

José Rivera. *La Sociedad: Guardians of Hispanic Culture Along the Río Grande*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2010. Pp. 212. Hardcover. \$35.00.

In the year 1900, a mutual aid society formed in New Mexican communities to defend their culture, land, and water rights being threatened by the arrival of Anglo-Americans to the region. José Rivera, a research scholar at the Center for Regional Studies and Professor of Regional Planning at the University of New Mexico, documents *La Sociedad Protección Mutua de Trabajadores Unidos (SPMDTU)* as a case study of collective action in the context of rapid economic and political change. Rivera describes his work as an institutional biography for readers concerned with the preservation of culture. Using a wider lens to look past Rivera's stated purpose, he has produced a compelling history of the disruption of the Latino community in New Mexico by Manifest Destiny.¹

Rivera had the benefit of previous SPMDTU efforts to document their first century including a book published in 1958, a photographic survey, and several oral histories. Rivera is a SPMDTU member and his familiarity may be both a benefit and a problem. Following an engaging introduction, the book is organized into four chronological chapters that discuss historical context and culture, the origin of *La Sociedad*, the organization today, and future challenges.

In 1598 Spanish settlement began in *La Provincia del Nuevo México* with towns that received land grants including individual farms and *ejidos* (commons) for water, pasture, hunting, and timber. After 1848, U.S. citizenship changed little in these communities until the 1878 arrival of the railroad. Suddenly land grants were challenged by the railroads, land speculators, and cattle company lawyers whose goal was to displace the villagers and sell their land.

¹ Rivera uses the terms Hispanic and Hispano (Spanish speaking) to identify the cultural identity of this community and he discusses conflict across Hispano/Anglo lines. This community is part of the larger, more inclusive Latino community and their story is parallel to others across Latin America. Also, Manifest Destiny is ignored by the author who instead focuses on the arrival of the railroad as the point of "conquest".

The 1897 *United States v. Sandoval* Supreme Court ruling that ejidos were not owned by the towns represented an enormous setback. The land became U.S. public domain and was opened to homesteaders, cattle companies, and eventually became the Carson, Santa Fe, and Cibola National Forests. The railroad had linked the region to the nation and forced the agropastoral people into a cash based industrial economy. The villagers became wage laborers picking crops, mining, and harvesting timber. They soon decided that instead of being reduced into the broth of the US melting pot, they would band together to maintain their culture. A real strength of this book is Rivera's first chapter which provides a succinct economic history of the region in parallel with an insider's look at traditional local culture.

The SPMDTU was founded on November 26, 1900 in Antonito, Colorado where many members came as seasonal farm workers. La Sociedad's charter was centered on mutual aid, cultural preservation, and defense against racial and economic discrimination. An unusual attribute was active resistance against pressure to assimilate into the dominant society by working to maintain major elements of their own culture. Rivera draws parallels to similar developmental pressures across the world where conflict exists between traditional cultures and new elites attempting to monopolize resources.

La Sociedad peaked around 1950 with sixty-five local councils and 2,000 members across New Mexico, Colorado, and Utah. Membership began to drop in the late-1950s with outmigration from the villages to urban centers. Today, six local councils remain focused on cultural preservation and community service as they chart their path forward in the twenty-first century. The text is peppered with a wealth of figures that include maps and photographs of people, meeting halls, memorabilia and old ledgers that provide the reader a concrete understanding of a century of SPMDTU history.

Rivera has succeeded in documenting SPMDTU history and more importantly, provides an understanding of how this established community responded to dramatic changes after the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. Some topics such as the design of meeting halls and decisions of recent conventions are less interesting than the many old photographs, transcripts of oral histories, and SPMDTU documents that paint a vivid picture for the reader.

Cultural and social historians studying subaltern groups negotiating change will find the book valuable. U.S. historians will gain a different perspective on Manifest Destiny through the eyes of marginalized people. Manifest Destiny is typically discussed only in terms of land but Rivera's narrative tells the story of how a community established for three centuries reacted to this disruption.

Jerry Sisneros