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*Account of a Protestant Missionary in
1850s Brownsville, Texas*

Born in Littleton, New Hampshire, on March 21, 1811, Melinda Rankin received a New England education and began teaching in the common schools of that region. Similar to many women who traveled West to spread the gospel through the public schools, Rankin also chose to combine proselytizing and teaching. Melinda's goal was to convert Catholics to the Presbyterian faith in Mexico. However, because the Mexican constitution forbade the teaching of other religions, she chose to open a school and mission in Brownsville, Texas, along the U.S./Mexico border. With the assistance of the American and Foreign Christian Union in New York, Rankin eventually reached her goal of establishing missions inside Mexico. She also taught among the freed people of the American South after the Civil War and lived actively until her death on December 6, 1888.¹¹⁹

In this passage from her book, *Twenty Years among the Mexicans*, the strength of her evangelical spirit is conveyed through her thoughts and actions while teaching Mexicans in the border town of Brownsville. Readers will gain a sense of the intense anti-Catholicism prevalent in the United States of the early 1850s and the means in which native populations such as the Mexicans of Brownsville interacted with missionaries in their midst.

From: Melinda Rankin, *Twenty Years among the Mexicans: A Narrative of Missionary Labor* (Cincinnati: Chase and Hall, Publishers, 1875), pp. 34-45, 57-61, 63-74.

CHAPTER V.

In the spring of 1852 I believed that time had fully come for me to commence my work for the Mexican people. I had gained some very important information in regard to my probable success, through Rev. Daniel Baker, D.D., a Presbyterian minister, who, in 1850, had ascended the Rio Grande River as far as Roma, a distance of two hundred miles, for investigating the condition of the country for evangelical work. He represented the Mexicans as accessible, and many of them manifesting the desire for instruction in the Bible.

I left Jefferson, Eastern Texas, in May, and went to New Orleans to take passage on a vessel for Brazos Santiago, near the mouth of the Rio Grande

River. I purposed going to Brownsville, a place situated about sixty miles up the river, opposite Matamoras, Mexico. The steamship for which I waited brought news of the invasion of Brownsville, by Indians, of a very alarming character. This condition of affairs, prevailing at the place of my destination, presented somewhat of an obstacle in the way of the further prosecution of my journey, as I had hoped that things had become sufficiently settled on the frontier to insure personal safety at least. But could I turn back because of difficulties in the way? I thought of the trials of "Pilgrim," who met lions in the way, and also of the advice given to him "To keep in the middle of the road, and the lions could not harm him." "Duty to God" was my watchword, and on His powerful arm I trusted for protection, and I resolved to go forward. Remaining in New Orleans over the Sabbath, I attended what was then Rev. Dr. Scott's church, where I heard a sermon from a stranger (Dr. S. being absent) which fully established my faith in God's Providential dealings with his people. Although that stranger, who was a foreigner, judging by his dialect, may never know, in this world, the comforting message he brought to me on that occasion, perhaps a future day will reveal that it was a word spoken in season to one soul at least. With renewed courage I took passage, and crossed the Gulf of Mexico, landing at Brazos, and passing over an arm of the sea, arrived at Point Isabel. There I took a stage for Brownsville.

A new sensation seized me when I saw, for the first time, a Mexican, a representative of the nation for which I had entertained such profound interest. I did not feel, as many others have expressed, that the sight of a Mexican was enough to disgust one with the whole nation. A heartfelt sympathy was revived, not by the prepossessing exterior, surely, but because a priceless soul was incased in it for whom the Savior had died. And a whole nation of souls, shut out from the light of the gospel of salvation, pressed with an increased influence upon my heart. Although I was coming into a land of new and untried scenes, yet I felt God's presence encompassing me, and I repeated the lines of Madame Guyon,

"To me belongs not time nor space,
My country is in every place;
I can be calm and free from care,
On any shore, since God is there."

Just before arriving in Brownsville, the driver of the stage asked me where I wished to be left. I replied, "Take me to the best hotel in town." He answered, "There is no hotel in Brownsville." This intelligence was somewhat of a damper upon my feelings and prospects, and I muscd upon the unpleasant condition of a stranger arrived in such a place after nine o'clock at night. After a little time the driver said, "I know a German woman who sometimes takes lady boarders, and I will take you to her house." Accordingly, I was set down at this woman's door, and I found my way inside, and asked for a night's lodging. The woman kindly received me, and I passed the night very comfortably.

At ten o'clock the next day I sallied out in quest of more commodious quarters. I found an American family, with which I was invited to remain a few days, but they could not give me permanent board. After several applications for a boarding-place, I was finally compelled to provide a home for myself, which I did, by renting two rooms, one for a residence, and the other I intended appropriating to school purposes. The day before opening my school, I went to my rooms, but not under very auspicious circumstances. At dark, I had no bed to sleep on, nor did I know how I was to obtain my breakfast, to say nothing of supper. But before the hour of retiring came, a Mexican woman brought me a cot, an American woman sent me a pillow, and a German woman came and said she would cook my meals and bring them to me. Did I not feel rich that night as I retired to my humble cot? Indeed, I never closed my eyes in sleep with more profound feelings of thankfulness to God. I fully believed I was where my Divine Master had called me to go—upon the border of that land where I had so long desired to be—and to whose people I trusted to the Lord would make me eminently useful.

Next morning I opening my school with five pupils, but more promised. The education of the children seemed the most feasible means of benefiting the people at the time, and I opened a school although upon the American side of the Rio Grande. The laws of Mexico, at that time, most positively forbade the introduction of Protestant Christianity in any form, and had I gone into Mexico proper for the purpose of teaching the Bible, I should have been imprisoned.

That portion of Texas between the Rio Grande and Nueces Rivers had been claimed by Mexico previous to the late war, but the United States had conquered, and, consequently, it was under our government. Some thousands of Mexican people preferred remaining in their old homes, which fact gave me an opportunity of laboring among Mexicans under the protection of our own government. I was truly happy in a short time in obtaining some thirty or forty Mexican children, and giving them daily instruction in the Bible, against which the parents manifested no objection. I found some who could read in the Spanish language, and a few who had acquired some knowledge of the English. The parents were greatly desirous their children should learn the English language, and become Americanized, and hence my school received popular favor: on that account. To be able to put the Bible into the hands of three or four dozen Mexican children, and give them instruction in its blessed teachings, I felt to be an unspeakable privilege. Although the work might look small to the eye of human reason, yet faith bade me hope it might prove a *beginning*, and I was satisfied to work on, even in this small way. The parables of our Savior afforded me much encouragement, especially those in which He compares the kingdom of heaven to a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown, is the lead of all seeds, yet from it sprang a tree sufficiently large for the fowls of heaven to lodge in its branches; also "to leaven, which a woman took (there was a good deal of significance in the fact that it was a *woman*) and hid in three measures of meal, until the whole was leavened."

CHAPTER VI.

In the midst of the most sanguine expectations of permanent good upon this frontier, I was surprised, one day, by hearing that several priests and nuns had come from France to establish their head-quarters at Brownsville. They had brought means for erecting a convent, for the evident purpose of educating the youth of the Rio Grande Valley. Suddenly and unexpectedly, all my prospects of usefulness there seemed completely frustrated; for what could I do, with such an array of influences against Protestantism and the Bible? But, could I abandon the field, and leave it in the hands of foreign priests and nuns? Indeed, I could not get my own consent to run before popery, while I held in my hand such a powerful spiritual weapon as the Word of God, and I was enabled to carry the matter to the throne of grace, and wait for Divine direction. I spent whole nights in prayer to God. During one of those seasons in which I was earnestly seeking for guidance, a light suddenly dawned on my mind, from these words in the book of Revelation: "These shall make war with the Lamb, and the Lamb shall overcome them: for he is Lord of lords, and King of kings: and they that are with Him are called, and chosen, and faithful." The impression that these words made upon my heart, immediately settled the question of my remaining. Although single-handed and alone, yet, with the assurance derived from these words of Scripture, I felt stronger than my enemies; and I resolved to stay and maintain my post. In order to make a successful stand, I must have a building which would bear some comparison with the party with which I had to compete. My accommodations hitherto had been exceedingly limited; and, as I could obtain no aid from the inhabitants of the region, I resolved to go to the United States and secure the means for building a Protestant seminary at Brownsville. If France could afford to send four millions of dollars to the United States for educational purposes, (as she did that year) I felt that the Protestant Christians of the United States could afford a few hundred for the Rio Grande; so, I closed my schools, and set my face toward my native land, feeling quite assured of prompt and efficient aid. The scene of my departure was calculated to deepen my interest for these people. As I was about starting on the stage for Brazos, I was surrounded by the Mexican girls and their mothers, each uttering the earnest request, "come back," "come back very soon," and they stood and watched me with tearful eyes, until I passed out of their sight. When I arrived at Brazos, I could find no conveyance to New Orleans but a schooner, and that very small and inconvenient.

[Miss Rankin's ability to obtain financial contributions in New Orleans was limited, but she made many contacts and gained confidence that her work in Brownsville—and efforts to raise money—were appropriate and useful endeavors. She had little luck in Louisville, but convinced members of Philadelphia's Presbyterian Board of Education to help her raise five hundred dollars. In Boston she obtained another five hundred dollars from its churches. These efforts wearied her, but after a few months rest, she returned along the Ohio and Mississippi rivers arguing the importance of her

cause at every stop. Occasionally she accepted rides, but the greater part of her journey was made on foot, walking eight to ten miles a day. Many people along the way expressed contempt for Mexicans but sanctioned her work with donations of 10 to 20 dollars. Overall, she described the journey as fatiguing but ultimately rewarding and successful.]

In the autumn of 1854 I entered my new seminary. This was an auspicious event. The days of labor and scenes of anxious solicitude were all forgotten on the morning I assembled my pupils for the first time in this Protestant institution. I explained to them that the building had been given by Christian friends abroad for their benefit, and endeavored to impress them with the vast importance of improving the privileges it would afford them to the best advantage possible. With my Mexican girls, I consecrated this new edifice to God by reading a portion of Scripture and by prayer. The American Bible and Tract Societies of New York continued to supply my demands for books; although I often wondered at their liberality, considering the very unpopular work I had in hand. I used often to think, in reference to the indifference which prevailed so extensively towards Mexico and her people, that the Lord had chosen me for the work because I was so very insignificant, and it mattered little if I did spend my poor life and services among the Mexicans.

CHAPTER IX.

In 1855 I felt the need of assistance, and I ventured to write a letter to Rev. Dr. Kirk, of Boston, Mass., asking for a colporteur for the Mexican frontier. The letter, quite unexpectedly to me, was published in the magazine of the American and Foreign Christian Union for August, 1855. I will copy the letter, and also the remarks of the editor. It was headed—

"A Voice From The Rio Grande.

"The following letter from Miss Rankin, one of the worthy daughters of New England, who, by much sacrifice and indomitable perseverance, has succeeded in establishing a seminary for Mexican young ladies, in Brownsville, on the Texas side of the Rio Grande, which separates the United States from Mexico, will be read with much interest."

But to the letter:

"Brownsville, April, 1855.

Rev. Dr. Kirk:

"Dear Sir—Convinced that you have sympathy with whatever appertains to the interest of Christ's kingdom, I take the liberty of calling your attention to this remote land, where, and on the border of which, are thousands of

immortal souls under the influence of Popery, in its most enslaving and debasing forms. You are fully acquainted with Romanism, and, therefore, I need not describe to you the character of this soul-destroying agency of the arch-enemy Satan. I presume also, that I need not describe the painful emotions awakened in the heart by daily witnessing the sad influence of that system, so wisely calculated to lead immortal souls to endless ruin.

"We have in Brownsville some three or four thousand Mexicans, who have escaped the dreaded influence of a corrupt priesthood of their own country, in whose moral condition and wants my sympathies are deeply enlisted, and in whose behalf I now write. The enterprise in which I was engaged when last in your city I have, with the blessing of God, carried out successfully. A Protestant seminary is reared in front of papal Mexico, and within its walls are gathered Mexican girls, whose improvement encourages me to hope that their consciences may become enlightened, and that they will embrace the Gospel, which can save their souls. I trust it may ultimately be seen that this institution is one of the instrumentalities by which God intends to disenfranchise and enlighten Mexico from the dominion of popery . . .

I proposed to the Board of the American and Foreign Christian Union, that if they would furnish me the means for employing an assistant teacher in my school, so I could be, in part, relieved from school duties, I would become their colporteur and Bible reader. The proposal was accepted, and [January of 1856 I came under the auspices of that society. Re-enforced by a competent teacher, I was greatly strengthened, and the school and Bible distribution received a new impulse. I visited all the houses of the Mexicans in Brownsville and vicinity, and supplied every family of which any member could read, with a Bible. Only occasionally would I find one who rejected it. It was said by my American friends: "The Mexicans take your Bibles to turn over to the priests to be burned." I would follow up my investigations until I was satisfied that such was not true. Indeed, I never ascertained that a single Bible was destroyed. But I did ascertain that the Mexicans concealed them in the most careful manner, taking them out and reading them by night, as they said, "when the priests were not about." I went one day to the house where one of my pupils resided, to inquire after her absence, and also to make inquiry after a Bible I had furnished her. A report had crept into school that she had exchanged it with the nuns for a "saint," and that they (the nuns) had burned it. The mother of the girl met me at the door, and with streaming eyes told me that her daughter had died with yellow fever but a short time before. I asked her, if she had her Bible? She replied, "No, I put her Bible in her coffin, as she loved it so much, and it was buried with her." I found another similar case, where a father had put the Bible by the side of his son in his coffin. Although I could not fully coincide with this use of God's Word, yet there was something pathetic and suggestive in the act of these bereaved Mexican parents.

Additional Praise for Victoria-María
MacDonald's *Latino Education in the
United States:*

MacDonald has provided a comprehensive, readable, and provocative guide for those interested in the historical evolution of Latino education in the United States. The combination of shrewd introductory essays, carefully selected readings, and extensive bibliography should make *Latino Education in the United States* one of the preferred reference books in the fields of Latino studies, education, and history. . . . One of the most impressive elements of *Latino Education in the United States* is that it provides an outlet to the many voices associated with Latino educational issues: voices of oppression, hope, discrimination, opportunity, and relentlessness. MacDonald's scholarly command of the historiography of Latino education, combined with extensive archival research, make this book a must-read for those interested in Latino and educational issues.

—*Félix V. Matos-Rodríguez, Ph.D. and Director, Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, Hunter College*

Latino Education in
the United States

A Narrated History from 1513–2000

Victoria-María MacDonald

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