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Mexican Brick Culture in the Building of Texas, 1800s-1980s (Rio Grande/Río Bravo: Borderlands Culture and Traditions)

By Howard Scott Cook

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Although brickmaking was one of the pioneering non-agricultural manufacturing industries in the Rio Grande Valley, as well as in other areas of the lower Rio Grande region, this is the first ethnographic study of the industry. The many and important connections between brickmaking in Mexico and Texas lead author Scott Cook to consider many core issues in the interdisciplinary field of border cultural studies, even as he gives a clear picture of the development and decline of the binational industry.

Drawing largely on oral testimonies from living informants and from ten years of fieldwork in surviving sites, Cook explores the organization, development, and techniques of the border brick industry, cataloging the range of organizational forms of brick manufacturing from household-based petty commodity units to wage-labor-based petty capitalist units. He also highlights a series of linkages between production, labor markets, and commodity markets. Finally, he focuses on understanding how and why handmade brick production disappeared in Texas just as it took off into explosive growth in Mexico, roughly in the period from the 1950s to the 1980s.

Cook necessarily deals with both sides of the border. Historically, the circular flow of people, materials, and culture in the brick industry has defied the River boundary as any sort

of formidable barrier to movement. Yet this study documents that, especially in the twentieth century, the “Border” cannot be romantically dismissed as a fiction which has no quotidian existential impact on the movement of people, commodities, and culture.

Major themes developed include:

- The development and spread of Mexican brick culture in Texas
- Case studies of brick making in South Texas and Northern Mexico
- Mexican brick export industry and the role of joint capital

- The impact of intercultural relations and views of the other on cross-border business

- Issues of citizenship and identity in the histories of border brickmaking families

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Scott Cook is professor emeritus of anthropology and interim director of the Puerto Rican and Latino Studies Institute at the University of Connecticut. His Ph.D. in anthropology is from the University of Pittsburgh.

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