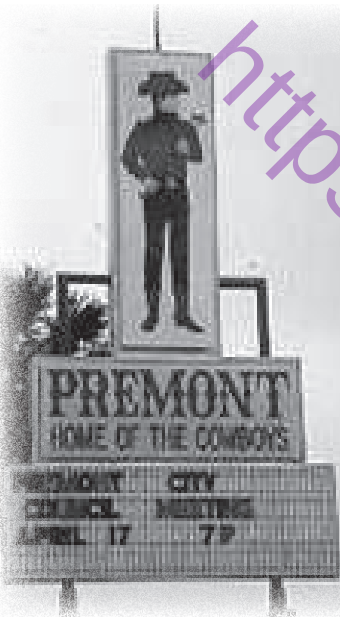




Premont, Texas Official and Unofficial Geographies: Ethnographies of Place

by Abel Garcia

Recently, I spent a weekend at home in Premont, Texas, driving around with a new perspective of space and place. The town is much different than when I lived there 10 years ago. It seems that the border that separates the East and West is not as predominant as when I was a kid. Now, the city from East to West appears to be old and falling apart. I recall the homes in the far west side being very nice, but now many are in disrepair. The school facilities appear to be in disrepair, too. Most of downtown is vacant. Recently, the chain pharmacy, CVS, recruited the local pharmacist to work for a large corporation in another city 30 miles away. After 20 years, he shut his doors downtown. Driving down highway 281 there are several vacant gas stations, and convenience stores. The ones still trying to hold on appear to be closed due to the condition of the buildings and busted up lights.

In seeing all this, I can't help but wonder what the solution is. What kind of industry can be brought into this community to revitalize it? And even if there is industry brought into the area, is there a large enough and educated enough population to work in it? Premont appears to be disintegrating, and runs the risk of dying soon if nothing is done about the economic conditions. In the Intro. to Chicano/a Studies Class, my project was to compile a community history based on interviews with local residents. The project gave me a better understanding of the area, and some insight as to why the conditions of the city continue to decline.

I grew up in Premont located in Jim Wells County about 25 miles south of Alice and about 80 miles north of the Mexican border. It is the quintessential one stop light town, where everyone knows everyone, and high school sporting events are central to the town's people. Having grown up in such a close knit area, it's hard to consider the geography of a Latino place only in relation to the street or neighborhood my house was in. Most people where I come from will say that they are from Premont, rather than saying what part of town they grew up in. There is no need to ask what part of town they grew up in. You will know. They are from the same place that you are from, Premont.

Premont is located at the site of what was the Los Olmos y Loma Blanca land grant issued to Ignacio de la Peña in 1831. The land was purchased by R.P. Haldeman in order to attract northern Anglo settlers to the warm climate and ideal farming land. The town became part of Jim Wells County in 1911 and was incorporated in 1939. Although the initial plan was to attract northern Anglo settlers, at the time of Premont's inception there was already a small population of Mexican American families

living in the area employed by local farmers and ranchers. Haldeman set up a portion of town for those families located on the eastern side of town. A plaza was built for these Mexican American families called Hidalgo Park, which still exists. To many, it is known as the Mexican Park. Historically, the East Side of Premont has been Mexican. Like so many other Texas towns where the economy dominated, race, status and class are visible spaces. "Across the tracks" marks Premont's racial/class divide.

Around 1933 Premont's first oil was drilled, causing a surge in the economy and growth in population as well as development on the west side of town, mostly Anglo. The population continued to grow into the 1950's to about 2,500 residents where it has remained. When comparing homes between the East and West Sides it is obvious that the East is the older part of town with homes that have wood or exterior siding. On the West there are more brick homes and the property values are higher with the schools being located on that side of town. On the southwest corner of town there are a few blocks of homes that are significantly larger and nicer. Locals state that this area had started out as a Mobile Oil camp, with the employees of the company building homes there. Most of these people were Anglo families not from the area. Like the rest of the Texas economy, most of it is based on oil, land and water. As the natural resource-based economy eroded in Premont, the majority of Premonters were out of work, and the ethnic geography shifted—Across the tracks.

My grandfather moved to the West Side of town in 1966. According to my father's family he designed the layout of the home himself and hired his own contractor to build it. My father's family was one of the first Mexican families to make the move across the tracks. Before moving to the west side of town, his family lived one block west of Hidalgo Park. My grandfather's brother, Rafael's family lived directly across the street from Hidalgo Park, and the home continues to be in the family, today. One block north lives my grandfather's sister Ortencia's family. My parents lived next door to Ortencia up until 1975 when they moved over to the West Side of town.

During the 1960's my grandfather was employed as a fire fighter for the Kingsville Naval Air Base. He was steadily employed by the fire department for several years. In addition, he distributed the local paper, he and my father ran an auto parts store, and he also had a small nursery. Compared to other Mexicanos there, my grandfather was a pretty successful businessman by the 1980's, owning his own monument company. According to my father and his siblings, adjacent to their home on the West Side of town were cotton fields and during harvest time they worked the fields and picked cotton to supplement the family income.

In 1975, my parents moved down the street from my grandparents. According to my parents there was a significant population of Mexicanos living on the West Side of town by this time. The home they purchased was built during the 50's, and they paid around \$28,000. They continue to live there today. When I asked my mother why they had decided to move, she stated that my older sister and brother wanted to move across the tracks in order to be closer to their friends and cousins living out there. As I questioned my mother about the move she also revealed that at the time she and my father were earning a better living and could afford to move to the newer side of town. In 1969, my mother went to Beauty School, to become a cosmetologist. Upon graduating she found employment with my father's cousin, Bertha Ortiz,



who owned a downtown beauty shop. She and Bertha, now in her eighties, continue to work there today. Bertha had already been living on the West Side of town prior to my mother and father moving. This was also another motivating factor in moving to the West Side of town. However, as I look at the migration from east to west, the changing demography conveys a changing economic landscape. When the west side changed, it was during the economic downturn of the region's economy.

According to the 2000 US Census Bureau, about 80 percent of the total population of Premont is Hispanic with 18 percent Anglo. These statistics indicated that the majority of Mexican families remained in the community despite the economic strife during the early and mid part of century, following the Great Depression. It appears as though the Anglos who moved into the community looking for wealth in the farm and ranch industries had a hard time competing with the few landowners who owned thousands of acres surrounding the town. The heirs of the Seeligson and Canales ranches still hold a large portion of the land today. They continue to be in the cattle and oil industry, but the community does not appear to be prospering from their enterprises. According to the Census Bureau only about 4.6 percent of the community was employed in farming, fishing and forestry occupations. This is a huge turn around from the early and mid part of the century.

My father, born in 1938, remembers picking cotton as an adolescent. He reports that most Mexicans in the community worked in the fields at one time or another when he was young. Some worked out in the fields for a living and others to supplement their family income. Growing up, I spent a lot of time with my grandfather who was born in Duval County, but moved to Premont during his adolescence. He and his brothers worked in the fields daily. Today, the largest percentage of the population is employed in management, professional and related occupations with education, health and social services being the predominant industries. In the administrative and service sector of the economy, this "white collar" group is largely dependent on State and County government retaining the area. Although, the figures for "white collar" employment seem to indicate progress for the Mexican American majority of Premont from skilled or semi skilled labor in the fields to professional and management positions, the majority of inhabitants earn wages below the poverty line. According to the US Census Bureau nearly a quarter of the townspeople earn less than \$10,000.00 a year, and over 50 percent of single moms earn wages under the poverty line. When oil and agriculture weakened, the spin effects included sharp declines in other businesses, leaving Premont and other south Texas towns struggling for new industries and jobs.

The downtown area of Premont along Main St. used to be prosperous. According to family and community members, every building downtown was occupied during the mid part of the century. During its heyday, Premont's downtown area had a movie theater, bank, lumberyard, auto parts store, several restaurants, a cantina, grocery store, drug store, beauty shop, dance hall, hardware store, and a general store. Today, all that remains is a beauty shop on the south side and, on the northend, a grocery store, video store, restaurant, flower shop, and a beauty shop. The bank also remains, now owned by Wells Fargo. Before Wells Fargo took over it was called the First State Bank of Premont.

As far as the east side of town, historically, it has not been

a commercial area, and today there are even less businesses on that side of town than on the west side. Premont sits along State Highway 281, 9 miles north of Falfurrias. Highway 281 is one of the major US highways where imported goods from Mexico are passed through. This highway has been busy for decades, and one would think that Premont would be an area where businesses,



The author's grandparents' house on the East Side of Premont with no trespassing sign posted.

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such as gas stations, truck stops, fast food stops, and motels would be available to those traveling through the area, but it is quite the opposite. Over the last 10 years since I've moved away, several of the local fueling stations have shut down. There are numerous unused plots of land along the highway, that could accommodate new businesses, but nothing is in the making. The latest addition to the town has been a Dollar Store. According to community members, the land belongs to the city, and the city council has refused for decades to give up or sell the land for commercial use. No one could say why this has been happening. One idea is that there is a chance of construction of Interstate 69, which is a plan to turn Highway 281 into a NAFTA highway, and that Premont will be bypassed by the highway. Many feel that if this happens it will be the final blow and the demise of the city will accelerate.

This was the case for Falfurrias. Highway 281 used to run straight through the center of Falfurrias, where businesses prospered. Several years ago, in preparation for the interstate, the town was bypassed. Since this happened, numerous businesses have surfaced along the new highway. But, along the old section, businesses owned by locals are nearly all gone. Although, there are several new colossal filling stations along the new highway they appear to have little or no benefit to the community, most likely because none are locally owned. This is the fear that many claim Premont's community leaders have. There is apprehension in building along the highway due to the risk of being bypassed.

As with most south Texas communities the area has been neglected educationally. The Premont I.S.D. established in 1921 was the largest in the county. According to relatives on my paternal side of the family my grandparents both attended school in Premont, and were only allowed to attend through the sixth grade. As David Montejano pointed out, most of the rural counties of Texas were dominated by commercial farmers, who determined the educational level of Mexican Americans in south Texas. They ran the county governments and the local school boards based on their labor needs. My grandfather during the 1950's completed high school, by taking night classes and received his high school diploma. My grandmother did not finish her schooling. My father



and his siblings report that they attended integrated schools, but were not allowed to speak Spanish while at school. Of the five children in my father's family, two did not complete high school. My Uncle Lorenzo and Aunt Imelda both suffered from hearing loss at an early age making it difficult for them to complete school. My father also suffered from hearing loss, but completed school.

were geared towards vocational classes such as Auto Mechanics, Agriculture, and Welding. Although the majority of the school age kids in Premont were Hispanic when I went to school, there was still the dividing line of the railroad tracks and social class that determined whether you took vocational classes or not.

In my father's day, most of the Hispanics, regardless of what side of the tracks they lived on, were geared towards vocational programs and not encouraged to go to college. When my siblings and I were attending school, it may not have been a matter of race, but a matter of social class. The families who lived on the East Side of the tracks tended to make less money than those on the West Side. Many of the children from the East Side were first generation English speakers as well. Even though I was attending school in late eighties and early nineties, the idea that those on the other side of the tracks were less able to succeed continued in the consciousness of my parents and us even though the seeds of this idea had been planted long before. I find it interesting that even though the majority of the population in town are Hispanic, we still found a way to marginalize our own people.

My sister, a single mother with two daughters attending Premont Schools, says that currently the school is at risk of shutting down due to extremely low standardized test scores. They are also indebted to the State several million dollars after the last superintendent padded attendance records. According to her and her daughters there are a very limited number of certified teachers teaching at the school. Even when I was in school this was a problem. This can be attributed to the fact that Premont lacks appeal for any educator to want to make a move there. There is limited housing, industry or even entertainment. This is a problem, because with the lack of quality education, there will be a population of ill prepared young men and women who are unlikely to move away and go to college in order to become professionals. This further exacerbates the poverty in the area. Rather than using education for the betterment of the community it lessens the likelihood of these individuals obtaining better employment than the generation before and this continues to stifle the community. Inevitably, the community ends up with potential leaders that are uneducated and lack the foresight to be able to make good decisions to better the community. As I consider the economic outlook of south Texas towns, their future depends on education, whether new businesses and industries come in. For many in south Texas, work means working at the prisons, or border patrol.

Finally, I feel many who live in the community do not realize the bleak future that may be ahead. And to many, such as myself, who have gone and become educated looking for better opportunity, the town lacks appeal to return. For those of us who have young nieces or nephews or other school aged friends living in these communities, it is important for us to encourage kids to seek higher education. We have a responsibility, to raise awareness in youth regarding the advantages of education, because unlike our parents or grandparents, we've been allotted a somewhat better opportunity and we are aware of the advantages of being educated. I feel that planting this seed in the upcoming generation is one of the few solutions that we have complete control over.

Bio: Abel García, a student at UTSA, presented this paper at the NACCS Regional Conference in McAllen, Texas on February 29, 2008.



The author's grandparent's house on the West Side of Premont where they moved in 1966.

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His oldest sister, Minerva, went on to college and became a school teacher. Viola, the youngest, became a flight attendant. Lorenzo left home as a pipe fitter and gained employment in Houston for an industrial contractor, and Imelda was a stay at home mom.

My father never left town. After high school, he also worked as a pipe fitter, but later he and my grandfather opened up an Auto Parts store. According to my father and my uncle Lorenzo, they did not experience much discrimination in school from students. The majority of the kids in school were Hispanic. My father and his siblings participated in extracurricular activities such as sports and cheerleading. However, my father reports that there were few Hispanic teachers and he feels that, at times, he was looked down on by his teachers due to his poor hearing and ethnicity. Due to his poor hearing my father developed a speech impediment, and thus he and my grandfather felt it was best for him to try and earn a living in the community. They felt he would be at risk of harsher discrimination by moving to a place that had a larger Anglo population. Although my father speaks English very well, he prefers to communicate in Spanish. Looking back at my own experience in the Premont school system, it wasn't much different from my father's. With the 1954 Brown vs. Board of Education decision to desegregate schools, most school boards resisted. Up until 1976, it took local court actions to make sure that desegregation was happening. It wasn't until 1995 that the Edgewood case made it clear that there was unequal education with poor school districts suffering from the inequitable tax system.

The majority of the kids in school when I attended were Hispanic and I don't recall much discrimination. It was structural discrimination that operated. I recall there being a difference in the students who were from the East Side and those who were from the West Side of town. Historically, the East Side of town was predominantly Hispanic. Even during my father's years as a youngster, it was seen as a move up in class if your family was able to make the move over to the West Side which had been predominantly Anglo. In school those of us who lived on the West Side of the railroad tracks were mostly geared toward classes that prepared us for college, while the kids who lived on the East Side