| Garcia, Juan Francisco   | 68                      |            |
| Garcia, Leonardo         | 64                      |            |
| Garcia, Manuel           | 83                      |            |
| Garcia, Miguel           | 56                      |            |
| Garcia, Pedro            |                         | 13         |

| <b>Grantee</b>             | <b>North side of the river</b> | <b>South side</b> |
|----------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------|
| Garcia, Jose Prudencio     | 58                             |                   |
| Garza, Cayetano de la      | 86                             |                   |
| Garza, Nicolas             |                                | 5                 |
| Gonzalez Hidalgo, Salvador |                                | 14                |
| Guajardo, Jose Antonio     | 57                             |                   |
| Guerra, Juan               |                                | 31                |
| Gutierrez, Joaquin         |                                | 29                |
| Lopez, Antonio             |                                | 27                |
| Martinez, Antonio          |                                | 41                |
| Martinez, Eugenio          | 71                             |                   |
| Martinez Sotomayor, Jose   |                                | 26                |
| Martinez, Manuel Albino    | 87                             |                   |
| Martinez, Miguel Damian    |                                | 4                 |
| Mendiola, Carlos           |                                | 37                |
| Mendiola, Juan             |                                | 38                |
| Mendiola, Marcos           |                                | 42                |
| Mendiola, Pedro            |                                | 43                |
| Morales, Martin            |                                | 40                |
| Nazario, Antonio           | 82                             |                   |
| Peña, Javier               |                                | 2                 |
| Peña, Jesus Jose           |                                | 3                 |
| Rodriguez, Eugenio         | 84                             |                   |
| Rodriguez, Toribio         | 67                             |                   |
| Salinas, Laureano          | 79                             |                   |
| Sanchez, Agustin           | 69                             |                   |
| Sanchez, Blas de Jesus     |                                | 16                |
| Sanchez, Eugenio           | 85                             |                   |
| Sanchez, Maria Gertrudis   | 70                             |                   |
| Sanchez, Maria de Jesus    | 65                             |                   |
| Sanchez, Leonardo          | 66                             |                   |
| Sanchez, Santiago          | 55                             |                   |
| Sanchez, Tadeo             | 81                             |                   |



| <b>Grantee</b>            | <b>North side of the river</b> | <b>South side</b> |
|---------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------|
| Sanchez, Tomas            | 54                             | 43                |
| Treviño, Antonio          | 75                             |                   |
| Treviño, Blas             |                                | 32                |
| Treviño, Jose Dionisio    | 76                             |                   |
| Treviño, Juan Diego       |                                | 36                |
| Uribe, Francisca          |                                | 34                |
| Uribe, Francisco Javier   |                                | 30                |
| Uribe, Tomas              | 88                             |                   |
| Villarreal, Juan Bautista | 72                             |                   |

1. This is a copy of a list made by Fr. Florencio Andrés in 1936, which was based on a copy of the original Visit, certified by the mayor of Laredo, Florencio Villarreal, in 1842. Sections whose numbers are not found on the list were not allotted at the time but reserved for newcomers and future uses.

## Index

Surnames that begin with “de” or “de la” are listed under the name that follows (e.g. de la Garza is found under Garza, de la) and these follow names without prefixes. The names found in Appendix I and II are not included in this Index unless they are found elsewhere in the text.

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