

LITERACY AMONG INMIGRANTES IN TEXAS, 1850–1900

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Few studies have focused on the subject of literacy among Mexican Americans in the nineteenth century. Richard Griswold del Castillo's "Literacy in San Antonio, 1850–1860," stands out as one of the few studies of Mexican American reading and writing skills in nineteenth-century Texas.¹ Its limitations are obvious, however. As a research note, it made no pretense at comprehensiveness. It focused on only one town, and the ten-year span it covered is rather narrow. Griswold del Castillo nevertheless touched upon an often neglected aspect of Tejano history—the immigrant dimension of the Chicano experience.

Specifically, the author contended that the increase in literacy apparent among Mexican Americans in San Antonio was due to the presence of the immigrant element. He speculated that immigrants were more motivated than the native-born to adapt to an English-speaking surrounding and so picked up basic reading and writing skills faster than their Texas-born compatriots. By attending school more frequently than native-born Tejanos, he argued, immigrant children increased the literacy of the general Mexican American community in San Antonio.

Implications derived from the Griswold del Castillo study are misleading at times, however. Our study will therefore reexamine literacy among immigrants by utilizing a broader time frame and a wider geographic spectrum. Grounded in a more extensive data base than that employed in Griswold del Castillo's study, it will refine and confirm some of his findings but simultaneously amend and correct the more tenuous observations.²

The state of Texas may be divided into three regions where Mexican Americans were evenly concentrated in the late nineteenth century—South, Central, and West Texas. Such a division makes evident the fact that immigrants in Central Texas displayed a higher rate of literacy than elsewhere. This region, which includes the counties of Bexar, Guadalupe, Travis, Karnes, Victoria, Bee, and Atascosa, was the setting of San Antonio and Griswold del Castillo's study. In the city,

10.6 percent of the immigrant population over twenty years of age was literate in 1850, according to his findings. The number of literates increased to 41.8 percent in the next ten years. Table 1 shows a close correspondence between these findings and our calculations of immigrant literacy for Central Texas as a whole. The regional rate of literacy in 1850 was 18.7 percent and increased to 43.7 percent by 1860.³

To infer from these estimates that immigration was linked to the growth of literacy, however, is deceiving. The fact is that the more literate inmigrantes in the state made Central Texas their place of residence, perhaps because San Antonio lured the more educated of them in a way that no city in the south and western sections could do.⁴ As table 1 shows, higher immigrant literacy existed in the central area for every decade in the last half of the century, except in 1850, when the rates for South and Central Texas were near parity. The other regions invariably attracted fewer literate arrivals from Mexico or inmigrantes who achieved literacy after their arrival in the state. Not until 1900 did literacy, if considered in both complete and partial degrees, begin to even out across the three regions.⁵ By that year, some 34.4 percent of the immigrants in South Texas were at least partially literate, compared with 35.3 percent in the central region and 31.1 percent in the west. Notwithstanding this apparent equality, a noticeably larger percentage of the Central Texas immigrants had achieved full literacy. Thus the levels of immigrant literacy found by Griswold del Castillo for San Antonio cannot be generalized for all areas of dense Tejano population settlement. Such rates appear to have been somewhat particular to San Antonio and perhaps to similar "magnet cities" in the southwest that drew emigrés from Mexico.

The implication of ever-increasing mastery of reading and writing skills among inmigrantes reported in Griswold del Castillo's study also needs to be cast in a different light. In reality, immigrant literacy rates took a dive in all sections of Texas after 1860, and the most visible decline took place in Central Texas, where a plunge of some twenty percentage points occurred. Data from San Antonio show a similar pattern. Between 1860 and 1870, immigrant literacy in the city fell from 39.0 percent to just 17.6 percent. Subsequently, a resurgence occurred, with the result being that the rate of complete or partial literacy for immigrants in the city stood at nearly 57 percent in 1900. Nevertheless, the long-term pattern was not one of continuous increase either in San Antonio or at the level of the state's major regions. Immigrant literacy ebbed and flowed over the long term. Moreover, such patterns may have resulted from variations in the political and educational circumstances of Mexico and Texas instead of from the responses of individual inmigrantes to a new English-speaking environment. In other words, the Guerra de la Reforma (1858–61) and the French intervention (1863–

TABLE 1 Literacy Rates Among Immigrants, 1850–1900

	1850			1860		
	South Texas (%)	Central Texas (%)	West Texas (%)	South Texas (%)	Central Texas (%)	West Texas (%)
Literate:						
Population over age 20	19.7	18.7		22.0	43.7	23.4
Illiterate:						
Population over age 20	79.9	79.8		76.9	53.1	76.6
Can read but cannot write						
Can read and write but cannot speak English						
Cannot read or write but can speak English						
Missing cases (N)	0.4 (462)	1.5 (203)		1.1 (912)	3.2 (343)	(218)

67) may have been more significant in the decline of literacy between 1860 and 1870 than the aspirations of emigrating individuals and families. The Civil War years in the United States could have had similar effects.

Griswold del Castillo’s intimations that immigrant reading and writing skills boosted Mexican-American literacy also invite reconsideration. He demonstrated that immigrant literacy in San Antonio increased nearly fourfold between 1850 and 1860 while the rate for native-born Tejanos only doubled.⁶ On this basis, Griswold del Castillo contended that immigrant literacy augmented the general rate in the Mexican-American community. While our estimates verify his comparison for that ten-year period, more extensive analyses indicate that the literacy level of Mexican Americans was not consistently bolstered by the development of immigrant reading and writing skills. As literacy went into a decline after 1860, for example, the rates for the immigrants fell most drastically. Our estimates for San Antonio between 1860 and 1870 show that literacy rates for immigrants dropped more than twenty percentage points and cut the rate of literacy in half. In comparison, the decline among native Tejanos was only ten percentage points, a reduction of their literacy rate of less than one-fifth. When competency in literacy began its resurgence after 1870, as Griswold del Castillo suggested, immigrant rates did rise faster than those of native Tejanos in San Antonio. A regional level analysis follows the same trend, thus suggesting that the general pattern was that immigrant rates multiplied

1870			1880			1900		
<i>South Texas</i> (%)	<i>Central Texas</i> (%)	<i>West Texas</i> (%)	<i>South Texas</i> (%)	<i>Central Texas</i> (%)	<i>West Texas</i> (%)	<i>South Texas</i> (%)	<i>Central Texas</i> (%)	<i>West Texas</i> (%)
14.2	24.4	12.2	23.1	41.8	13.1	5.5	15.3	9.1
82.4	74.1	80.6	74.3	56.7	82.7	63.5	62.0	64.6
2.2	1.5	4.6	1.7	0.5	3.3	2.2	2.2	2.1
						26.0	11.6	18.0
						0.7	6.2	1.9
1.2 (1860)		2.5 (237)	0.9 (3238)	1.0 (577)	1.0 (732)	2.1 (3590)	2.7 (1164)	4.3 (1508)

most rapidly in periods when literacy was on the increase.⁷ But when literacy was in a downward spiral, the decline was most severe among the inmigrantes.

To further buttress his argument that the Mexican-born were significant contributors to literacy, Griswold del Castillo noted that school attendance among immigrant children in Bexar increased precipitously between 1850 and 1860. His findings indicated that the percentage of Mexican-born children between six and twenty in school grew from a meager 2.1 percent in 1850 to 26.5 percent in 1860.⁸ This increase was larger proportionately than for any other group of school-aged children, either Tejano or Anglo, and Griswold del Castillo interpreted it as an indication of a greater propensity of the immigrants to adapt to the English-speaking culture by developing skills of literacy.

Once more, our data for the city of San Antonio correspond closely with those of Griswold del Castillo.⁹ But as was the case in the analysis of literacy patterns, disparities exist between the school attendance trends implied by his statistics and the patterns that surface over a longer period of time and in a broader geographical setting (see table 2). To begin with, the dramatic increase in immigrant school attendance that took place in San Antonio between 1850 and 1860 appears to have exceeded any growth occurring in any part of the state during the last half of the nineteenth century.¹⁰ The regional calculations reported in table 2, for example, show that the escalation was not nearly as large for the region of Central Texas in comparison to San Antonio, where the

figures for immigrant students attending school were 26.4 percent in 1870, 34.5 percent in 1880, and 25.8 percent in 1900. In South Texas during the same years, moreover, the rate of attendance among immigrants declined almost as dramatically as it had increased in San Antonio. Thus, to infer from the rise of school attendance in San Antonio during the 1850s that immigrants were more motivated to assimilate into the English-speaking Texas culture than were native Tejanos bids rethinking. The overall regional patterns of both immigrant and native Tejano school attendance actually suggest a different reality.

Education in the nineteenth century, it should be remembered, was a local responsibility. Thus school attendance among both immigrant and native Tejanos should have responded to local conditions in the various regions of Texas during different periods. Indeed, such currents of events seem to explain the irregular patterns of Tejano school attendance better than hypotheses about personal motivation among immigrants and natives.

In South Texas, for instance, school attendance rates for both immigrants and native Tejanos approximated 20 percent at mid-century (table 2). This rate was occurring at a time when few Anglos had penetrated the region for settlement, and local political matters remained largely in the hands of Mexicanos. Beginning in the 1850s, however, Anglos arrived in the trans-Nueces area, gained control of local politics, and dominated the region's economic base. Additionally, Civil War activities and the border conflicts of the 1870s disrupted the routine of life and hindered educational development. The latter skirmishes also discouraged school attendance because Mexicanos became the targets of increased Anglo violence against cattle thieves from Mexico. Not until after the 1880s did disorder in the South Texas counties subside. Only then were local efforts renewed to establish schools and other modern institutions.

By the latter years of the century, then, Mexicanos were in a better position to resume their efforts at attending school. They constituted a majority of the population, and their culture gave the region a Mexican social ambience. Mexicans comprised the base of the laboring class, and a small group of *rancheros* retained modest landholdings. Hispanics made up the crux of potential voters, and Mexican politicians were a part of government life. Political machines that emerged in South Texas in the 1890s rested on such a constituency and perforce provided basic services as a mechanism for preserving their hegemony. Although Anglo wisdom held that Mexicans ought not to be well educated, concessions such as those for educational opportunities sometimes had to be made, even though often in token or elemental forms.

Different conditions prevailed in Central Texas. By virtue of accommodationist politics by José Antonio Navarro and other influential

TABLE 2 *School Attendance Rates of Immigrant and Native Tejanos, Ages 6–20, by Region, 1850–1900*

Year	South Texas		Central Texas		West Texas	
	Immigrant (%)	Native (%)	Immigrant (%)	Native (%)	Immigrant (%)	Native (%)
1850	19.0	22.8	2.1	14.7		
1860	6.0	9.3	10.0	11.5	21.0	23.9
1870	6.5	8.4	15.5	20.4	1.9	7.5
1880	11.4	20.8	16.6	21.4	2.9	22.2
1900	18.2	21.8	9.2	18.5	31.4	25.7

local Tejanos following the Texas Revolution, Mexican Americans in San Antonio retained a political role until the time of the Civil War, if not well after. Further, Bexar County was able to offer educational continuity through the Civil War and the Indian campaigns as a thriving center of activity for the state during the era. These two factors explain why immigrant children attended school at disproportionately greater rates in San Antonio than in the other areas of Central Texas. The unique circumstances in San Antonio thus allowed Central Texas as a whole to have higher literacy rates among immigrants than in other parts of the state.

Continued waves of Anglo immigrants into the city during mid-century, however, skewed San Antonio's demography heavily in favor of whites and gradually undermined the political ability of Hispanics to help the Mexican community there. Simultaneously, Central Texas became a most difficult region in which to live. Although violence and lynchings were less pervasive than in the frontier areas, institutionalized racism in Central Texas had the effect of disenfranchising Mexicans politically and prostrating them economically. European immigrants and other non-Hispanics provided the political support and the labor supply so that individuals in power did not concern themselves about Mexicans as much as their counterparts did in South Texas.

As Hispanic political strength declined in San Antonio after Reconstruction and prevailing patterns of Anglo-Mexican relations spread to Bexar County, a corresponding drop occurred in the percentage of Mexican immigrant children attending school in Central Texas. Those historical trends occasioned the increases through the decennial period of 1880 and the decline in the closing years of the century.

Circumstances in West Texas resembled the situation in the southern region. As of 1850, settlers had experienced little success in penetrating this parched terrain, and inhabitants in the region were either Mexican settlers in the El Paso valley or military men engaged in antebellum campaigns for Indian pacification. After the Civil War, the

military returned to the West, not to pacify Indians but to remove them and make way for more intensive Anglo-American development. Emigration from other parts of the state and nation followed, and white settlers spread throughout the entire region, even into El Paso after the 1880s.

West Texas nevertheless remained a region where Mexicans represented half of the population. In the border counties like Presidio and Val Verde, Tejanos constituted significant majorities and performed most of the ranch labor. In El Paso, Mexicans undertook all manner of tasks in the local economy and played a perceptible political role in the city and surrounding communities. The practice of employing the "Mexican vote" in return for machine concessions was as common a political technique in the El Paso valley as it was in South Texas. School attendance rates for Tejanos thus mirrored the history of the West: higher rates in 1860 when Mexicans still controlled many elements of local politics, then a drop during the Civil War years and the era of pacification, and finally a rise to the level of 1860, as Tejanos reasserted themselves with demands for education and other needs.

In summary, Richard Griswold del Castillo's argument that the general level of Mexican-American literacy in the nineteenth century was furthered by an influx of inmigrantes inclined toward assimilation appears tenuous. A more extensive analysis of literacy and schooling patterns does not support the hypothesis that immigrants from Mexico were more motivated than native Tejanos to adopt the language skills of an English-speaking culture. Actually, neither literacy rates nor school attendance among inmigrantes underwent the consistent escalation suggested by Griswold del Castillo. Instead, immigrant literacy and schooling fluctuated both over time and across geographic regions of the state. A more promising explanation for such patterns may lie in the changing political and educational circumstances of nineteenth-century Mexico and Texas.

NOTES

1. Richard Griswold del Castillo, "Literacy in San Antonio, Texas, 1850–1860," *LARR* 15, no. 3 (1980):180–85.
2. Data reported in this paper are part of an ongoing analysis of the federal census for Texas in the nineteenth century. The data base contains computerized information pertaining to some thirty characteristics of more than one hundred thousand individuals who resided in twenty counties in Texas between 1850 and 1900. The twenty counties were selected to provide a representative sample of the residents of the regions of South, Central, and West Texas; individuals were chosen on a random basis from the original census returns.
3. Our figures for San Antonio correlate even more closely with those of Griswold del Castillo. The immigrant literacy rates for San Antonio were 10.8 percent and 39.0 percent in 1850 and 1860 respectively, according to our sample.
4. This speculation is not fully supported by comparison of literacy rates for San Anto-

- nio with those of the region of Central Texas. Generally, immigrant literacy was higher in the region than it was in the city. In 1860, for example, the San Antonio rate of 39.0 percent compared to a 43.7 percent level for the region as a whole, and similar differences held for 1850 and 1870. These comparisons suggest an alternate speculation that the more literate immigrants from Mexico were attracted to areas of more advanced economic development rather than to urban environments *per se*.
5. In 1870 the Census Bureau began to distinguish between individuals with complete literacy skills and those who had only partial skills, such as the ability to read but not to write. Hence the distinction between complete and partial degrees of literacy is made in these comments.
 6. Griswold del Castillo, "Literacy in San Antonio," 182.
 7. Regional calculations show that in the period of declining literacy between 1860 and 1870, immigrant literacy fell by as much as twenty percentage points in Central Texas and as little as five percentage points in West Texas. Among native Tejanos, however, literacy rates did not fall at all in South and Central Texas during this time, with the only decline among Tejanos being ten percentage points in West Texas. Again, after 1870 the regional calculations show that immigrant literacy rates grew at a faster pace in all sections than did the native levels. By 1900 native Tejano literacy ranged from about 45 percent in South Texas to 52 percent in Central Texas. The immigrant rates ranged from 31 percent in West Texas to 35 percent in the central region.
 8. Griswold del Castillo, "Literacy in San Antonio," t. 4, p. 184.
 9. Our figures for San Antonio show that immigrant school attendance grew from a negligible level of less than 1 percent in 1850 to 25.5 percent in 1860. The calculations also show that native Tejano school attendance increased dramatically from 16.4 to 41.4 percent. Griswold del Castillo's data do not show such an increase for native school attendance.
 10. Immigrant school attendance in West Texas, primarily El Paso, may have paralleled the magnitude of increase in San Antonio during the 1850s. The 1860 rate for West Texas was 21 percent, thus suggesting the possibility of growth from 1850. The 1850 level of attendance is not available, however.