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Manuel Guerra and the politics of Starr County, Texas 1880-1920

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MANUEL GUERRA AND THE POLITICS OF STARR COUNTY, TEXAS 1880-1920

A Thesis

by

JESUS PEREZ

Submitted to the Graduate School of
The University of Texas-Pan American
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

May 2014

Major Subject: History

MANUEL GUERRA AND THE POLITICS OF STARR COUNTY, TEXAS 1880-1920

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May 2014

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ABSTRACT

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This study demonstrates the success of the Mexican American leadership of Starr County in maintaining their hold on power in defiance of Anglo American migrants in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. What aided Mexican American leadership in Starr County was that the major figure Manuel Guerra was highly educated, and his ancestors had settled the region as early 1767, which led many Mexican Americans both upper class and lower class to be loyal to him and those closely allied with him. The tactics used by Manuel Guerra and his allies were equal to the tactics used by political bosses across the United States. Using scholarly works on the subject, newspapers and election records, this study details what transpired during the period from 1880-1920. This study looks at how Mexican Americans under Manuel Guerra maintained power and landownership through the use of violence, elections, and protecting working-class Mexican Americans.

DEDICATION

The completion of my thesis would not have been possible without the assistance and understanding of my family. The two most important individuals were my mother Santos G. Perez and my cousin Lucia C. Portillo who wholeheartedly motivated me and supported me by all means to accomplish this project. Second, I would like to thank my good friend Hyanghee Lee who motivated me with her passion for education and friendship. I would also like to thank Ernest T. Martinez and Laura Lee Oviedo who have provided friendship and support over the past couple of semesters. Finally, I would like to thank my father Geronimo Perez for being supportive.

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I would also like to thank Dr. William L. Turk who was the first individual in my academic career who mentioned to me to pursue an advanced degree while still a junior working on my undergraduate degree. Without his encouragement and support I would have never applied to a graduate degree. Finally, I would also like to thank Dr. Brent M.S. Campney who provided encouragement in times when I felt I was not good enough to be in a graduate program.

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CHAPTER I

LITERATURE REVIEW

Not many scholars have written about the political history of the Rio Grande Valley and those counties just north of the Valley. Most of the political leaders throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries were Anglo Americans who in many cases ruled these counties through some sort of alliance with members of the Mexican American elite. Although this was true in most of what is South Texas, there were several key cities and counties where Mexican American landholders and merchants held the upper hand. One of these places was Starr County, Texas. Generally speaking, not many works have been written about Mexican American leaders of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, or how they were able to stay in power. The following is a preliminary list of books that either includes references to Manuel Guerra or books describing racial conflict between Anglo Americans and Mexican American during this timeframe.

Robert B. Rentfro in his book *The Republican Party in South Texas* attempts to analyze mainly the history of the Republican party of South Texas through the lenses of some of his ancestors. Throughout his work, Rentfro degrades Mexican American leaders and Mexican Americans in general. In many cases he even blames Mexican Americans for racial problems in South Texas. This book is relevant to this topic for two reasons. The first is that it provides an account of how the Republican Party functioned, which is important because Republicans were the main challengers of Manuel Guerra and his family in their rule of Starr County. The second

is that he perfectly describes how Anglo Americans did not view Mexican Americans as Americans, and thus considered them unfit for public service.¹

By contrast, *The Origins of Boss Rule in Starr County*, as the title implies concentrates on Starr County's political history. In this published thesis, Hernan A. Contreras traces the political history of Starr County and explains how this led to boss rule. A prime example of boss rule was Manuel Guerra because he controlled the Democratic party of Starr County. According to Contreras, Mexican Americans constituted ninety-five percent of the population of Starr County throughout the last half of the 19th century, and despite this fact Anglo Americans ruled the county with relative ease.

Contreras looked at several key elections to identify how Mexican Americans were unable to get into high positions within Starr County government. He says that during the 1880s and 1890s, Mexican Americans finally started to establish themselves in county government. An interesting fact he points to is that in South Texas, the Democratic Party attempted to make alliances with Mexican American elites, as was the case with James B. Well's alliance with Manuel Guerra. This is interesting because when looking at that that time the Texas Democratic Party's ideology was deeply influenced by white supremacy.²

However, Contreras makes the same mistakes many historians make in claiming that Manuel Guerra only came to power by the grace of James B. Wells and views Manuel Guerra as corrupt with no positive attributes. By contrast, I will prove that Wells sought out an alliance with Guerra because he knew Guerra would eventually challenge the established leaders and possibly take control of Starr County.

¹Robert B. Rentfro, *The Republican Party in South Texas*. (Kingsville: Texas A&I University, 1968), 147.

²Hernan A. Contreras, *Origins of Boss Rule in Starr County*. (Ann Arbor: UMI Dissertation Services, 2008),52.

Perhaps one of the most important scholars of Manuel Guerra and the political history of Starr County is Evan M. Anders. Anders has written two works on this issue, including a published dissertation and a book based on the aforementioned dissertation. In *Bosses under Siege: the Politics of South Texas during the Progressive Era*, Anders covers the entire history of Boss rule in South Texas during the progressive era. It is an excellent source because he describes the arrival of early Anglo Americans who came in search wealth, and attempted to make alliances with Mexican American elites. Additionally he also covers the arrival of the farmers in the aftermath of the arrival of the railroad in 1904, when newcomer Anglo Americans started segregating Mexican Americans and discriminating against them even more than previous migrants.

With regards to Manuel Guerra and Starr County politics Anders does a relatively good job of describing events. The problem is that like other historians, he only covers this as a side topic and does not go into any great detail of how Guerra rose through the ranks of Roma society and eventually became the political boss of Starr County. While Anders has done the best job in analyzing this topic, more work needs to be done in order to understand the perspectives of the Guerra family and Mexican American landholders. Anders, book *Boss Rule in South Texas: The Progressive Era*, covers the same topics but is a revised edition from his dissertation. He argues that Republican leaders such as Edward C. Lasater attempted to wrestle power from Guerra and that people like Lasater held that Mexican American were incompetent.

In his excellent survey of South Texas history, *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas, 1836 – 1986*, David Montejano, also takes issue at boss rule in South Texas and has small sections reserved for Manuel Guerra and his influence over Starr County. These sections are nothing big, as his book covers a wide period and a wide range of subjects. He mentions that

Guerra ruled Starr County for many years and that this enabled his family to remain in control well into the 1940s. He acknowledges that the main rival to Guerra's power was Edward C. Lasater, as do other authors. Other important and related topics covered by Montejano are bosses in other counties such as Archie Parr. This is important because he offers insight into how political bosses came to power and stayed in power.

In *Certain Aspects of the Political History of Starr County*, author Milton B. Newton, Jr. analyzes the political history of Starr County from its foundation until the early 1890s. For the most part, this work discusses much of the earlier history, and does not go into exact detail about Manuel Guerra, or other political bosses that rose to power in the late 1890s. Newton clearly sees the Anglo American takeover of South Texas as generally a peaceful affair, claiming that the "Anglo invaders" didn't dominate the majority but in fact assimilated into the majority.³

Newton's work provides a good base of research at how the political character of Starr County changed throughout the last half of the 19th century. He does so by analyzing several key elections throughout his period and comes to the conclusion that the Anglo American takeover of Starr County did not happen through dispossession. This contradicts the work of Dale Lasater, at least to a degree.

In *Falfurrias: Ed. C. Lasater and the Development of South Texas* Dale Lasater claims that Edward C. Lasater, Republican leader of northern Starr County, made claims to the low cost of his purchases of land from Mexican American families.⁴ Overall, this book is about the life of Edward C. Lasater and his struggles to build a ranching empire and to separate northern Starr County to form what would become Brooks County. This biographical sketch of Lasater is important because it analyzes the leadership of Manuel Guerra in Starr County and in addition,

³Milton B. Newton, Jr. *Certain Aspects of the Political History of Starr County*. (1964), 148.

⁴Dale Lasater, *Falfurrias: Ed C. Lasater and the Development of South Texas*. (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1985), 45.

proves that the Anglo Americans in northern Starr County disliked being ruled by what they though as uneducated and corrupt Mexican Americans. This thesis, will then, look at the opposite side of the coin and analyze how Manuel Guerra and his allies defended the interests of Mexican American landholders in southern Starr County from Anglo American takeover.

Anglo American arrivals in South Texas in the aftermath of the arrival of the railroad in 1904 generally portrayed themselves as victims of political bosses and as reformers. Their ideas of reform generally meant defeating political bosses including the Guerra family of Starr County and the Canales family of Cameron County.⁵ Throughout her book *No Mexicans, Women, or Dogs Allowed: The Rise of the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement*, Cynthia E. Orozco discusses the formation of the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), in the context of providing a history of South Texas and how newly arrived Anglos disfranchised Mexican Americans.

The relevance of this work to this thesis is that Orozco presents the ideas of “progressivism” and the ideas behind the battle against political bosses. A question left unanswered though is how were Manuel Guerra and his family able to stay in power despite the fact that other political bosses lost control over their territory, including James B. Wells in 1910. With this in mind, it becomes necessary to look at Starr County politics as separate from other regions and look at how the Guerra’s stayed in power even after the death of their patriarch in 1915.

The Murder of Stanley Welch and the 1906 Starr County Election by Joe Baulch is an article which describes the mystery surrounding that murder and how Manuel Guerra and some of his major allies were involved in it. This article only covers a small portion of the history, but

⁵Cynthia E. Orozco, *No Mexicans, Women, or Dogs Allowed: The Rise of the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010), 34.

nonetheless is important because it talks about the struggle the Guerra's faced and if they did in fact commit crimes, they were only committing crimes Anglo Americans committed across the Southwest.

One of the best books on South Texas history from the perspective of Mexican Americans, which the author refers to as *Tejanos*, is *Tejano Legacy: Rancheros and Settlers in South Texas, 1734-1900* and published in 1998. Author Armando C. Alonzo takes a different perspective than most Anglo American historians of the region because he places the Mexican American experience at the forefront of the struggles and successes in the Lower Rio Grande Valley. He contradicts writers who he argues "have distorted the *Tejano* experience in the post-1848 period."⁶

He acknowledges that Mexican Americans had many difficulties since the region was annexed by the United States, but states that Mexican Americans had a lot of success in business and ranching up to 1885.⁷ He brings the theme of credit in a section of chapter which describes the decline of Mexican American ranchers, a theme which will be discussed throughout this thesis. This broad survey provides an excellent background for many topics which could be elaborated on by future historians.

Bearing this in mind, my thesis will discuss ranching, business, politics, and paternalism from the perspective of one of the most powerful Mexican Americans in the South Texas region, Manuel Guerra. Through his perspective and those close to him I will show that Mexican Americans were not passive, they were in fact taking action and in rare circumstances their efforts bore fruit and they took control of local government as was the case with Manuel. He was in fact an early civil rights activists for Mexican American landowners and working class.

⁶ Armando C. Alonzo, *Tejano Legacy: Rancheros and Settlers in South Texas, 1734-1900*. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998), 05.

⁷ *Ibid*, 227.

CHAPTER II

INTRODUCTION

The Rio Grande Valley of South Texas has had a long and often violent history due to many overlapping factors. The oldest regions of what today is considered South Texas is located in the counties of Starr and Zapata, which were originally settled by Spanish colonists. The settlement of these regions dates back to the mid – 1700s, specifically 1746 and 1747, when Jose De Escandon explored the region and recommended the building of settlements and missions. Escandon was given broad powers to settle the region not only of what would become Starr County, but also of present day Tamaulipas. He christened the territory *Nuevo Santander* in honor of his birthplace of Soto La Marina, Santander, Spain. Nuevo Santander encompassed the areas immediately north and south of the Rio Grande River, up to the Nueces River, where the province of Texas began.

The locations of these settlements were chosen carefully by Escandon because they needed to make this area of the Spanish Empire safe from foreigners by blocking penetration of the area by other European powers, as well as to pacify the Kawakawa Indians.¹ The first settlement established in this geographical region was Santa Anna de Camargo on March 05, 1749. Escandon placed one of his lieutenants, Blas Maria de la Garza Falcon in charge of this settlement. Other nearby settlements included Reynosa founded on March 14, 1749 only days after Santa Anna de Camargo. An additional site established was San Ygnacio (1750) in today's

¹Donald E. Chipman and Harriet D. Joseph, *Spanish Texas: 1521 – 1821*, Revised Edition. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010), 171.

Zapata County, but this was done independently of Escandon and was founded by Jose Vasquez Borrego. As settlements were being established along the river, many ranchers from Camargo bypassed the settlement of Reynosa and established small ranches in what would be the Matamoros region.² Not content with the wealth and land they accumulated in their original grants from Jose De Escandon, many of the more powerful and wealthy families from Camargo kept claiming more and more land for themselves, in spite of the fact that their original grants were a minimum of 4,428 acres. The problem with this was that it left very little land for smaller farmers and would-be ranchers, leading to a vast accumulation of wealth in the hands of a few elite which resulted in class struggle during this early history of the area.

Of the first four settlements mentioned three were on what is now the Mexican side of the Rio Grande, and only San Ygnacio was located in what is now the United States. The settlement of San Ygnacio was followed in 1753 by Carnestolendas a small *racheria* founded by Blas Maria de La Garza Falcon.³ The importance of this settlement is that Carnestolendas would in time become today's Rio Grande City. These settlements prospered both under Spanish and subsequently Mexican rule, after Mexico won its independence from Spain in 1821. The main economic activity in these remote regions of Spanish Mexico was sheep and cattle raising, with many huge landowners prospering thanks to land grants awarded by both the Spanish and Mexican governments.

Although historians agree that the area of Nuevo Santander prospered, an important question to ask is who prospered. Those on top prospered and everyone else was forced to live off the meager sums that they were accorded for their services, of which the main were agricultural related and labor intensive services. This issue of unequal opportunity

²Milo Kearney and Anthony Knopp, *Boom and Bust: The Historical Cycles of Matamoros and Brownsville*. (Austin: Eakin Press, 1991), 13.

³Contreras, *Origins of Boss Rule in Starr County*, 04.

and vast accumulation of wealth on the part of some would later have profound consequences for the history of the region as well shall see.

Large ranches dominated much of the economy of what is now South Texas and the families who controlled these ranches dominated the political processes in the region as well. At this junction it is important to ask who were some of the families that dominated the political field at this point, and how did they come to accumulate vast amounts of wealth in a supposedly “legitimate” way. Although these families accumulate land and wealth in a legitimate way, it was only accomplished by expropriating and exterminating indigenous peoples, and by forcibly blocking working-class Spanish colonists from acquiring land through laws and regulations. The original landowners from the Camargo and Reynosa regions were awarded such large land grants because they were the settlers chosen and approved by Jose De Escandon, founder of the Nuevo Santander province.

These early families came to dominate both Camargo and Reynosa politically and would later compete against each other in their desire to accumulate land, wealth, and political power in the city which would be christened Matamoros on January 28, 1826.⁴ The struggle for power in the Matamoros region occurred because of the desire for more wealth on the part of the settlers from Reynosa, who were jealous of the power held by the settlers from Camargo. Throughout the early settlement of Matamoros and its general vicinity the battle was obviously not between all the different settlers from Camargo and Reynosa, but rather from a fairly small group of closely related families.

One of the most important families to call the lower Rio Grande Valley home was the Balli family. They came from Reynosa and challenged the status quo; meaning they were against the power and wealth held by the settlers from Camargo. The Balli family was not itself short on

⁴Kearney, *Boom and Bust: The Historical Cycles of Matamoros and Brownsville*. 29.

wealth and land, but claimed much more land north of the Rio Grande River. The Balli family was prominent and therefore they accumulated much land, including the Llano Grande grant and the entire area which would become South Padre Island in the then distant future. Father Nicolas Balli, a Roman Catholic priest was one of the most influential members of the de Balli family and the Spanish government granted him both of the aforementioned claims and much more. The Balli family, like most other prominent families, were mainly ranchers of both cattle and sheep, although some merchants would eventually establish prominence.

Although the main livelihood for Spanish colonial citizens and subsequent Mexican – *Tejanos* was sheep and cattle raising, towns, missions, and trading did develop. In Spain's northernmost frontier settlement in Nuevo Santander and Texas there were two major structures which adorned the landscape and provided important services to their surrounding communities. These major structures were the Catholic mission and the *Presidio*.

Missions were important in these regions because they were a place for unity during the harsh times and were a place where people of varying levels of faith came together. In the Spanish era these were also important, especially in Spanish Texas, because this was the main vehicle for trying to convert Indians into Catholics and making them good Spanish citizens. Despite the fact that many colonial citizens did not follow Catholicism, because of Church rules and not many Indians converted, missionaries tried to bring all people together; soldiers, families, and government officials and minister to them.⁵

While missions were undoubtedly very important, Presidios were even more so. Presidios were more important because they were generally the center of economic activity. In one way or another Presidios affected all aspects of life because the income of most colonial citizens was

⁵Robert A. Calvert, Arnaldo De Leon, and Greg Cantrell. *The History of Texas*, 4th Ed. (Wheeling: Harlan Davidson, 2007), 31.

largely derived from them. Some of main ways presidios affected economic life was by the salary of its soldiers and the hiring of individuals to not only build them, but maintain them. Many cattle ranchers of the area had their best customers in the Presidios, and did not have to send their cattle south into the interior of Mexico.

Throughout the Spanish era, frontier settlements in Nuevo Santander, as well as the settlements in Texas grew slowly, if at all. Although the Spanish government tried to encourage settlers from Mexico and other regions of the Spanish Empire to move there, these efforts were only slightly successful. Distance was a major cause in the failure of growth in these settlements. Settlements in Nuevo Santander and Texas were a long way from the center of Spain's Empire in Mexico City. What this signified was an increase in danger from assaults from banditry and Indian attacks on supply routes, or on the settlements themselves. Additionally, Spain had economic and trade policies that were detrimental to itself and its colonies. Economically speaking the major fault of the Spanish Empire was that its economic system was based on mercantilism, but a version dating back from the late middle ages, which had not been brought up to date even as late as the eighteenth century.⁶

According to historian David J. Weber, Spain was not developing any new technological advances during this period of history. The Spanish economic system was based on the exportation of raw materials to Spain and the importation of manufactured goods from Spain. The problem with this system was that as Spain extracted the wealth from its new world colonies, that wealth moved to more industrialized countries of Northern Europe, from which

⁶David J. Weber, *The Spanish Frontier in North America*, Brief Edition. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 132

Spain bought manufactured goods and borrowed large amounts of capital and the flow of money continued from Spain to England and Holland for example.⁷

Spain during the period history discussed was engulfed in many wars across Europe, most specifically they were attempting to assert the dominance of the Roman Catholic Church and their power over European rivals such as Great Britain. The Spanish Crown did not possess large amounts of liquid assets therefore they resorted to borrowing to fight their wars and the countries and bankers who lend them the money, did so at very high interest rates. Additionally, Spain was not producing the goods its aristocracy sought or the military weaponry it needed to fight its wars, so the borrowed money went to buy weapons from third party countries and therefore the wealth Spain robbed from Latin America was already earmarked to something, causing Spain to go into debt.

Although Nuevo Santander and Texas were not great sources of wealth and constituted Spain's frontier, the problems afflicting the mother country had a lot to do with the lack of success in developing these provinces. Spain lacked the manpower to defend and colonize these territories and therefore their expeditions into their far northern frontier were limited to a few settlements in both Nuevo Santander and Texas. Even though both of Spain's far northern provinces lagged behind in settlement and prosperity, Nuevo Santander did much better than *Tejas* north of the Nueces River, as the former had up to 30,000 people by the end of the eighteenth century, although most were south of the Rio Grande River.⁸ The population of

⁷James Oakes, Michael McGeer, Jan E. Lewis, Nick Cullather, and Jeanne Boydston. *Of the People: A History of the United States, Volume I: To 1877*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 07

⁸Contreras, *Origins of Boss Rule in Starr County*, 07.

Texas at this point would not even reach 2,000 Tejanos, of which the best estimated is about 1,000 in San Antonio and less than five hundred in other settlements.⁹

The beginning of the nineteenth century was a time of change for Spain and its colonial empire including Nuevo Santander and Texas. Europe in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was engulfed in the so – called Napoleonic War, which were a series of wars between France and most of its neighbors. Although these wars may be referred to as the Napoleonic Wars, because France was under the leadership of Napoleon Bonaparte at the time, these wars were not only directed against him, but at the idea of dethroning a standing monarch during the French Revolution. Additionally these wars were directed at the idea of anyone assuming a royal title from another monarch, because European monarchs feared a similar situation in their countries. Bearing this in mind, Napoleon Bonaparte crowned himself Napoleon I, Emperor of France and under his leadership France greatly disturbed life in Spain’s colonies, including Nuevo Santander and Texas.

On March 1808, after French armies triumphantly occupied Portugal, Napoleon sent his armies into Spain, throwing the Spanish court and its colonies into confusion. This was a time for change for Spain and its colonies all over the Western Hemisphere because the Bourbon monarchy, which held the empire together, was abolished by Napoleon when he forced both Charles IV and his successor Ferdinand to abdicate the throne.¹⁰ Napoleon appointed his brother Joseph Bonaparte as the new monarch of Spain, but the Spanish elite and the colonial elite was largely opposed to the new king.

⁹ Randolph B. Campbell. *Gone to Texas: A History of the Lone Star State*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 71.

¹⁰ Galen D. Greaser. *New Guide to Spanish and Mexican land grants in South Texas*. (Austin: Texas General Land Office, 2009), 93.

This brought major changes in Spain's system of government as a Regency Council formed in Cadiz in the name of Ferdinand of Spain. This Regency Council produced the 1812 Constitution which declared all realms in the Spanish Empire were equal and all had the right to send delegates to the Regency Council. The colonial elite who ruled over New Spain in many instances were debating whether or not to be loyal to the Regency Council at Cadiz, or form their own councils and declare loyalty to Ferdinand directly.

As this was going on at a national and international level the people of the Rio Grande region were themselves debating the issue of loyalty and battling each other, as well as the higher authorities. Of the major settlements in the vicinity of the Rio Grande River only Matamoros did not issue a declaration in favor of the revolt. Reynosa, Camargo, and Revilla did. The major revolutionary figure to have an impact in the region was not even native to the Nuevo Santander region. This man was Jose Bernardo Gutierrez De Lara. Gutierrez De Lara was involved in revolutionary activities and insurgencies in Texas, Nuevo Santander, Nuevo Leon, and Tamaulipas. Gutierrez De Lara for a period of time led a group of revolutionaries that not only surprised the Spanish but actually dislodged the Spanish from Texas and under his leadership Texas issued its first declaration of independence in 1813.

Spanish authorities at this point in time were very hard pressed and as in all wars, civilians paid the price for war. Spanish authorities in New Spain had to finance an army to suppress Gutierrez and his allies, and therefore they imposed a tax on the local inhabitants as late as 1815.¹¹ Fortunately or unfortunately for the region after the defeat of Gutierrez, there were no more revolutionary movements in New Spain's northern frontier.

When Napoleon was defeated by the combined armies of Great Britain and her allies, a new dilemma came to the Spanish colonies mainly that now Ferdinand was back on the throne

¹¹Kearney, *Boom and Bust: The Historical Cycles of Matamoros and Brownsville*, 13.

and that the colonial elite could no longer disregard the colonial administration because it would be seen as treason.¹² Prior to this the colonial elite acknowledge Ferdinand as monarch but they would not swear allegiance to the Regency Council and its colonial administration, preferring to say they were managing the colonies in the name of Ferdinand.

Even though Ferdinand was back on the throne after 1814, the revolution that had begun in 1810 was not completely put down and rebel leaders kept fighting for independence, but in a different direction. The initial Mexican war for independence was made up of Mestizos and Indians which caused Spaniards and Creoles to join forces. By the late 1810s, this was changing dramatically as the Creoles were those in rebellion against the Spanish colonial government. Although Nuevo Santander and Texas were not important due to low population and economic insignificance, the rebellion had great impact on the region for the majority of this conflict. Overwhelmingly, this impact was negative mainly because of a lack of security which would only become worse in years to come.

With a large number of Creoles in open revolt against Spanish authority, a major Spanish commander Colonel Agustin de Iturbide contacted with the major rebel leader in the south of the country, Vicente Guerrero. The meeting between the two resulted in the Plan of Iguala on February 24, 1821, which led Mexico to independence.¹³ The plan was flawed at first in many aspects, specifically in the need of a monarch and the fact that it sought the recognition of independence from the Spanish government.

The new Mexican government which was being formed by Agustin de Iturbide and Vicente Guerrero, among others failed first of all to gain recognition from Spain as an independent government. Also, the fact that a monarch was been sought out of the Spanish

¹²Edwin Williamson. *The Penguin History of Latin America*. (New York: Penguin Books, 2009), 221.

¹³Ibid, 225.

Bourbon Dynasty was also a failure as no Spanish prince would accept the throne of the new country. Without a monarch it was difficult for the new government to function as all previous institutions were tied to the monarch first and to the Catholic Church second. The need for a monarch to preserve the social, economic, and religious structures as they were, was evident to many Creoles, or so it seem, especially to conservatives. Bearing this in mind, Agustin de Iturbide was proclaimed Agustin I, Emperor of Mexico, a proclamation made by his military supporters, which was later accepted by Congress.

With this, Mexico including its northernmost provinces of Nuevo Santander and Texas were to change destinies forever. With Mexico's independence a reality by 1821, Nuevo Santander effectively ceased to exist as it was largely incorporated into the State of Tamaulipas.¹⁴ Mexico as an independent country faced the same problems Spain had faced in settling and reinforcing its northern frontiers. The Mexican government had many problems trying to bring settlers mainly into the northernmost province of Texas, as Nuevo Santander, especially south of the Rio Grande River had a substantial population.

With Mexicans unwilling to move north of the Nueces River, Mexico had one alternative; external immigration. Mexicans just as the Spaniards before them did not move into Texas, because it was a peripheral region with little importance, it was inhabited by Indigenous populations, of which many were hostile to foreigners. Only the most adventurous and those who wanted wealth moved into this region. In retrospect this decision seems too many historians as one of the worst made in the history of that country, but nevertheless with a neighbor like the United States, the upcoming collision of cultures was unavoidable.

The American-Mexican collision was unavoidable due to a desire among Americans to expand their country from the Atlantic to the Pacific Oceans. The desire of Anglo American

¹⁴Greaser, *New Guide to Spanish and Mexican land grants in South Texas*, 03.

expansion was nothing new by the time of the Texas Revolution, it had been around earlier in the nineteenth century. By 1803 the United States during the Presidency of Thomas Jefferson had acquired the Louisiana Territory from France for the sum of fifteen million dollars. In the aftermath, of the French and Indian War in which Spain was an allied of France, Spain was compensated by the French for their assistance by granting them the Louisiana Territory. This territory was given back to France by Spain, during the Napoleonic occupation of the country.

American politicians saw the western hemisphere as an extension of power and trade for the United States; therefore these politicians were interested in controlling these areas, whether it is by direct rule or economic controls.¹⁵ Of all emerging Latin American countries, Mexico was unfortunately in the direct route of American expansion, which meant direct control of a large percentage of its territory was an American desire.

The years between Mexico's independence and the Texas Revolution were one for economic prosperity for the ruling elite of Matamoros and its surrounding areas, the ranching family elites, and for a new group of foreigners who came to dominate commerce. This new group of foreigners came from the United States and several European countries. These Americans and Europeans had something which many Mexican elite ranching families lacked, and this was capital. Capital was and is an important tool to control economics, finance, and politics. These immigrants of which the majority were immigrants from the Southern United States and Western Europeans from France for example would later on support the United States war effort against Mexico, hoping that Matamoros and areas south of the Rio Grande River would be annexed. Although this problem of Anglo American immigration was a bad decision

¹⁵Thomas Bender. *A Nation Among Nations: Americas Place in World History*. (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006), 113.

on part of the Mexicans, this policy had been previously approved by the Spaniards because of the lack of adequate settlers from within the country.

External immigration into Texas commenced even before Mexico became an independent country. The Spanish government in 1819 granted the first *empresario* contract to an American citizen named Moses Austin. By granting this type of contract Spain was seeking settlers who would become loyal citizens, Roman Catholic, and would serve as a buffer between Spanish territory and the expansionist United States. In his contract Moses Austin was permitted to bring three hundred American families into Texas, but they had to fit the ideal settlers that Spain desired.

Unfortunately, Moses Austin passed away on his route back to the United States, and therefore the contract passed on to his son Stephen F. Austin. The younger Austin not only had to recruit settlers to take into Texas, but he had to start over and get his contract ratified by the newly independent government of México. Fortunately, Austin did not have much trouble in getting the new Mexican government to ratify his contract. The contract was left virtually intact with the exception that instead of swearing allegiance to Spain the settlers had to swear allegiance to Mexico.

Immigration into Texas over the next decade continued without any major regulations made by the Mexican government. Major problems with the Anglo – Texans did not begin until the late 1820s and early 1830s, when some Mexican officials became concerned with the danger posed by American settlers and the United States.¹⁶

Mexico sent an exploratory expedition under General Mier y Teran into Texas to assess the situation and Mexico was alarmed by it, because the population of Mexicans in Texas was minimal, while that of Anglo-Texans was growing drastically. Bearing this in mind, Mexico

¹⁶Campbell. *Gone to Texas: A History of the Lone Star State*, 116.

passed the *Decree of April 06, 1830*, which prohibited further immigration from the United States and also prohibited the importation of slaves into any region of Mexico. This law angered Anglo-Texans because many of the Americans coming into Texas were from the Southern states, where slavery was legal. Slavery was seen as a way to become wealthy by many of the Americans coming in and led to widespread breaking of any laws Mexico passed condemning the owning of humans beings.

Conflict between Americans and Mexicans was bound to occur no matter if slavery was permitted or not, because ethnicity and racism played a very large role in the revolution led by Anglo-Texans, although it was supported by some upper-class *Mexican-Tejanos*.¹⁷ Slavery, racism, and individual liberty were among the major causes of the Texas Revolution, when it finally arrived in the winter/spring of 1835-1836. No one single issue led to the revolution, but all of these issues were already causing resentment among Anglo-Texans. In the Anglo-Texans view their society and culture promoted individual liberty, at least for whites, because it allowed them to purchase land and acquire slaves.

Although slavery in the view of Anglo-Texans had been previously under attack and even though their ethnocentrism was already firmly established, the final act of provocation was when Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna took over the Mexican presidency. Anglo-Texans viewed Santa Anna a former liberal with great hatred, because he was turning towards centralism, and therefore wanted to make Anglo-Texans subordinate to central government authorities in Mexico City. At this point many Anglo-Texans and their federalist *Tejanos* allies viewed themselves as revolutionaries fighting for freedom in the same manner colonial Americans had rebelled against the British.¹⁸

¹⁷Ibid, 133.

¹⁸Calvert, *The History of Texas*, 4th Ed, 79.

Throughout the Texas Revolution there were two major historically significant battles: the Battle of the Alamo and the Battle of San Jacinto. Although the first of these battles is significant historically, it was not a victory for the revolutionaries. The Battle of San Jacinto which took place April 21, 1836, was the final and defining battle of the Revolution. This battle was a disaster for the Mexican Army, personally led by Santa Anna. Although there are many rumors and speculations about how and why a supposedly superior Mexican Army was defeated by a group of volunteers. For the purpose of this paper, the primary objective is stating that it was a momentous victory for the Anglo-Texans and for a short while their Tejano allies.

Texas history from this point forward, took a turn for the worse in regards to treatment of the native Tejano community. In the aftermath of the Mexican-American War (1846-1848), the United States would finally guarantee the Rio Grande River as the southern boundary of the State of Texas. Throughout the first decades of American rule on the lower Rio Grande Valley, Anglo Americans started to assert their dominance. Many of these Anglo Americans married into elite Mexican American families to increase their own landholdings and power. Although Anglo Americans did not arrive in the Valley in large numbers prior to 1904, they controlled much of South Texas politics.¹⁹

Much of the lower Rio Grande Valley as well as much of the former Mexican territory from Texas through New Mexico, Arizona, California, and Colorado, was under Anglo American domination. Even though much of the territory was controlled Anglo American newcomers in several areas of Texas including the border cities of Laredo, Roma, and Rio Grande City, Mexican Americans were able to retain power, despite the fact that by the late

¹⁹Benjamin H. Johnson. *Revolution in Texas: How a Forgotten Rebellion and its Bloody Suppression Turned Mexicans into Americans*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 34.

nineteenth century Mexican Americans were being disfranchised throughout the entire American Southwest.

In these border areas of Texas, Mexican American leaders were viewed with contempt by Anglo Americans for several reasons. First, discrimination against non-whites was rampant in this era of American history because Anglo Americans viewed Mexican Americans as inferior as African Americans. Throughout the period after the Mexican-American War, Tejano landowners who owned huge grants of land were under attack by a new wave of powerful and land hungry immigrants. Ironically Spanish-Mexicans had been the land hungry immigrants who claimed huge parcels of territory. This territory had been Native American and should have been subdivided between the working class of Mexicans.

These Mexican American landowners, who had, with carelessness, taken land because they viewed the indigenous population as inferior, were now themselves being treated as inferior indigenous people by citizens of a stronger nation. An interesting aspect of all this is the issue of class warfare and the struggle for material wealth and comfort. There has always been a competition for wealth and the early Spanish expansion into this region is a perfect example, just as the American expansion is another perfect example. This competition led those with power and wealth to develop systems to help them maintained their power through a system of political patronage.

Throughout both rural and urban America a system of political patronage developed in many regions, where political bosses were constantly re-elected to control local politics, in exchange for protection and services they would offer their constituents.²⁰ Boss rule in Starr County, against the overwhelming direction of Texas and American politics was to fall into Mexican American hands by the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Speaking

²⁰Marjorie R. Hershey. *Party Politics in America*, 14th Ed. (New York: Longman, 2011), 53

generally, boss rule in Starr County was controlled largely by a small group of closely allied individuals and families, but under their leadership a significant percentage of the population of Mexican Americans was able to vote. Even though this vote was largely directed by the leaders, it allowed for non-whites to vote at a time voting rights for minorities were for all purposes non-existent.

This aspect of political bossism is one of the most interesting and strange aspects of the history of this region. Mexican Americans and other minorities, mainly African Americans, were being disfranchised through all means possible during this period in American history. In several areas of the Texas- Mexico, Mexican Americans were able to take power from Anglo Americans, or at a minimum forced these politicians to share their power. For example, this occurred in Starr County, Laredo, and El Paso. Although this was done in what today are considered undemocratic ways as was the disfranchisement, and this stands as an important accomplishment of Mexican American leadership in the region.

The period of Mexican American boss rule in Starr County lasted from the last decade of the nineteenth century and would continue until 1946, when the Guerra family started losing control over local elections. The Guerra family as will be described in later chapters originated in Spain, but was some of the earliest settlers in what is Starr County. they were originally awarded land grants as early as 1767. With this in mind, this thesis will look at how Manuel Guerra, the first Mexican American political boss of Starr County came to power and how he assured his family's position for several generations. I will also, provide a small biography of Manuel Guerra. In addition, I will prove that Manuel Guerra and his allies were generally defending the rights of Mexican American landowners and to a lesser extent their employees from newcomers

like Edward C. Lasater who will start to challenge the old established patterns and leadership in the region.

The expression to a “lesser extent” does not mean that Guerra and his associates were not preoccupied with working-class Mexican Americans, but simply implies that he and his upper class allies had much more to lose if Anglo Americans took complete control over the region. Working class Mexican Americans would have had a much worse experience had not these landowners stood against Anglo Americans migrating into the region.

I will look at the political history of Starr County from the perspective of Manuel Guerra and those closely allied with him. My thesis will be the first that examines Guerra as an active leader rather than someone who only came to power with the help of James B. Wells, a political boss of Cameron County. I will also look at other aspects of his life and career. I will look at the early education and training Manuel Guerra received, and in doing so analyze how his political ambitions and thoughts started forming at an early age. Also, I will explain how the history of this region is in fact a history of class struggles and how those with more capital and resources try to dispossess those with fewer resources.

Although many historians and political scientists have written about the issue of boss rule in the United States, including writings on South Texas boss rule, little has been done in regard to the Mexican side of the issue. This issue is important because in South Texas Anglo Americans never became a majority, although throughout most of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries they dominated much of the politics. This is in fact very interesting because in all neighboring counties Mexican American landowners lost a very large percentage of their wealth and influence if not an overwhelming percentage.

By looking at many factors from the perspective of Manuel Guerra and by placing him at the center of this study, I will make an important contribution to the literature on boss rule in South Texas. His history is an important part of South Texas history and yet all studies which mention him and what was going on in Starr County only mention him as a side topic. Also it is important because it will look at Starr County society and how racial divisions between Anglo American newcomers and; original Anglo Americans and Mexican Americans on the other hand shaped much of his political philosophy.

CHAPTER III

Racial violence and inequality was widely practiced and accepted by White Texans throughout the late nineteenth century. Racism was largely one sided at this point in history, as many Anglo Americans believed themselves superior to every other racial and ethnic group in Texas and on a very broader scale in the United States. Before the United States acquired Texas and the rest of Southwest, Spaniards and subsequently Mexicans were themselves racist and severely discriminated, against indigenous peoples and those of a lower socioeconomic status.¹

Although this research is related to Mexican American boss rule in Starr County and the racial discrimination faced by Mexican Americans across the American Southwest, it is nevertheless imperative to discuss how White Mexicans and before them the Spanish thought of themselves as members of a superior caste. This is important to the central theme for two major reasons. First, racism and land dispossession was nothing new although Anglo Americans were bringing to the region, although newly augmented Mexican Americans lost vast tracts of land from 1852-1900 in several regions of South Texas.²

Second, the world Manuel Guerra was born into was one that was drastically changed from the one his ancestors had encountered upon their acquisition of land north of the Rio Grande River. Guerra's ancestors came into this region when Spain was economically strong and the Spanish were attempting to settle the northernmost lands of Spanish Mexico. The Spanish at

¹Alonzo, *Tejano Legacy: Rancheros and Settlers in South Texas, 1734-1900*, 24.

²Ibid, 179.

this point in history were doing the same things Anglo Americans would do in later centuries, which was mainly to acquire new territory from indigenous peoples' and convert and enslave these people to a large degree.

Bearing this in mind, this section will briefly discuss early Spanish treatment of indigenous people after the conquest of their portion of the Western Hemisphere; including both Mexico and Texas. Additionally it will briefly discuss the way of life in the Northern Frontiers under Spanish and Mexican rule. Furthermore, this section will trace Manuel Guerra's ancestry back to Spain, describe where the Guerra family settled in Mexico, how they acquired land north of the Rio Grande River, and how racial and ethnic tensions occurred in Texas.

Upon their arrival in the Western Hemisphere the Spanish quickly established dominance their throughout what would become New Spain and several regions of what is now the United States. Their quick conquest of indigenous empires, such as the Incas and the Aztecs was largely due to two factors. The first of these was superior military technology, including artillery and other gunpowder weapons which were something indigenous peoples had never been exposed too.³ Although the Spanish had better and more modern technology, this is not the only or even main explanation of why they defeated indigenous people so quickly.

Perhaps, even more important were the diseases the Spanish brought on their first voyage to the Americas and contact with indigenous peoples. Spain had like the rest of Europe been plagued by one disease after another. By far two of the deadliest diseases Spain and the rest of Europe had been exposed to were smallpox and the Bubonic Plague, diseases that could cause the death of millions of people. Although these are just two examples of the diseases Europe had been accustomed, there were many more. By this point in history the Spanish and other

³James L. Roark, Michael P. Johnson, Patricia C. Cohen, Sarah Stage, Alan Larson, and Susan M. Hartmann. *The American Promise: A History of the United States, Volume I: to 1877*. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2009),

Europeans had developed some immunity to these types of diseases because they had been affected by them for centuries. During their many voyages the Spanish carried them to the Western Hemisphere, infecting many of the indigenous peoples they came in contact with.⁴

Indigenous peoples in the Western Hemisphere had been isolated for so long from the rest of the world that diseases such as smallpox were unknown to them, and therefore did not have any resistance to them. Along with superior Spanish military technology these types of diseases decimated the defense efforts of indigenous peoples and their will to resist. With the arrival of the Spanish the former isolation of the indigenous peoples was forever broken to their detriment. The sea bridge established by the arrival of Spanish forces in the Western Hemisphere decimated the indigenous population so much, that by 1570 a full ninety percent of indigenous people in the Caribbean and Central Mexico had died.⁵

At this point in history before the Scientific Revolution and advances in medical technology, the Spanish in many regards did not know why many of the Indigenous peoples were dying in great numbers. In this epoch of history, many Spaniards believed that they were able easily to defeat Indigenous peoples because of the superiority of their culture, as well as through the grace of their God; the God of Roman Catholicism. With better technology, and the assistance of plagues such as smallpox the Spanish quickly overcome Indigenous resistance.

In addition to the advanced technology and diseases brought by the Spanish, another factor that helped them in defeating the Aztecs was the alliance they established with several enemy tribes of the Aztecs. The Aztecs were by far the most powerful Indigenous tribe in North

⁴Oakes, McGeer, Lewis, Cullather, and Boydston, *Of the People: A History of the United States, Volume I: To 1877*, 19.

⁵Roark, Johnson, Cohen, Stage, Larson, and Hartmann. *The American Promise: A History of the United States, Volume I: to 1877*, 47.

America, specifically in Central Mexico, and many other tribes resented the fact that they were subordinate to them, and that they had to pay tribute to the Aztecs and their Gods.

The struggle to defeat the Aztec Empire was nonetheless very harsh as the Aztecs fought back to the best of their abilities, but their bravery was no match for Spanish weaponry, disease and Spain's Indian allies. By 1521, the Aztec Empire had been defeated, and Mexico occupied by the Spanish. Once the Spanish took control of what they named "New Spain" they showed their true desires, as they started to brutalize Indigenous peoples even those that had originally supported them in their assault on the Aztecs and turned Aztec against Aztec if possible.⁶

With the firm belief in the superiority of their own culture and civilization, the Spanish were quick to organize an empire of slavery and oppression inflicted on Indigenous people's throughout Mexico and the rest of their empire. Prior to the conquest of its empire in the Western Hemisphere Spain had been recently reunited by the strongest kingdoms in the Iberian Peninsula, Castile and Aragon. Spain for hundreds of years was itself conquered and occupied by a people known as the Moors, a people of Muslim background from North Africa.

The new united Spanish Kingdom therefore set out to stamp out all they viewed as enemies and in primary those individuals and thoughts they viewed as foreign. Spain was reunited into a Roman Catholic Kingdom and its leaders were considered the most holy of the many Roman Catholic leaders of Western and Southern Europe by the papacy. With this in mind, Spanish leaders viewed non-Catholics as their primary enemies, especially Muslims and Jews. It was during this crucial period in Spanish history that religion came to be viewed as a racial and ethnic category.

⁶Howard Zinn. *A People's History of the United States, 1492-Present*. (New York: HarperPerennial, 2003), 09

The racial ideology in Spain was that of “blood purity” and they believed that anyone without Jewish or Muslim blood was certainly superior to anyone who had any drop of Jewish or Muslim blood, despite the fact that neither of these are racial categories but religious identifications.⁷ This is very important for the history of Spanish Mexico, including Texas, because the Spanish brought these ideas of racial superiority to their empire.

Spain therefore would force its religion on the Western Hemisphere converting Indians through the mission system. They also forced Indians into bondage in which they had to work to their limits to make their Spanish masters wealthy. The Spanish used several methods to make sure Indians worked extraordinarily hard for them by inflicting severe punishments on those that could not meet their demands. For example in the early colonial period Indians had to work scavenging for gold and those who met the requirements were awarded a copper token, and those who were found without one had their hands cut off and were left to die.⁸

Although Indigenous people and other poor members of society found defenders in some of the missionaries sent by the Catholic Church, these efforts of defense were to a large measure unsuccessful, because real power rested with the elite of Spanish Conquerors and officials appointed by the Spanish Crown. Additionally, not all missionaries or religious personal defended Indigenous and poor people, and in fact some tried to extract more wealth from these already impoverished people.⁹ This was especially true among the leadership of the Catholic Church, those who had some stake in the oppression and subordination of fellow human beings.

As this was going on in areas with large Indian populations, Indigenous people and even their mixed blood offspring in areas such as Texas would in time face racial discrimination and

⁷Mark A. Burkholder, Lyman L. Johnson. *Colonial Latin America*, 4th Ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 195.

⁸Zinn, *A People's History of the United States: 1492-Present*, 04.

⁹Burkholder, *Colonial Latin America*, 4th Ed, 173.

subordination at the hands of Spanish born settlers known as the *Peninsulares*, as well as at the hands of the Creoles, who were Spanish, but born in the colonies. The previous brief discussion of the very broad topic of Spanish racism is provided in order to set the stage about how life was on the Nuevo Santander and Texas frontiers, and to show how the Spaniards viewed others as inferior based on physical differences. When you look at Spanish racism, you find out that what they did correlates perfectly with what Anglo Americans would later do to Mexican Americans, which is taking away land from its original owners and viewing the natives of the region as inferior.

With this short survey of Spanish discrimination it is proper to start discussing how the Spanish acquired land north of the Rio Grande River, including from where the Guerra family originated and how it established itself in such a prominent position in the area then known as Nuevo Santander. In order to understand this we must also look at how the Spanish ruled these territories from initial settlement in 1747 to 1810 in regards to the dangers they faced from indigenous peoples in the region of Nuevo Santander and Texas, and how it differed from the Spanish conquest of Indigenous people in Central Mexico.

The dominant indigenous groups in the area now known as South Texas were the Coahuiltecas in the Rio Grande Valley and the Karankawas along the coastal bend.¹⁰ The peak of their civilizations lasted until about 1523 when the Spanish started exploring the region.¹¹ These indigenous groups formed strong farming communities and dependent on no one for their survival themselves. The livelihood of these groups nonetheless differed, based on the regions they inhabited. The Coahuiltecas had a harsher time than the Karankawas in supplying

¹⁰Kearney. *Boom and Bust: The Historical Cycles of Matamoros*. 07.

¹¹Ibid, 08-09.

their food necessities because they lived in the harsher and drier environment of the Rio Grande Valley. They survived on small game hunting, fishing, and the picking of roots and berries.

The Karankawas depended largely on fishing as they inhabited coastal regions, but also did hunting and gathering to supplement their diets. Before the arrival of the Spanish these Indians formed strong agricultural and fishing communities, but by the time the Spanish started settling these regions in 1747 they were growing progressively weaker, as they were starting to be decimated by Spanish disease like the Indians of Central Mexico. Additionally the Karankawas were being also decimated by stronger invading tribes such as the Lipan Apaches.

The main vehicles for Spanish colonization of these remote areas were presidios, missions, and the families that settled around them for ranching purposes. As the Spanish moved into the area in 1767 they first and foremost sent the missionaries to try to convert Indigenous peoples to Catholicism and therefore bring them under Spanish control. Both the Coahuiltecan and Karankawas were by this point weak, because they were constantly being harassed by Lipan Apache groups, who were themselves being harassed by the stronger Comanches of Northern Texas. Therefore, they had two options for survival. The first option these Indians had was to surrender themselves to stronger enemies, while the second option was to join the Spanish in the mission and thus convert to Catholicism and receive the protection of Spanish military forces.¹² The Coahuiltecan and Karankawas would both eventually “disappear” either because they died due to disease or warfare, or because their descendants eventually mixed with other groups, both Spaniards and other Indians.

This left the Lipan Apaches as the main indigenous group in South Texas, as they had been pushed south by the advancing and more powerful Comanche groups. When Spanish

¹²Jesus F. De La Tejada, Ross Frank, Ed. *Choice, Persuasion, and Coercion: Social Control on Spain's North American Frontiers*. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005), 127.

settlers reached the north side of the Rio Grande River, it was the Lipan Apaches who they would face mostly, but would also face Comanche raids, especially because the Spanish kept their alliance with the Lipan Apaches. Although many Spaniards would settle the area of Nuevo Santander including the Balli and Guerra families, Indian control of most of the territory kept many others from moving in, meaning that the small number of Spanish families coming were capable of attaining more land than they would have otherwise.¹³

Historian Hernan A. Contreras argues that the region of Nuevo Santander was an area where egalitarian views prevailed, but this cannot be true given the history of land acquisition in the region.¹⁴ For example the Balli family and how they acquired huge land grants from Spanish authorities. Families such as the Balli were connected to other important families and were granted huge land grants at no or very little cost, meaning indigenous peoples were robbed and working class colonists were not able to acquire land lawfully. As important as the Balli family was to the history of the region, our main focus now shifts to the Guerra family, whose history is very important to understand Mexican American history in Starr County and South Texas politics.

The Guerra family was no doubt in the top hierarchy of Spanish rule in Spanish Mexico specifically in Nuevo Leon and Nuevo Santander from 1767 to Spanish collapse in 1821. The Guerra family was not landless or poverty stricken in their native Spain, although it is likely that they were not at the top of the hierarchy there. Most Spanish colonists to the Western Hemisphere were in fact looking for wealth that they were unable to accumulate in Spain for various reasons. One of these reasons was the legal principle of the eldest male son receiving any

¹³Ibid, 169.

¹⁴Contreras, *Origins of Boss Rule in Starr County*, 10.

inheritance so that the wealth is not subdivided into smaller and smaller amounts, the only exception was if the widow was still alive or if there was no male heir.

A second reason for Spanish moving to the Western Hemisphere was that it was easier to acquire land there by being adventurous and moving into new territories before anybody else did. The first recorded instance of the Guerra family settling north of the Rio Grande River is placed at 1767, when Jose Alejandro Guerra received Spanish land grants whose southern boundaries were south of the Rio Grande and northern boundaries were north of the Rio Grande.¹⁵ Jose Alejandro Guerra was himself not extremely wealthy as compared to other members of the colonial elite in Central Mexico and other regions of the Spanish empire, because he was what today is considered a civil servant and only acquired wealth through his loyalty and hard work.

Generally speaking, the Spanish elite stayed closer to the centers of power and did not travel long distances into hostile territory. Jose Alejandro Guerra was by no means a pauper, but he was also not destined to become a governor or a viceroy in Spanish Mexico. He was able to acquire land for his wiliness to not only serve the Spanish Crown, but also his superiors in New Spain.

Jose Alejandro Guerra originally was an employee of Spanish authorities and the Spanish elite. His post was that of a land surveyor for which he received remuneration, which was much higher than what poverty stricken peasants or indigenous peoples received, placing him in the middle-class of the region. In addition to his salary for his post, he received the aforementioned land grants which the Guerra family would benefit for generations to come. However, it is important to mention that several members of his family already owned some land south of the Rio Grande River. His importance is that he was the first to acquire land in what would become

¹⁵Evan M. Anders. *Bosses Under Siege: The Politics of South Texas During the Progressive Era*. (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International, 1978), 115.

the United States. Going back to the question about how much egalitarianism was possible in this region of the world poses an interesting dilemma.

Although indigenous peoples were being constantly pushed aside and working-class Spaniards were landless, there was significant mobility in Nuevo Santander during this period. Mobility was not available to Indians, people of African ancestry (although there were not many people of African ancestry in Nuevo Santander), or for the mixed race majority. However, if an individual or family were loyal servants to those on top and were Spanish “enough,” they could definitely move up in rank, from employee to landlord. This is the beginning of the story of how the Guerra family became dominant in the region of what would later become Starr County.

The Guerra family, who in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century came to dominate Starr County and the local Democratic Party, are divided into two main branches of the family tree. The first of these branches are the Guerra’s from Revilla. The father of this branch of the family was Antonio Guerra Canamal who was born in 1580 in Villas de Llanes in Asturias, Spain.¹⁶ Antonio was married twice first to Maria de Porras, who gave birth to a son Antonio Guerra Canamal de Porras, who died shortly after giving birth. His second wife was Catalina de Vela who also gave birth to a son Vicente Guerra Canamal de Vela.

Although the exact year Antonio left his native Spain and moved to Spanish Mexico is unknown, it is known that he moved after the birth of his second son in 1609. Both Antonio Guerra Canamal de Porras and Vicente would eventually make their lives in Mexico City where they would both marry. Antonio would marry Luisa Fernandez and Vicente would marry Leonor de Morales. With the marriage of these two who were brought to Spanish Mexico, the Guerra family became established in Mexico.

¹⁶Jose Felipe De La Pena, Ed. *Los Guerra de Coahuila, Nuevo Leon, Tamaulipas, y Texas, 1602-1900*, 3rd Ed. (Ventura: Family History Publications, 2007), 08.

The first Guerras in Spanish Mexico primarily settled in Mexico City, but from there they started expanding, especially into the northernmost regions of Spanish Mexico, which at that point included the province of Nuevo Leon. The first recorded Guerra family member to have lived and married in Monterrey, Nuevo Leon was Ignacio Guerra Canamar, who married Maria de la Garza Cavazos in 1660.¹⁷ This branch of the family was moderately wealthy in their own right and was an important pioneer family in the settlement of the northernmost regions of Spanish Mexico especially Nuevo Leon and Guerrero.

Although this first branch of the Guerra family are important, more important for this thesis are the second branch of the family who settled in the region of Ciudad Mier, from where they would expand north across the Rio Grande River. As it might be imagined both of these branches have the same origins and would only later become more divided as both families grew and became distant from each other. Jose Francisco Antonio Guerra a descendant of Ignacio Guerra is generally considered the founder of this branch of the family, and through his marriage to Maria Josefa de la Garza this family became important in and around Ciudad Mier, and eventually, in a small region of the United States, specifically Starr County, Texas.

It is from this branch of the family that Manuel Guerra and his relatives like Deodoro Guerra would originate from. Although Jose Alejandro Guerra would be the first Guerra to acquire land grants north of the Rio Grande River, some of his early ancestors in the region already owned land grants south of the Rio Grande. For example the parents of Jose Francisco Antonio Guerra, who were Antonio Guerra Canamar and Antonia de la Garza Trevino, were already the proprietors of *Porcion 66* in Ciudad Mier.¹⁸

¹⁷Ibid, 09.

¹⁸Ibid, 35.

Early Guerra family members together with all the other settlers brought by Jose De Escandon to Nuevo Santander were pioneers in many aspects. These colonists, like many European colonists had to be brave to move into remote places where Indigenous people still lived free and threatened “civilized” westerners. Although they were indeed brave they did commit atrocities against Indigenous peoples in many ways, although atrocities in what is South Texas were as rampant or as clearly recorded as was the case in Central Mexico.

These early Guerra family members were mainly landowners and were mainly involved in cattle and sheep raising, which was the livelihood for the majority of settlers in Nuevo Santander and Texas. Early on most of their land was south of the Rio Grande River, but quickly after Jose Alejandro Guerra was granted land north of the Rio Grande River, other members of the Guerra family received important grants there as well.

Maria Josefa Guerra, another ancestor to Manuel Guerra and the Guerra family of Starr County, also acquired land north of the Rio Grande River in 1767. The land awarded to Maria Josefa Guerra what located in what today is modern-day Zapata County, which lies northwest of Starr County. Maria received Porcion 19 from Spanish authorities, which amounted to over 6,500 acres.¹⁹ The size of these land grants was huge and many of those benefiting from these grants received more than one. Jose Alejandro Guerra also received two land grants totaling 13,000 acres of land; yet others such as the Balli’s of Cameron County received even more.

With this amount of land they were able to start off relatively well off and later on expand on what they received at no cost. It was at no cost because Spanish authorities awarded them to settlers who did not pay for it, but did have to make improvements on it. It is no wonder that after the United States acquired this region many of these families fought with all means

¹⁹Robert W. Fish, Ed. *A Preliminary Index to the Royal Spanish and Mexican Land Grants in Zapata County*. (Zapata: The Zapata County Historical Society, 1986), 44.

possible to retain their lands. As mentioned earlier land dispossession has been an important component in the history of European conquest and colonization of the Western Hemisphere. The descendants of these early Spanish settlers, as Mexican-Americans, later faced dispossession by a non-European nation, the United States.

Although a majority of the population of the United States was in fact of European ancestry, the United States like Latin America was at one point a European colony. In the aftermath of American (1776) and Mexican independence (1821), problems started to arise, due to the expansionist attitudes of the United States and the fact that the United States wanted western territory and Mexico was in the way of American hegemony.

The issue arising from Texas independence and later on American annexation is how Mexican Americans in the southwest and specifically in South Texas were treated. Mexican Americans of both the ruling classes and their peasants were affected in different ways. As we will discuss some elite Mexican American families did phenomenally well and acquire even more land, then they had previously owned, by helping Anglo Americans in their dispossession of middle-status Mexican American landowners.

Although some Mexican American elites benefited from alliances with Anglos the vast majority who owned any land would face threats from Anglo American immigrants. The Yturria family of Cameron County was one of the families who ended up with even more land thanks to their alliance with Anglo American such as Richard King and Mifflin Kennedy. The Guerra family on the other hand, was mostly left alone in their region of South Texas well into the closing of the nineteenth century, when people such as Edward C. Lasater started moving in and agitating against Manuel Guerra and his allies, including James B. Wells of Cameron County.

The Guerra family had alliances with Anglo Americans moving into the region, but unlike others, they did not use their alliances with them to acquire even more land for themselves.²⁰ Before actually going deep into Starr County and South Texas politics and how Manuel Guerra rose to power, assisted in defending Mexican American landowners and, also protected the Mexican American working-class, I will describe the ethnic and racial tensions facing Mexican Americans. The timeframe that this will cover will be from after the Texas Revolution in 1836 to 1882. This section will primarily focus on Texas south of San Antonio.

Problems between Anglo Americans and Mexican Americans started soon after Texas independence and grew worse after the United States annexed Texas as its twenty-eighth state. Anglo Americans had historically viewed Mexican Americans and Mexicans with disgust, claiming that these people were unable to progress because they refused to work hard or be productive in anyway.²¹

These ideals were nowhere close to true. Although some Anglo Americans in the American Southwest and other regions of the United States were highly successful, they only became so by exploiting the labor of their fellow white Americans, and that of African Americans, Mexican Americans, and other minorities. With regards to Texas, Anglos constantly claimed that Mexicans were unambitious and only cared about leisure, and therefore never progressed.²²

As mentioned in the introductory section of this paper the history of the American southwest is the history of racial conflict and class struggles. As Anglo Americans claimed

²⁰Anders, *Bosses Under Siege: The Politics of South Texas during the Progressive Era*, 151.

²¹"In Laredo, the Latin element is giving way to Anglo-Saxon progress. The town has two Spanish-language newspapers. "'El Horizonte'" and "'El Tiempo.'" 1882. Found in *San Antonio Express News*, Reel 24, 2-3, (Austin: Dolph Briscoe Center for American History at University of Texas)

²²Hans Mickle, "Correspondence of Hans Mickle to Express," 1882. Found in *San Antonio Express News*. Reel 22, 2-3. (Austin: Dolph Briscoe Center for American History at University of Texas)

Mexican Americans were unambitious and unsuccessful; they obviously forget to take notice that it was Anglo American ruling elites that in many cases caused Mexican Americans go into poverty or made the pre-existing poverty even worse. Early after the Texas Revolution the destruction of Mexican American civilization was made a priority by many Anglo Americans that would see robbing Mexican Americans of all they had, especially Mexican Americans of working-class status, who had no means of defending themselves.²³

By stealing land from Mexican Americans through several methods, including legal issues or outright violence, during this period of time not only were they making them poorer, they were making themselves wealthier. Some of the major and most prominent examples of this were Richard King and Mifflin Kennedy, who were assisted by upper-class Mexican Americans, including Francisco Yturria, who was briefly mentioned earlier. The dispossession of Mexican Americans of their land was so great that the State of Texas actually sought to curbe the expropriation of many of the wealthier Mexican Americans, who had some resources to defend themselves.²⁴

The problem was that even these legal methods to defend land ownership and rights ended up costing many Mexican Americans their land. Most of the middle-class Mexican Americans did not know how to work the American legal system and knew very little English at best, which meant they had to hire Americans to do the legal battles for them in the court system well into the early twentieth century.²⁵ These American attorneys would charge Mexican Americans extremely high fees that would force Mexican Americans to pay by transferring land

²³Arnoldo De Leon, *They Called them Greasers: Anglo Attitudes toward Mexicans in Texas, 1836-1986*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983), 78.

²⁴Jerry Thompson, *Cortina: Defending the Mexican Name in Texas*. (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2007), 21

²⁵“No. 1555. Henrietta M. King Et. Al. vs. Jesus Trevino in the District Court of Cameron County, Texas.” Found in *James B. Wells Papers, 1837-1926*. (Austin: Dolph Briscoe Center for American History at University of Texas)

ownership to the attorneys who would in turn sell it for a huge profit or keep it to expand their own landholdings.

Criminal activity against Mexican Americans was not only done with regards to material property, many Mexican Americans were killed by lynchings and other brutal ways that did not only include the murder of adult males, but also included women and children. When Mexican Americans were defending their territory and property, they were accused of being the aggressor by Anglo Americans and thus they called on the army to help destroy those viewed as pesky, although many Anglo Americans would deny this.²⁶

Racial violence was accompanied by the expropriation of many Mexican American landowners throughout the period following the Texas Revolution, a process that would later increase in the lower South Texas region after the arrival of the first railroad in 1904. Some Mexican Americans benefited greatly by assisting Anglo Americans take over land from less well-off Mexican Americans. Although many of the Anglo Americans who migrated to South Texas forcibly removed Mexican Americans some especially those in distant places formed alliances with elite Mexican Americans and worked together to promote common goals, profit, and capital.²⁷

Even though the first wave of Anglo Americans formed alliances and utilized Mexican American voters to accomplish their goals, the second wave of Anglos moved in South Texas in the closing decades of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were different altogether. This second wave of Anglos did not form alliances with Mexican American elites and even sought to

²⁶“El Tiempo of San Antonio States that the army wants to destroy Mexicans,” 1877. Found in *San Antonio Express News*. Reel 14, 2-2. (Austin: Dolph Briscoe Center for American History at University of Texas).

²⁷De Leon, *They Called them Greasers: Anglo Attitudes towards Mexicans in Texas, 1836-1986*. 94.

overthrow those remaining in high-status positions as well as the first wave of Anglos which had formed those alliances.

It was during this second phase of American immigration that Manuel Guerra, became the political boss of Starr County in conjunction with old Anglo residents such as James B. Wells the political boss of Cameron County. By the time Guerra rose in prominence in politics, the old established order was under attack by newer Anglo immigrants, which would make Mexican American domination of Starr County of utmost necessity.

With these thoughts, the following chapter will discuss Manuel Guerra's education, early business experiences and his rise within the Starr County political system. By doing so I will shed new light on how he protected Mexican American landowners and their employees from expropriation and racial violence inflicted by Anglo Americans. Although by modern standards Guerra and his allies are considered corrupt, we will show that what he was doing was in fact needed for the sake of Mexican Americans and how it was no worse than all the atrocities committed by Anglo American throughout the nineteenth century.

CHAPTER IV

At the closing of the nineteenth and early twentieth century Anglo American racism and disfranchisement against Mexican Americans in Texas started to become the norm through many legal channels. Racial violence against Mexican Americans was already widespread even though the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo referred to them as white American citizens

The region of South Texas known as Starr County which was formed in 1848 in the aftermath of the Mexican American War was dominated by Anglo Americans from its initial founding until 1896, even though they were a minority in the region. Authors such as Milton B. Newton, Jr. argue that unlike other regions of the American Southwest the transition of political power in Starr County was generally a peaceful affair, claiming that the “Anglo invaders” did not dominate the majority but in fact assimilated into the majority.¹

The argument that Newton makes is partially true as many of the first people to move into Starr County and the rest of South Texas were single men looking for adventure and wealth. A problem with his work is that he does not look into the “progressive era” or at Mexican Americans of a lower socioeconomic status. An easy way for the first Anglo Americans who moved into South Texas to obtain wealth early on was by marrying into elite Mexican American

¹ Newton, *Certain Aspects of the Political History of Starr County*, 148.

families, resulting in the mixing of American and Mexican cultures. For example, Manuel Guerra, married the former Virginia Cox, daughter of Noah Cox.²

As mentioned earlier Anglo American immigrants into South Texas established alliances with elite Mexican Americans and together they established a political system known as bossism, a system which was rampant across the United States especially in cities such as New York and Chicago.³ Lower socio-economic status Mexican Americans in these border areas of South Texas although persecuted by Anglos as in the rest of the American Southwest were able to get some protection and political participation as long as the old order persisted.

An explanation of the “old order” is practical here. The old order in South Texas, including Starr County is the political system that allowed some Mexican American landowners to stay in control of all or some of their land, while forming alliances with powerful Anglo Americans. Manuel Guerra, in his rise to political domination of the Democratic Party of Starr County was assisted by James B. Wells, a major political figure in the lower South Texas borderlands.⁴

This political system worked well from the start because it at least allowed for Mexican American political participation even though it was controlled by the bosses. The importance of Manuel Guerra is that he not only was able gain political prominence, but he actually became the most powerful man in Starr County. By the first decade of the twentieth century Manuel Guerra, and his family were established in Starr County, but before this could happen many events had to occur.

²Dick D. Heller, *Heller's History of Starr County*. (Mission: Dick D. Heller, Jr., 1994), 10

³John T. Salter, *Boss Rule: Portraits in City Politics*. (New York: Arno Press, 1974), 03

⁴Anders, *Bosses Under Siege: The Politics of South Texas during the Progressive Era*, 150.

This chapter will look at the early life, educational, and business experience of Manuel Guerra. We will look at all these aspects and place them into the larger context of the things that are going on in Texas including the segregation and disfranchisement of Mexican Americans, as well as the continued violence. The Mexican American working-class did not have many rights, but as long as Mexican American landowners stayed in power in this region, they offered others paternalistic protection.

This chapter will also consider political history of Starr County from 1848 onward, and the early political baptism of Manuel Guerra. A broader theme in this research is class struggle and the accumulation of wealth a theme that I will analyze. Anglo Americans who rebelled did so because they viewed Guerra and his allies as obstacles to their capital accumulation and greater wealth.

Manuel Guerra and his generation of family members during this era in history were living up to the name their forebears had made for the family. From the first land grants awarded by the Spanish government to Jose Alejandro Guerra and other members of the family the Guerra's had developed into a paternalist family which sought to protect the interests they held.

Guerra's paternalism developed from the necessity to protect those in a lower socio-economic position than the landowners on both sides of the Rio Grande River. Although the landowners would offer protection to working-class Mexicans and Mexican Americans, they did so in exchange for complete child-like obedience, in both economic and political issues.⁵

The paternalist practices of Mexican American landowners in the lower Rio Grande Valley would in fact come into play even more with the arrival of Anglo Americans into the region after the United States acquired the territory. Even though Mexican Americans in this

⁵Jovita M. Gonzales, *Social Life in Cameron, Starr, and Zapata Counties*. (Austin: University of Texas, 1930), 51.

region held some political power, it wasn't because Anglo Americans granted them this power; it was because Mexican American landowners coerced the Mexican American working-class into voting for them.

The number of Anglo Americans moving into the Southwest varied by region, which meant that some areas had a larger proportion of Anglo migrants than others. The persecution and disfranchisement of Mexican Americans started much earlier in the majority of the American Southwest than it did in lower South Texas. These problems in South Texas did begin early in some regions, but in Starr County the real problem did not begin until the late 1890s. Disfranchisement and racist attitudes began as early as the Mexican surrender in San Jacinto. Albeit this is not the American Southwest yet, Texas as a prior Mexican possession was the first to suffer from Anglo American racism and disfranchisement at the conclusion of the Texas War for Independence.⁶

Bearing this in mind, Mexican-Texans who would become Mexican Americans shortly after were the first to suffer the indignities of being deemed an inferior race. Mexican American elites had not long before thought themselves as superior human beings, because they essentially had pure Spanish blood which meant they were in a sense white. With the arrival of Anglo Americans, they struggled to retain their whiteness and superior status.⁷

Although there are many types of power, perhaps the most important really is political power. Political power means having the capabilities of changing society, restricting the freedom of others, and having the right to be prosperous in a society. Without political power, people are defenseless and are a pawn in the hands of those in power. Political power in lower South Texas

⁶Contreras, *Origins of Boss Rule in Starr County*. 14.

⁷Laura E. Gomez, *Manifest Destinies: The Making of the Mexican American Race*. (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 47.

was a life and death struggle for Mexican American landowners. The day that these people lost their political power, was the day that they stopped being large landowners and the day that they became subordinate to Anglo Americans.

Although it has been widely held that Mexican Americans were complacent, this is a great misconception, because even in the years of oppression, they were active in both major political parties, especially for lower political offices.⁸ Early on, Starr County politics was dominated by the Democratic Party, but in other regions of Texas including San Antonio, those few Mexican Americans who actually acquired some political power, did so in both the Republican and Democratic parties.⁹

The history of Starr County can be traced to the formation and subsequent separation of San Patricio and Nueces Counties. The entire region of what is South Texas was in 1845 organized as one county, which was San Patricio. Early in 1846 Nueces County was separated from San Patricio County and the area which became Starr County was included in the former.¹⁰ The formation of this county was an important precedent for the future further division of the region into smaller and smaller counties. The division of counties in South Texas would continue all the way into the early twentieth century.

The first election for local offices in Nueces County took place in July 1846, with results showing that most office holders were of Anglo American origins, although some Mexican Americans were elected to minor offices.¹¹ Nueces County itself, after a brief two year period,

⁸Francisco A. Ruiz is a Republican Candidate for school director, Precinct No. 5. 1873. Found in *San Antonio Express News*. Reel 6, 2-2. (Austin: Dolph Briscoe Center for American History at University of Texas).

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Newton, *Certain Aspects of the Political History of Starr County, Texas*, 52.

¹¹*Certificate of Election, 1846*, State of Texas returns (Nueces County), Elections Division, Texas Secretary of State, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library Archives and Commission: Austin, Texas.

was subdivided and land taken to form several other counties, including Starr County, Texas formed officially in 1848.¹²

Under Texas law every new county government had to be formed by the elected county officials of an adjacent county. The first county government of Starr County was elected on August 02, 1848, which was initiated by the officials of Nueces County.¹³ Before the first elections took place interim officers were placed on major positions. When this is taken into consideration it is clear that officials in neighboring countries already had someone in mind when supporting them for the position. In politics, this can always be expected, because those in power will always select those who they think will work for them and will try and establish a monopoly of political power.¹⁴

Even though the majority of the residents of Starr County at this point and throughout its history have been majority Mexican American or of Mexican origin, their status in the political establishment was not always important. The elections held in Starr County from 1848 through 1851 showed that a majority of political offices were held by Anglo Americans.¹⁵ At this point in the history of Starr County, Mexican Americans, even the landowners and former political figures in the region were not well-informed about the American political structure.

This figures highly in the reasons why Mexican Americans were not well represented in the political structure of this county or in many other counties across the American Southwest. Anglo Americans took Mexican American confusion as a sign of their supposed inferiority, but the case was that no immigrant group assimilates into mainstream culture or politics within a

¹²Contreras, *Origins of Boss Rule in Starr County*, 51.

¹³Heller, *Heller's History of Starr County*, 07.

¹⁴Glenn C. Altschuler, Stuart M. Blumin, *Rude Republic: Americans and their Politics in the Nineteenth Century*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 217.

¹⁵Newton, *Certain Aspects of the Political History of Starr County*, 61.

couple of years. Additionally, in regions as isolated as Starr County it was very difficult to get the people to go out and vote, as was shown in the 1852 election, where results were only available for one precinct, even though six precincts existed.¹⁶

What these early elections also show is the inactivity of Mexican Americans in the political system; the 1852 elections shows that no Mexican Americans were elected to high offices within the county.¹⁷ One significant reason Mexican Americans landowners married their daughters to Anglo Americans who were moving into Starr County in fairly large numbers and the rest of the American Southwest was to gain some protection for their status.¹⁸ Anglo Americans married these young women to gain wealth and status in a region where they could not expropriate Mexican American land so easily.¹⁹

When this is taken into consideration it becomes obvious that the number of Anglo Americans remained small in the region, and in addition to Anglo American immigrants into the region, there were people from several other nationalities including Irish and French immigrants.²⁰ This meant that early Anglo American immigrants could conduct themselves as they would in other regions in the American Southwest or in regards to other minorities. Anglo Americans in these regions of South Texas had to moderate themselves in their racial ideology and not demand too much from the landed gentry.

Election records consistently show Mexican American politicians were relegated to the bottom offices throughout the 1850s and 1860s in Starr County. Anglo Americans used the chaos

¹⁶*Certificate of Election, 1852*, State of Texas election returns (Starr County), Elections Division, Texas Secretary of State, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library Archives and Commission: Austin, Texas.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Albert L. Hurtado, *Intimate Frontiers: Sex, Gender, and Culture in Old California*. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1999), 44.

¹⁹David Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas, 1836-1986*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 33.

²⁰Rentfro, *The Republican Party in South Texas*, 53.

of the methods to keep them in lower political offices.²¹ Throughout this period of history Starr County and other regions surrounding it were under constant harassment by bandits from both sides of the border.²²

These bandits, which mostly came from south of the Rio Grande River, attacked and took away anything that they could. A primary example of banditry is described by Milton B. Newton, Jr. which occurred in 1854.²³ The actual number and origin of these bandits is not clearly known as records only indicate that a group of men disguised as Indians looted churches and killed American soldiers during night hit-and-run attacks.²⁴ In fact, many of them had once called the north side of the Rio Grande River home, but through violence and intimidation Anglo Americans forced them to leave.²⁵

Although Starr County was immune to racial intimidation by Anglo Americans to a certain degree, other border areas adjacent to Starr County were not. Additionally, those areas further north were areas where Mexican Americans were being expelled and driven from their homes by brute force in many cases done by authority figures such as the Texas Rangers.²⁶ Many of those forced to leave had no option, except to turn to banditry to ensure the survival of themselves and their families. This is not an excuse for those bandits, who did live a life of crime, but with the expropriation of much of the resources they had once called their own, Mexican Americans did turn to crime to survive and to combat racial hatred with racial hatred.²⁷

²¹Newton, *Certain Aspects of the Political History of Starr County*, 71.

²²Ibid.

²³Ibid.

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵De Leon, *They Called them Greasers*, 50.

²⁶Gary C. Anderson, *The Conquest of Texas: Ethnic Cleansing in the Promised Land, 1820-1875*. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2005), 07-08.

²⁷Ibid, 12.

At this stage of Texas and American history disfranchisement was the norm for African Americans, but Mexican Americans who were considered white had some advantages over them. Even though African Americans were American citizens as of 1866, they were not allowed to sit on juries in courts across the American Southwest including Texas, while Mexican Americans did have the right to sit in juries.²⁸ The issue of sitting on juries and being able to present in court is an important reason why Mexican American landowners were able to fight off at least some of the attacks initiated by Anglo Americans.

Landowners in Starr County benefited greatly from this and the isolation of the region. These landowners including Manuel Guerra's relatives in the United States had greater success in protecting their land easier than Mexican Americans in other regions. Mexican American landowners in other parts of the American Southwest had at least some sense of belonging because they were able to demand their rights within the legal system. Unfortunately this was only possible for those with the financial resources to utilize the courts.²⁹

Even though courts were accessible by Mexican Americans throughout this timeframe, many Mexican Americans, even landowners, felt frustrated with the inefficiencies of the court system.³⁰ Additionally, some Mexican Americans who were more sympathetic to the plight of working-class Mexican Americans were angered at the injustices committed by Anglo Americans. People such as Juan Cortina were precursors to Manuel Guerra; the only difference was the methods they used to combat injustices. Juan Cortina was among the wealthiest people

²⁸“Many Spanish-surnames listed as members of the Grand Jury.” 1873. Found in *San Antonio Express News*. Reel 6, 3-1. (Austin: Dolph Briscoe Center for American History at University of Texas).

²⁹“The Rodriguez case, in which Joseph Rodriguez is accused of voting twice in the same election, is to be heard by the state supreme court.” 1873. Found in *San Antonio Express News*. Reel 6, 2-1, (Austin: Dolph Briscoe Center for American History at University of Texas).

³⁰Thompson, *Cortina: Defending the Mexican Name in Texas*, 31.

in the lower region of South Texas and violently rebelled against Anglo American injustices against Mexican Americans of a lower socio-economic status.³¹

Resentment and anger had to do a lot with the Cortina insurgency in the 1850s and 1860s, an insurgency that would spread across the entire border areas of lower South Texas and reach Starr County. The social inequality theme is at the forefront of the Cortina insurgency because he was against the oppression inflicted on working-class Mexican Americans by Anglo Americans. Cortina was angered because Mexican Americans of all classes were losing their lands. Paternalistic attitudes fueled much of his anger, because as a Mexican American landowner he felt it was his duty to protect his employees.³²

Even though Cortina was one of the wealthiest landowners in South Texas through inheritance he decided to stand and fight against the expropriation of many of his less fortunate compatriots. He constantly viewed Anglo Americans such as Charles Stillman, Richard King, and others who amassed large tracts of land and capital “on the ruins of Spanish land grants.”³³

A difference between Juan Cortina and Manuel Guerra, who would later rise to the defense of Mexican American landowners in Starr County and of the Mexican American working-class, was that Cortina used violence to defend Mexican American rights, while Manuel Guerra used politics and alliances.³⁴ Although most of the Cortina violence was focused on the lower Rio Grande River, mainly in and around Cameron County it did spread into areas in the northern parts of the Rio Grande.³⁵

³¹Ibid, 33.

³²Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas, 1836-1986*, 51.

³³Thompson, *Cortina: Defending the Mexican Name in Texas*, 20.

³⁴Ibid, 77.

³⁵Ibid, 109.

Historians such as Jerry Thompson try to portray Juan Cortina as an exemplary defender of Mexican American rights but it is likely that people like him in the end caused more damage than healing. He met violence with violence because he viewed Anglo Americans as expropriating and persecuting his people, but in turn Anglo Americans responded with even more violence, which in many cases was directed against the people he was supposed to be defending.³⁶

Manuel Guerra's methods of defense were thus more effective as I will describe because instead of starting armed insurrection he formed alliances. But these alliances weren't alliances like those established by Francisco Yturria, who benefited from the detriment of other Mexican American landowners.³⁷ Guerra's alliances protected Mexican American landowners and through them they protected their employees through the paternalistic views they held. Additionally, Guerra would turn out to be an astute politician, not because he was more intelligent than others but because he read about the situation and of the consequences Mexicans faced in newspapers, especially during his year in Corpus Christi.³⁸

From humble beginnings Francisco Yturria would become one of the most prominent Mexican American landowners and politicians in the Rio Grande Valley benefiting immensely from alliances with Anglo Americans.³⁹ During the first decade of twentieth century, Yturria would add an additional 13,000 acres of land to his ranching and commercial empire.⁴⁰ Yturria, unlike Cortina and Guerra did not even attempt to defend Mexican American rights, not even the

³⁶Ibid. 74.

³⁷Jane C. Monday, Frances B. Vick. *Petra's Legacy: The South Texas Ranching Empire of Petra Vela and Mifflin Kenedy*. (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2007), 145.

³⁸"Corpus Christi, May 13: Mexicans recently killed four Anglos at Laguna Madre. Yesterday, three Mexicans found hanging in San Patricio County." 1874. Found in *San Antonio Express News*, May 17, Reel 7, 2-2 (Austin: Dolph Briscoe Center for American History).

³⁹Monday, *Petra's Legacy: The South Texas Ranching Empire of Petra Vela and Mifflin Kenedy*, 40.

⁴⁰Johnson, *Revolution in Texas: How a Forgotten Rebellion and Its Bloody Suppression turned Mexicans into Americans*, 40.

rights of landowners. In the end, he ended up accumulating wealth at the expense of small time Mexican American landowners.⁴¹

Capital accumulation at this instant becomes important to discuss once more, as Yturria and many elite Anglo Americans used their access to capital as their primary tool to expand their landholdings and keep violence constantly flowing.⁴² Francisco Yturria, Richard King, Mifflin Kenedy and many others in the region of South Texas monopolized credit in their hands and provided credit to only a handful of individuals with whom they were sympathetic.⁴³ By controlling all capital flowing from the Eastern United States and Western Europe, they forced many small Mexican American landowners into default and did not provide the loans necessary for them to modernize their farms or ranches.

Although there were several ways in which capital was controlled by a handful of individuals, the way they controlled capital and credit in late 1800s South Texas was by acting as their own bankers.⁴⁴ Yturria, King, Kenedy and others owned their own banks and thus were able to manipulate the lending process. The Yturria family, for example, owned its own bank from 1853 to 1953, in the era before multi-national corporations and banking institutions bankrupted or bought out smaller competitors.⁴⁵

The political participation of Mexican Americans in Starr County, despite poor initial participation was increasing, regardless of the violence affecting the region. Trends from 1854 to 1866 show that Mexican Americans although relegated to bottom political offices, were in fact obtaining a greater number of those political offices, and that by 1864 about thirty percent of

⁴¹Monday, *Petra's Legacy The South Texas Ranching Empire of Petra Vela and Mifflin Kenedy*, 51.

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Ibid.

elected officers were of Mexican American origin.⁴⁶ The number of political offices held by Mexican Americans would actually continue to rise throughout the 1860s.

During the Civil War a number of Mexican Americans in the regions adjacent to Starr County became powerful and well-liked by Anglo Americans who were loyal to the Confederate States of America. Perhaps one of the most prominent Mexican Americans from the region was Santos Benavides of Laredo.⁴⁷ His story significant because he showed the extent of Anglo American and Mexican American cooperation in isolated regions of the state. On the other hand, he was not the only Mexican American to serve in the Confederate army from the region. A large percentage of those registering to serve the Confederacy from Starr County were in fact Mexican Americans, with well over fifty percent of those registering having Spanish surnames.⁴⁸

Referring to the issue of Mexican American support or opposition to the Confederacy we mentioned Santos Benavides as a staunch supporter for the Confederacy. Opponents of the Confederacy among Mexican Americans in South Texas included Antonio Ochoa and his employees.⁴⁹ Ochoa and forty of his men took over precinct three in Zapata County, but his employees were ambushed by pro-confederate forces under Matthew Nolan who was backed by the county sheriff while Ochoa was away in Mexico.⁵⁰

The Civil War years affected politics in Starr County as they did in the rest of South Texas. Local politics were to a large extent pushed aside for national issues such as continuing raids by Juan Cortina and his supporters as well as the threat of Union forces moving into the region. The necessity of having the good will of Mexican American landowners and their

⁴⁶*Certificate of Election*, 1864, State of Texas election returns (Starr County), Elections Division, Texas Secretary of State, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library Archives and Commission: Austin, Texas.

⁴⁷De Leon, *They Called them Greasers*, 50.

⁴⁸Newton, *Certain Aspects of the Political History of Starr County*, 112.

⁴⁹Contreras, *Origins of Boss Rule in Starr County*, 27.

⁵⁰Ibid.

peasants actually help in getting more Mexican American elected into office. Bearing this in mind, the Civil War gave some opportunity to Mexican American landowners to move into higher positions of power within Starr County as well as the rest of South Texas.

In the aftermath of the Civil War, local politics again became an issue as immigrants once again continued to flow into Starr County from the Southern and Midwestern United States and therefore new challenges came to the forefront.⁵¹ Across South Texas during the late 1860s and into the 1870s, Mexican American landowners would start challenging established Anglo American politicians and demanding a say in local government.⁵² Soon after the Civil War Starr County politicians reinstated the old political structure that dominated local politics. The two-party system in Starr County finally reached a mature stage as the establishment of blue and red clubs became the dominating factor in being elected to political office.

The majority of Mexican Americans in Starr County, as in the rest of South Texas, were uneducated which meant that many of them were unable to read and write. Political bosses across the entire United States, but more specifically in regions with new immigrants or uneducated constituents, adopted color labels to aid potential voters in identifying their respective party. Starr County Democrats and Republicans were not the exception and they adopted color labels as well.⁵³ Even though Starr County politicians adopted color labels for their campaigns and elections, a major difference was that here the Republicans were the blue club and the Democrats were the red club.⁵⁴

⁵¹Rentfro, *The Republican Party in South Texas*, 32.

⁵²“Mexican Democrats bolted the local convention protesting a lack of representation. They are thinking of running their own ticket.” 1878. Found in *San Antonio Express News*, September 20, Reel 16, 4-3 (Austin: Dolph Briscoe Center for American History).

⁵³Rentfro, *The Republican Party in South Texas*, 50.

⁵⁴Anders, *Bosses Under Siege: The Politics of South Texas During the Progressive Era*, 113

From the late 1860s to the late 1870s, the Democratic Party in Starr County dominated politics without much of a Republican challenge.⁵⁵ A strange occurrence in Starr County was the way in which the Democratic Party dominated the region. Throughout the rest of Texas and the American South, the power of the Democratic Party rested on the ideology of white supremacy, meaning Anglo American supremacy and the disfranchisement of minorities.⁵⁶ The Democrats in Starr County on the other hand were forced to make concessions to Mexican American landowners who controlled the votes of their peasants, and in doing so the party of white supremacy was supported by a majority of Mexican Americans in a region that still continues to be Democratic.⁵⁷

The supremacy of the Democratic Party in Starr County was first challenged by Republicans in the early 1880s.⁵⁸ Election records show that even though Democrats were in the majority, their numbers were greatly diminished.⁵⁹ The Republican challenge during the early 1880s was however short lived as the Democrats reasserted their dominance in the late 1880s.⁶⁰ The Republican Party in the late 1880s and early 1890s could be said to be in the wilderness as they had little representation in Starr County politics as in the rest of South Texas. As Robert R. Rentfro argues in *The Republican Party in South Texas*, the source of Republican power in South Texas rested in federal appointments during Republican administrations.⁶¹

A Republican insurgency in Starr County would not take place until the late 1890s and early 1900s. This Republican insurgency took place under the leadership of Edward C. Lasater

⁵⁵Ibid.

⁵⁶Contreras, *Origins of Boss Rule in Starr County*, 52.

⁵⁷Ibid.

⁵⁸*Certificate of Election*, 1882, State of Texas election returns (Starr County), Elections Division, Texas Secretary of State, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library Archives and Commission: Austin, Texas.

⁵⁹*Certificate of Election*, 1884, State of Texas election returns (Starr County), Elections Division, Texas Secretary of State, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library Archives and Commission: Austin, Texas.

⁶⁰Anders, *Bosses Under Siege: The Politics of South Texas During the Progressive Era*, 113.

⁶¹Rentfro, *The Republican Party in South Texas*, 63.

who would become one of the wealthiest men in Starr County and in South Texas. When Lasater started his political and ranching empires in 1895, he would come face to face with Manuel Guerra and his allies.⁶²

Manuel Guerra was born in Mier, Mexico on 25 December 1856 to Jesus Guerra Barrera and his wife.⁶³ Guerra was born into one of the wealthiest families in Northern Tamaulipas and South Texas whose ancestors first earned wealth through land grants given to Jose Alejandro Guerra in 1767. Like the children of most Mexican ranchers and merchants, Guerra was fortunate enough to have an excellent education when compared to his lower class Mexican and Mexican American counterparts.

He received his early education in his native city of Mier where he attended a local primary school before moving to Monterrey, Nuevo Leon, Mexico to continue his studies at *El Colegio Civil de Monterrey*.⁶⁴ His focus of study in Monterrey was that of business administration as he was being groomed to join his father in the merchant business as well as to manage the extensive landholdings the Guerra family owned north of the Rio Grande River.⁶⁵ Since most of the wealth the Guerra family possessed originated from landownership and the many opportunities for business in the United States, Guerra was sent to Corpus Christi, Texas to study and gain business experience by working for George F. Evans.⁶⁶

Guerra first arrived in Corpus Christi at the age of fourteen in 1870 and would spend the next seven years of his life in that city.⁶⁷ After he completed his studies and business experience in Corpus Christi, Guerra relocated closer to his native Mexico by settling in Roma, Texas and

⁶²Dale Lasater, *Falfurrias: Ed. C. Lasater and the Development of South Texas*, 97.

⁶³*Corona Funebre: Dedicade a honrar la amada memoria del Hon. Manuel Guerra Banquero, Comerciante, Ganadero, y Agricultor*. (Kingsville: El Popular, 1915), 02.

⁶⁴Ibid.

⁶⁵Ibid, 03.

⁶⁶Ibid, 02.

⁶⁷Ibid.

established his own merchant house in association with his father and uncle, while also making a transition to manage the Guerra ranchlands in Starr County.⁶⁸

The Guerra ranchlands in Starr County and in adjacent counties were some of the largest in the region. Other ranchers in Starr County and in nearby counties were larger than theirs, but some others specially those of Anglo Americans such as the King ranch were accumulated by expropriating Mexican American ranchlands. Guerra's neighbors included families such as the Ramirez, Garcia, and De La Pena, whose ranch was surrounded by Guerra owned properties.

The original grants given to the Guerra family totaled seven. The size and origin of these grants differed depending on which government awarded the grant and in what year.. Some were awarded by the Spanish government, while some later were awarded by the government of the State of Tamaulipas. The oldest grants given to Guerra family members were those given to Jose Alejandro Guerra and Maria Josefa Guerra in 1767. These two grants alone numbered over 19,000 acres of land.⁶⁹ Other important grants were awarded by the State of Tamaulipas to Guerra family members in the 1830s including grants to Juan Jose Guerra, Ysidro Guerra, and Francisco Chapa Guerra, totaling over 60,000 acres of land.⁷⁰

. Unlike the mixed-blooded indigenous peasants in the region, he was able to move well in Anglo American circles. Although intermarriage between Anglo Americans and Mexican Americans was common in the region, in most cases it was Anglo men marrying Mexican women. But in the case of Manuel Guerra and a few others, it was Mexican men who married Anglo women.⁷¹

⁶⁸Anders, *Bosses Under Siege: The Politics of South Texas During the Progressive Era*, 115.

⁶⁹Greaser, *New Guide to Spanish Land Grants in South Texas*, 254.

⁷⁰Ibid, 253-254.

⁷¹Heller, *Heller's History of Starr County*, 10.

As mentioned earlier Manuel Guerra married the former Virginia Cox, daughter of Noah Cox, a lawyer by profession. In addition to being a very successful attorney Cox was also involved in public service throughout his lifetime. Although, he was by no means a major figure in politics or public service, he did leave his mark on the Starr, Zapata, and Webb educational systems.⁷² The marriage benefited both the Guerra and Cox families, although it is likely that Virginia, as most females, did not have a say in who they would marry in this point in American history.⁷³ The intermarriage of the Guerra and Cox families proved to be God-send for the majority of Mexican American landowners because both were powerful families, but it was more important for Manuel Guerra to be accepted by Anglo American society.⁷⁴

With the arrival of Manuel Guerra on the political scene of Starr County, politics would change as Anglo Americans who immigrated into South Texas during the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century would come face to face with a leader who would refuse to yield his power and his land. Guerra knew that the only way to defend his land ownership was by defending other Mexican American landowners and the Mexican American working-class. Even though Mexican American landowners were important for his rise into county politics, perhaps more important, although not clearly recognized, was the Mexican American working-class of the region.

Without the working-class Guerra and his allies would have never risen to political domination of Starr County. Throughout the late nineteenth century Mexican Americans could vote if they chose or were coerced into voting, and additionally Mexican nationals could also

⁷²Arnulfo S. Martinez, *History of education in Starr County*, (Austin: University of Texas, 1966), 79.

⁷³Ibid.

⁷⁴Newton, *Certain Aspects of the Political History of Starr County*, 141.

vote if they declared their intention to become American citizens.⁷⁵ Mexican American peasants were the significant majority of the population of Starr County unlike the population of nearby counties such as Hidalgo where Mexican Americans went from ninety-eight percent to only fifty-four percent of the population.⁷⁶

Political boss families including the Guerra's in Starr County and the Canales in Cameron County used their family ties to get the Mexican American working-class to vote favorably for them and those they supported.⁷⁷ By controlling the largest number of working-class votes who in Starr County remained a majority of the population Guerra and his allies would be reelected. Additionally, Guerra was not shy about using violence and racial rhetoric against Anglo Americans and Mexican Americans who decided to back the Republican opposition.

Controlling Mexican American peasants was important to all political bosses in the South Texas region from Cameron to Duval Counties. Even though Guerra and likeminded political bosses such as James B. Wells of Cameron County and Archie Parr of Duval County used violence to dominate, this was not their major source of support. The sensitivity these political bosses held for the working-class majority of Mexican Americans was perhaps an even more important factor in controlling the peasantry.⁷⁸

Even though Mexican American peasants were clearly poor and with few rights, a paternalist attitude prevailed. Jovita Gonzales argued that in case of necessity of any kind the

⁷⁵Orozco, *No Mexicans, Women, or Dogs Allowed: The Rise of the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement*, 35.

⁷⁶Ibid, 21.

⁷⁷Ibid, 34.

⁷⁸Evan Anders, *Boss Rule and Constituent Interests: South Texas during the Progressive Era*. Box J: Government, Library Archives and Special Collections, The University of Texas-Pan American, 270.

peasants could always turn to their employers.⁷⁹ The alliance between Guerra, other Mexican American families, and Anglo American families would be brought to the brink of defeat with the Republican Party gaining strength in the region and actually controlling other border areas of Texas.⁸⁰

The following chapter will trace Manuel Guerra's rise to political domination of Starr County, the assault on his rule by Edward C. Lasater and will analyze and prove that the common consensus among many prior historians of Guerra are false. Guerra as slightly mentioned in the first chapter was in fact a political boss who controlled politics with an iron first, but under the circumstances it was the only way to protect Mexican American landowners and their peasants from worse conditions. We will look at primary sources including electoral records, newspapers such as *the San Antonio Express News*, both of which we have used so far. Additionally, we will look at more localized newspapers including the *Brownsville Herald* and the *Democrata Fronterizo*.

We will also look at the Starr County Declaration records to identify the numbers of Mexicans declaring their intention to become American citizens. Lastly we will trace how the disfranchisement of Mexican Americans in the manner in which African Americans were treated had finally arrive and how Starr County survived this new oppressive measures initiated by the State of Texas.

⁷⁹Gonzales, *Social Life in Cameron, Starr, and Zapata Counties*, 50.

⁸⁰Rentfro, *The Republican Party in South Texas*, 48.

CHAPTER V

Even though Mexican Americans across the American Southwest had faced *de facto* oppression and discrimination, oppression of the *de jure* sort was not the reality as was the case with African Americans and other minority groups. For example, Asian immigrants moving into California were prohibited from working in mines by law, unlike Mexican Americans who were forced out of mine works by outright violence even though they were American citizens according to the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo.¹

The oppression of Mexican Americans, African Americans, and others came from two closely interrelated sources. The first source, was economic and the fact that throughout history humans struggle to survive and to advance in society at the expense of the weaker members of society. The second source of discrimination was racial, and this gave a veneer of legitimacy to the murder and expropriation of their land.²

South Texas Mexican American landowners early on were able to withstand American rule largely due to the isolation of the region and to the small number of Anglo Americans migrating into South Texas counties. While Mexican Americans in many regions of the Southwest, including many regions of Texas were being disfranchised, Mexican Americans in Cameron and Starr Counties controlled almost fifty percent of the elected offices, albeit lower

¹Johnson, *Revolution in Texas: How a Forgotten Rebellion and Its Bloody Suppression Turned Mexicans into Americans*, 11.

²Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 210.

ranking political offices.³ By 1890 the Rio Grande Valley's population had increased to approximately 50,000 up from 8,500 thirty years earlier.⁴ This is the general population including Anglo Americans, Mexican Americans, and the few African Americans residing in the region.

The uneducated peasantry across South Texas was the most important element in Mexican American landowners holding political office. Large *haciendas* dotted the landscape of Cameron, Starr, and Duval Counties and within these extensive landholdings lived the majority of uneducated Mexican Americans, whose votes were manipulated by their bosses. These Mexican American landowners offered protection from violence and hunger to their peasants in exchange for loyalty and obedience. Landowners in the region were to a large extent lucky because the first wave of Anglo American migrants were few in number and actually integrated into upper class Mexican American society very well.⁵

Anglo politicians who formed early alliances with Mexican American landowners, would keep those alliances in the face of a new wave of aggressive Anglo migrants because they depended on the votes of the Mexican American working-class for their power. The only way of keeping it was by providing services to Mexican American ranchers who controlled the votes of the peasantry, a fact of life in South Texas from the 1860s through the middle of the 1890s.⁶

Individuals such as Manuel Guerra and his relatives including Deodoro Guerra and Jacobo Guerra were members of the Mexican American landowning class closely allied to the

³*Certificate of Election*, 1878, State of Texas election returns (Cameron County), Elections Division, Texas Secretary of State, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library Archives and Commission: Austin, Texas.

⁴Joe R. Baulch, *James B. Wells: South Texas Economic and Political Leader*. (Ann Arbor: Xerox University Microfilms, 1975), 75.

⁵Johnson, *Revolution in Texas: How a Forgotten Rebellion and Its Bloody Suppression Turned Mexicans into Americans*, 13.

⁶Anders, *Boss Rule and Constituent Interests: South Texas Politics During the Progressive Era*, 274.

political bosses who courted the landed elites and their peasants. Some of the most important allies the Guerra's acquired were James B. Wells of Cameron County who throughout most of his life dominated the South Texas Democratic Party, and Archie Parr of Duval County who, like Wells and Guerra, controlled his county with an iron fist, but also provided important services.

The rising capitalist system of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was a major cause of Mexican American disadvantage in land ownership and in political rights. Even though South Texas was within the boundaries of the United States, and its inhabitants were granted American citizenship, I argue that during the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first two decades of the twentieth century, South Texas experienced economic colonization.

Anglo Americans who continued to migrate into Starr County and South Texas had the advantage of having access to capital to make extensive purchases of land, implements, and seeds to build up their farms, unlike Mexican American landowners. Larger Mexican American landowners such as Manuel Guerra, Francisco De La Pena, and others survived discrimination because of the alliances they formed with powerful Anglo Americans. These Mexican American landowners had difficulty accessing adequate levels of capital, but were far better off than their less fortunate counterparts. Before going into the economic and segregationist political fronts, we will discuss Manuel Guerra's entry into politics and look briefly at his allies, James B. Wells and Archie Parr.

As mentioned in the preceding chapter Manuel Guerra had a very good education in childhood and early adulthood and was groomed to become a leader. In his native Mexico, Guerra, was a member of the Civil Guard for a short period of time, a position he viewed as his patriotic duty in order to protect his country and his compatriots from both domestic and foreign

enemies.⁷ So Guerra had advantages in becoming a major political and business leader in Starr County, but his importance was that he controlled the county Democratic Party, a great achievement for a Mexican American in the United States.

His political activities were aided by his many successful enterprises.⁸ He expanded his inherited wealth as his merchant house became the largest and most influential in Starr County.⁹ Guerra was involved in several other businesses throughout his lifetime including processing cotton through the cotton mill he owned.¹⁰ In this role he worked with many farmers who planted cotton in and around the areas of Roma and Rio Grande City.

Anglo American farmers in the region, with small or large landholdings, therefore needed Guerra to process their cotton and to get supplies through his merchant house.¹¹ In fact, Guerra is given credit for sustaining the production of cotton in Starr County, as he owned the only cotton mill in the county.¹² The success he had in business and the community led him to be well-respected by both affluent Anglo American and Mexican American families. Mexican American peasants respected him, as their protector. His successes in business would also engender hatred against him, especially among people who would have little influence in Roma and Rio Grande City where county government and finances were controlled by the Democratic Party machinery of which he was the leader. Perhaps the best known individual who disliked Guerra would be Edward C. Lasater.

The ranchlands Manuel Guerra managed were not expanded as most land was already held in private ownership in Starr County. In addition to building a local merchant empire,

⁷*Corona Funebre*, 03.

⁸“Manuel Guerra, Dealing in Livestock and Stock Raiser: Roma, Texas 4/16/1900.” Found in *James B. Wells Papers, 1837-1926*, Legal Materials, 1900-1910, Box 2H166 (Austin: Dolph Briscoe Center for American History)

⁹*Corona Funebre*, 05.

¹⁰“First Bale 1905 Crop.” 1905. Found in *Brownsville Daily Herald*, June 27 (Denton: University of North Texas).

¹¹*Ibid.*

¹²*Ibid.*

Guerra was also a successful minor banker.¹³ Undoubtedly, a major reason he survived the wave of new immigrants and capital flowing into South Texas during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was his successful status as a banker. However in the decades to come small and middle-size bankers would be absorbed by larger financial organizations.¹⁴

With banking, ranchlands, and merchant businesses under his belt, Guerra stood in an extraordinary position to shape the future of Starr County and of the Democratic Party in the county. Although he conquered the business world of Starr County, Guerra felt insecure with his holdings because he had watched Mexican Americans lose their entire livelihoods in other regions when they lost political control. This constant fear would make him understand that to be able to protect himself and other Mexican Americans; he needed to control the political machine in Starr County.

Even though the number of Mexican Americans in political offices had increased throughout the later part of the nineteenth century in Starr County, he knew they only held minor political offices and until 1876 accounted for less than fifty percent of office holders.¹⁵ The protection of Mexican American lands, businesses, and of the peasantry would become rallying calls for his personal control of Starr County politics. Guerra was a man of his word and genuinely desired that other Mexican Americans prospered and lived in peace.

The patronage political system, known as boss politics, provided a clear guideline for what Guerra aspired too. He wanted control of the county offices not only for the sake of their

¹³*Corona Funebre*, 03.

¹⁴Robert C. Tucker, Ed. *The Lenin Anthology*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1975), 214.

¹⁵*Certificate of Election*, 1876, State of Texas elections returns (Starr County), Elections Division, Texas Secretary of State, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library Archives and Commission: Austin, Texas.

power, but give out benefits to supporters and to prevent the influence of individuals such as Edward C. Lasater and the “reformers” who moved into the region in the early twentieth century.

Archie Parr and James B. Wells, who controlled Duval and Cameron Counties respectively, were Guerra’s role models. Even though these are primary examples in the South Texas context, political bossism existed across the entire United States, especially in large developed cities. Some historians including Evan M. Anders have argued that Guerra only reached his position because Wells allowed him to, but his argument is nowhere proven. Wells was definitely a powerful man with a law degree, wealth, and connections, all attributes Guerra had acquired throughout his career. To better understand the methods used by Guerra I will briefly discuss how Wells and Parr controlled their respective counties.

Although both these men were important in South Texas politics, James B. Wells was much more closely connected to Manuel Guerra and the Starr County Democratic Party than Archie Parr ever was, therefore I will look at him first and in more detail. Although much could be said about the formative years of James B. Wells that is not the main point of this small narrative of his life. Throughout most of his later life, he dominated the Cameron County Democratic Party and the politics of South Texas.

An early alliance Wells made was with his then superior Stephen Powers, both of whom had political ambitions, but were hampered by the Republican control of the Brazos Santiago Customs House.¹⁶ The Customs House was important for Republicans in South Texas because it provided them some power in South Texas, which otherwise would have been nonexistent and an obstacle facing the Democratic Party machinery who ran the county governments in the region. The positions within the Customs House were appointed, therefore, when Republicans

¹⁶Baulch, *James B. Wells: South Texas Economic and Political Leader*, 81.

held the presidency local Republicans held control of the positions and of the patronage it came with.¹⁷

Although control of the Customs House almost always eluded Wells throughout his control of South Texas politics he nevertheless kept control of Cameron County until 1910, when progressive forces overpowered his base of power, the Mexican American electorate. With support from wealthy benefactors including Richard King and Mifflin Kenedy, first achieved political power when he led the Democrats to victory in the 1883 Brownsville municipal elections.¹⁸

With his inauguration in city politics behind him, he quickly used his influence among ranchers and local merchants to increase his power over Cameron County and the rest of South Texas. Evan M. Anders and other historians such as Joe R. Baulch consider him the dominant figure in South Texas politics and rightly so, I make no argument to the contrary. However, they are stating he picked Manuel Guerra as the political leader of Starr County, when in fact Guerra was already a political force based on his vested economic interests.¹⁹

Guerra had the influence and connections within Starr County to achieve power without assistance from Wells. What could be correctly attributed to Wells is the fact that both he and Guerra benefited from the alliance they formed in the late 1880s, until the former lost control over his county and the Democratic Party machine of South Texas. Next I turn to Archie Parr, another of Guerra's most important political allies.

Parr's political rise in Duval County was relatively slow at first, but for political leaders this is the fact of life in many instances. Parr wanted power and did not want to share it. This led

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Ibid, 85.

¹⁹Ibid, 97.

him to think the same way as Manuel Guerra. Like Guerra Parr sought to get Mexican American ranchers and peasants on his side. He sought out ranchers because they controlled large landholdings, although more Mexican American landowners lost land in this county than in Starr County. Mexican American peasants were like in the rest of South Texas poor, but they were important to Parr's political rise and domination. Therefore, he sought out their vote.

The moment of truth for Parr would come when Anglo Americans killed three Mexican Americans during elections. Parr at this moment had to decide whether to side with Anglos or Mexican Americans. He made the correct choice for himself and his family, "put up your guns, amigos, and let the law take its course."²⁰ Parr feared that if Mexican Americans retaliated with violence, violence would spread across the region and Texas Rangers would become involved. Instead of violence, Parr suggested that Mexican Americans vote their problems away, by selecting him as their leader, from which point he dominated Duval County.²¹

Parr would rule over Duval with an iron fist just as Guerra would Starr County, but would protect the majority of the Mexican American peasantry from racial violence, and the remaining large Mexican American landowners.²² In Cameron County Wells did this also, but early on he did work against some Mexican American landowners and in favor of King and Kenedy interests. Like Guerra in Starr County, Parr was able to not only dominate the county during his lifetime, but passed on his power to this family.²³

The power and wealth Guerra had acquired and inherited by the late 1880s aroused not only the enmity of Lasater and other Anglo Americans, but also Mexican Americans or perhaps

²⁰Dudley M. Lynch, *The Duke of Duval: The life and times of George B. Parr*. (Waco: Texian Press, 1976), 05.

²¹Lasater, *Falfurrias: Ed. C. Lasater and the Development of South Texas*, 115.

²²Ibid.

²³Lynch, *The Duke of Duval: The life and times of George B. Parr*, 05.

Mexicans from south of the Rio Grande River.²⁴ A group of bandits who called themselves “*La sociedad contra los cabrones*” was feared and hated by merchants, ranchers, and Mexican American peasants in the region of Starr County for violent tactics which they used.²⁵ Even though border bandit groups such as these threatened integrated upper-class Mexican Americans, they would wreak havoc among the general population.

Powerful men like Guerra himself feared such groups because they threatened him and others with kidnapping if they did not receive the money they demanded to ensure their protection.²⁶ As a banker Manuel Guerra had the capital necessary to pay off these bandits, but other large landowners who owned wealth in land only were more susceptible to attack by these bandits because they had trouble paying them off.²⁷ Even before moving into the political scene Guerra was disliked by disgruntled Mexicans and by the middle of the 1890s, he was facing disgruntled Anglo Americans as well.

By the early 1890s, almost sixty percent of land in Starr County was still owned by big landowners who were descendants from the original grantees.²⁸ This fact would arouse the envy of Anglo Americans motivated by greed and a sense of racial superiority. They wanted to get the land and they would use force if need be. Edward C. Lasater, unlike Guerra was not a wealthy heir of land or capital, but nonetheless by the middle of the 1890s, he was fast accumulating wealth, the majority of it through land he purchased.

²⁴“Brownsville, October 26: A band of extortionists called ““La Sociedad Contra Los Cabrones”” has lately terrorized a number of Rio Grande City merchants including Manuel Guerra and Donancio G. Garza.” 1887. Found in *San Antonio Express News*, October 27, Reel 31, 3-3 (Austin: Dolph Briscoe Center for American History)

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶“Senor Manuel Guerra of Rio Grande City reports, that the band of extortionists named “La Sociedad Contra Cabrones” have threatened to kidnap him and torture him unless he gives them \$8,000.” 1887. Found in *San Antonio Express News*, October 28, Reel 31, 5-2 (Austin: Dolph Briscoe Center for American History)

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Gonzalez, *Social Life in Cameron, Starr, and Zapata Counties*, 38.

Lasater purchased land very cheaply from fifteen Mexican families, who had been affected by severe droughts.²⁹ These families were forced to sell their land at below market prices, because they preferred to get something for their land rather than lose it because they couldn't pay their taxes.³⁰ The droughts affecting South Texas in the late nineteenth century affected Mexican American ranching families in adverse ways because of their lack of fluid capital, which prevented them from surviving in bad economic circumstances. In addition their lands were sold by court order.³¹

The advantages Lasater had throughout his lifetime compared to most Mexican Americans in general was the fact he was Anglo American and had access to capital in times of need. Lasater also had better opportunities at getting capital to solve his problems. Both he and Guerra had access to larger and more powerful businessmen and women who provided loans to ranchers such as them.³² A primary example of this was Henrietta King, heiress to the King Ranch and other business assets. Both Guerra and Lasater owed large sums of capital to her.³³

Guerra first went into politics in 1894 when he won a position on the County Commissioners Court, a position he would keep until his death in 1915.³⁴ Although the position of a Commissioner on a county court seems relatively unimportant, it was one of the most powerful positions in nineteenth century county politics. These positions were powerful because they were used to keep opposing parties and politicians under control. With regards to Starr

²⁹Anders, *Bosses Under Siege: The Politics of South Texas During the Progressive Era*, 117.

³⁰“Tax Sale: A number of Spanish-Surnames appear on list of delinquent-taxpayers; property to be sold at public outcry.” 1890. Found in *San Antonio Express News*, Reel 35, 2 (Austin: Dolph Briscoe Center for American History)

³¹“Tax Sale: A number of Spanish-Surnames appear on list of delinquent-taxpayers; property to be sold at public outcry. “ 1889. Found in *San Antonio Express News*, Reel 35, 2 (Austin: Dolph Briscoe Center for American History)

³²Lasater, *Falfurrias: Ed. C. Lasater and the Development of South Texas*, 95.

³³Ibid.

³⁴Anders, *Bosses Under Siege: The Politics of South Texas During the Progressive Era*, 116.

County, it is clearly shown in the 1892 election when the Democratic controlled County Commissioners Court overturned the election of the Republican nominee for sheriff, because they viewed him as incapable of serving since he did not speak English, although this was not proven.³⁵

County commissioners in nineteenth century Texas had major responsibilities regarding county finances and to deliver services provided by the county. The main responsibilities of the commissioner's court were to meet the needs of the community whether they be providing assistance in times of need or building roads.³⁶ With Guerra and the Democrats in control of taxation and budgeting, they could dispense the money and benefits in a way that suited them best. This meant helping Mexican American landowners and Mexican American peasants.

His position as county commissioner and his wealth brought Guerra into the control of the Democratic Party machine in Starr County, something which quickly caught the attention of James B. Wells, who wanted an alliance with Guerra. So did Archie Parr. Guerra knew that the times were changing as Anglo Americans were dominating the more fertile lands of upper Starr County, and therefore developed or created the alliances with these men to safe guard his own power.

Some of the first steps Guerra took after achieving power as a county commissioner and after he became head of the Starr County Democratic Party, was to follow the tradition set by paternalistic rulers across the South Texas borderlands and in the United States. He was quick to use county funds to help those who needed it the most, including cash-strapped ranchers and the Mexican American peasantry on whom he and other aspiring politician depended on to gain political power.

³⁵Ibid, 114.

³⁶<http://www.county.org/texas-county-government/texas-county-officials/Pages/County-Commissioner.aspx>

Second, he realized the old method of transporting Mexican nationals to the United States to vote was a good technique for keeping the Anglo Americans in northern Starr County under control.³⁷ These methods were not begun by Guerra or Lasater; they were in fact used since the beginning of the American takeover of the region. The only difference was that they slowly became more important because of all the new Anglo American immigrants coming in from northern states. Using Mexican nationals in elections was so popular that Lasater and the Republicans adapted the method as well, although it was more difficult for them to get the voters, because not many Mexican American peasants were willing to vote for people who wanted to disfranchise them or felt racially superior to them.³⁸

Lasater and the Anglo Americans moving into South Texas hid their racism and discrimination behind the façade of reformism. The Republicans were indeed reformers, but the important question to ask is, what type of reformers? These reformers were not only a phenomenon in the Rio Grande Valley; they were in action across the United States. The era closing with the nineteenth century until the beginning of the First World War in American history is referred to as the progressive era and reformers in South Texas compared themselves to others across the nation. Although reformers across the United States had good objectives, they to a large degree discriminated against all minorities, not only Mexican Americans³⁹

The reformers moving into Starr County were drawn by the vast opportunities available there, especially with those being made available by Lasater himself. Land prices in South Texas were very affordable to those who had access to capital and the land was very fertile in

³⁷“Eagle Pass, October 12: Many Mexicans declare their intention to become citizens for the purpose of voting. Even after declaring their intention, they consider themselves citizens of Mexico. 1888. Found in *San Antonio Express News*, October 13, Reel 33, 2-2 (Austin: Dolph Briscoe Center for American History)

³⁸Anders, *Bosses Under Siege: The Politics of South Texas During the Progressive Era*, 120.

³⁹Orozco, *No Mexicans, Women, or Dogs Allowed: The Rise of the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement*, 29.

most of South Texas, including the northern regions of Starr County. By the late 1890s, Lasater envisioned that his extensive landholdings of 380,000 acres be subdivided into smaller farms both farming and dairy, and he set aside 60,000 acres for this purpose.⁴⁰ Most of the newcomers were thus lured in by Edward C. Lasater in his role as a developer. Credit should be given to him because he did in fact lead the development of what was then Northern Starr County, although he did it by taking advantage of Mexican Americans.

Segregation for Mexican Americans in the Southwest was technically very different from that of African Americans in the South because Jim Crow laws which segregated African Americans were not existent for Mexican Americans before 1896. Mexican American segregation was not a statewide phenomenon but started locally in areas such as Corpus Christi, where in 1892 school officials set up separate schools for Anglo American, African Americans, and Mexican American children.⁴¹

There was no legal basis for segregation in Texas before 1896 yet the first signs of official discrimination were starting to appear under the façade of reforming society. Mexican Americans under the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo were white; therefore, discrimination against them was not legally sanctioned at this point in history. Anglo Americans, especially new immigrants from the Midwest did not want their children to attend school with non-white children. These newcomers did not want Mexican Americans whether they were elite or peasants voting in elections.

Newcomers proclaimed that voting was only for Anglo American citizens even though the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo declared Mexican Americans to be citizens. In their eyes,

⁴⁰Anders, *Bosses Under Siege: The Politics of South Texas During the Progressive Era*, 118.

⁴¹Orozco, *No Mexican, Women, Or Dogs Allowed: The Rise of the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement*, 30

however, Mexican Americans were not entitled to the privileges of citizenship.⁴² Violence in the early twentieth century once again started to engulf the Rio Grande Valley, including Starr County and surrounding regions, violence reminiscent of the nineteenth century.⁴³ This statement might make it seem as if the nineteenth century was in the distant past by the 1910 and 1920s, but the fact was that by the close of the nineteenth century, things were moderately peaceful in some border areas of South Texas.

The relative calm of the 1890s Starr County was almost shattered as soon as the new century came about. Edward C. Lasater and his cohort of supporters in northern Starr County were angered at the power held by Mexican Americans and those Anglo Americans who were their allies. They were angered because the school system in this region remained un-segregated and because Mexican American votes counted, while this was starting to give way in other regions of South Texas.⁴⁴

Lasater and his supporters, which included Mexican Americans resentful over the influence the Guerras held knew that the Democratic Party of Starr County was impenetrable. So they started to back the Republican Party of Starr County in order to challenge the Guerra dominated Democratic Party.⁴⁵ Lasater received his baptism of fire in politics in 1900, when Republicans were decidedly defeated by over 600 votes in major county races.⁴⁶ This loss for Lasater, was harsh, who had contributed large sums of money to candidates; candidates who had

⁴²Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas*, 131.

⁴³“Batesville, June 29 (Correspondence of Deputy Sheriff T. G. Baker to Express): The Reason the grand jury in Laredo is so critical of the Texas Rangers is that politicians there are trying to attract the Mexican vote.” 1885. Found in *San Antonio Express News*, October 27, Reel 31, 3-3 (Austin: Dolph Briscoe Center for American History)

⁴⁴Martinez, *History of Education in Starr County*, 144.

⁴⁵Lasater, *Falfurrias: Ed. C. Lasater and the Development of South Texas*, 108.

⁴⁶*Certificate of Election*, 1900, State of Texas elections returns (Starr County), Elections Division, Texas Secretary of State, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library Archives and Commission: Austin, Texas.

the backing of the Brazos Santiago Customs House and respected valley Republicans such as Rentfro Creager.⁴⁷

1902 was a fateful year for Mexican Americans and poor citizens across the State of Texas, as it was this year that the state legislature passed a constitutional amendment that required the payment of a poll tax to be allowed to vote.⁴⁸ Although this law was to large extent directed toward African Americans and Mexican Americans, poor Anglo Americans were also unable to vote. Starr County politics were clearly shaken by this because the Mexican American peasantry who lived precariously did not have the access to funds to pay these poll taxes.

This law also sent tremors though the Mexican American elite, including Manuel Guerra, Deodoro Guerra, Jacobo Guerra, and those closely associated with them. Wells and Parr in Cameron and Duval counties were also worried about the new situation. This law seemed as a victory for the reformers who had been migrating into the region. Fortunately, for members of the political machines that controlled the region, they controlled county finances and county offices already.

In addition, they held the wealth of the region and through several methods they paid the poll taxes for the vast majority of Mexican Americans in the region. Lasater and his Republicans also paid poll taxes for Mexican Americans and Mexican nationals in desperate attempts to check the power the Guerras held and to break the power of the Democratic Party. By most accounts there were two methods used to pay poll taxes. The most common way to pay was by deducting a percentage of employees' checks, but in more desperate circumstances, wealthy party leaders used party funds to pay these poll taxes.

⁴⁷Lasater, *Falfurrias: Ed. C. Lasater and the Development of South Texas*, 101.

⁴⁸Orozco, *No Mexicans, Women, Or Dogs Allowed: The rise of the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement*, 35.

By paying poll taxes for hundreds of Mexican Americans and Mexican nationals, the Democrats were able to carry the 1902 election with relative ease.⁴⁹ The number of Mexican nationals declaring their intention to become citizens for the purpose of voting actually had grown for almost every election after 1886, with the number only declining in 1894 and 1896.⁵⁰ Mexican nationals brought in by the Guerras were a major factor in the Democrats' constant victories, especially after the number of Anglo Americans started increasing.

In Starr County Jacobo Guerra, Manuel Guerra's brother, was county treasurer and in this position he would not provide poll tax receipts to Republicans trying to disfranchise the Mexican American peasants on whom the Guerras relied.⁵¹ This meant that Republicans would have a hard time proving that their electors had paid the poll taxes necessary to vote. Although this was a thorn in the side of Republicans, they were well-funded by Lasater and other Republicans residing in Northern Starr County, including the city of Falfurrias.

By 1904 Lasater and the Republicans were becoming a large threat to Manuel Guerra and the Democratic Party, that the Democrats held conventions that addressed this issue.⁵² While this was occurring in Starr County, Wells and his allies in Cameron County were facing their own challenges from reformers. They held meetings throughout most of the year to discuss the threat posed by the reformers.⁵³ Not only was their political power threatened, but their lands and businesses were also under direct threat. Additionally, Mexican American peasants who were under the paternalistic guidance of these landowners were under direct threat of racial violence

⁴⁹“Starr County Declaration Records, 1890-1902.” *Texas State Library, Local Archives*, vol. 2, Reel 1016454, LRGV Collection, University of Texas-Pan American.

⁵⁰“Starr County Declaration Records, 1883-1896.” *Texas State Library, Local Archives*, vol. 1, Reel 1016454, LRGV Collection, University of Texas-Pan American.

⁵¹Contreras, *Origins of Boss Rule in Starr County*, 70.

⁵²“Democratic Convention: Met at Rio Grande City and Transacted Business.” 1904. Found in *Brownsville Daily Herald*, July 28 (Denton: University of North Texas)

⁵³“Democratic Convention: A Harmonious Meeting of Cameron County Democracy.” 1904. Found in *Brownsville Daily Herald*, July 18 (Denton: University of North Texas)

from these new immigrants. These new migrants wanted the land still owned by the grantees and wanted to rid the region of anyone who was perceived different. The 1904 elections were again carried by the Democrats as were the 1900 and 1902 elections, despite perceived threats.⁵⁴

The 1906 election was perhaps one of the most important for Guerra, his family, and the established Democratic Party machine in the region. By this election Lasater was willing to contribute even more funding to Republican candidates and the number of Anglo Americans in northern Starr County had increased further. The major event in this election was the defection of Gregorio Duffy from the Democratic to the Republican Party.⁵⁵ Duffy was a deputy sheriff and tax collector, and at this point in his career wanted to become sheriff. But the Guerra family and their close allies did not want Anglo Americans having positions of power from which they could persecute Mexican Americans.

Early on Duffy wanted the nomination of the Democratic Party to run for sheriff, but he realized that this was nearly impossible because of the opposition of the Guerras and of the Mexican American landowning class and their peasants whom they represented. In the 1906 election there were three Guerra family members running for public office in Starr County.⁵⁶ Elections records show that all three were elected to their prospective offices.⁵⁷

Manuel Guerra in 1906 made a statement against Duffy and the Republicans who quickly drew their support behind him, as he needed them to get poll tax receipts.⁵⁸ In his statement Guerra makes it clear that Duffy was a bad example for the citizens of Starr County because he

⁵⁴*Certificate of Election*, 1904, State of Texas elections returns (Starr County), Elections Division, Texas Secretary of State, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas Library Archives and Commission: Austin, Texas.

⁵⁵“La Politica en el Condado de Starr: Una Carta Importante.” 1906. Found in *El Democrata Fronterizo*. August 18 (Denton: University of North Texas)

⁵⁶Deodoro Guerra was running for sheriff in the 1906 Starr County election and Jacobo Guerra was seeking to be re-elected as County Treasurer.

⁵⁷*Certificate of Election*, 1906, State of Texas elections returns (Starr County), Elections Division, Texas Secretary of state, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas Library Archives and Commission: Austin, Texas.

⁵⁸Contreras, *Origins of Boss Rule in Starr County*, 71.

betrayed one political party and thus he could betray the other.⁵⁹ Guerra also made it known that he did not believe Duffy had a chance at winning the election primarily because he lacked the support of Mexican American peasants.⁶⁰

The *Falfurrias Facts*, a newspaper owned by Edward C. Lasater, was one of the main for propaganda vehicles used by the Republicans in their support for Duffy and other candidates. Republicans were very forceful and discriminatory in this election as they claimed that Guerra and other Democrats were incapable of running county or city governments because they were of Mexican extraction and because they viewed them as ignorant and corrupt.⁶¹ The Republicans claimed that their party would end corruption and patronage. They promised to enforce poll tax laws, and school jobs would no longer be used as a political tool.⁶² Even though they promised all this, they still could not win the election. The major reason they lost was because most Mexican American peasants were under the control of landowners whom back Guerra, his family, and their associates.

Important facts about this election were that both sides paid poll taxes for hundreds of Mexican nationals brought into the United States just for the purpose of voting. Both sides, Democrats and Republicans, knew this election was going to be very important and use violence against each other in this election. Lasater and his associates screamed in the *Falfurrias Facts* that Guerra was using violence, but they were doing exactly the same and in fact actually won Rio Grande City, a Guerra stronghold, in this election through the use of intimidation.⁶³

⁵⁹“La Politica en el Condado de Starr: Una Carta Importante.” 1906. Found in *El Democrata Fronterizo*. August 05 (Denton: University of North Texas)

⁶⁰Ibid.

⁶¹Lasater, *Falfurrias: Ed. C. Lasater and the Development of South Texas*, 103.

⁶²Martinez, *History of Education in Starr County*, 145.

⁶³Lasater, *Falfurrias: Ed. C. Lasater and the Development of South Texas*, 104.

Mexican American peasants in other regions of the county voted in large numbers thanks to poll taxes being paid for them by party leaders. When the results came back Democrats won all seats in the county commissioners' court and all major positions of power, while the Guerra family consolidated their hold on both the party and the county. Manuel Guerra was re-elected county commissioner, Jacobo Guerra was re-elected county treasurer, Deodoro Guerra was elected Sheriff, therefore defeating Gregorio Duffy.⁶⁴

By meeting violence with violence and using racial rhetoric, Manuel Guerra and his associates kept control of the county in this fateful year, which many feared would be a year of defeat of the Democratic machine in the county. Anglo Americans had been using racial rhetoric against Mexican Americans since before the United States acquired the southwest and in Starr County, they were victims of this. Guerra proclaimed that his enemies were to blame for the injustices committed against Mexican Americans and stated that if Republican reformers won the election, injustices would arrive in Starr County. By doing this, Guerra took almost all Mexican American votes, only those jealous or coerced voted Republican.⁶⁵

Although 1906 was the closest election faced by the Democratic Party machinery led by Guerra, Republicans continued to challenge the Guerras, as they continued to challenge machine politics across South Texas. The number of Anglo Americans moving into most regions of South Texas increased even further after 1904, when the first railroad made it into the region. Falfurrias, Lasater's headquarters, already had a railhead by this point, but the rest of South Texas did not.

⁶⁴*Certificate of Election*, 1906, State of Texas elections returns (Starr County), Elections Division, Texas Secretary of State, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas Library Archives and Commission: Austin, Texas.

⁶⁵*Corona Funebre*, 09.

The arrival of the railroad into South Texas had dire consequences that resonated all the way into Starr County. The value of property across South Texas increased, which meant that taxes increased across the board.⁶⁶ Lasater claimed that taxes were increasing on Guerras enemies, but the fact was that they were increasing continuously throughout the 1910s for all landowners, including Mexican American landowners.

Mexican Americans across South Texas were the most damaged by this increase in taxes. Everything goes back to the issue of capital and the fact that smaller Mexican American landowners did not have the capital necessary to pay for this increase in taxes. Throughout South Texas, especially Hidalgo and Cameron Counties, courts ordered the sale of their land for delinquency.⁶⁷

With the 1906 election behind them, both Guerra's Democrats and Lasater's Republicans looked with anxiety to the 1908 and 1910 elections, but before these took place Manuel Guerra faced his most daunting challenge of his political career. Duffy, who lost the race for sheriff, was appointed Customs Inspector at the Brazos Santiago Customs House by Republicans. In this position he posed a serious challenge to the Guerra's who had a lucrative business in importing, which many claimed was illicit, but this was neither proven nor disproven. If illicit businesses were conducted by Manuel Guerra, little information is available if available at all; it is difficult to trace this type of information.⁶⁸

What happened in late 1906 remains partially unknown; the only known fact was that Gregorio Duffy was murdered behind a saloon. The blamed for this fell on Manuel Guerra, his

⁶⁶Johnson, *Revolution in Texas*, 31.

⁶⁷Ibid, 32.

⁶⁸Anders, *Bosses Under Siege: The Politics of South Texas during the Progressive Era*, 133.

cousin Deodoro Guerra, and a number of other individuals.⁶⁹ Manuel Guerra and the livelihood of Mexican American landowners and peasants were under direct threat. If he was found guilty, he knew that what was occurring in other South Texas counties could finally occur in his county.⁷⁰ Anglo Americans wanted to disfranchise Mexican Americans and dispossess them of their land by any means possible and they knew they couldn't do that in county politics. So Manuel Guerra, the thorn on their side, was accused of being involved in the conspiracy to murder Duffy.⁷¹

The Duffy case would not officially open in federal court until 1908, over two years after his murder.⁷² By the 1908 election, Manuel Guerra had his hands full as he was still party leader, county commissioner, businessman, and a rancher, while trying to clear his name and those of his fellow supporters accused from the murder of Duffy. Although these were very difficult times for the survival of the Mexican American landowning class, under Guerra's leadership they were resilient. After the jurors were selected for the federal court session, the Republicans were only able to win one important position.⁷³

The reason Guerras were taken to federal court was because the State District court would be too loyal to Guerra.⁷⁴ Mexican American peasants under the control of their bosses again made the difference in the election, as they were all united in their efforts to keep Anglo Americans at bay. They all felt sympathetic towards to the Guerra's who were under attack. Many

⁶⁹“Federal Court in session: Uncle Sam's Mill of Justice Started Grinding today.” 1908. Found in *Brownville Daily Herald*, May 11 (Denton: University of North Texas)

⁷⁰*Corona Funebre*, 10.

⁷¹*Ibid.*

⁷²Anders, *Bosses Under Siege: The Politics of South Texas during the Progressive Era*, 140.

⁷³“List of Jurors selected for next Federal Court.” 1908. Found in *Brownville Daily Herald*, October 13 (Denton: University of North Texas)

⁷⁴Lasater, *Falfurrias: Ed. C. Lasater and the Development of South Texas*, 105.

of them, in fact, felt loyalty to Guerra as he was one of the most charitable landowners in Starr County in helping poorer Mexican American peasants.⁷⁵

In 1909, a non-election year, was when Manuel Guerra, Deodoro Guerra, and others including Gabriel Morales, who was captured and transferred from Mexico, were acquitted of Duffy's murder.⁷⁶ *El Democrata Fronterizo* claims justice was done because Manuel and others accused of Duffy's murder were innocent all along.⁷⁷ With this issue settled, Manuel Guerra could now turn his entire attention to the upcoming 1910 election and the threat posed by Republican reformers still led by Lasater. It was a worrisome period because Wells, his closest and most powerful ally in Cameron County were facing severe challenges from the reformers.

Because of the upcoming election, Lasater proposed to divide Starr County into two in 1907.⁷⁸ The first attempt at division was defeated by South Texas Democrats, who backed Manuel Guerra. Guerra and other ranchers did not want to lose the northern tax base, because doing so would force them to raise taxes higher in the southern regions of the county.⁷⁹

As in the previous elections, Republicans kept proclaiming that they were reformers and thus would provide a better leadership for the people of Starr County. They also claimed, as they had, since at least the 1880s, that Mexican American peasants were unfit to vote.⁸⁰ The Republican reformers said that their votes were controlled and not properly exercised by the

⁷⁵*Corona Funebre*, 06.

⁷⁶"Morales Brought in From Mexico: Turned Over by Republic to U.S. Authorities." 1908. Found in *Brownsville Daily Herald*, February 14 (Denton: University of North Texas)

⁷⁷"El Condado de Star: La Justicia se abre paso. Terminan los escandalos." 1909. Found in *El Democrata Fronterizo*, May 22 (Denton: University of North Texas)

⁷⁸Lasater, *Falfurrias: Ed. C. Lasater and the Development of South Texas*, 108.

⁷⁹Anders, *Bosses Under Siege: The Politics of South Texas during the Progressive Era*, 143.

⁸⁰"Northern and Western Newspapers report that in some areas of Texas, Mexican landowners are still holding other Mexicans in peonage." 1888. Found in *San Antonio Express News*, February 29, Reel 32, 2-1, (Austin: Dolph Briscoe Center for American History)

voters themselves. The Republicans saw this as the way to finally destroy the Mexican American elite.

As historian Benjamin H. Johnson explains, the political machines from Cameron to Starr Counties were according to modern standards corrupt. But these machines had a place for Mexican Americans, whom Johnson refers to as *Tejanos*.⁸¹ The 1910 election was dramatic for all parties involved both. James B. Wells the leader of the South Texas Democratic Party machines was defeated when his colleagues were defeated.

With regards to Starr County, the Democrats again carried the election, but Manuel Guerra and Edward C. Lasater were both becoming weary of their confrontation. By that point Manuel Guerra was willing to see Starr County divided into two.⁸² Lasater's Falfurrias home base was constantly agitating for a separate county ever since Lasater originally had proposed it in 1907. The Anglo Americans who ran Falfurrias claimed that they were living in intolerable conditions and that they were being discriminated against by the Mexican American rulers of the region.

It is true that Manuel Guerra and his associates used racial rhetoric, but this was only because it was used against Mexican Americans across the entire Southwest for over half a century. Even though the Democrats carried the county in 1910, the fears that arose from the defeat of the Wells machine, led Guerra to agree to the political division of the county despite the loss of tax revenue. By doing so he was not only safeguarding his own political power, but was safeguarding Mexican American landowners and safeguarding their workers from the racial violence that took place and was to take place in other regions in the middle of the 1910s.

⁸¹Johnson, *Revolution in Texas*, 178.

⁸²Lasater, *Falfurrias: Ed. C. Lasater and the Development of South Texas*,

So Falfurrias was made the seat of the new county of Brooks, while Rio Grande City remained the seat of government for a smaller Starr County.⁸³ With Starr County safeguarded for Mexican American hegemony, the violence that would spread across South Texas over the next decade would not spread like fire into this county, although there were some violent incidents, but this could not be avoided.

By this time Manuel Guerra was tired of all the struggles he had to face during his lifetime and his relatives such as Deodoro Guerra were starting to take a more active role in politics and business, motivating Manuel Guerra to retire. Deodoro Guerra was by this 1915 still sheriff and in this position he would in 1915 help uncover the *Plan De San Diego* plot to rise up and take the southwest from American authorities. This was also the year Manuel dies and with him, the era of paternalism in Starr County, an era in which Mexican American landowners till protected their workers in the tradition set by the first settlers of the region.

Even though the Guerra's protected their workers, the Mexican American landowning class, and the working-class majority population, they were doing it generally to protect their own interests, so the plot to take the land from the United States was detrimental to them and therefore worked actively against it.⁸⁴ Bearing this in mind, the Guerras were willing protect their constituencies against Anglo Americans, but when Mexican Americans or Mexican nationals threatened them, they would aligned themselves to friendly Anglo Americans.⁸⁵

Violence was a tool well used by Guerra as well. By using violence to respond violence and by providing paternalist protection to Mexican Americans peasants, Guerra and others kept

⁸³Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas, 1836-1986*, 139.

⁸⁴Johnson, *Revolution in Texas*, 79.

⁸⁵“Senor Manuel Guerra of Rio Grande City reports, that the band of extortionists named “La Sociedad Contra Cabones” have threatened to kidnap him and torture him unless he gives them \$8,000.” 1887. Found in *San Antonio Express News*, October 28, Reel 31, 5-2 (Austin: Dolph Briscoe Center for American History)

their lands and prevented Anglo American domination of their small region. The area remained in Mexican American political control throughout the rest of the twentieth century and it is likely to remain so as the demographics show that Mexican Americans are an absolute majority. Not only did it remain in Mexican American hands, it remained under the control of the Guerra family until the middle of the twentieth century, when a so-called “New Party” started challenging the Guerra family.⁸⁶

⁸⁶Heller, *Heller's History of Starr County*, 30.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

Disfranchisement by expropriating Mexican Americans of their land was the norm from the time of Mexico's defeat in 1848 until well into the twentieth century. Disfranchisement took different forms, especially before it became de jure, because Anglo Americans had technically no legal backing to do what they were doing. Once methods of disfranchisement became legal in the late nineteenth century, things were different. The level of discrimination and expropriation Mexican Americans experienced at different levels and with different intensity depended on the region of the country in which they lived.

Several border areas of Texas remained in Mexican American control and much of the land in these regions remained in their ownership well into the late nineteenth century. Starr County, Texas stands as one of the prime examples of Mexican American prowess and intelligence. Early in the history of that county, Anglo Americans did control many of the major political offices and the Democratic Party machinery, but even from 1848-1890 all major Mexican American landowners kept ownership of their land.

In 1848 Anglo American domination of Starr County started and Mexican Americans south of the Nueces River, were able to keep much of their land mainly because Anglo Americans were limited in number and instead of forcing their luck

they sought alliances with Mexican American landowners. One of the most common methods of forming these alliances was through intermarriage. The intermarriage between single Anglo American males and upper class Mexican American females was very common from the middle of the nineteenth century to the 1880s.

The alliances established in the early years of Anglo American penetration into Starr County and other regions of South Texas were by the 1890s under attack by new Anglo American migrants. These migrants, under the banner of “progressivism” and “reform” attempted to remove the power held by Mexican American landowners, their Anglo American allies. The main vehicle for attempting to do this was by taking the Mexican American rights to vote. Voting rights were in Texas under threat at the state level especially after 1902, when the poll tax became a requirement for voting.

Mexican American landowners under the leadership of Manuel Guerra were not discouraged by this, as they had the wealth necessary to provide money to pay poll taxes either directly or by taking it from the paycheck of their employees. Additionally, all county offices were controlled by Democrats which was loyal to Manuel and his family. Edward C. Lasater the main Republican reformer in Starr County sought by all means to discredit and overpower Guerra, but he could not. The major obstacle that stood in his way was loyalty of the Mexican American working-class in the region who backed those who showed they cared for them. Although by modern standards paternalistic attitudes are outdated, or viewed as a way to keep people subservient, in Starr County it benefited Mexican Americans as a whole.

Another anomaly in Starr County was that the Mexican American working-class in the region were not racially attacked or lynched as in other regions of Texas and the American Southwest. The 1911 division of Starr County into two entities was the end of Republican

attempts to overpower Mexican American landowners and Manuel Guerra and the Democrats would remain in control of the county. Manuel Guerra died in 1915, but his legacy lived on as the Democrats in the region kept control and are still in control.

Manuel's son Gustavo Guerra followed his father's footsteps as he became a major Democratic leader in the county.¹ Gustavo was born in the years leading up to his father's rise to power Starr County politics. From a very early age he was like his father in that he too was groomed for politics and business. Like his father, he was very successful in business affairs and in politics he became tax collector while his father was still head of the Democratic Party machinery and was sheriff for a large portion of his life.²

This contingent of affluent Mexican Americans, Anglo Americans attempting to get the Mexican American lower class and working class votes persist to this day throughout most of the American Southwest. It is easy to see when one looks at the current political spectrum in the United States. The Democratic Party of today promotes the idea of social welfare and providing assistance to those in need and even though this applies to people of all ethnic backgrounds, many people including Mexican Americans themselves see themselves and other minorities benefiting from their policies.

As the demographics of the United States continue to change, it is likely that the Democratic Party tradition established in Starr County and other regions of South Texas will be detrimental to the Republican Party, especially in states such as Texas.³ Throughout history the working classes and have been the majority of any nation and whoever convinces them that they are in their interests will win out in democratic elections. In this case it is the Democratic Party

¹<http://www.thehandbookoftexasonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fgujv>

²Ibid.

³<http://www.sanders.gov/events/inquality-for-all>

which will end up winning Texas, but not the Democratic Party who once controlled the state, but a new party which provides essential services to those who need them.

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- “Graytown, March 27: A fifteen year old Mexican boy was dragged to death by a horse.” 1879. *San Antonio Express News*, March 29, Reel 18, 4-2, Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, University of Texas, Austin.
- “In Laredo, the Latin element is giving way to Anglo-Saxon progress. The town has two Spanish-language newspapers ““El Horizonte”” and ““ El Tiempo.”” 1882. *San Antonio Express News*, December 22, Reel 24, 2-3, Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, University of Texas, Austin.

- “I passed through San Diego and found it a typical Texas-Mexican town.” 1883. *San Antonio Express News*, December 29, Reel 26, 2-3, Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, University of Texas, Austin.
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- “Laredo, December 20 (correspondence of Hans Mickle to Express): Between San Diego and Laredo are a number of villages comprised of a few jacales. Also, there are a number of ranchos owned by Mexicans.” 1882. *San Antonio Express News*, December 22, Reel 24, 2-3, Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, University of Texas, Austin.
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- “List of Jurors selected for next Federal Court.” 1908. *Brownsville Daily Herald*. October 13, <http://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph147826/?q=Manuel%20Guerra>
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- “Many Spanish-surnames listed as members of the Grand Jury.” 1873. *San Antonio Express News*, September 5, Reel 6, 3-1, Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, University of Texas, Austin.
- “Mexican Democrats bolted the local convention protesting lack of representation. They are thinking of running their own ticket.” 1878. *San Antonio Express News*, September 20, Reel 16, 4-3, Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, University of Texas, Austin.
- “Mexicans of the city are protesting political bossism and will not allow the “”voting of Mexicans”” to occur in the upcoming election.” 1884. *San Antonio Express News*, October 22, Reel 28, 2-2, Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, University of Texas, Austin.
- “Morales Brought in From Mexico: Turned Over by Republic to U.S. Authorities.” 1908. *Brownsville Daily Herald*, February 14. <http://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph147680/?q=Manuel%20Guerra>

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Jesus Perez graduated from Weslaco East High School on May 2007 and started attending the University of Texas-Pan American (UTPA) in August 2007. His major field of study was history and minor in political science, completing his Bachelor of Arts degree in May 2011. The following August he started his Master of Arts degree in History, with this degree being awarded in May 2014. In his second semester of graduate coursework he was appointed as a Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA) for Dr. Charles V. Waite in his History 3330 General Survey of Texas History courses.

He was reappointed as a GTA for the following four semesters until his graduation in May 2014. While on his last year of thesis research and writing he applied to a number of Ph.D. programs in both History and American Studies, with several of them accepting him, including University of Kansas and University of Oklahoma. He will start his Ph.D. degree August 2014 at the University of Oklahoma, where he would like to concentrate in Latin American History.

While an undergraduate at UTPA he also worked as an Avid Tutor for history and political science a position he kept for several semesters. This experience also helped in getting him hired as an Avid Tutor at Idea Quest College Preparatory in Edinburg, Texas.