

CHAPTER I

THE NORTHEASTERN FRONTIER

Chapter I recounts the history of the founding of the Mexican state of Tamaulipas and examines the reasons for such late settlement and independent nature of the inhabitants of the Northeastern Frontier of what was originally called New Spain. In particular, this chapter explores the founding of the cities of Laredo when it was still part of Mexico, and Nuevo Laredo, as the Mexican side of the city on the Río Grande was named after the city was divided in 1846.

Two hundred years after Cortés conquered Central Mexico in 1519 a new generation of Spaniards, who were neither sponsored by the Spanish monarchy nor from any wealth, settled the borderlands of northern New Spain. They sought the same things that the early Spaniards had looked for, fame and fortune, yet these Spaniards were marginal and the chances of discovering any great wealth on the far Northern Frontier of New Spain were remote at best.

The northern part of New Spain was especially difficult to settle not only because of the geographical

drawbacks, but also because of of pressure on Indian populations. Just north of Querétaro on the central plateau of Mexico where the Spaniards were firmly established, was the territory of the semi-sedentary and hostile Indians known as the Chichimecs. Their territory came to be of particular interest to the Spanish when the presence of valuable minerals, especially silver and gold, was discovered. The result was that the Chichimecs were either subdued or pushed farther north so that the Spanish could more easily exploit the vast mineral wealth in the traditional Chichimec territory. The Indians were forced north and east into the provinces of the Northern Frontier.

From the northern plains of the United States, the Apaches were pushed south by a domino-effect thrust from the Comanches, who in turn were forced south and west by the English and French colonists. Therefore, aggressive European settlement in North America, ever moving west and south, and aggressive Spanish settlement radiating north was combining to drive the semi-sedentary Indians of New Spain north, and the semi-sedentary Indians of North America south. In other words, a confluence of Indians hostile to European control was occurring around the Rio Grande.

Mexico City and Madrid were aware of the dangers to the Spanish settlers of the frontier, but there was little

they could do. The frontier was far removed from the center of power. Presidios, which were walled forts occupied by Spanish soldiers, had been established along the borderlands by fiat of the Spanish crown for the purpose of protecting the local inhabitants. Yet there never seemed to be enough money, arms or soldiers to adequately supply the presidios or protect the settlers. Communication was difficult at best. It took weeks, often months to travel from the borderlands to Mexico City. Despite royal efforts from 1723 to improve conditions by reinforcing its presidios, the provinces continued to be plagued by the rigors of war, pestilence and hunger.¹

The Spanish invoked two conflicting Indian policies during this period. From 1772 to 1786 Viceroy Bernardo de Gálvez followed a plan of appeasement and cooptation towards the Indians. After 1788 Viceroy Manuel Antonio Flores reversed that rather successful policy, and proceeded to wage incessant war, even though several Indian tribes had already sued for peace, notably the Lipan Apaches and the northern Comanche Nations. He made no distinction between peaceful and hostile Indians. Flores urged a vigilant watch upon the "treacherous Chichimecs whose treason and bloody thievery had continued despite the

¹ Moorhead, Max L. The Apache Frontier. p. 67.

armistice".² He saw no reason for mercy and urged a policy of Indian extermination. Fortunately the policy of Flores was short lived.

De Gálvez' more humane policy advised officials to welcome Indian suits for peace and arranged subsidies for the Indians already at peace. The de Gálvez policy produced the result sought by Spain: the cessation of border hostilities and the ability of Spanish settlers to populate the area with only occasional hostility from the Indians. This quasi-peace lasted until Mexico began its fight for independence from Spain in 1810.³

The peace on the frontier envisioned by de Gálvez was good news for the settlers. The frontier presidios were not effective militarily against the Apaches and the Comanches. A few hundred soldiers distributed along a ragged line of presidios, made a strong show of force or retaliation against the Indians impossible. It took too long for the commander of a province to round up the necessary soldiers to counter-attack with any concentrated force. By the time the Spanish troops were organized, the Indians raiders were long gone.

Another reason for Spanish military ineffectiveness was low morale. Until 1772, Spanish soldiers were paid

² Ibid, p. 130.

³ Moorhead, , p. 30 - 31.

between 380 and 420 pesos per year, out of which the soldiers had to pay for their own military equipment, food and clothing. Since there was little hard currency on the frontier, the soldiers were basically paid in goods which were charged against their annual salary. More often than not, the soldiers took more goods than their salary could cover, and therefore were hopelessly in debt to the captain who was also the owner/manager of the supply stores for the presidio. This might easily have set the standard for debt peonage of the 19th century. Ironically, the soldier's debt made the captain wary of committing his troops to the field for fear that his soldier/debtors might be killed and their debt uncollectable.⁴ After 1772, adjustments were made by the government in Madrid and an accountant was placed in charge of the army stores, but this was no better, for at the same time, the salaries of the troops and the officers were reduced. Morale was even worse.

Although an armed military presence on the frontier was ineffective, Spain had two goals in the settlement of the Northern Provinces. They sought to erect a buffer against hostile Indians and to check the westward expansion of the French from Louisiana, the English from the Atlantic colonies and the southward probe of the Russians from California.

⁴ Moorhead, p. 31.

A major portion of the 18th century was spent in conflict between France, Spain and England over the question of which country should control the land and potentially rich commerce of the western portion of North America. The French and English sent traders into Spanish territory. Spain retaliated by sending priests, accompanied by a small group of soldiers into these remote borderlands to chase off the traders. They also attempted to convert and pacify the indigenous Indians and to establish presidios, with a small Spanish civilian population, in the border areas in order to confirm their territorial dominance.

Spanish settlement proceeded from the center in Mexico City and radiated in all directions away from the center. The farther from the center, the more marginal was the population; they did not have the sophisticated occupations that were a prerequisite for residence in Mexico City. Older provinces in the settlement pattern were the jumping-off points for the settlement of new ones.

In the province of Nuevo Vizcaya, which extended from what is now the Mexican state of Durango, north to what is now the present state of New Mexico in the United States, settlers slowly moved north settling the territory of Chihuahua. They moved north again, to Tejas (Texas), as it was called in New Spain, and then northeast to Coahuila and

lastly to Nuevo Santander, which is today the Mexican state of Tamaulipas.

Initially, moves to Nuevo Santander were made in order to obtain more and cheaper land for livestock grazing. In the settlement of most other provinces, the Spanish crown offered rewards, privileges or financial support to tempt colonists to move from their established homes into uncivilized frontier provinces.⁵ The offers for settlement of Nuevo Santander were modest by comparison, offering only free land and infertile land at that.

The man chosen by the crown to settle the province of Nuevo Santander was Don José de Escandón, a native of Spain and late of Querétaro.⁶ In 1746 he was granted permission to settle the area between the Río Panuco and the Río Nueces which was the original border between Nuevo Santander and the province of Tejas. (See Map I)

Escandón, accompanied by soldiers, explored the area looking for suitable sites with enough water to support a small population. By 1748 he had assembled a sizable group of 755 soldiers and 2,515 colonists from Querétaro to settle Nuevo Santander. In less than seven years with more people drawn from the settled areas of Nuevo Leon and

⁵ Jones, Oakah L. Los Paisanos. P. 245.

⁶ Wilcox, p. 85. Southwest Historical Quarterly. Vol. XLII, Oct. 1938.

Coahuila, Escandón established twenty three civil settlements, (1748-1755). These 23 communities contained a total of 1,337 families, or 6,385 persons and 144 soldiers. There were also 15 missions within the province. Within seven years Nuevo Santander had a larger population than Tejas was to have for the next one hundred years. Historians attribute the successful settlement of the province to Escandón's intelligent leadership and careful planning. The costs of the settlement were borne equally between the Spanish crown and Escandón personally.⁷

One of the last towns to be established in Nuevo Santander under the aegis of Escandón was called Laredo. The town was actually planned and settled by Don Tomás Sánchez with the permission of Escandón in 1755. It was located on the eastern bank of the Río Grande, where the banks of the river were high and not far from the Paso Jacinto where there was a natural crossing.⁸ The settlement was formally named San Agustín de Laredo, supposedly named after a town of the same name in the Spanish province of Santander on the Bay of Biscay.⁹ Other chroniclers suggest that Escandón chose the name at random.

⁷ Bolton, H. E. Southwest Historical Quarterly. Vol. VI, July, 1902. P. 189.

⁸ Wilcox, p. 86.

⁹ Wilcox, p. 88.

In 1757 Laredo listed 85 inhabitants. The census of 1789 recorded 700 persons and a count of defensive weapons for use against the hostile Indians. The town was settled on both the east and west banks of the Rio Grande and livestock raising was their major occupation since water supplies were too erratic for farming. Presidios and missions played no part in the establishment of Laredo. Rancheros occupied this land in advance of the government or the Church.¹⁰

The advantage of Laredo was its proximity to the Paso Jacinto the natural and easiest crossing point of the Rio Grande for travelers going to either Tejas, Coahuila or Nuevo Leon. The townspeople were assured of trade and food by its geography.

Laredo, in comparison with the other towns founded by Escandón during the same period, was the slowest in growth. Even the town of Mier, founded only two years earlier than Laredo had increased considerably in both population and livestock. Although Laredo was not as fast growing as the other towns, it did not suffer the same fate as that of its sister town Dolores, which simply disappeared.¹¹ Laredo's one advantage was its location.

¹⁰ Wilcox, p.89.

¹¹ Bolton, p. 194.

Thirty years later, Laredo still had a population of 700, a settlement of 110 Carrizo Indians and a troop of soldiers to protect the town from raids by the Comanche and Apache.¹² The town ignored most directives from Spain and Mexico City, for example those orders which directed them to live within the town and to keep their livestock outside the city limits. It was human nature to want to be close to ones' livelihood. Spain could do little to make Loredoans obey the directives. The seat of government was too distant.

During the war of independence from Spain, the Northern Provinces were ignored because the struggle took place in the center of Mexico. Nuevo Santander in general and Laredo in particular carried on as best they could, ignored and ignoring the political controversy and official directives sent from Mexico City and Spain. The 1819 census noted that 37 of the 50 nearby ranchos had been abandoned because of Indian raids.¹³

The independence of Mexico from Spain was achieved in 1821 and the new state of Tamaulipas was created from what was the old New Spanish province of Nuevo Santander. For Laredo a negative result of the war with Spain was that its

¹² Ibid. p.88.

¹³ Jones, p. 177.

presidio was abandoned and the town was left to the mercy of the Apache and Comanche.

On a visit to Laredo in 1822, Stephen F. Austin described the town as being "as poor as sand-banks, and draught and indolence can make it".¹⁴

In 1828 the Mexican Boundary Commission inspected Laredo and a draftsman on the commission named José Maria Sánchez kept a diary of the inspection. Sánchez had few positive comments about the town of Laredo:

...Its population numbers about 2000 persons, all care-free people who are fond of dancing, and little inclined to work. The women, who are, as a general rule good-looking, are ardently fond of luxury and leisure; they have rather loose ideas of morality, which cause the greater part of them to have shameful relations openly, especially with the officers, both because they are more numerous and spend their salary freely, and because they are more skillful in the art of seduction. The garrison of the presidio consists of a company of more than one hundred men, but, in spite of this fact the place has not prospered, nor do its inhabitants try to increase its prosperity. The streets are straight and long; all the buildings are covered with grass; and the houses have no conveniences.¹⁵

The census of 1828 showed a population of 2,054 people, but Indian troubles had become more acute and the population dropped by 308 persons in 1834. Continual

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 88.

¹⁵ Southwest Historical Quarterly. Vol. XXIX April, 1926, p. 250. C. Castaneda, trans.

letters to the governor in the capital at Victoria, begging for troops were of no avail. Pleas to the central government in Mexico City went unanswered. An ironic description of the town in 1828 by the alcalde, or mayor, noted that the town's population was robust and healthy with most infirmities caused by arrows, bullet wounds and lances launched by the Comanches.¹⁶

To add insult to injury, not only was Laredo being over-run by Indian attacks, the town was badly used by Mexican government troops crossing into the Province of Tejas to put down troubles that were brewing there. Mexican troop commanders demanded fresh supplies from the town without payment, and commandeered all available horses in exchange for their spent mounts. Tejas and Coahuila were demanding that the 1829 Mexican constitution be withdrawn and replaced with the older and more liberal constitution of 1824. The proximity of Laredo to a convenient crossing of the Rio Grande was not always an advantage since it was also convenient for the Comanche, Apache and Mexican troops. As usual Laredo was left to fend for itself.

The quality of life in Laredo continued to be meager and marginal. The few mining operations in the province were in the south and the livelihood of Laredo was still

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 89.

based on livestock. Farming was a sometime thing. Most the town's supplies were imported from the center of Mexico.

In 1836 Texas gained independence from Mexico and the area between the Río Sabinas and the Río Grande was disputed territory, with ownership being claimed by both the Republic of Texas and Mexico. This area, which included Laredo, was considered a no-man's land and as such was home to outlaws, Indians, and freebooters. As usual, Laredo was provided with little help in her defense. So frustrated were the Laredoans with the indifference of the Mexican government that in 1839 they joined in a short lived rebellion which created the Republic of the Río Grande. This new formed republic also supported the old Federalist Constitution of 1824, the same one that Texas and Coahuila had demanded. By 1841 the rebellion ended and its leaders were executed. Laredo was back in the hands of the centralist government of General Santa Ana.

Between 1842 and 1846 Laredo was invaded many times by bands of Texas Rangers who had early on stated that Texas considered the land between the Río Nueces and the Río Grande to be a part of Texas. After Texas joined the union of the United States in 1845, war with Mexico followed.

In 1846 the flag of the United States was raised over the town of Laredo by Texas volunteers who were passing through on their way to Camargo. Several weeks later, the

former president of the Republic of Texas, Mirabeau B. Lamar, and his troops marched into Laredo unopposed and declared Laredo officially a part of the United States.¹⁷ In 1847 Lamar established Texas law on the eastern side of the Rio Grande, which included only half of the town of Laredo. He then declared the western half of Laredo, which was on the other side of the river, to be under the jurisdiction of Mexico. The town was now split in two with Laredo on the Texas side of the Rio Grande, and Nuevo Laredo on the Mexican side.

The town of Laredo appealed to both the United States and Mexico declaring its preference of remaining as a part of Mexico, but again the wishes of the town were ignored by both sides and the town was permanently severed. A major reason for preferring Mexico to the United States was the issue of land tenure and the rights of ownership. The laws of Mexico recognized the rights of the ejido lands, which were public lands held in common by the town for farming and pasturage. Loredoans had serious doubts about the intention of the United States to honor the Spanish land laws, which differ greatly from Anglo-Saxon law. Spanish land laws were more relaxed than those that are based on English common law. Surveys and registration of land

¹⁷ Hinojosa, Gilberto Miguel. A Borderlands Town in Transition. p. 56.

ownership with the government were casual at best. Often a description of a plot of land was based on physical objects, such as a rock or a tree or perhaps a stream. Physical characteristics can change and thus throw the question of boundaries into chaos.

In the event, those who wanted to remain Mexican citizens were forced to move to the west side of the river and a majority of the Laredoans did. It was for the most part not as great a sacrifice as it appeared for many of the townsfolk owned property on both sides of the river.

Between 1846 and the turn of the century, both the Laredos were harried by Indians, bandits and armies; armies from the United States, armies from the Republic of Texas, armies of the Centralists and the Federalists, armies of the Republic and armies in favor of the Hapsburgs, Maximilian and Carlotta. For almost two hundred years Laredo had been tormented by Indians, freebooters and armies; armies retreating, armies advancing. She had been pushed and shoved, and given scant attention. Still the Laredos had survived where some neighboring sister towns had not. The Laredos remained in the back-water of national development until the advent of the railroads which came to the Laredos in 1881. From that time, both towns increased in population and in wealth. Trade that had previously entered and exited Mexico at Matamoros and

Brownsville began to flow through Laredo and Nuevo Laredo on the newly established railroads.¹⁸ Prosperity, which for so long eluded the Laredos, had come to these towns in the form of the railroads. Massive emigration augmented the prosperity of both; trade flourished. It had taken 126 years.

Four railroads met at the crossroads of Laredo and Nuevo Laredo: the Texas-Mexican from Corpus Christi; the International and Great Northern, a national system which connected Laredo with San Antonio and Saint Louis; the Ferrocarriles Nacionales de Mexico, an American-built railroad system reaching into central Mexico, which formed part of Porfirio Díaz's modernization program; and the Río Grande and Eagle Pass, which joined Laredo with northern Mexico.¹⁹

It was within the above history that the Mexican branch of the Longoria family sought its fortune. Many Mexicans headed for the border town of Nuevo Laredo once the railroads had arrived. There was a good chance of improving one's condition. Nuevo Laredo, like all border towns, was far from the center of power.

Isolation had forced the town to survive on its own. This same isolation had also caused it to have a luke-warm

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 117.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 118.

allegiance to the government in Mexico City. It made the citizens of Nuevo Laredo schizophrenic. In location, they were much closer to the United States than to Mexico. Most were bilingual and intermarriage between the two sides was commonplace. On the whole, the two sides acted as if they were one town. There was no border control. In fact, the United States Immigration Border Patrol was not officially created until May 8, 1924, and was an outgrowth of immigration legislation sponsored by the State of California.²⁰

It can be seen that the Northeastern Frontier was settled last because it was the least desirable place to be in the 18th and 19th centuries. Hostile indigenous populations, poor soil conditions and erratic water supplies did not speak well for a swift and popular settlement. Laredo and Nuevo Laredo gained a sense of independence because of their isolation from their respective centers of powers. An aura of toughness penetrated these border towns, forcing the populations to be self-reliant or perish. By the 1880's however, the Northeastern Frontier of New Spain was on the verge of entering an exciting and prosperous era.

²⁰ Abrahamson, Eric. "Guarding the Gates", California Historical Courier, San Francisco, California Historical Society, February/March, 1987.