



# **I Would Rather Sleep in Texas: A History of the Lower Rio Grande Valley and the People of the Santa Anita Land Grant**

*Mary Margaret McAllen Amberson, James A. McAllen, Margaret H. McAllen*

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This superb work of history tells the story of the Lower Rio Grande Valley and the people who struggled to make this daunting land their home. Spanish conquistadors and Mexican revolutionaries, cowboys and ranchers, Texas Rangers and Civil War generals, entrepreneurs and empire builders are all a part of this centuries-long saga, thoroughly researched and skillfully presented here.

Steamboats used the inland waterway as a major transport route, and fortunes were made when the river served as the Confederacy's only outlet for money and munitions. Mexican presidents and revolutionaries, European empires and investors, American cattle kings and entrepreneurs all considered this river frontier crucial. Men, women, and beasts braved the unforgiving climate of this land, and its cattle and cowboys gave rise to the great cattle drives up the Chisholm Trail to Kansas. It was and remains a crossroads of international cultures.

In this moving account of the history of the families of the Santa Anita land grant, almost two hundred years of the history of the lower Rio Grande Valley (1748–1940) are revealed. An important addition to any collection of Texas history, *I Would Rather Sleep in Texas* is one of the most complete studies of the lower Rio Grande, abundantly illustrated with maps and photographs, many never before published.

In 1790 the Santa Anita, a Spanish land grant, was awarded to merchant José Manuel Gómez. After the land passed to Gómez's widow, part of the grant was acquired by María Salomé Ballí, the daughter of a powerful Spanish clan. Salomé Ballí married Scotsman John Young, and her family connections combined with his business acumen helped to further assemble the Santa Anita under one owner.

In 1859, after Young's death, Salomé struggled to hold onto her properties amid bandit raids and the siege of violence waged in the region by borderland caudillo Juan Nepomuceno Cortina. Soon after the beginning of the Civil War, she married Scotch-Irish immigrant John McAllen. They participated in the rapid wartime cotton trade through Matamoros and had business associations with a group of men—Mifflin Kenedy, Richard King, Charles Stillman, and Francisco Yturria—who made fortunes that influenced businesses nationwide. Rare firsthand accounts by Salomé Ballí Young de McAllen, John McAllen, and their son, James Ballí McAllen, add to a deeper understanding of the blending of the region's frontier cultures, rowdy politics, and periodic violence.

All the while, the Santa Anita remained the cornerstone of the business and stability of this family. As the lower Rio Grande Valley moved into the modern era, land speculation led economic activity from 1890 through 1910. The construction of railroads brought improved means for transportation and new towns, including McAllen, Texas, in 1905. The book's ending reveals how, in 1915, Mexican warfare again spilled over the banks of the Rio Grande with deadly results, tragically affecting this family for the next twenty-five years. *I Would Rather Sleep in Texas* tells a remarkable story that covers a broad sweep of Texas and borderlands history.

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