

The Epic Tradition of the Founding of Nuevo Laredo

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Translated by Olivia Cadaval

Perder la tierra, perder la lengua, perder las costumbres, es perder el cimiento de la vida, dejar de ser.

Pedro Casaldáliga

En Nuevo Laredo existe una de las tradiciones más significativas que contribuye a forjar la identidad de los habitantes de la frontera norte mexicana. Se trata de una tradición histórica que asegura que, en 1848 al perder México la pequeña población de Laredo — a causa de la firma del Tratado de Guadalupe Hidalgo entre México y los Estados Unidos — muchos de los laredenses la abandonaron. Según la tradición, la población de Laredo fue abandonada por sus habitantes porque no se resignaron a pertenecer a una nueva nación y decidieron emigrar a la margen derecha del Río Bravo y fundar otro asentamiento que bautizaron con el nombre de Nuevo Laredo, en recuerdo de la población perdida. Además, la tradición asegura que, no contentos con trasladarse ellos mismos al lado mexicano, también desenterraron a sus muertos, cruzaron sus restos y los reihumaron en Nuevo Laredo con el fin de que no yacieran en territorio extranjero.

To lose the earth, to lose the language, to lose the customs, is to lose the foundation of life, to stop existing.

Pedro Casaldáliga

In Nuevo Laredo there is an historical tradition that is central to public expressions of civic identity at the border. It is the story of how, in 1848, when Mexico lost the small town of Laredo to the United States because of the signing of the

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Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, many of its inhabitants abandoned their homes and emigrated to the other side of the Río Bravo, where they founded a settlement they called Nuevo Laredo in memory of their lost home. The tradition adds that they disinterred their dead, moved their remains across the river, and reinterred them in Nuevo Laredo so they would not lie in foreign territory.

This nationalistic tradition has been repeatedly cited throughout the history of Nuevo Laredo. In September of 1848 the governor of Tamaulipas lamented “the deep pains” that the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo had caused but recognized the “worthy and faithful Mexicans” who had moved to the Mexican side and founded Nuevo Laredo. At the end of the century, Juan E. Richer, author of the first known history of Nuevo Laredo, wrote:

Celebrating the peace of 1848, many of the residents of the lost Laredo, not wanting to lose their nationality, or to form part of a nation whose race, ideas, customs, language, and religion were totally different from their own, crossed the river and established themselves between two small ranches . . .

The tradition achieved a culminating moment of glory during Nuevo Laredo's Centennial Celebration in 1948. It became part of the official shield of the city, whose motto, “Always with the Homeland,” refers to the events of foundation. The tradition has also been evoked in sculptures, murals, poems, songs, hymns, street names, schools, as well as in political speeches. The civic monument to “the Founders” built in 1958 has the following words inscribed on it:

A city as patriotic and Mexican in its very essence as Nuevo Laredo knows that a city



The mural at the water plant in Nuevo Laredo commemorates the town's epic beginnings. When Laredo became part of the United States in 1848, the Mexican residents of Laredo, rather than lose their citizenship, crossed the newly-established border and founded Nuevo Laredo, carrying with them the disinterred remains of their ancestors.
Photo by Luis Barrera

is not only a present and a future, but also a past; in order to settle in this site they brought the revered remains of their ancestors, making them part of Mexican history.

Some local historians have questioned the accuracy of the narrative because of its lack of historical documentation. But the historical record does include similar exoduses motivated by similar nationalistic concerns. And in this light, the story of the founding of Nuevo Laredo appears not only as a documentary problem but also as a problem in the history of ideas — their character and their diffusion, persistence and reproduction. In this sense, the narrative of the foundation of Nuevo Laredo can be considered as an epic and still more as a charter myth. As an epic, it is a deed of historic importance accomplished with great effort and difficulty. As a charter myth, it is a story that informs the conduct of a social group and symbolically expresses its attitude in confronting the world.

These two ideas, epic poem and origin myth, are immanent in the behavior valorized in tradition about the founding of Nuevo Laredo. On occasions when their civic identity is in question, this tradition roots Nuevo Laredoans and maintains them “always with the homeland.” As long as this city occupies an important geopolitical position on the international border with the United States, the foundation myth of Nuevo Laredo will be fundamental to the expression of its civic identity.

Citations and Further Readings

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