The Southwest in Minor Chord

Charles Allen
THE SOUTHWEST IN MINOR CHORD

No book which attempts to interpret the Southwest region as a whole could reasonably be expected to show the quality that marks the more localized interpretations of the area. The Southwest is so large, so diverse in its geology, ecology, population, and economics that it would be perhaps impossible for one person to absorb and know the entire scene. One should be prepared to freely grant Mr. Peyton the right to a certain amount of superficiality; and certainly one should not ask of him the convincing detail or the authoritative generalization such as one frequently finds in Frank Waters' *The Colorado*, or Mary Austin's *The Land of Journeys' Ending*, or Harvey Fergusson's *Rio Grande*.

Green Peyton's *America's Heartland: the Southwest* was not intended for educated Southwesterners, I suspect, although they will find a number of satisfying and courageous remarks scattered throughout the book. There is often a dependable, swift eye for the climate and scenery. There is a nice sketch of individualist J. Frank Dobie. There are a few neat jibes at the exploitative tendencies of southwestern businessmen. There is a good deal of healthy scepticism regarding the desirability and feasibility of industrializing the semi-arid country west of Fort Worth. There is a good deal to recommend the emphasized contention: "Gregarious folk, who yearn to see this land teeming with humanity, live under the curious delusion that wealth and importance of a country, are measured by the number of people who can be packed into it." Above all, many non-Texans will be delighted to discover a native Texan finally admitting that the typical Texan is prone to an overweening chauvinism, big-

*University of Oklahoma Press, 1948.*

386
ory, arrogance, and aggressiveness. On the other hand those persons who know this region fairly well may be a little troubled by the frequent factual inaccuracies: on the subject of New Mexico, for instance, Peyton insists that El Vado Dam is “northeast of Albuquerque”; that “The last Indian [Pueblo] revolt in New Mexico flared up in 1680”; that after 1692 a “long, drowsy age of peace began in New Mexico.”

And those persons with knowledge of the area, though they would be prepared to graciously condone a good deal of superficiality, would be considerably bored with the rather overwhelming superficiality. Although Peyton devotes separate chapters to El Paso and Dallas, he manages to interpret these cities with the blithe insight of a week-end tourist. The short chapters on states—Arkansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, and New Mexico are even more sketchy; even Texas, which occupies several chapters, is treated with spotty glances.

Parenthetically, the reasons for excluding Arizona from the definition of the Southwest and for including Arkansas are whimsical: although Arizona looks southwestern, its spirit and alignments are with California! Although Arkansas looks and acts southern, it is southwestern because it was considered southwestern during the early 1800's; and because of its cattle, oil, and “Latin” peoples.

But to return to Peyton’s superficiality for a moment. Whether he is attempting the region’s history, its educational institutions, its press, its literary and art activities, or its cattle and oil industries, he manages only elementary and commonly accepted information. Nor is the main outline of any one subject established. What he neglects to state about the essentials of the oil or cattle industries, for example, makes a greater impression on the reader's mind (I am still assuming the informed southwestern reader) than the romantic collection of exciting episodes and flavorsome anecdotes. In both businesses the small operator and the hired hand, increasingly important and influential, are only
mentioned, and inevitably in terms of their picturesqueness rather than their day by day struggle to keep alive and make a living.

If the *Heartland's* thinness would bore the educated southwestern reader or any educated reader who is somewhat informed about the Southwest, the book might very well puzzle all perceptive people who are uninformed but yet honestly willing to learn. Such people, though knowing nothing or next to nothing about the Southwest, would soon see that Peyton scarcely recognizes many of the most significant aspects of life—whether New England life, Midwest life, or Southwest life—particularly the political, social, and economic forces. They would wonder at the very incidental references to such matters as public health, race relations, banking, state and city government, political organization, transportation, public and private hospitals, tax structure, housing, freight rates, small industries—in fact, if we take New Englanders as an example of potential readers of the book, they might be vexed, New Englanders being what they are, at the determined refusal to analyze the dynamics that sustain, or fail to sustain, the fifteen million human beings who inhabit the region. Their vexation would not be appeased appreciably, I am afraid, by the author's ingenuous admission: "I am not an authority on anything. A journalist has no time to become a scholar."

Then, too, Peyton's explanations of social phenomena might appear to the keen-witted New Engander not only superficial but also frequently far-fetched and preposterous, at times even dangerous. They would not quarrel with his observation that "The Southwest has a vast body of minor literature. The main line of American writing has passed it by." But they would not be able to make heads or tails of the paragraph of cause:

One reason is, I think, the very fact that this country is so ancient and peculiar to itself. Ever since the United States be-
came a nation, its writers have been preoccupied with the task of creating a national literature distinct from its European sources; of interpreting the wide continent as a whole. The origins of American literature lie mostly in England. But the Southwest has its origins in Spain and France, and so it is a stranger at the literary feast of our time.

(Nor am I certain of what Peyton is trying to say here, but if he is assuming the Spanish ever developed a literary tradition in the Southwest, he is of course wrong. For obvious reasons, they not only failed to develop a literary tradition, but also failed to produce one significant piece of pure literature.)

Granting, for the sake of politeness, that Southwesterners are unconcerned and fatalistic about the Bomb, New Englanders might rudely snort at Peyton's explanation: "The Southwest is constitutionally incapable of fearing the Bomb. Its people have lived too intimately with death for too many centuries to fear it now." And certainly New Englanders might become downright wrathful at the author's explanation of the unlovely traits of Texan character: something about the blood and culture of 185,000 people of German extraction influencing a total Texas population of over seven million with a case of Prussianism.

And so I trust Peyton did not intend his book for knowledge-loving New Englanders.

For whom did he intend the book then? For those whom Mencken used to derisively label the bamboisie? If so, I am afraid Peyton will not find many takers, for America's Heartland will offend their prejudices just as quickly as it offends the intelligence and common sense of the more informed and critical. Perhaps Mr. Peyton had the Esquimaux in mind.