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Living on ,the Edge of America: At Home on the Texas-Mexico Border by Robert Lee Maril (review)

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Lacking a cohesive community spirit and wise political leadership, they suffered for the most part from policies that benefited only the entrenched elites.

Given the uncertainty of life on the Rio Grande delta, those with capital, land, or political prominence generally discouraged new ventures and kept others out, even in times of plenty. Control of the Matamoros customs house by force or by bribe was imperative for aspiring political and economic leaders on either side of the border, and residents of both cities, especially *Matamorenses*, faced repeated armed invasions by competing local, regional, national, and international political factions. Meanwhile, the have-nots from either bank of the Rio Grande lived in grinding poverty, with few alternatives: submission, rebellion, or emigration, which resulted in frequent population turnovers or declines.

Although generally balanced, *Boom and Bust* may be too close to primary and secondary sources that provide the establishment's perspective, resulting in a somewhat gingerly treatment of racial/ethnic and class issues. In addition, some of the eight "cycles" could have been merged and the extensive local detail reduced for a wider audience. Still, the research on Brownsville and Matamoros needed to be brought together into one story. For this, the authors should be commended. They have put together an invaluable, interestingly written source book.

University of Texas at San Antonio

GILBERTO HINOJOSA

Living on the Edge of America: At Home on the Texas-Mexico Border. By Robert Lee Maril. (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1992. Pp. xiv+180. Preface, acknowledgment, epilogue. \$24.50.)

This book attempts to describe border culture along the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas. Robert Lee Maril's diary-like style covers some thirteen years of personal experiences as an outsider to the Valley's culture. In three sections, he combines storytelling and participant observation to tell thirty-one short stories. A sociologist by training, Maril explores the forces at work in peoples' lives that keep many of them under the control of external factors in the borderlands. While interesting on the level of storytelling, as social science the work is sketchy, scattered, and hardly defines the dynamic aspects of Mexican American culture. Maril needed to employ a wider, culturally relative view of South Texas affairs. He needed to probe the common-sense coping systems of Texas-Mexico culture. He should have viewed several institutions, not just his own teaching experiences.

Maril begins his book with an introduction to the Valley as hot, humid, and semitropical, and finds a crudeness in the cultural diversity around him. He ends with a recent trip back to the region, where he discovers that the limpid heat, smell of possum sweat, and impoverished environment are forever a part of his heart. While this may be his perception, he does not adequately fill in the basic continuities in human affairs over time. Many of the stories merely deal with the problems Maril personally encountered while teaching at one private school and two higher-education institutions. His efforts to provide alternatives

to the educational inequities in the region eventually led him to start his own short-lived school in Brownsville. The difficulties of this venture are told in "Educating Juan" and "Devil Student," two of his more graphic accounts. Most of his stories attempt to work an overall theme: the condition and quality of being poor in South Texas. Maril sought to document this in another volume, *Poorest of Americans* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), but his focus here on individuals who daily experience the social and economic inequality of Valley life could have been a useful method of examining a culture. Maril tells some entertaining stories about "The Enchilada Gang," encounters with his neighbor's dogs, and his Valley students. But this was not the purpose of his book.

This attempt at a loosely defined ethnography does not provide a social science analysis of Mexican American culture. Maril was just too close to the experience as participant/observer. His frame of reference is filled with flagrant bias, and many of the problems he discusses may be the result of "sour grapes" experiences during his stay in the Valley. It reminds one of William Madsen, another social scientist who was caught up in his own time and space system. The book should be read accordingly.

The University of Texas-Pan American

ROBERTO MARIO SALMÓN

They Made Their Own Law: Stories of Bolivar Peninsula. By Melanie Wiggins. (Houston: Rice University Press, 1990. Pp. xvi+284. Foreword, preface, black-and-white photographs, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$24.00, cloth; \$12.95, paper.)

This book is an example of local history at its best. The author has combined solid historical research about the Bolivar Peninsula from the prehistoric inhabitants to the 1980s with a separate section of fascinating interviews with those who remember events in the early twentieth century.

Bolivar is peculiarly isolated. Its western tip is in Galveston County, while most of the peninsula is in Chambers County. Bolivar, however, was a great distance from the seat of Chambers County, at Wallisville until 1908 and then at Anahuac, which left law enforcement to the locals; hence the title of this book. When the Gulf and Interstate Railroad reached Point Bolivar from Beaumont in 1896, the residents were more conveniently connected with Jefferson County than with their own county seat.

Ranches, truck gardens, and orchards provided income for residents; hunters, fishermen, and beachgoers enjoyed the rambling beach hotels along the railway. When the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers began building the north jetty in the 1890s to protect and deepen the entrance to Galveston Bay, locals hoped for improvements for a port on the peninsula. Finally, in 1907, Congress authorized a twenty-five-foot-deep channel from Bolivar Roads to the proposed wharf on the peninsula. Port Bolivar had a boat and barge shipyard, which in 1908 was building a ferry to carry railroad cars from the peninsula to Galveston Island. The long dock erected by the Santa Fe Railroad, which had bought out the G&I, received its first large vessel in 1908, and townspeople believed that Port Bolivar