

Mario L. Sanchez and Kitty A. Henderson

# Los Caminos Del Rio

## A Bi-national Heritage Project Along the Lower Rio Grande

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**I**n Texas we are fortunate to have significant examples of the Hispanic built environment. We can still journey along trails traveled by the Spanish colonists that take us across rivers, mountains, and lands which they named centuries ago. We can attend church services in missions located in cities they planned according to strict regulations. We can partake in a round-up at a working ranch founded in the 18th century. And we can still marvel at the stone constructions and the irrigation technology which enabled Hispanic settlers to sustain their fragile outposts in our Texas borderlands.

In the Lower Rio Grande region of Texas, Los Caminos del Rio Heritage Project focuses on the preservation of Hispanic cultural resources. Begun in 1990, the project links cultural and natural resources from Laredo to Brownsville, Texas, and from Colombia to Matamoros, Mexico, into a bi-national heritage corridor. The corridor concept unifies border communities that have shared a common heritage for two-and-a-half centuries. Los Caminos del Rio uses this shared heritage to foster tourism, education, bi-national cooperation, and community involvement activities as a way to preserve our border culture, stimulate economic activity and strengthen pride of place.

Los Caminos del Rio is supported by a partnership of bi-national public and private sector organizations interested in cultural, educational, and tourism development. The partnership was officially initiated through the creation of a Texas State Interagency Task Force in 1991.

The partnership provides a large pool of experts that undertake an interdisciplinary planning approach, provide technical assistance, and leverage funds from a variety of sources. U.S. project partners include the Texas Historical Commission, Texas Departments of Transportation, Commerce and Parks and Wildlife, the National Park Service, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Mexico partners include Secretaria de Turismo, Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH), and the State of Tamaulipas. Los Caminos del Rio Inc. of Texas and A.C. de Mexico acts as the bi-national, regional grass roots advocate for the project, providing coordination and leadership. This non-profit organization is incorporated on both sides of the border.

On October 30, 1992, these entities demonstrated their commitment by signing a collaborative agreement in Roma, Texas, which declared Los Caminos del Rio as a bi-national endeavor.

First-year activities of the project resulted in *A Shared Experience*, a survey of the cultural resources of the Lower Rio Grande region. This publication, completed in collaboration with the Secretaria de Turismo and INAH, has received numerous state and national awards. Now in its seventh year, Los Caminos del Rio continues activities to make the project tangible to corridor residents and visitors' accomplishments include:

- assistance in the rehabilitation of the Capitol of the Republic of the Rio Grande in Laredo and Our Lady of Refuge Church in San Ygnacio,
- designation of Palmito Ranch Battlefield and the Roma Historic District as National Historic Landmarks,
- initiation of the restoration of the Historic District in Roma, the Old River Pumphouse in Hidalgo, and the Point Isabel Lighthouse,
- completion of the second edition of *A Shared Experience*, its companion teacher's guide, and a series of traveling history trunks which are being incorporated into the social studies curriculum of border schools, and
- production of "Rio Grande: La Frontera," a PBS documentary that highlights the historical and architectural significance of the border region.

Recently, US/Mexico partners published an interpretive guide for visitors and held the first bi-national conference on preserving the heritage of the Lower Rio Grande. Mexico continues to collaborate on the project by sponsoring "Citizens Clean-up and Awareness Days" in Guerrero Viejo and Villanueva; by the start-up of a public/private and for tourism development; by the designation of historic districts in Camargo, Mier and Guerrero; by implementing an urban re-forestation program for the area; and by designating the historic Roma-Miguel Aleman Suspension Bridge as a joint US/Mexico landmark.

Los Caminos del Rio has raised awareness of border citizens, private philanthropy, and federal and state agencies of both countries to see the Lower Rio Grande region as a distinct heritage corridor. This awareness has increased attention and funding by a variety of organizations for the preservation and economic benefit of a unique region shared by the U.S. and Mexico.

For more information, contact Los Caminos del Rio Inc., P.O. Box 415, Laredo, Texas 78042, <caminos@ICSI.net>.

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*Mario L. Sanchez is Director of Regional Heritage Programs, Texas Historical Commission, Austin.*

*Kitty A. Henderson is Heritage Education Coordinator, Regional Heritage Programs.*