

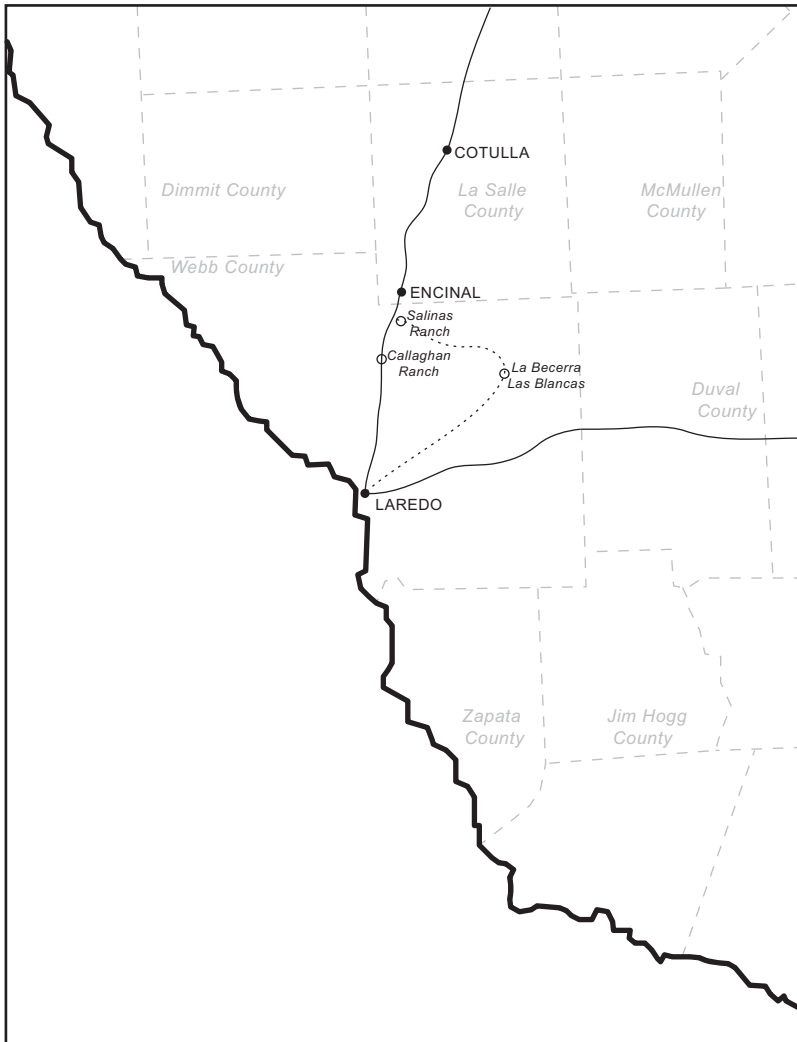
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Webb County, Texas

Webb County, Texas, lies on the north bank of the Rio Grande, the boundary between the United States and Mexico. The county is in deep southwest Texas, 150 miles south of San Antonio on Interstate Highway 35, and 150 miles due west from Corpus Christi. Laredo is the county seat of Webb County, which is the sixth largest county in the state of Texas and part of what many call the South Texas Brush Country.

Rainfall averages about 20 inches per year, and the countryside consists of gradually sloping hills, the western terminus of the Gulf of Mexico Plains, covered with native brush 6 to 8 feet in height, and mesquite and huisache trees 10 to 20 feet in height. Nopales, prickly pears, cover a large part of the ground. White-tailed deer, feral hog, quail, and other wildlife are plentiful, and rattlesnakes abound. The record books are full of trophy white-tailed deer from Webb County, additions continue annually.

Although the area is semiarid, land along the river is very fertile, being the northern rim of the Rio Grande Valley. With irrigation from the Rio Grande over the last two centuries, the fields have yielded magnificent crops of hay, onion, cabbage, carrots, watermelon, cantaloupe, and many other products. Farming has gone through an evolution that has put the small farmer out of business, but there are still many farms around the Laredo area. Produce comes to Laredo, and after undergoing processing, moves out to the produce markets of the nation. In addition, much produce from Mexico comes through Laredo. Away from the river, the soil varies from gravel hills to red sandy loam to black and gray soil.



Webb and surrounding counties: the Brush Country

Farmers, whose land does not adjoin the fertile river land, depend on rain for crops.

Cattle producers too must depend on rain for the grass that provides feed for their herds. Many cattle ranchers profess that they raise grass and not cattle. In reality, without the grass, the cattle are insignificant. In dry times cattlemen put out hay that was either raised on their own ranches or purchased and brought in. Although more troublesome, a very effective alternative is to *chamus-*

car, to burn prickly pear. Liquefied natural gas—the propane used in jet burners carried on workers' backs in small backpack models, or 200- to 300-gallon steel tank models on small trailers—burns thorns off the nopales, the prickly pear cactus. The de-thorned, singed cactus is food for the cattle. Neither hay nor burned pear offers much protein, but these maintain the herd until the rains come and provide for grass growth. Even after good rains, it takes weeks for grass and forbs to begin growth, giving rise to the saying, “but it doesn't rain grass.” After burning or singeing, the cactus smells like a steamed green vegetable, and the cattle and wildlife cherish it; cattle herd easily with a good burning, or *chamuscada*. In reality, seven or eight years out of ten are very dry, and the cattle and the operation suffer considerably. Drought and the high cost of feed bills discourage many from pursuing an otherwise beautiful and rewarding profession.

In the early 1950s, rancher Arturo T. Benavides from Bruni introduced buffle grass to South Texas, forever changing the countryside. It has been marvelous for this part of the state. Before buffle grass, ranchers depended on sparse native grasses for cattle survival. Buffle grass is extremely hardy, it is full and rich, and makes excellent feed, and most importantly, it spreads like wildfire. Improved buffle grass and other varieties have helped cattle ranchers tremendously. Just about everywhere you turn in South Texas, you see healthy stands of imported grass. Salinas family photos taken in the 1920s, 30s, and 40s show the bare earth, where either native grass stood, or no vegetation grew at all.

Nine months out of the year the temperature is very hot. The temperature soars to the 100-degree Fahrenheit mark during most of the months of June, July, August, and some of September. During much of the rest of the year the temperature hovers in the 90s and high 80s. In November, the temperature drops to the low 40s with highs in the 70s and occasionally in the 80s. December, January, and February lows are mostly in the 40s, sometimes in the 30s, and occasionally in the 20s and teens; highs during these winter months average in the 70s and 80s. Seldom does the temperature drop to freezing or below; if it does, it is only for two or three days. Snow comes but once every twenty years or so, and usually

melts when it hits the ground. Sometimes it stays for a day or so, enabling a rare snowman and snowball fight. Any adult can talk of memories of Thanksgiving and Christmas days in the 90s, and some in the hundreds. The year my son Antonio Ignacio was born, 1984, we celebrated Easter Sunday in 110-degree weather.

The founder of Laredo was Don Tomas Sanchez. Laredo was a part of New Spain first, then the Republic of Mexico, then after the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, a part of the Republic of Texas, and finally, a part of the United States. Laredoans formed their own republic, the Republic of the Rio Grande, that lasted but a couple of months in the 1800s, giving Laredo the added brag of having been under seven flags and not six as the rest of the state.

For the first several years, most of the founding families of Laredo lived on what is now the Texas side of the Rio Grande. In fact, Laredo was the only one of the several villas founded by the Spaniards on the Rio Grande that was established on the north bank. When Laredo became a part of Texas, and the United States, many families moved to the south bank, now the Mexican side of the river, to Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas.

History and circumstance have created a microculture along the Rio Grande, centered primarily in Webb County. Unlike other parts of the state, Laredo had little unfriendly immigration after the Civil War, thus preserving its culture, heritage, and wealth. The local Tejanos kept their position through power. My grandfather Antonio Salinas was reputed to have one hundred “yellow boys” at his disposal. “Yellow boys” were .30-30 caliber lever action Winchester rifles of the era; they had a yellow brass action, and thus were nicknamed “yellow boys.” To have one hundred yellow boys meant to have one hundred men each armed with a Winchester rifle, and ready to respond if and when necessary. Thus, Hispanics in Laredo and the surrounding counties were able to maintain an upper and middle class, when northern counties were not. In the northern and surrounding counties, most Hispanics lost everything they had. I have met many Texas Hispanics who are in awe of the men and women who come from the South Texas Brush Country—some as leaders, some as just plain individuals, some with a swagger and some not, but all with pride, confidence,

and independence. As an example, Webb County produced several of the best and most successful of the Hispanic officers that fought in the American Civil War. Most noted were Colonel Santos Benavides and his brother Captain Refugio Benavides, distant cousins of the Salinases. Descendants of these individuals prosper to this day in Webb and surrounding counties.

In my family, we feel that we inherited our independence and contrarian behavior from the Spanish pioneers. We say that before the discovery of the New World, all the males in Spanish families who were over-confident, independent, rambunctious, over-achievers, and perhaps hyperactive were sent to the haciendas under the supervision of strong and firm *caporales* (foremen). Over-active young men either conformed to acceptable behavior standards or were doomed to live out their lives on the hacienda as cowboys.

After the discovery of the New World, rather than waste the energies on the family hacienda in Spain, the families sought instead to send the young cowboys to the New World, as delegates, in hopes of claiming riches and new land for the family. Thus, some think that the founding families of Laredo, from whom we descend, were mostly hyperactive contrarians who were misfits in Spain and became pioneers to the New World, settling in what would become South Texas. I frequently told my ex-wife that we perpetually swim upriver, against the current. We all laugh about it, but there may be some truth in it.

Today there are very few pure-blooded Spaniards. A pure-blooded Spaniard is a *gachupín*. A Spaniard born in the New World was a *criollo* (creole). At first fine lines distinguished mixtures, such as a *cuarteron*, a *quarteroon*, later those of mixed blood were simply *mestizos*, being part Spanish and part Mexican Indian.

Today we are mostly mixed. More than any other border area, Laredo has been a true melting pot of ethnic groups. Hungarians, Polish and Russian Jews, Germans, Italians, French, Lebanese, Greeks, and many others have readily settled in the Laredo area and eventually mixed with the predominant Spanish and Mexican Indian. Today most of us are simply *encartados*, of mixed blood, presenting a beautiful spectrum of color, varying from dark ebony

or coffee, to brown, to golden brown, to gold, *cafe con leche* (coffee with milk), to whitest of the white. Our eyes range from the very dark brown through light brown, hazel, green, and blue to the light blue-white. Today as citizens of this great country, we consider ourselves Americans first and above all, whether our heritage is Mexican, Spanish, Italian, French, Polish, German, Lebanese, Greek, or whatever. I know from family history that during the early decades, national origin, or ethnic origin, did not play a big part in the life of the Salinases. The important things were to be unbothered, to fend for themselves, survive, and make a living.

There are those in the family who say that we are pure-blooded Spaniards, but I find it hard to believe that the Spaniards who conquered Mexico City and then took over two hundred years to arrive at what is now Laredo did not intermarry with the natives. I guess that only when the genome is finished will we be able to tell for sure. When the Spaniards arrived in Laredo they were probably already of mixed blood. Our family has been here from the beginning.

The first contingent of Spanish settlers arrived on the north bank of the Rio Grande at what is now Laredo, Texas, in 1755, 236 years after Cortez conquered the Aztecs in Mexico City. They named the river and the settlement they founded. The river they called Big River, Rio Grande; they also called it the Rio Bravo, which means Fierce or Vicious River, not literally translated as the Brave River, as some say. After crossing the river, they named the settlement Laredo, after a city in the province of Santander in Spain by the same name. The Spaniards knew the area as Nuevo (New), Santander.

When the Spaniards arrived, they brought an entire industry with them: the cattle industry. They brought the cattle, and they brought the horses to work them. Of course, they brought the technology, a whole system of equipment, technique, and craft for working the cattle. Several decades after arrival, the cattle population had spread to the entire area later to be the state of Texas. With the increase in population came the advent of the rancho or hacienda, the cattle ranch, largely imitating the ranches and haciendas in Spain.