

INTRODUCTION



Between 1866 and 1900, the city of San Antonio grew from an isolated, rather exotic town of diverse ethnic and social groups to a complex, cosmopolitan city. The city's civic festivals, six of which will be explored here, evolved and changed along with the city itself. The rise and development of these festivals echo similar events in other cities in the United States during the nineteenth century and the contemporaneous infancy of the American pageant movement, with its emphasis on patriotism and culture as expressed in spectacle.

In South Texas, this development could only have taken place after the Civil War. San Antonio had a chaotic history during the first half of the nineteenth century, and it was far too unstable for citizens to stage annual festivals (though they occasionally thought about it). Religious celebrations were different: they could be celebrated in times of disorder and stress; in fact, they often thrived under such conditions, when people prayed for better times and celebrated narrow escapes or miraculous rescues. Civic festivals, on the other hand, needed the routine of stability in order to be planned on a yearly basis. The usual impetus for such celebrations in the United States was patriotic, even though they may have only begun years after the event that inspired them and often commemorated a pivotal moment that became elevated over time to the status of myth. Various patriotic declarations fitted the bill nicely. In other cases, if such an event was not available, one was appropriated for the purpose.

In the nineteenth century, many of these celebrations commemorated events among particular ethnic groups, emphasizing both the country or culture of origin and their present Americanization. San Antonio's festivals reflected a general trend of ethnic toleration in the United States after the Civil War—the celebration of the melting pot ideal that brought the best of the “old country” to the culture of the new.¹ And so, on the day of the festival, the principal downtown streets and plazas belonged to the group staging it, no matter what their economic and social situation in the everyday “real” world. They proudly displayed themselves and their contributions to their fellow citizens in a street parade. Afterward, in a public celebration held in a city park or similar venue, they

offered traditional food, orations in both their native tongue and in English, anthems, salutes, fireworks, sports contests, and balls. The parades were free to all; something might be charged for food or dances, but the cost was nominal. Inclusion rather than exclusion was the rule of the day.

In the following chapters, we will follow the progress of six different festivals put on by various ethnic or societal groups during the period from 1866 to 1900: the Fourth of July, which might be supposed to be the most inclusive; the African American Juneteenth; *Diez y Seis* (celebrating Mexican independence); Columbus Day (celebrated by the city's small Italian American community); the German American Volksfest; and the Battle of Flowers, organized by the city's upper-middle-class women.

This particular group of festivals was chosen because each consisted of a parade that in most cases was joined by a park festival that could last up to three days. The Volksfest, *Diez y Seis*, the Fourth of July, and the Battle of Flowers celebrated the three dominant ethnic groups of the period in San Antonio (German American, Mexican American, and Anglo-American). The Italian American and African American groups were much smaller but, for reasons we shall examine, decided to emulate the festivals of their more populous brothers and sisters. On the other hand, some of the city's other smaller ethnic groups were excluded from this exploration, because their festivals (when they had them) were different. The city's Irish, for example, celebrated Saint Patrick's day as a religious holiday, with a procession culminating in a solemn Mass, rather than with the raucous parades seen in the Northern and Eastern United States. The small Franco-American community, on the other hand, opted to celebrate Bastille Day—a likely patriotic candidate—with a banquet.

Festivals are a feast for the senses. Visual messages are conveyed both by the marchers and the decorated street and park. The smells and tastes of foods reach participants, as do the odors of fireworks, horses and donkeys and their manure, and warm bodies. Marching bands play music, which is heard along with the shouts and exclamations of spectators (and maybe marchers too) and the boom of fireworks and military salutes. Do all these things change as the urban environment changes? What was the experience of marching or watching like in 1866? How was it different in 1898? How do these festivals reflect the cultural and urban growth and makeup of the city and its inhabitants? Do they change and evolve as the city evolves? Do they create their own myths and enduring iconographies?

In order to try and visualize these festivals and parades and what drove them,

it is important to look “from the inside out,” through contemporary writings, photographs, engravings, documents, and especially newspaper accounts. These celebrations often made the front page. To understand why, we must first examine how San Antonio developed and grew during the period between 1866 and 1900. Through this we will see how various communities within the population, whether Anglo-American, African American, Mexican American, Italian American, or German American, shifted within their own identities and within their relations to each other and to the changing city as a whole. In looking at the festivals in this way, we must often assume the views and prejudices of both celebrators and viewers. For this is the way the culture was both understood and reflected at the time, even if we are inclined to disagree with the participants more than a century later. In short, we must hearken back to an age when manifest destiny was the philosophy and “progress” the favorite catchword.