Since its creation in 1991, UTA's Center for Greater Southwestern Studies and the History of Cartography has focused on the huge geographic region encompassing the southwestern portion of North America. Some observers at the time questioned the Center's broad geographic focus, which includes northern Mexico and virtually all of the portion of the United States that was, until the tumultuous period of 1836-1848, part of Mexico.

Time has proven the wisdom of defining the Southwest very broadly, for that has permitted us to study many interconnected peoples, events, and geographic locations.

But at the same time some questioned the Center's broad geographic focus, others actually thought the regional focus was too tightly defined. To prove their point, they cited historic developments in Caribbean ports such as Havana—or even distant cities like Seville or Madrid, Spain—that greatly affected "Southwestern" history. With the recent approval of UTA's Transatlantic History doctoral program (see Fall 1998 issue of Fronteras) the Center will be more closely connected to European and North African locations that influenced southwestern history. Students working in Southwestern Studies, for example, will now expand their horizons as they interpret connections between portions of the Old World and our part of the New World. Eight new history graduate courses are now being offered. One of them—Lands of Encounter—encourages students to interpret how people from one part of the world perceived the new places and peoples they encountered. We now study the journeys of Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca (1529-1536) or Francisco Vázquez de Coronado (ca. 1540-42) as encounters that started a transatlantic dialogue. We also see later observers, such as scientist/nobleman Alexander von Humboldt, as part of the continuing process of encounter. Because maps play a pivotal role in such encounters, the history of cartography remains a crucial part of the new program—building on UTA's growing collection of 7,500 historic maps and 1,500 atlases. The new program thus brings the Center closer to its original vision—the more effective interpretation of history through maps and other historic records that shed light on our region's past.
Two New Books Interpret Volatile Native American Borderlands Frontier

Although the current U.S.-Mexican border was established in the mid-nineteenth century, the area along it was the scene of violent conflicts well into the twentieth century. One reason for the incessant trouble here related to the treatment of the Native Americans by European Americans. South of the border, Spain left a legacy of warfare against the Apache that continued into times of Mexican rule. North of the border, westward-moving Anglo Americans appropriated the lands of native peoples as they entered the area after the 1850s.

Two new books deal with the predicaments faced by, and sometimes precipitated by, the native peoples. The first book reviewed here—Chasing Shadows: Apaches and Yaquis along the United States Mexico Border, 1876-1911—describes and interprets the political history of the borderlands. Focusing on the treatment of native peoples, author Shelley Bowen Hatfield notes that the problems were rooted in a colonial past. Because policies never actually addressed deeper cultural issues, but either forced assimilation to Spanish/Mexican culture or isolated native peoples, these problems continue to the present day. Hatfield consulted original documents to tell a fascinating story of interaction and betrayal along the border. The pages resonate with conflict, for both the Apache and the Yaqui were never satisfied with the treatment accorded them by both governments. Moreover, the border itself presented new problems for both the United States and Mexico. These surfaced because differences in enforcement encouraged native peoples to raid one side of the border, then cross the border to relative safety. Finally, when the U.S. and Mexico cooperated through reciprocal agreements that permitted troops to the cross border in pursuit, they jointly suppressed the more recalcitrant native peoples because it was in their mutual interest. Despite that cooperation, widespread bloodshed did not end along the border until the late 1910s and the end of the Mexican revolution. One incident in particular, the murder of Judge H. C. McComas and his wife, and the kidnapping of their son Charley near Lordsburg, New Mexico in 1883, is mentioned in a few lines. Yet it was this action—led by Geronimo and a number of his party who had left the San Carlos reservation—that caused a public outcry among settlers. That outcry reverberated through the territorial government and all the way to Washington D.C., and was a factor in widespread military action that ultimately brought about Geronimo’s surrender.

It is the McComas’ tragedy—and the perennially unresolved question of what happened to the young Charley McComas—that sparked the interest of Southwestern historian Marc Simmons. In Massacre on the Lordsburg Road, (Texas A & M University Press, 1998), Simmons uses his skills as a historical detective in attempting to solve a 115 year old mystery. After placing the borderlands in the context of the tumultuous 1870s and early 1880s, Simmons essentially reconstructs the scene of the crime. On March 28, 1883, the hapless—actually careless—McComas family happened to intersect with Geronimo’s party quite by accident. In a classic example of crime by opportunity (or being in the wrong place at the wrong time), the McComases fell victim to broader geopolitical forces triggered by decades of mistreatment and mistrust. Because Simmons tells one terrific mystery story here, it would be unfair to give away his conclusion. One can say, however, that some questions in Southwestern history can only be answered with a degree of surety—but never absolute certainty. That, of course, is what keeps the region’s history so tantalizing.

If you are interested in developing a broad understanding of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands and their relationship to two important groups of native peoples, then Chasing Shadows is the book you should read (to order, contact the University of New Mexico Press at 1720 Lomas Blvd, N.E., Albuquerque, New Mexico, 87131-1591, or phone toll free 1-800-249-7737).

If, on the other hand, you are interested in learning more about a pivotal incident in the sometimes violent history of the Southwest—and in watching a historian skillfully set out to solve a mystery in the process—then Massacre on the Lordsburg Road is the book to read (to order, contact Texas A & M University Press at Drawer C., College Station, Texas, 77843, or call toll free 1-800-826-8911). But if—like many Southwestern historians—you are interested in the broader picture as well as a fascinating vignette of New Mexico-borderlands history, then both books should be on your bookshelf.
Field Trips Encourage Students to Explore the Natural History of the Big Bend

by Robert Neill

The spectacular Big Bend country of West Texas has long captured the attention of naturalists, including those who accompanied the U.S.-Mexico border surveys of the 1850s. The magic of this mountainous desert country endures to the present as the Big Bend draws increasing numbers of eco-tourists. One of the more enjoyable aspects of teaching biology at the university level is the opportunity I have to introduce students to the ecology of the Big Bend National Park and the Chihuahuan Desert via field trips. Of the more than 120 students that I have taken to the region over the last fifteen years, most (at least 65%) have returned to visit on their own at a later date. Although I take the same trails each visit to the park, something new and different usually presents itself for inspection. The Big Bend offers a unique experience to the uninitiated, an experience not soon forgotten. In the classroom I can discuss the desert, show students plant and animal specimens, but to fully appreciate the ecology, one must experience the environment first hand. The sounds, smells, and sights produce a lasting impact for the first time visitor.

Consider, for example, the Lost Mine Trail. Located in the Chisos Mountains of Big Bend, it offers an opportunity to study the pinyon-juniper-oak woodland association. A pamphlet at the trail head provides the visitor with information about each of thirty-two stops along the trail. In it, the dominant vegetation is identified, ecological concepts are elucidated, and readers grasp the breathtaking panorama from atop the peaks at trail's end. Alerted to what they can experience on this trail, students frequently see alligator lizards, Gray-breasted Jays, and Acorn Woodpeckers. Along this trail, mountain lions have been observed in recent years. Peregrine Falcons nest on some of the higher peaks near the Lost Mine Trail. Vegetation, too, interests the students. The weeping or drooping juniper looks completely water stressed but is actually well adapted to the harsh dry climate of the Chisos Mountains. The madrone tree offers another example of a plant that is adapted to environmental conditions that students observe first-hand in the field—conditions such as topography. When viewing the north and south facing slopes, for example, students note that the vegetation differences are strikingly apparent. The vegetation of the south facing slope is smaller, more scattered, and has less biomass than the plants on the north facing slope. Students are quick to note that the southern exposure receives more sun, which in turn reduces the water available to the plants.

Night transforms the desert landscape. Frequently students are often overly concerned about the various "critters of the night," but I assure them that their concerns are, for the most part, overrated. Occasionally, however, we will encounter various animals that cause us to be extra cautious. Typically our campsite will be in the Chisos Mountains basin campground. Evening visitors to the campground include the Carmen Whitetailed Deer, Javelina, and the ever curious striped skunk. The Javelina often occur as a loosely aggregated, small group, and will wander through the campsite. I confess I do get a chuckle listening to the students in their tents as they debate the safety of venturing out to the privy. They, too, travel in small groups, but with a quick step and flashlights on high beam. A muffled scream suggests a brief encounter with a Javelina—or one of the students imitating one from behind a nearby bush. One night Roshi, a biology major from Iran, seemed to be residing in a mobile tent. Shortly after the tent movement, I heard a series of loud, heated phrases in a language foreign to my ear. Abruptly, a skunk wormed his way out of her tent through the small opening where the zippers were joined. Luckily, it waddled on down the path disappearing behind (appropriately so) a skunk bush sumac, choosing not to leave any souvenirs.

If the nights are cool after a warm desert day, we frequently drive the roads at night looking for animals seeking the road's warmth. We do this carefully, for it is not unusual to find snakes on the road as they are trying to maintain body temperature on the warm black top. The Western Diamondback Rattlesnake, with its black and white banded tail, is one of the more active nocturnal snakes. Most are around three to four feet long, but they can range to about six feet in length. In the higher elevations, the Black-tailed Rattlesnake becomes more common. Unfortunately, snakes are occasionally found
dead on the road, having been run over by motorists who are in more of a hurry than we.

But daylight reveals the grandeur of the Big Bend’s topography, and days are often sunny here in West Texas. Seasons, too, play a role in how the land looks. A trip to the Big Bend in the late spring or early summer will be considerably different than one in October. In the spring, the Big Bend Century Plant becomes the most conspicuous plant in the landscape. The century plant begins flowering in the lower elevations in May, but will flower in abundance into August in the higher elevations. The flower stalk can grow up to 45 centimeters (18 inches) per day to a height of 4-7 meters (about twelve to twenty-one feet). Anywhere from nine to twenty-two branches, each bearing up to 300 flowers, will be produced along the upper part of the stalk. Once in full flower, this century plant is literally a “cafeteria plant” to many different animals. The nectar produced by the flowers and the variety of insects found therein provide an excellent food source to visiting animals. Ring-tailed cats, bats, and more than forty species of birds have been recorded feeding at the flowers. Mock aerial combat is fascinating to watch as hummingbirds defend territories centered around the century plants. Two former UTA biology graduate students, Therese Allen and Dr. Joe Kuban, actually wrote their master’s theses on the avifaunal associates of the century plant and the ecology of the hummingbirds.

As students quickly learn, anyone interested in bird photography will be rewarded if they will focus their telephoto lenses on an active cluster of flowers on this spectacular flowering plant of the Chisos Mountains.

Students learn that these plants are not only fascinating, but also useful. Many of the plants in the Big Bend serve medicinal purposes. Indians used juice pressed from the aforementioned century plant as cough syrup and for making poultices. Fibers from the leaves were used in making ropes and various alcoholic beverages were derived from brewing the century plant. Another agave relative of the century plant, the lechuguilla, has been used to treat rheumatism and plant juices were used in shampoos. The curanderos, or healers, of the southwest Indian tribes often used the creosote bush to treat various arthritic ailments. A boiled solution was poured into a tub and the patient soaked in the solution for 20-30 minutes. Extracts of the creosote were also used to treat cuts and bruises. The creosote bush is a very abundant plant in the Chihuahuan desert and considered one of the indicator plants of such a vegetative formation. There are other beneficial uses for such a plant. Our telephone poles are treated under pressure with creosote bush solution to retard fungal infection which might weaken the wood. One suspects that there must be other yet undiscovered uses for such a successful and abundant shrub of the desert southwest. When an extract of creosote is separated into its constituent compounds by the process of chromatography, many phenolic and flavonoid type compounds are evident when inspected under ultraviolet light. I suspect the Indians realized the useful nature of this unappreciated plant more than we do today.

Considering its desert status, the Big Bend’s abundance of bird and animal life never ceases to amaze the students. On rare occasions, one might encounter the eastern collared lizard on rock piles not far from a shaded crevice. This large headed, colorful lizard is wary of any intruders. When disturbed, it will oftentimes sprint away on its hind legs, similar to the dinosaurs in the movie Jurassic Park. Of course, it is illegal to collect in the park, and it is just as well. Should you pick up a Collared Lizard, you can expect to be bitten for your trouble. This lizard is a voracious feeder, as it will catch spiders, insects, and small snails. Able to defend itself well, it will readily bite when handled.

On one July evening during my second trip to Big Bend about fifteen years ago, we camped below the group campground in the Chisos Mountains. After dark, we heard a high pitched, punctuated, whistling noise. Five students, plus myself, flashlight in hand, descended into the valley in an attempt to identify the peculiar ascending and then descending whistle that resembled the sound of a yelping puppy. For some time, we looked for the elusive whistle. It seemed as if a ventriloquist was at work. A bit later, two more puppy-like sounds were heard. We were perplexed because we were surrounded by something we couldn’t see or locate. Finally, one student spotted a couple of tiny reflective yellow circles in the flashlight beam. Upon closer examination with the binoculars, we were finally able to identify our mysterious sound. A tiny elf owl, hardly as large as a common house sparrow, was seen perched on an acacia branch announcing his presence to other members of the species. Once we identified this miniature marvel, we quickly returned to camp as we did not want to disturb any courtship or nesting activities.

On various hiking trails we commonly encounter Turkey vultures circling overhead. Occasionally mixed in the block is an uncommon Zone-tailed Hawk, a bird that mimics the vultures in flight. The hawk is looking for live food but the vultures prefer prey that has already expired. I know that I am imagining things, but the vultures seem to pay me and the students extra attention at the end of a long day!

As I plan for another student field trip this coming November, it is easy to generate new enthusiasm for the Big Bend. The students will be recruited, campsite reservations made, and all will look forward to a new adventure to Big Bend National Park. On every trip, I confirm that biology classes become more meaningful when the flora and fauna that we study in class are experienced first-hand in this magnificent setting along the Texas-Mexico border.

Editor’s note: Robert Neill is Associate Professor of Biology at UTA, and has written several articles on southwestern flora and fauna.
Texas Map Society to Meet in San Antonio

Saturday, April 10th will find the Texas Map Society meeting in San Antonio. The meeting’s location—The Alamo—will provide a setting for members to learn more about historic maps of the city of San Antonio, surrounding areas of Texas, and other regions. Speakers will include George Nelson of Uvalde (“Historic Maps of San Antonio and vicinity”) and James B. Oliver of the San Antonio Missions NHP, National Park Service (“Mapping Historical/Archeological Features at the San Antonio Missions”).

There will also be a special session on map collecting. Plans call for the attendees to gather in San Antonio on Friday afternoon/evening for a tour of the Tobin Air Photography Studios, followed by a special dinner aboard a boat along the fabled San Antonio “Riverwalk.” Lunch on Saturday will be at a historic hotel near the Alamo. For more information on this meeting, or to learn how to join the Texas Map Society, contact David Buisseret, secretary-treasurer, Texas Map Society, c/o History Department, University of Texas at Arlington, 202 University Hall, Arlington, TX 76019, 817/272-2898, e-mail: buisser@uta.edu.

Center Fellows Recent Publications


Center Fellows Elected to Executive Committee

Of the ten Center Fellows recently appointed (see Fall 1998 Frontena), three have been elected to represent the Center Fellows on the Center’s Executive Board. The three center fellows are: Sam Haynes, Associate Professor of History; Dennis Reinhardt, Professor of History; and Ken Roemer, Professor of English. The Executive Committee consists of university administrators and faculty who assist the Center’s director in making important decisions on the Center’s future programs, activities, and directions. In a related development, Dr. Sam Haynes was also elected to serve as chairperson of the Center Fellows.
Meet the Center Faculty

Dr. Robert Neill received his doctorate from the University of Oklahoma in 1970—the same year he began teaching at UTA. His research interests include population trends in migratory birds, ecology of the Barn Owl, and the ecology of the Big Bend region of West Texas. As Associate Professor of Biology, Dr. Neill teaches ten different classes at UTA. Dr. Neill presented an illustrated lecture entitled “Cross Timbers and Prairies: the Biological Heritage of Arlington” at the Discovering Arlington’s Heritage conference in 1993. His many interests include photography and travel—two vocations that enhance his research, teaching, and public presentations. Dr. Neill’s popular field trips to the Big Bend are described in the article on pages 3 and 4 of this issue.

Center Fellows: Stacy Alaimo, Assistant Professor of English; Chris Conway, Assistant Professor of Foreign Languages-Spanish; Bob Fairbanks, Professor of History; George Green, Professor of History; Sam Haynes, Associate Professor of History; David Narrett, Associate Professor of History; Elizabeth Ostdiek, Professor of Foreign Languages; Dennis Reinhardt, Professor of History; Doug Richmond, Professor of History; and Ken Roemer, Professor of English.

Associate Center Fellow: David Bautista, Endowed Chair for Southwestern Studies; Brooks Elwood, Professor of Geology; Jeff Hanson, Associate Professor of Anthropology; and Jay Henry, Professor of Architecture.

The “Cross Timbers” to be Featured in UTA Presentation

Historians have long speculated about the significance of the Cross Timbers, a distinctive area of dense forest consisting largely of post oak and black jack oak trees. The Cross Timbers extend northward from Texas into Oklahoma and includes a small portion of southeastern Kansas. Arlington, Texas is located in the Eastern Cross Timbers, and its landscape resonates with the region’s history. Center Director Richard Francaviglia will present an illustrated lecture on the Cross Timbers at the February 26th meeting of the Friends of the UTA Libraries. According to Francaviglia, a number of observers in the mid-nineteenth century concluded that the Cross Timbers was destined to separate civilization from the wilderness, but the forest did not serve that role very long before much of it was transformed by the axes of the pioneers. Francaviglia’s lecture is based on his forthcoming book entitled The East Iron Forest: A Natural and Cultural History of the North American Cross Timbers. The lecture will feature historic maps, lithographs, and references that appeared in historical journals and reports. The Friends of the UTA Libraries usually meets about six times a year to hear presentations on topics of historical and cultural interest, and welcomes new members. For more information on how you can attend this meeting—and how you can join the Friends of the UTA Libraries—please contact Betty Wood, University of Texas at Arlington, Special Collections, 603 Central Library, Arlington, TX 76019, 817/272-3393.

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