

10-2014

The Harness Maker's Dream: Nathan Kallison and the Rise of South Texas by Nick Kotz (review)

Anthony K. Knopp

The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, Anthony.Knopp@utrgv.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.utrgv.edu/hist_fac



Part of the [History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Knopp, Anthony K. Review of *The Harness Maker's Dream: Nathan Kallison and the Rise of South Texas*, by Nick Kotz. *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 118, no. 2 (2014): 234-235. doi:10.1353/swh.2014.0100.

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Liberal Arts at ScholarWorks @ UTRGV. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty Publications and Presentations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks @ UTRGV. For more information, please contact justin.white@utrgv.edu, william.flores01@utrgv.edu.

ciated by anyone with an interest in border life of the first half of the twentieth century, aside from whatever role or impact the photos may have had on tourists or others during that period.

Arreola considers “high photo density for a site” to provide a means for researchers “to analyze place serially, through time” (128–129). He illustrates this with juxtaposed photos (1920s and 1940s) of the Juárez Monument and *kiosco* in the Reynosa plaza. In this instance, the plaza became demonstrably more aesthetically attractive thanks to decorative plantings of native trees and shrubs. It goes without saying that photos from any source taken at different times of the same place, activity, or subject will provide researchers with visible markers of change.

There are, of course, inevitable limitations in coverage of border postcard photos. For example, the phenomenon of the *zonas de tolerancia* was not acceptable subject matter for postcards. Yet, these sites surely did as much as anything else to stereotype border towns as “exotic” places where, to borrow lyrics from Ry Cooder’s song “Skin Game” (for the movie *The Border*), “Mexico, Mexico, a boy can be a man down in Mexico.” Even though these activities in cross-border cities and stored in the memory banks of untold numbers of male visitors, were not the stuff of picture postcards, they were partially captured in images by freelance photographers sold (or not) to the patrons of establishments in the *zona de tolerancia*.

Despite such source limitations, Arreola is to be congratulated for his dedication and perseverance as a collector of postcard images and, more so as a cultural geographer, for his thoughtful interpretation of them through careful archival research and for his imaginative larger vision of Mexican border life and history.

University of Connecticut (emeritus)

SCOTT COOK

The Harness Maker’s Dream: Nathan Kallison and the Rise of South Texas. By Nick Kotz. (Fort Worth: TCU Press, 2013. Pp. 346. Black and white plates, notes, bibliography, index.)

In an era when the relevance of the American Dream is in question, journalist Nick Kotz brings to life a classic example of the phenomenon from his own family. Appropriately, the origin of the Kallison family dream began with the patriarch, Nathan, in a *shtetl* in Imperial Russia. Jews were barely tolerated in Russia, and in the 1880s pogroms and Cossack raids made life tenuous. In 1890 seventeen-year old Nathan emigrated, eventually joining an elder brother in Chicago. Here Nathan was able to utilize a skill he had developed in Russia—harness-making. He opened a harness shop in 1894, married a year later, and became an American citizen in 1896. Kotz claimed that “From the very first, Nathan believed that Americanization—in addition to hard work and saving money—was the key to success” (24).

The endangered health of Nathan’s wife prompted a search for a more salubrious climate, leading to relocation in San Antonio in 1899. Although the Alamo city was in transition and modernizing, Nathan’s new leather crafting shop had great potential in South Texas ranch country. That potential was fulfilled despite considerable competition by hard work, long hours, and the production of quality merchandise. Dressed in a three-piece suite, Nathan provided personal attention to the needs of his customers and began what became a family tradition of involvement with the community, beginning with the Reform synagogue Temple Beth-El. By 1903 the Kallisons were able to purchase a large home for their four children on the edge of the prestigious King William district and were soon mentioned in the newspaper society pages.

Sensing an evolution in merchandizing, Nathan Kallison sold his leather business in 1908 in order to create a general merchandise and ranching supply store. By 1910 he was wealthy enough to acquire a nearby ranch for nearly \$17,000. In 1924 the “Kallison Block” was constructed; much of it was devoted to a department store that still resembled a country store and catered to the ranching community. By this time sons Morris and Perry were major factors in the business, having been schooled in commerce by their father.

Kallison’s survived the Depression by selling necessities at low prices and by the judicious extension of credit. The Kallison family supported Roosevelt’s New Deal and the ranch became a temporary haven for the homeless. Youngest son Perry became famous as radio personality “Ol’ Trader,” promoting the store with homespun charm and humor.

In the late 1930s Nathan Kallison’s health weakened, resulting in the 1941 decision to divide family assets equally among the children; conflict among them emerged and intensified in the postwar era. For a time after the war Kallison’s expanded and prospered under sons Morris and Perry, but the business failed to adapt to the challenges of discounters, “big box” stores, malls, and the diminished commercial role of downtown.

Author Nick Kotz is a grandson of Nathan Kallison. He is also a Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative reporter and author of six books. Skilled in research and rhetoric, Kotz applied his impressive talents to the challenge of recreating a history in which the principal participants no longer lived, leaving behind no diaries and few documents. Telling this story of personal lives requires a certain degree of speculation on the part of the author, but it is consistently based on sound evidence. The endnotes provide testimony to the extensive research underpinning the story. Through this research Kotz was able to reconstruct the record of the Kallison family and establish the context—national, state and local—in which Nathan and his family established their lives and the merchandizing phenomenon which supported them. *The Harness Maker’s Dream* will become a South Texas classic for the history of ranching, commerce, urban development, San Antonio Jewry, and the evanescent American Dream.

University of Texas at Brownsville

ANTHONY K. KNOPP

Chicana/o Struggles for Education: Activism in the Community. By Guadalupe San Miguel. (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2013. Pp. 254. Illustrations, figures, notes, bibliography, index.)

Guadalupe San Miguel earned his reputation as one of the foremost historians of the Mexican American experience in Texas public schools with his works “*Let All of Them Take Heed*”: *Mexican Americans and the Quest for Educational Equality* (1987; reissued 2001). He then furthered his analysis with *Brown, Not White: School Integration and the Chicano Movement* (2001), and *Contested Policy: The Rise and Fall of Federal Bilingual Education in the United States, 1960–2001* (2004). In his latest work he brings the story into the twenty-first century by focusing on the effects of the Chicano movement on public education in the Southwest.

In the present volume, San Miguel seeks to discover the effect of Chicano activism on improving educational opportunities for Mexican American students, at all levels of educational enterprise. He argues that the efforts since the 1960s have “both extended and intensified the historic struggle for education that earlier activists had initiated.” (5). He notes that previous histories have focused on Mexican American students gaining equal access to educational facilities. He