

The Trained Eye

Taking a Look at El Rancho in South Texas

You don't have to be a high-end portfolio manager or trust banker when you take a look at New York to know that the city is a center of finance. And you don't have to be a movie mogul in Los Angeles to see why it is the capital of the film industry. No, and you don't have to be a lumberjack to see that the Pacific Northwest is a major producer of lumber.

In each case, the trained eye can discern the general drift. It doesn't take a detailed knowledge of the past—or the even the present—to determine these things. What it takes is a general kind of knowledge and a consciousness alerted to looking for the signs on the land. With this much basic comprehension, all the learning that may follow—all the details catalogued and all the facts filed—fit into the big picture like the proverbial pieces of a puzzle. Yes, it all fits: like magic, the light seeps forth from the dawn of understanding; you get a grip on how things are.

Does it follow, then, that if you fly into Corpus Christi, and then drive 35 miles southwest to Kingsville, and from there south or west across South Texas to the Rio Grande, that you can see what surrounds you? If you take a look, can you see that you are in the land that gave birth to the greatest of American icons—the cowboy?

Can you see that a good deal of the reality and the mythology associated with the cattle industry in the American West started here? Can you see this is actually the home of the range? Well, yes, it does follow—if you have the basically trained eye, a general kind of knowledge, and if you are looking for the signs on the land. Of course, most people don't have those prerequisites, but those fortunate enough to view the John E. Conner Museum's exhibition, *El Rancho in South Texas: Continuity and Change from 1750*, or its accompanying catalogue, will have a very well-trained eye indeed.

And even with a general kind of knowledge and a museum curator's visual consciousness, both of my eyes were opened to a fresh and stimulating view of Texas while serving as a consultant in the planning and implementation processes of the exhibition. The combination of a valid beginning concept; multi-disciplinary expertise; astonishing material culture sources; and oral history,

secondary and original documentation; provided the essential, rich elements for the project. All of those were assembled, manipulated, and managed with outstanding diligence and remarkable excellence by the staff of the Conner Museum, most particularly by the exhibition curator and author of the accompanying interpretive catalogue, Dr. Joe S. Graham.

From the beginning, when University of Texas-trained folklorist and anthropologist Graham conceived *El Rancho in South Texas*, the project was ambitious. Teaching at Texas A&I University in Kingsville, and as a Research Associate at the Conner Museum on the campus, Graham came to the exhibition with a West Texas ranching background and academic credentials and museum experience to amplify his enthusiasm for and dedication to broadening peoples' vision of the importance of two and one-half centuries of ranching in South Texas. His contributions constituted not only the starting point, but throughout, the guiding force of an extraordinarily valuable endeavor undertaken by a small museum in the far southern reaches of the nation. *El Rancho in South Texas* represents nothing less than a whole new way of looking at Texas—absent the Alamo, absent the missions, absent the Rangers—a new way that was predicated on going back to the beginning, and bringing the origins of Texas—and much of the Southwest—right up to the present.

The beginning in Texas was the private cattle ranch, and as *El Rancho* showed, it was “the basis for civilization and culture in the region... a way of life for the majority of people living there, and its importance continues today, not only with famous spreads like the King Ranch but with the hundreds of smaller ones on which many communities... continue to rely for their identity and survival.”* Material culture and exhibit environments in the exhibition were meant to demonstrate for local audiences the history and significance of the ranch, and to inform those viewers how the ranch as a social and cultural—as well as economic—institution based on Spanish and Mexican tradition, began in Texas in the mid-18th century and was transformed to its current modernized and diversified counterpart. To do this, a number of subjects had to be explored: the background of Spanish exploration and settlement in Texas, the

ranch as a Spanish institution and the ranch in Mexico—including the emergence of the vaquero. A chronology of the ranch in Texas is the centerpiece of the exhibition, with sections on vaquero equipment (lariats, ropes, chaps, saddles, spurs, branding irons, and such; as well as prickly pear burners, posthole crowbars, and barbed wired staples). Also treated are less expected but telling and extremely informative sections on local dwelling types (the jacal de lena, or mesquite and thatch huts) and materials (local sillar or caliche block), land and water control, and corral types, many dating from the early-19th century and still to be seen on the land by the trained eye. Modification of land use—from cattle to agriculture—and the combining of Hispanic and Anglo cultures, along with 20th-century modifications such as oil and gas ranching, and modern cattle ranching technology, complete the chronology.

These are only some of the many subjects in *El Rancho's* telescopic viewfinder of South Texas, but this selection is chosen to illustrate the diversity of themes, artifacts, and knowledge that were brought together by the staff and consulting exhibition team to create a highly textured, historically valuable, and innovative learning experience.

At the Conner Museum, one of the principal goals is to document and preserve the history and culture of Hispanics in South Texas, which is the majority population in the region. But recognizing that only the most general knowledge of Hispanic contributions to ranching was prevalent, Graham and museum director Jimmie Piquet set out to make a thorough study and to gather documentation on the social, economic, and cultural implications of Tejano ranching in South Texas. In an exhibition goal that was more than achieved, the Conner endeavored to use the perspectives of history, folklore, visual and cultural anthropology, and ethnic studies. Limited staff did not restrict ambitions. David Garrison, exhibit designer and production manager from the University of Texas Institute of Texas Cultures was brought on board for the project. An imaginative selection netted consultants from other Texas institutions and from across the nation, who were invited to lend their particular expertise: exhibit designer David Haynes (Institute of Texas Cultures); architectural historian Dr. Eugene George, Jr. (University of Texas at Austin); university historians Dr. Arnoldo de Leon (Angelo State University), Dr. David

Montejano (UTA), Dr. José Roberto Juárez (St. Edwards University), and Dr. George A. Coalson and Dr. Andres Tijerina (Texas A&I University); and museum historians Richard E. Ahlborn and Lonn Taylor (National Museum of American History), William Charles Bennett, Jr. (Museum of New Mexico), and yours truly.

Besides supplying commentary and response to written materials by mail, some of the consultants participated in a symposium held in conjunction with the exhibition opening, and most of them had already traveled to Kingsville two times for joint meetings with staff, and for unforgettable road trips from Kleberg County on the Gulf of Mexico across South Texas to the Rio Grande, visiting post-modern ranches as well as non-operating, former ranches. We walked the ground and examined chapels, ranch buildings, residences, fences, and water tank; asked a lot of questions—and answered a few ourselves. Besides research in a number of repositories, Joe Graham interviewed more than a score of Tejanos, all of whom are ranchers or descendants of the ranchers who began the traditions and evolution described by the project. The result of all this work—and who knows how many staff hours racked up in planning, loan arrangements, text writing, brochure and other exhibition element production—seems well worth the effort and the cost.

Support from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Meadows Foundation, and the John E. Conner Museum at Texas A&I University made it possible for an ambitious project to be realized at a highly successful level. *El Rancho in South Texas* is proof that meaningful, innovative, and quality contributions to interpreting the Southwest can be undertaken by on-site, hard-working institutions. And personal experience urges me to declare that it is also proof that there's always room for improving the vision of even an already trained eye.

Note

* Joe S. Graham, *El Rancho in South Texas; Continuity and Change from 1750* (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 1994), ix. This informative and heavily-illustrated catalogue is available from the John E. Conner Museum at Texas A&I University.

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