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LA CORRIDA DE LAS CORVINAS

by Manuel Medrano¹

It was the Cold War summer of 1962. Military “advisors” were being sent to South Vietnam, and John F. Kennedy was still President of the United States. I was all of thirteen, attending Central Junior High School in Brownsville, Texas and coping miserably with adolescence. I was a poor geek from the farm who could milk cows and feed hogs, but could not run fast, or hit a baseball, and my best prospect for girls was to be their “friend.” How much worse could it be? My life would have been a total failure had it not been for my Tio Antonio, Tia Fela, and *sciaenops ocellatus*, the red drum.

My uncle Antonio was the best fisherman I ever knew. He once caught a red-fish nearly fifty inches long and had the photograph to prove it. Tio was nearly six feet, five inches tall with endless legs. He could easily walk to the second sand bar and cast a line over sixty yards. When I could not walk as far, he would ask, “don’t they teach you how to fish in school?” My aunt Fela was about five feet three inches tall, but could still cast over forty yards against the wind. She made the best egg and potato tacos, and her corvina albondigas were nothing less than legendary.

I was ten when they began to invite me to fish with them, and since they were retired, they went often. At six a.m. they would pick me up at our little rancho near El Jardin Elementary School. Somehow, the three of us, all our fishing tackle, three fold-up canvas stools, two bait buckets and a cast net, fit into a light blue 1953 Chevrolet station wagon. Tio’s rods, which were about nine feet tall, protruded from the half open back seat window like majestic sugar cane stalks ready for burning. We were always on our way by sunrise. He used to say, “Los que esperan, pierden” (those who wait, lose). Many times, during the forty- five- minute journey, I was caught in their conversation crossfire as both spoke concurrently about what we might catch that day. Still, there was nothing I would rather do than go fishing with my tio and tia. They knew Boca Chica Beach as well as their backyard. Sometimes they taught me what I never learned in school. Once, they told me that exactly where we were fishing once walked the pirates of Bagdad and Clarksville, nineteenth century settlements on both sides of the Rio Grande.

The redfish run near the mouth of the Rio Grande, occurred between the late canicula (dog days) in early August amid sweltering temperatures, an unforgiving sun, and the first Fall norther. Then, it was not uncommon to see the rapidly moving murky water of a once-great river merge with the lapping blue-green water of the Gulf of Mexico. Swirling currents created tiny whirlpools as the river emptied into the gulf. Beneath the surface were red and black drum, whiting, snook and those useless catfish.

Confluence and diversity were unmistakably present at the river's end. On the Mexican side, pescadores (fishermen) on shore and in small boats fished for and kept almost everything – shark, black drum, jackfish, everything, sometimes with sedales or handlines, sometimes with inescapable gill nets. Some viejitos (old men), who had done this for fifty years, were missing teeth and had hair as white as the bundled cocaine that crossed the river every day. Their makeshift shanties provided temporary shelters from the unforgiving sun during the day and coyotes and sand crabs at night. The older they were, the more weathered their wrinkled, leather-like faces. Three generations of them - some were only thirteen; most never reached sixty.

On the American side were veterans struggling with realities of the border and themselves, qualified only enough to defend their country. Their tattoos told stories of service, patriotism and love. To some, the sand dunes behind them seemed all too familiar, but in different countries at different times. And there were others, like old men and women who came to spend time with their grandchildren. They would always warn their nietos, “No entren a lo hondo” (Don't go into the deep). Some abuelitas (grandmothers) wore the same bonnets that my tia Lupe wore when we picked cotton near the Port of Brownsville.

The day began as the men and older boys caught an assortment of baitfish with a tarraya (cast net) and shook the catch into a white five-gallon bucket half-filled with water. The young children laughed when they brought the carnada (bait) from the bait bucket to the waiting men and women. Because the mullet and croaker were still alive and slippery, it was fun to catch and hold them. The fishermen soon carefully hooked them near the tail to keep them alive.

Bamboo rods and Penn reels, sometimes bought at the flea market, were nestled into four-foot steel rod holders. Over two dozen of them stood at attention like soldiers going into battle. Hooks were baited with fingerling mullet, shrimp or sand crab. Both young and old waited for the unmistakable click of the drag and bending of the rod. When a school of bull reds feeding near the second sand bar took some of the bait, the game was on. The corvinas were coming! The corvinas were coming! Suddenly, four rods shook erratically and, for a moment, their lines went limp. Within seconds the rod tips were bending and pointing toward the water. Reel clickers sounded like cicadas as the fish quickly stripped out yards of monofilament line. The pescadores quickly dislodged rods from rod holders and set the

hooks. The pulling of the taut line tested their patience and skill. Nothing was more embarrassing than losing a corvina to a snapped line or bent hook. This indicated a lack of preparation or skill, and neither was acceptable, especially to the person who had just lost dinner.

For those who were not catching fish, the anticipation was almost breathtaking while they waited for another school to swim through. On some days they never did. For the fortunate ones who had landed these three-foot beauties, fillets and chicarrones (cracklings) de corvina were on the dinner menu. For those who had not, there was a determination to return and to momentarily escape the everyday challenges of paying the rent and keeping a job on a frontera where lines blurred between hiring a wetback and hiring a “Mexican” to work for the Border Patrol.

Both my tío and tía passed in the 1980s. I wish I had told them how much they meant to me. I am nearly sixty years older now and seldom surf fish at the mouth of the river. There are days that the river does not even flow into the gulf. Drug activity there has increased significantly and so has the presence of the Border Patrol. Stash houses dot the landscape, and the term “coyote” brings to mind human smugglers before wild, howling dog-like creatures. What has not changed, however, are the memories of some of the best times of my life, with people I admired and respected. They were doing what they loved to do, families and friends who were so much more than la corrida de las corvinas.

Endnotes

1 Manuel F. Medrano is Emeritus Professor of History at UTRGV. He is producer/director of the Los del Valle oral history documentaries and author/co-author of six books and over twenty-five articles and essays about people, history and culture in the Rio Grande Valley.

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