

Still celebrating independence

29 July 2000

On Sunday, just a few weeks after Independence Day, some San Antonians are commemorating Texas' involvement with the American Revolution.

The Damas and Caballeros de Gálvez will gather at San Fernando Cathedral for the 8 a.m. Eucharist celebration to observe the birthday of Bernardo de Gálvez, governor of the Spanish province of Louisiana at the time of the American Revolution and later viceroy of New Spain.

As governor of Louisiana, Gálvez was instrumental in bringing about "The Texas Connection with the American Revolution," as Robert H. Thonhoff has titled his book (Eakin Press, 1981). That connection involved driving thousands of cattle and horses from Béxar to Louisiana to feed the army Gálvez recruited to fight the British along the Gulf Coast.

In 1776, the British colonies in North America declared their independence and the start of the Revolutionary War. Five years later, in 1781, the British surrendered at Yorktown, but the conflict did not officially end until the Treaty of Paris in 1783.

Spain entered the war against England, and interestingly, in May 1779, Gálvez led an army that at one point launched 7,000 men in successful campaigns from Mobile, Ala., to Pensacola, Fla.

The first herd of horses destined to help Gálvez left Béxar in the summer of 1779, almost as soon as news of Spain's declaration of war against England reached San Antonio. Later, in October, the cattle drives began.

A key person in these first drives was Joseph Félix Menchaca, said to be one of the soldiers that accompanied Martín de Alarcón on the founding expedition to San Antonio.

At the time of the American Revolution, Menchaca was the senior ranking officer, below the governor. He presided de Béxar; he and his family occupied the Rancho de las Cabras.

Soldiers on the frontier also were settlers. Many of them were descendants from central Mexico, and many provided the frontier with the villagers of a wider migration to the frontier, where they enjoyed considerable social and economic mobility.

Their primary duty was, of course, to provide defense. Accordingly, presidial troops protected the five missionary-led Indian communities in the area from Apache and Comanche attacks.

Along with receiving compensation for their military duties, soldiers farmed and ranched for a living. Their presidio, or garrison town, was established in 1718. Shortly after its foundation, the soldiers began clearing fields and building dams and *acequias* (irrigation canals) to grow subsistence crops.

Their lands, however, were expropriated when the king granted them to the settlers from the Canary Islands who arrived in 1831. The soldier-settlers then set up temporary residences on un-irrigated fields. Following the example of missionary-led Indian and presidial Spanish towns, they established ranches along the San Antonio River valley.

In time, they intermarried with the Canary Islanders and became leaders in the civilian town of San Fernando.

Originally, the livestock drives were south to Saltillo, Béxar's connection with the provinces below the Rio Grande, since the mountains between Laredo and Monterrey were impassable at the time.

But the goods available to Béjarinos at Saltillo were expensive. Most of those goods were introduced into New Spain from Europe through the port of Veracruz and then brought overland to Mexico City before being hauled north to Saltillo.

Those same European goods were cheaper if acquired in Louisiana, but Mexico City merchants were influential in forbidding their introduction into Texas. Because of Spain's geopolitical objectives, however, the restriction of trading with Louisiana was lifted.

Tejanos then drove herds to support Gálvez's campaigns against the British and brought back the less expensive goods — a connection that could not be severed once the war was over and the need for troops was terminated.

Additionally, by the 1770s, Tejanos had developed their own notion of independence from their own sense of being different than town residents in the Mexican highlands, from those of American colonists, and more independence Tejanos adopted.

Accordingly, because of our ancestors' connection to the American Revolution and Gálvez's role in that struggle, July is remembered as Independence month in Texas.