Preface and Acknowledgments

This book had its origins in a small trunk—twenty-two inches long by eleven inches wide and high and made of tin reinforced with wood strips—filled to the top with papers either generated or preserved by my paternal grandfather, Lorenzo de la Garza. Among the first were dozens of typewritten copies of his personal and business correspondence on flimsy onionskin, dating from the first third of the twentieth century, as well as original replies to that correspondence—for example, a brief (printed) thank-you note from the recently elected Mexican president, Francisco Madero, dated November 1911. The second group, on more durable rag paper and either printed or in the flowing copperplate script of the nineteenth century, consisted of official documents, such as deeds to family lands signed by President Porfirio Díaz in the 1880s and correspondence on a variety of topics. Included in this correspondence were several letters relating to the deaths of two heroes of Mexican independence, Colonel Bernardo Gutiérrez de Lara and his brother, Father Antonio, whose dual biography (*Dos hermanos héroes*) my grandfather wrote in the early part of the twentieth century. At the bottom of the trunk lay the heaviest items, mostly sepia-tinted portraits on stiff cardboard, known as *cartes de visite*, of family members in stiff collars that gave their heads a haughty tilt and colorful postcards commemorating travels or special occasions.

My grandfather lived most of his life (and died) in Ciudad Guerrero, Tamaulipas, a small town founded in the middle of the eighteenth century as part of a chain of settlements known as Las Villas del Norte along the lower Rio Grande. Grandfather Lorenzo died in 1948, five years before Ciudad Guerrero was flooded by the construction of Falcon International Reservoir, and its inhabitants were relocated to a new town. How the

small trunk made its way from Guerrero Viejo (Old Guerrero) to Guerrero Nuevo, when neither my grandfather (who was dead) nor his daughters, who had already moved to Laredo, Texas, were there to supervise its transport, remains a mystery, but the trunk ended up in the new town, together with miscellaneous items, in the storage room of my maternal grandparents' house. There I found it, some fifteen to twenty years after my grandparents' death. Nobody else was interested in old papers, so I carried it off to Austin, Texas, where it came to rest in *my* storage room, undisturbed, for some ten years. During that decade of repose, the paternal papers were joined by others from the maternal side that a young family member found stored in a ranch building. But the best was yet to come: my collection of family papers was finally complete when my sister gave me the letters exchanged between our parents during their courtship, letters that she had kept till then. These letters, from the late 1930s and early 1940s, detailed the joys and sorrows of the lovers, proving that, indeed, "the course of true love never did run smooth." In addition to revealing the hopes and aspirations of the writers, these letters introduced me to my parents, whom I had barely known, particularly my mother, who died when my sister and I were barely toddlers.

For years I figuratively sat on this wealth of family history without daring to delve into it. On the one hand, I was daunted by the practical considerations of sifting through the great number and variety of materials that would require, not only that I put them into some sort of order, but also that I make provisions for their conservation. For example, the oldest item in the trunk was a military appointment made by Mexican viceroy Francisco Venegas in 1812, and my parents' letters were, of course, priceless. On the other hand, I feared that poring through the contents of the small trunk and the boxes that had joined it later was dangerously akin to opening Pandora's box. My fears were that, upon my lifting the trunk's lid, myriad memories and feelings would fly out that would never be contained again. And indeed it turned out to be so, for as I read those old letters and documents, their authors came back to life through their words and resurrected their world with them. It was a world that had existed in a particular place—the northeastern Mexican states of Coahuila, Nuevo León, and Tamaulipas (which then extended into South Texas, up to the Nueces River), a region oriented toward but not divided by the Rio Grande/Bravo—and at a particular time, roughly bracketed between the middle of the eighteenth century and the middle of the twentieth. This was the world that had existed in the land that came to be known (rightly or wrongly) as the Republic of the Rio Grande.

Much like an archaeologist who reconstructs a lost civilization from the fragments of broken pottery found buried in the earth, I took these fragments of paper, long buried in the tin trunk, and worked to extract from each the stories that they contained. They were stories of personal milestones—weddings, births, and deaths—all happening within the framework of historic events, such as wars and revolutions, as well as times of recovery from the periodic strife. They were stories that deserved to be told; however, for these stories to rise above being merely a collection of anecdotes and form a coherent picture, they needed to be connected to the broader events of the time and the places in which they occurred. To accomplish this, I had to go beyond the materials that I had and consult not only the orthodox sources for the history of the region, but also privately published local histories and memoirs, which often provided details that the more general and academic works did not. In going from the particular narratives gleaned from the family papers and the personal recollections that I gathered to the broader accounts contained in history books, I have attempted to flesh out the world and the times only glimpsed in those individual documents and stories, while, at the same time, giving history a human face.

But although this work takes family history and genealogy as a point of departure for the events discussed, the ancestors and family members serve primarily as springboards or chroniclers for the narratives that follow. These narratives tell the story of a people who, while straddling two countries across a river, have managed to retain a common cultural identity, much as the Basques have done on both sides of the Pyrenees (as Mark Kurlansky relates in *The Basque History of the World*, an informative and entertaining book that I read only after finishing the final version of this manuscript). This work, though, remains a *personal* history, with a personal perspective in the telling of stories from which a reader without specialized knowledge can derive enjoyment, as well as information, following the old dictum of *enseñar deleitando* (teaching while delighting).

The work is made up of nine sections (in addition to the preface), with titles that usually intimate, rather than describe, the topic discussed in each. The arrangement of the sections is thematic, rather than strictly chronological, although the chapters are placed in a particular sequence that contributes to propelling the overall narrative. Nevertheless, readers who feel like reading the chapters out of sequence may do so without sacrificing too much coherence, and for this reason, certain facts may appear in various places, although, I trust, not to the point of tedious repetition. The family papers and other sources from which I quote are often in Spanish,

and where the content is not clear from the context, I append an English translation. All translations are my own.

By limiting the time covered in this work to primarily the two hundred years from the middle of the eighteenth century to the middle of the twentieth, I realize that I have attempted to capture—as if in amber—a world already gone. The last fifty years of the twentieth century (and the first decade of the present) opened the old Republic of the Rio Grande to the rest of the world through expanded means of communication and commercial initiatives, such as NAFTA, and, in doing so, changed it permanently. I realize that this work is, therefore, also an elegy for a world and a time already lost. In the five years that have elapsed between the beginning and the conclusion of this work, I have also come to fear that I am writing the obituary of the place where I was born and grew up, as every day brings to light greater and more horrific tales of violence that threaten its existence. And yet I am reminded that in the past 250 years the Rio Grande frontier has endured, not infrequently, wars, military occupations, raiding parties by both the *indios bárbaros* and the *anglosajones*, local insurrections, and a ten-year revolution. The people of the so-called Republic of the Rio Grande endured and survived then and will probably do so again.

Along the way, in the time it took me to reach the end of this journey into the past (longer in duration and in extent than I had anticipated), I had—and still have—much cause for gratitude to many persons who helped me with their information, their memories, and their encouragement. Heartfelt thanks hereby go to all of them: Among close and extended family members, my sister, Alicia Margarita de la Garza; my niece, Evelina Teresa García; José Carlos de la Garza; and Mrs. Aurora García Cavazos. In Nueva Ciudad Guerrero, Tamaulipas, the late Mr. Jaime Gutiérrez, president of the association of Hijos y Amigos de Guerrero Viejo, and María del Carmen González, curator of the Municipal Archive. From Ciudad Victoria, Tamaulipas, state archivist Carlos Rugerio Cázares, a restoration architect who took time to answer my questions on the architecture of Guerrero Viejo. My thanks also to J. J. Gallegos and George Farías, for sharing their information about the leaders of the Republic of the Rio Grande (Antonio Zapata and Juan Francisco Farías, respectively); in Laredo, Texas, Joe Moreno, Special Collections librarian, Laredo Public Library, and Margarita Araiza, executive director of the Webb County Heritage Foundation; and in Austin, Adán Benavides and Margo Gutiérrez of the Benson Latin American Library and the staff of the Briscoe Center for American History, both at the University of Texas, as well as Galen Greaser, Spanish translator and archivist at the Texas General Land Office, who helped

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From the Republic of the Rio Grande

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