

Historian examines river life

Rio Grande's past studied

United Press International
BROWNSVILLE — A.A. Champion sits in a little room with a magnifying glass and 46,500 index cards and outlines the past life of the Lower Rio Grande Valley and all the interconnections that make it larger than itself.

Champion is sought by historians, government officials and laymen alike for his knowledge of the way things were. Many seek information on the 1840s when Brownsville was no more than a series of fields cultivated by Mexicans along the surging Rio Grande.

Schooners and their wind-

lapped sails bobbed in the near-by Gulf of Mexico near the end of their journey from New Orleans to the docks at Brazos-Santiago Pass — where goods would be unloaded, placed in mule trains and hauled to the Italian, French, U.S. and German merchants trading in the bustling market at neighboring Matamoros, Mexico.

At 84 years of age, Champion's research throws off a whirl of stories.

The northern Mexican states and Texas Mexicans, he says, were in "sympathy" with the Anglos during the mid-1830s at

the time of the Texas secession from Mexico.

"The northern Mexican states had no great love for the central government of Mexico. They had been mistreated and given a bad time."

Dressed in dark slacks, white shirt and a contemporary tie, Champion leans back in his desk chair and crosses his hands behind his head and what's left of his white hair. His thoughts are geared to another time.

He remembers the time before manmade concoctions like dams tamed the Rio Grande.

"Today we don't even have a river. We have a little ole' dirty creek that used to be a navigable Rio Grande, rampaging Rio Grande that would fill up twice a year and overflow into the rest of the country, be a sea of water for weeks.

"Nobody could stop the Rio Grande. It was a terrific stream. Reddish, murky and swift what a beautiful sight."

Champion's research has allowed him to talk authoritatively about the number of steamboats that puffed and churned up and down the river, carrying Gen. Zachary Taylor's

troops and supplies before and during the Mexican-American war.

For 50 years, Albert Alfonso Champion has been researching and investigating the history of the area, his home that was created in part by pioneer ancestors who settled in Port Isabel when there was not much there other than Taylor's troops, camped and preparing for war with Mexico.

Champion, born in 1899 in what was then known as Point Isabel, still manages real estate and other investments.

Contemporary histories of Brownsville rely on Champion's notes that go back to when the Spaniards colonized Northeastern Mexico in the mid-18th century.

He also speaks of the time when Spaniard Alonso Alvarez de Pineda first explored the Gulf Coast from Florida to Veracruz and landed south of the Rio Grande, at present-day Soto la Marina, Mexico, for 40 days in 1519.

Some historians believe that it was the mouth of the Rio Grande that de Pineda and his men found, but Champion uses a complicated and technical map showing the shifting mouth of the Rio Grande and other information to dispute that claim.

Champion has some disdain for newspapers and their fast-paced and sometimes frantic requirement to print information that he feels is without deep and thorough verification. But journalists might find it comforting to know Champion, who calls himself a researcher and also sometimes questions the accuracy of historians.

"A historian can make an error and that error will be repeated by others not going into deeper research," he said. "I want history to be a deep, researched, truthful history."

For instance, Champion said that the National Park Service sponsored a team to study the first Mexican War battle site at nearby Palo Alto for consideration as a national park. But Champion said he soon informed the researchers that their calculations of the battlefield site just outside Brownsville were off by about 3 miles.



Dorm Decorations

Yvonne Garibay, a sophomore biomedical science major from Waco, and Beckie Blakeway, a business analysis and management

major from Little Rock, Ark., display their prize-winning dorm decorations in the hall decoration contest at Krueger Hall.

Structure defects found in amusement park ride

United Press International
HOUSTON — The head of the Consumer Product Safety Commission says defects were found in two other states on amusement park thrill rides similar to one that caused a fatal accident at the Texas State Fair this year.

Commission chairwoman Nancy Steorts said an investigation turned up structural defects in Enterprise rides at Valdosta, Ga., and Lakeland, Fla.

At the commission's recommendation, owners of those two rides closed them down, she said.

"When they saw what we saw, they didn't mind keeping it (the ride) closed," said Steorts.

A similar ride in West Palm Beach, Fla., did not exhibit any structural problems and continued operation at a fair during the past three months.

On Oct. 17 in Dallas, an Enterprise gondola broke loose

and flew onto the crowd at the Fair Midway, killing one and seriously injuring others in the gondola. About 15 people were treated for injuries.

No official cause of the accident has been determined, although inspections revealed that bolts were weakened on the ride.

It was the second incident involving a State Fair in recent years. In 1978, a car plunged off the Star ride, killing one man and injuring several other people.

Steorts said investigators from the commission were going to amusement parks to check the safety of their rides.

She said Texas has no park rides, but 22 other states do.

"In Texas there is an insurance program, but hopefully next year there will be a licensing program," she said.

"We will encourage the state to take a more active role in licensing and inspecting these rides."

Several multimillion-dollar lawsuits have been filed as a result of this year's

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WE WISH YOU A MERRY CHRISTMAS.

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