

Sporting and Leisure Activities in the American-Mexican Colonies of Texas, 1821-1835

Jodella K. Dyreson
Weber State University, Utah

As an outpost of “rough and tumble” southern society, the American-Mexican colonies in the 1820s and 1830s Texas often found themselves represented as the most violent of antebellum American frontiers. Travellers to Texas told tales of breakfasting with multiple murderers. A group of Texan settlers chasing bandits left the head of one of their victims on a pole as a warning “to all others who might see it.” Mexican Texas, and later the Republic of Texas developed a reputation as a haven for the most violent of southern scoundrels. Tales of rough-and-tumble fighting, duels over honor, murder over gambling debts, a fascination with bloodsports, gambling, horse racing, and copious imbibing marked contemporary descriptions of Texas. How accurate were those accounts? How violent was Texas? Did sports and amusements in the Anglo colonies represent an especially violent form of the Southern sporting tradition? Were early Texan sports Southern or did they derive from Western patterns? How did Mexican sporting patterns influence those of Texas? Did the sports and amusements exhibit the antimodern features which Elliott Gorn and Allen Guttmann have identified with the Southern sporting tradition?

Elliott Gorn has detailed the social and cultural factors which spawned violent Southern sports among the male subculture of the region’s plain folk. Rejecting bourgeois and elite values, southern men created ritualized sports and amusements which high-lighted back country codes of honor and reflected the violent and impoverished world in which they lived. This paper explores the diffusion of this Southern sporting culture into the American Mexican frontier. It also examines the ways in which the Mexican and Western sporting practices merged with Southern customs. Texas was a meeting ground for several cultures and its sporting life reveals those multicultural influences.

This paper also details the history of sport in early Texas, connects it to southern conceptions of honor and ritualized violence, and contrasts the male sporting subculture with amusements and entertainments of female settlers. It is based on primary sources dating from the 1820s and 1830s. Since very little work has been done on sport in the American colonies of Mexican Texas, I believe that this paper will contribute to the historical picture of sport and amusement in a neglected corner of early nineteenth century North America. In addition, I plan to employ some of the new interpretive literature on Southern, Western, and borderlands history in an effort to explain the social significance of Texan sport.