

Culture & Environment in the Río Grande/Río Bravo Basin: A Preview

He who drinks water from the Río Bravo will never leave its shores.

—Popular saying collected by Gregorio Garza, Field Researcher, Laredo, Texas



Compiled by Lucy Bates, Olivia Cadaval, Heidi McKinnon, Diana Robertson, and Cynthia Vidaurri; translation editors Ileana Cadaval Adam and Patricia Fernández de Castro

This year's Festival program forms part of a larger Río Grande/Río Bravo Basin project that includes:

- Folklife Field Research Schools held in Texas, New Mexico, and Colorado to train local academic and community scholars and to direct local research for the Folklife Festival and other public programs
- Production of local public programs in collaboration with local organizations to present research carried out in the region (sponsored by the Texas Folklife Resources and the Texas Council for the Humanities)
- Smithsonian Folklife Festival programs for 1998 and 1999
- Production of educational materials and a film documentary.

This collaborative training and research approach builds on our work with binational institutions, researchers, and community members that participated in earlier Smithsonian projects in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands region. The following article offers samples of project research reports and reflects the multivocality of the region.

This project is cosponsored by El Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes with support from the U.S.-Mexico Fund for Culture (The Rockefeller Foundation, Fundación Cultural Bancomer, the Fondo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes), SBC Foundation, Texas Folklife Resources, and the Texas Council for the Humanities. Folklife Fieldwork Research Schools were supported by Colorado College, Tierra Wools, the University of New Mexico, University of Texas—Pan American, and a grant from Smithsonian Outreach Funds.

Río Grande/Río Bravo Basin

The Río Grande/Río Bravo Basin is a complex cultural, ecological, and political landscape. The river travels through mountains, deserts, plains, and subtropics and the states of Colorado, New Mexico, and Texas in the United States and the states of Chihuahua, Coahuila, Nuevo León, Durango, and Tamaulipas in Mexico. In its almost 2,000-mile journey, it is known by different names: El Río Grande del Norte, Río Bravo, the Wild River, Río de las Palmas, Po'soge, the Rio Grand. Many diverse groups of people live in the Río Grande/Río Bravo Basin, each with its own personal and collective experiences.

Po'soge, the Río Grande del Norte, is one of the longest, most celebrated, and most vital rivers in North America, yet it is one of the most endangered. Water diversion has made the desert bloom through centuries-old Native American and Hispano *acequias* and 20th-century locks and canals. Only by allowing it a measure of its previous wildness will the Río Grande survive as an ecologically healthy river. —Enrique Lamadrid

University of New Mexico

Much research on rivers focuses on water and land rights, environment, history, architecture, health, and archeology. In this project, we asked, together with our Río Grande/Río Bravo colleagues, "What about living people? What about the cultural heritage and creativity of groups whose experiences have been shaped by the river?"

In particular our challenge was to research, plan, and produce a program on how local cultures contribute to a sustainable river-basin environment. Our approach was to engage scholars, educators, and individuals — formally and informally trained — who are involved in community cultural work. We sought to understand relationships between culture and environment and to see how contemporary traditions can be relevant



The river between Texas and Chihuahua, near Presidio and Ojinaga.

El río entre Chihuahua y Texas, cerca de Ojinaga y Presidio. Photo by / Foto de David Bosserman

to balancing human prosperity with environmental sustainability. We asked:

- 1) What kinds of communities live in the region today?
- 2) What is their traditional knowledge for managing the environment?
- 3) Can local culture provide a foundation for sustainable development projects?

These questions led us to explore the many meanings of the Río Grande/Río Bravo.

After a review of the field research, we decided that to adequately treat the richness and magnitude of the project requires an additional year's planning and production. This year, we are presenting a small Festival program that will preview cultural regions, expressive traditions, and issues that will be featured at the 1999 Festival. Many voices and perspectives have shaped this program. The collaborative process has been as important as the public product.

The goal of the Smithsonian project is to understand a region's diversity through its natural resources, cultural traditions, and historical experiences.

The research of our Río Grande/Río Bravo Basin fieldworkers team was focused on community enterprises, recycling projects, and, in general, on sights and sounds of the river that exemplify the region's environment. After learning "what, how, and why," researchers reached the heart and soul of the study, the essential spirit of an individual or community being researched. In each community enterprise, one detects a cultural weight, a force that projects values and richness, and that points to the diversity of life in the region.

—Juanita Elizondo Garza
University of Texas—Pan American

The Río Grande/Río Bravo Basin is nurtured by tributaries, both natural and cultural.

Priscilla Chavéz likes to recall how her father insisted his children learn things that could never be stolen from them. Land can be lost, but the culture endures, as much a part of the Río Grande Valley as the river itself. "My father made good corn flour," she said. "It was the best. And he told my sister, 'I am

going to pass this heritage to you.' And she continued making corn flour, and she makes the best.... To the boys he left the music...." —Recorded by

Enrique Lamadrid
University of New Mexico

Carolina Carbajal from Las Cruces, New Mexico, with a staff made from sotol.

Carolina Carbajal de Las Cruces, Nuevo México, con una ramo de sotol.

Photo by / Foto de
Elaine Thatcher



A river provides raw materials.

The Ysleta women potters dig river clay in several local spots. When Fermina and her sisters were young and working with their grandmother, the family had sources in four hills. Each hill produced a different color of clay, ranging from pale pink to dark. Today they dig clay wherever they find it. Fermina had found a deposit of good clay but said she had only had access to it for a brief time before it was fenced off and posted.

—Elaine Thatcher
in si' •tu, Santa Fe, New Mexico

The Río Grande/Río Bravo is a desert river of limited resources. It flows through an arid region of cooperation and conflict over water.

The water in the ditch connects us to the river. But it connects us to each other as well.... Even if there are conflicts over the watering schedule and you are mad at your neighbor, you know you have to figure out how to resolve it. Over the long term, it keeps people interacting in a very positive way.

—Riparian biologist Manuel Molles
interviewed by Enrique Lamadrid
University of New Mexico

Great River, Mighty River

Like the semi-desert lands it crosses, the Río Grande/Río Bravo is a natural wonder whose power and beauty we appreciate the more we get to know it. I first saw the river when I moved to Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas, on the other side of the border from Laredo, Texas. There on the border, I came to know a river that equally separates, conjoins, and gives life to these two communities. For at the same time that the river is a boundary marker between countries, it is also the shared resource that has allowed communities to thrive together for centuries. First as ranching settlements and now also as international commercial gateways, the towns of Nuevo Laredo and Laredo — like Matamoros and Brownsville, Mier and Roma, Piedras Negras and Eagle Pass, Ciudad Juárez and El Paso — literally live off the river.

Why bring our river to the Smithsonian Folklife Festival? When Olivia Cadaval, Richard Kurin, Cynthia Vidaurri, and I first discussed the idea in El Paso, one of our central concerns was to address the relationship between the river and the communities it has fostered, not only on the U.S.-Mexico border but throughout the watershed. About 13,000,000 persons live in the Río Grande/Río Bravo Basin. Many of them are first-generation inhabitants of the U.S. Southwest and northern Mexico. The families of others have been here for a long time. Wide open spaces, clear air, life in the desert and the mountains, and the solace these offer have attracted many. But ironically the growth of cities, industry, agriculture, and ranching have so polluted the river that it is one of the most endangered on the continent. To survive in this environment, the diverse peoples who have made this region have developed strong and tenacious cultures. The river's degradation is a threat to their way of life. The people of the basin have responded with creativity, responsibility, and initiative in an effort to protect their cultural heritage and enhance the vigor of the river and its communities. It is this intense vitality that the Festival celebrates.

—Patricia Fernández de Castro
El Colegio de la Frontera Norte

Acequia, the Spanish word for "irrigation canal," is derived from the Arabic *as-saquiya* (water carrier). Secondary and lateral ditches are called *sangrías*, a metaphorical term that expresses the same wisdom as the Spanish saying: "*El agua es la sangre de la tierra*," "Water is the blood of the land." Another saying: "*El agua es vida*," "Water is life."

—Enrique Lamadrid
University of New Mexico

Human practices can be in harmony or at odds with the logic of the river.

Looking at the Pueblo communities on the Río Grande, we see the large issues of cultural survival, economic development, and environmental maintenance. Control of water is part of that cultural struggle to survive. For example, our value system for use of land and water is incompatible with that of the jurisprudence system. We are taught to con-

serve the water; but the laws say we must use the water, even when we do not need to use it, in order to maintain our water rights. Moreover, the attempt to manage the Río Grande [by building a dam] adversely affected the very social fabric of Cochiti Pueblo. For some 20 years we were not able to carry out our planting rituals. Agriculture is not just a food source for us; it is intimately connected to who we are. This year, for the first time in two decades, we will plant again.

—Regis Pecos, State of New Mexico, Office of Indian Affairs

A river is the focus of values that can bring together or divide communities.

The *matachines* of the East Mountains on the outskirts of Albuquerque perform their important rituals of environmental maintenance and renewal along the waterways of the Río Grande Valley. But recent urban development threatens their

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practices. *Matachin* Bernadette Garcia explains: "See, the developers go and sell all this property, but they don't put in the deeds that we have access rights according to the original land grants. Then we end up having to fight them in court be-

cause of that. So the people who buy don't know about it. So they happily move in. Then it's time for our fiestas and our procession. And they say, 'No you can't go through our land. This is my property.' Here is where all the fights

begin. It shouldn't be like that. It's only once a year that we have to go in procession to the spring. We will always go in procession to the spring. Or until they run us over."

—Barbara Gonzales
University of New Mexico
Field School Participant



Matachines at the Feast of San Ysidro, Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Los matachines en la Fiesta de San Ysidro, Albuquerque, Nuevo México. Photo by / Foto de Miguel Gandert



The last hand-pulled ferry on the river at Los Ebanos, Texas.

El último chalán tirado a mano en el río en Los Ebanos, Texas. Photo by / Foto de Charles Weber

A river invites journey, settlements and resettlements, borders, and social networks.

I was born in Veracruz on the Gulf of Mexico. I married when I was young. My husband was from Ciudad Victoria in the neighboring state of Tamaulipas, and he was picking cotton at that time. We met, we married, and since his family lived over in Ciudad Victoria he said: "Let's go." And we did. After 20 years of marriage I came to Matamoros on the border. Here in Matamoros, at the *maquiladora*, we interact with each other, tell each other things, know each other, fight and share our problems. We take time in between our work for each other.... Sometimes we sell things to make a little extra money.

—Eustolia Almaguer Vazquez
interview by Alma Jiménez
El Colegio de la Frontera Norte

As the field research trip came to an end, a Texas researcher remarked upon her different experiences of crossing the Río Grande. In Texas, the river forms an international boundary, and crossing means a forced stop by government authorities on each bank. But in Colorado and New Mexico the river can be crossed and crisscrossed without the need for a single halt to identify one's nationality. This experience shed light on the relationship between a geological formation and arbitrary boundaries.

—Juanita Elizondo Garza
University of Texas-Pan American

Los Chileros

In late August one of the most celebrated seasonal rituals of the upper Río Grande begins: the chile harvest. Here, chile is a staple. As people say, "*La comida sin chile es como un beso sin bigotes*," "Food without chile is like a kiss without a moustache." Eduardo and Priscilla Chávez have been roasting and selling chile in the north valley of Albuquerque for as long as anyone can remember. Their chile stand near the St. Carmel Church on Edith Boulevard is a popular meeting place for local residents, for Indians from the nearby pueblos of Sandía, Santa Ana, and Santo Domingo, and for tourists. As Mrs. Chávez says, "Chile brings people together." Mr. Chávez says, "The next best thing to growing chile is selling it."

—Enrique Lamadrid, University of New Mexico



A chile stand in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Un puesto de chiles en Santa Fe, Nuevo México. Photo by / Foto de Olivia Cadaval

A river inspires singers, poets, and storytellers. In the U.S. Southwest, *La Llorona* is a legend of a weeping woman encountered near rivers, streams, and *acequias* in the region. There are many versions of this tale, but they all recount the story of a Native woman who drowns her children out of hate for their Spanish father. She forever haunts the waterways searching for her children.

La Llorona lives in the hearts and minds and *ríos* of Mexican Americans everywhere. Her story is told in schools, on camping trips, and in many other places. Even *las aguas negras* (sewage waters) have heard her cries. From John Dodd, *Hispanic Folk Music of New Mexico and the Southwest* (1980):

Yesterday I wept wanting to see you,
Oh Weeping Woman

And today I cry from seeing you.

—Molly Timko,
University of New Mexico
Field School Participant

The river is the heart of a life-sustaining environment.

Atrisco, New Mexico, began as a 1692 Spanish *merced*, or land grant, west of the river from Albuquerque, bestowed jointly on a group of Tiwa Indians and Spanish settlers. The name is of Aztec origin meaning "place by the water." The size of the tract varied as the Río Grande shifted its course. Until recent times the community made its living through agriculture. Although the people of Atrisco no longer depend on agriculture for their livelihood, the waters of the Río Grande still nourish family gardens, orchards, and alfalfa fields. The traditional *acequias* and the water they carry symbolize the spirit of a community that has learned to defend its culture, lifestyle, and values.

One of the rites of spring along the upper Río Grande is the annual cleaning of the *acequias* from the *acequia madre*, or mother channel, down to each field. Everyone is obligated to participate in the effort. At the Northern Tiwa Indian pueblo of Picurís, special music is sung to help keep the work

rhythms of cleaning the ditch. Instead of beats on a drum, the cadence comes from the percussion of shovels hitting the ground. The flowing of the first water of the spring in the ditch is an occasion marked with blessings, excitement, and anticipation. When the *compuertas*, or floodgates, are opened near Indian pueblos, the waters are blessed with sacred cornmeal. In Hispano communities, the priest blesses the water and the processions that honor the patron saint of agriculture, San Isidro Labrador.

—Enrique Lamadrid
University of New Mexico

Guillermo "Willie" Mancha owns a neighborhood store which has been an institution in Eagle Pass, Texas, since 1948. Three generations of his family have prepared and sold traditional Mexican foods that are part of the ranching culture of the region. For a century Mexican ranchers have created an economy of fruits, vegetables, and livestock, which become ingredients for regional foods such as tamales, *chorizo* (sausage), *menudo* (tripe stew), *fajitas*

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(flank steak), and *barbacoa de cabeza* (cow's head barbecue). The custom was to consume the entire animal, preferably a goat, *desde la barba hasta la cola*, "from the beard to the tail." They say Mexicans combined *barba* (beard) and *cola* (tail), to coin the term *barbacoa*, the origins of barbecue.

—Mario Montañó
Colorado College

A river defines complex economic, social, and political environments. Contemporary river basin cultural communities have creatively responded to historical and environmental challenges in different ways. This can be seen in the story of the Rarámuri Indians of Chihuahua, Native communities who were forced to migrate from the countryside.

Considered the most majestically scenic area of Northern Mexico, the Sierra Madre Occidental is the homeland of an indigenous tribe called the Rarámuri [Tarahumara]. Over the years Rarámuri families have steadily been migrating to urban areas in the Mexican states of Chihuahua, Sinaloa, and Durango.

Rarámuri commonly visit the cities in order to sell or trade crafts, medicinal herbs, and textiles; to purchase goods that are not available in their home communities; and to work as wage laborers for short periods of time. In the fall of 1995, Ciudad Juárez created a neighborhood in the northwestern area of the city for migrant Rarámuri. Many women from this community sell medicinal herbs near a local market in Ciudad Juárez. Most of the herbs are brought down from the Sierra usually during the early fall. Taught at an early age to recognize medicinal herbs found in their homeland, Rarámuri know their uses in curing particular diseases.

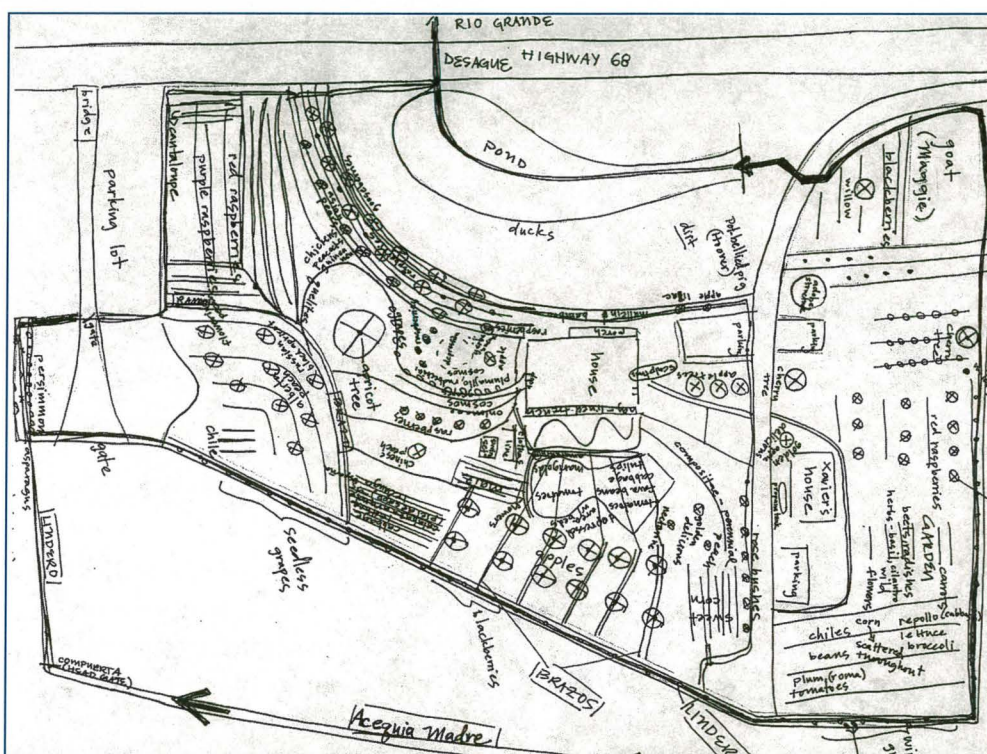
Only a few crafts are made in this community, but several women often travel to the Sierra to gather craft materials unavailable in the urban area. For example, some Rarámuri women gather

The Arellanos and Their Land Grant

The Embudo Valley in New Mexico has a wide variety of environmental zones ranging from desert grassland to piñon-juniper and sub-alpine. The Río Grande sustains the whole region. The area's history of Hispano agriculture and silviculture goes back to the Embudo Land Grant of 1725. Estevan Arellano's mother, Celia Archuleta,

is a direct descendant of Francisco Martín, one of the three original grantees. The Arellanos feel the strong link to their land strengthened and reinforced through the maintenance of foodways and other practices that follow the annual agricultural cycle.

—Ken Rubin
Colorado College Field School Participant



Map of the Arellano centenary ranch.

Mapa del rancho centenario de los Arellano. Drawing by / Dibujo de Joanna Stewart

Amidst the incredible variety in the garden there is a harmony between the plants, the soil, and the human hands that nurture the harvest. According to Estevan Arellano's philosophy of farming, it is important to achieve a natural landscape. "I just let [plants] go and find their own niche where they like to be. . . . They continue moving and finding their own place where it's more natural for them." Estevan's thoughts on chemical pesticides make clear his personal connection to the land. "Pesticides are the worst thing you can do to the soil," he explains. "Soil is a living organism, and it has feelings, it has a soul, it has everything a human being has. So if you want it to produce, you have to treat it kindly."

—Joanna Stewart, Colorado College
Field School Participant

pine needles or bear grass (*palmilla*) to weave baskets (*waris*). But the women also find materials in Ciudad Juárez to sew traditional Indian clothing and weave sashes (*fajas*). They are expert seamstresses.

—Genevieve Mooser
Eastern New Mexico University

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Ixtle is a fiber extracted from the *lechugilla* plant and used to weave hammocks, rugs, and bags. The Department of Ecology of the State Government of Coahuila is encouraging people to work by offering scholarships to learn this skill and by helping to support family-run workshops. Craftsman José Isabel Quiroz learned how to weave *ixtle* from his father, who still works with him. Quiroz's wife puts the finishing touches on the crafts.



Cecilio Hernández crushing the lechugilla blade to release the fibers.

Photo by Imelda Castro Santillán



Herbalist Maclovía Zamora travels throughout the Upper Río Grande harvesting regional plants and talking about their use in Hispano and Native American traditions. She harvests cedar from the East Mountain area of Albuquerque to make smudges that are burned during ritual cleaning and purification practices in Native communities.

Maclovía Zamora collecting cedar for making smudges.

Photo by Heidi McKinnon

Brick-making in Ciudad Juárez

In the Colonia Mexico 68 neighborhood in Ciudad Juárez, many of the brick-making families have created a space or "yard" for their homes, kilns, and brick-making businesses. The Colonia lies adjacent to the Juárez Industrial Park, the second largest *maquiladora* manufacturing area in the city. Don Serafín explains how he started his own brick business in the Colonia: "I watched how they worked and how they mixed the earth and loaded it, fired it, the whole process. Before, everything was lyrical, everything rustic, and that is how I taught myself. I simply watched how the older people worked — that's how I learned and liked it. That's why I started to work on my own, and I am still here...."

—Erin Ross, Southwest Center for Environmental Research and Policy, New Mexico State University



Tierra Wools

The mission of Tierra Wools is to produce and sell yarn and hand-woven woolen goods; to teach Río Grande weaving, spinning, dyeing, and related skills. We shall maintain a hiring preference for low- to moderate-income people; ensure that provisions will be made so that low- to moderate-income employees will have financial access to ownership; help further the history and culture of the area by maintaining and evolving the Río Grande weaving tradition; maintain a preference for purchasing locally grown wool, especially *churro* wool; and maintain our primary place of business within a 50-mile radius of Los Ojos, New Mexico.

Antonio Manzanares with a churro sheep on his ranch in Los Ojos, New Mexico. Photo by Cynthia Vidaurri

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Immediate economic necessity and the long-term dream of owning a piece of land are factors that drive many low-income families of migrant farmworkers to live in *colonias*. To help them achieve their goals, the United Farm Workers of San Juan, Texas, developed a unique program that emphasizes dedication to public action, volunteerism, respect for all cultures, and egalitarianism. Amid telephones, faxes, and computers, *campesinos* use modern technology while still maintaining traditional values and practices.

—Victor Hernández and Cynthia Cortez
University of Texas-Pan American
Field School Participants

Dolores Venegas teaches women traditional craft-making in Río Bravo, Tamaulipas, using recycled materials and others readily available in the surrounding region. *Carrizo*, reed cane, for *piñatas* is found along the banks of the Río Bravo/Río Grande; flower baskets are made from old tin cans; and glue is produced from flour, vinegar, salt, and water. Newspapers and *mazorca* (corn husks) are also used.

—Beverly Ortiz, University of Texas-Pan American
Field School Participant

As we followed the Río Grande, crossing and crisscrossing this river, we became aware of the great environmental and cultural issues that persist along this vast area. From the headwaters in Colorado to the Gulf of Mexico, every region of the Río Bravo/Río Grande faces its own issues of history, language, culture, religion, and sustenance.

—Juanita Elizondo Garza
University of Texas-Pan American

"It Was a Way Out of the Fields"

Every weekend at places with names like El Flamingo, Prieta's Bar, or Club 77, the sound of *conjunto* music blares as dancers twirl to *huapangos*, polkas, *redovas*, and *shotis*. This tradition has survived in what was once an isolated cultural area in South Texas known to the *conjunto* aficionado as "*el valle*" (the valley). At one time, the area was more like Mexico than the United States, but during the first half of this century it adapted American traditions, developing a unique blend that is now known as Tex-Mex.

Traditional dance music is heard in the small local clubs and dance halls where some dance styles have remained relatively unchanged for the past 50 years. But accordion-driven Tejano music coexists with traditional dance music in venues that appeal to the younger generations. In his accordion-repair shop sanctuary, Amadeo Flores entertains a steady trickle of *conjunto* aficionados, star performers, and occasional college students looking for their roots, with an unceasing flow of humor and musical anecdotes. Although he has lived most of his life in the area, he has frequently traveled where his music has taken him. Amadeo is also an expert *bajo sexto* musician, accordionist, accordion tuner, part-time historian, and full-time player of weekly *conjunto* gigs. His history as a performer began in the forties, when music was a pastime, and over the years he has developed it into his livelihood. When asked why the public turned to the accordion-driven *conjunto*, he answers without hesitation, "It's something they understand and they can dance to. They want something simple and return to it." On this day Amadeo was showing off publicity photos of his accordion-repair clients and his current musical competitors, some of whom could be his grandchildren and are, in fact, his pupils. He survives and thrives in a changing musical world through his appreciation of younger generations and his irrepressible sense of humor.

—David Champion and Ramón de León
Narciso Martínez Cultural Center
San Benito, Texas

Olivia Cadaval received her Ph.D. in American studies at George Washington University. Cynthia Vidaurri received her masters in sociology at Texas A & I University and has taught Chicano and borderlands studies at Texas A & M—Kingsville University. They are founders of the Latino Cultural Resource Center at the Center for Folklife Programs & Cultural Studies and co-curators of the Río Grande/Río Bravo Basin program. Festival program interns Lucy Bates, Heidi McKinnon, and Diana Robertson are graduates from University of Edinburgh, University of New Mexico, and University of California at Los Angeles, respectively. Ileana Cadaval Adams is an independent writer and translator. Patricia Fernández de Castro is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Chicago and researcher at El Colegio de la Frontera Norte.