

1994

Exploring the Paper Trail of Carlos Eduardo Castañeda

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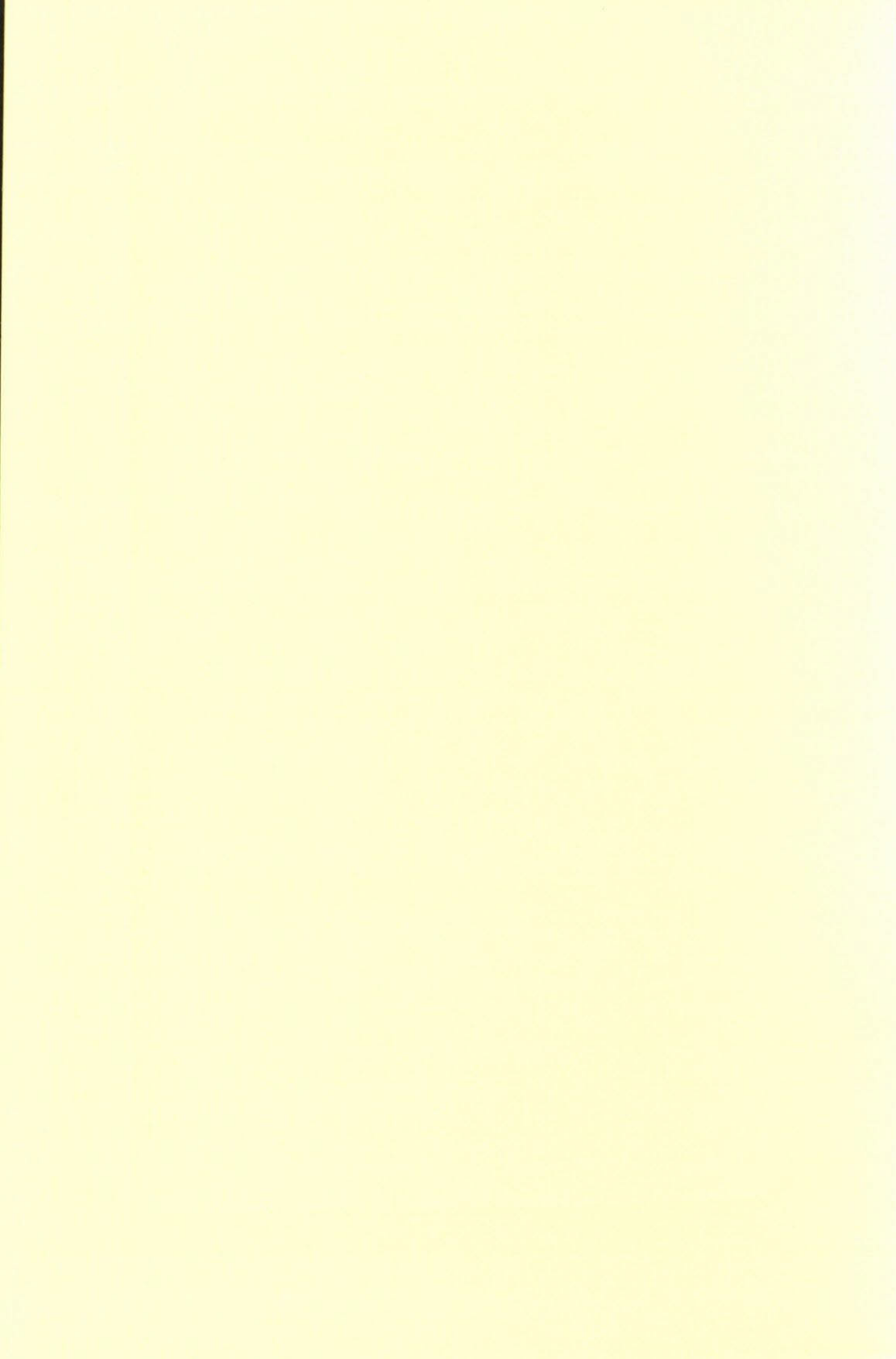
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Carl
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Exploring the Paper Trail of
Carlos Eduardo Castañeda

by
Félix D. Almaráz, Jr.



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The University of Texas at El Paso

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Texas Western Press
The University of Texas at El Paso
El Paso, Texas 79968-0633



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Published in September, 1994, in a printing limited to 500 copies.

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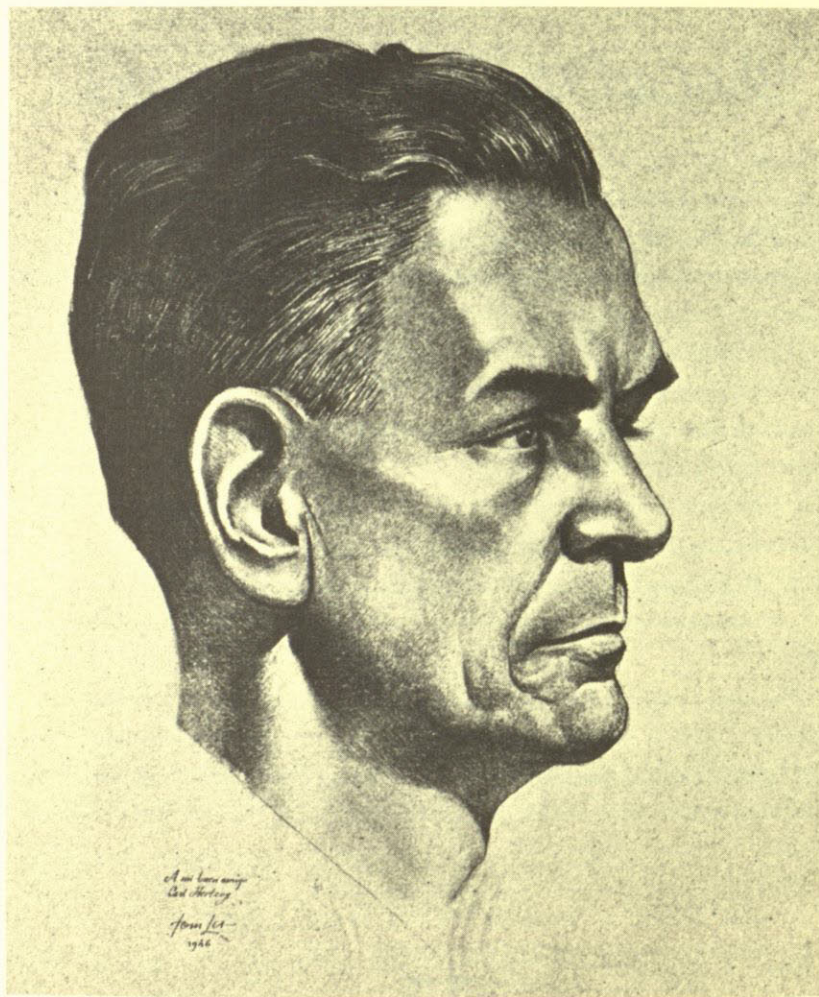
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(Drawing by Tom Lea, 1946)

J. Carl Hertzog
1902 — 1984

**Exploring the Paper Trail of
Carlos Eduardo Castañeda**

by Félix D. Almaráz, Jr.

February 13, 1994

Carl Hertzog Lecture Series, No. 6



In harmony with the conceptual design of the Carl Hertzog Lecture Series, the paper trail of Carlos Eduardo Castañeda, historian, librarian, and public servant, veered through El Paso in 1936. Primarily through his contacts with Cleofas Calleros, José Cisneros, Bishop Anthony J. Schuler, S.J., and two units of the Knights of Columbus, El Paso Council 638 and Del Norte Council 2592, Castañeda's sojourn in far West Texas occurred at mid-point of his life.

For more than twenty years I have followed this paper trail in search of the elusive Castañeda. In retrospect, the quest began as an avocation in 1969. Over the years it has changed into a vocation, as I struggle to finish writing a biography of this highly gifted Mexican American historian of first rank.

Castañeda's delimiting years were 1896 to 1958. He was born in Camargo, Tamaulipas, just across the border from Rio Grande City. His parents were Timoteo Castañeda of Yucatán and Elisa Andrea Leroux of France. The family then moved downriver to Matamoros, opposite the Texas town of Brownsville. By the turn of the century the Castañeda family owned homes on both sides of the border, thus making them bi-national proprietors (comparable to some residents of Ciudad Juárez and El Paso).

Orphaned in his pre-teen years, reared by elder sisters, Carlos Eduardo generally manifested a cheerful, optimistic disposition as he advanced through the public schools. Shortly before the United States entered the conflict of World War One, Castañeda emerged as valedictorian of his graduating class of 1916 of Brownsville High School. For an immigrant student with an Hispanic surname, his scholastic achievement was truly remarkable. As the late Joe B. Frantz once observed, Castañeda succeeded by the sheer force of his native intellect.

Entirely on the strength of superior grades in science and mathematics, Carlos' teachers counselled him — in fact, convinced him and the family — to enroll in the School of Engineering at the University of Texas at Austin. There was a lingering conviction in those years along the border and in Latin America that the most prestigious professions were law, engineering, and medicine. Consequently, entry into any one of those career paths was tantamount to financial security and social prominence. Coming from a home environment in which self-discipline, dedication to learning, and

loyalty to family were sterling values, the teachers' advice to Carlos about engineering was logically sound.

In the autumn of 1957, as an upper-division student at St. Mary's University in San Antonio, I enrolled in a history class called *The Spanish Borderlands*, conducted by Dr. Joseph William Schmitz, S.M. In that class I became acquainted with Castañeda's monumental, seven-volumed *Our Catholic Heritage in Texas*. Notwithstanding the fact I was an older student recently discharged from active duty in the U.S. Army (that included a tour of thirteen months at Fort Bliss, Texas), Castañeda's detailed history intimidated me. How could an individual write so many volumes on the same broad topic?

Reading Castañeda's books was not an easy task. Such an undertaking required physical and mental energy. His tomes were heavy, replete with lengthy narration, massive detail, and copious footnotes. Through constant dedication, slowly I became fascinated with his graceful style that captivated mind and spirit. For the labor that he devoted, embracing twenty-five years of his life, to writing *Our Catholic Heritage in Texas*, Carlos became tagged in the profession as a Church historian. Actually, his contributions to history covered a much broader spectrum, which is why he preferred recognition as an historian of the Borderlands and Latin America.

Intellectually speaking, I unconsciously procured an invitation to identify with Herbert E. Bolton's school of the Spanish Borderlands along two separate tracks: First, through the writings of Carlos Eduardo Castañeda; and secondly, through graduate seminars directed by Professor Donald C. Cutter at the University of New Mexico. Castañeda's contact with Bolton emanated from one of his teachers at the University of Texas at Austin, Charles Wilson Hackett, whereas Cutter's connection to the great master developed through Lawrence Kinnaid at the University of California at Berkeley.

Personally, I never met Castañeda. One morning in April, 1958, as students at St. Mary's University waited for Brother Joe Schmitz to commence his inimical lecture on Texas history, I glanced at a news report published in *The Alamo Messenger* announcing that Carlos E. Castañeda had died in Austin at the age of 61 years and six months. I cannot explain why I felt sad that morning. I recall trying to tell Brother Joe that a great historian whose books were on his reading list had died, almost as if I wanted an observance of silence to his memory. How strange that I should have experienced that feeling. After all, except for his books, I hardly knew the gentleman.

Years later at the University of New Mexico, I encountered several opportunities to consult Castañeda's volumes as I researched the topic of Governor Manuel Salcedo of Texas as a possible dissertation project. In 1968, I returned to St. Mary's University as a junior member of the history faculty. During the academic year 1969-1970, under the auspices of a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities, I devoted long hours to research in the library, ferreting out interesting information related to the Mexican American heritage in Texas. Castañeda's books were solid references on the topic.

In the spring of 1970, a graduate student from Laredo, J. Gilbert Quezada, came to the history department to invite three professors (two historians and an education instructor) to accompany him to a west-side residence in San Antonio to evaluate a private archive. Reluctantly I agreed to abandon my carrel in the library to look at this archive compiled by Eleuterio Escobár, a retired businessman and one-time civic leader. In retrospect, I have never regretted that small investment of time and courtesy.

When we arrived at a modest, well-kept home north of Our Lady of the Lake University, Don Eleuterio escorted us to a front room literally stacked with boxes of records. Admittedly, I was overwhelmed with both the magnitude and multitude of primary sources associated with the fledgling years of the League of United Latin American Citizens (acronym LULAC).

At random I scanned a correspondence file for the 1930s. Tucked away were several letters written on stationery of the San Felipe Independent School District in Del Rio, Texas, signed by Superintendent Carlos E. Castañeda. Rhetorically, I asked what was an historian of Castañeda's caliber doing in Del Río? In probing for answers to that question, I began exploring his paper trail when I accepted an invitation to deliver three guest lectures at Pan American College in Edinburg (now a component of the University of Texas System).

The first lecture focused on Castañeda in his role as a public servant during World War II. Why did Castañeda seek appointment as regional director of President Roosevelt's Committee on Fair Employment Practice, with headquarters in Dallas and later in San Antonio? What facts did Castañeda uncover when he investigated complaints of discrimination by Hispanic workers in Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona? At best, my exploration in 1970 had resulted only in a sketchy outline of his life. A year later, an executor of the Escobár estate donated the collection to the Benson Latin American Library at UT-Austin.

Responding to Valley-wide publicity announcing my scheduled lecture in Edinburg, Castañeda's youngest sister, Josefina, came over with friends from Brownsville. After the presentation, she enthusiastically informed me that she had family papers for me to consult — in case I should want to know more about her brother. Most of his private papers, she said, were in the possession of his widow, Elisa, in Austin. Afterwards, she telephoned Elisa and told her about my lecture. In short, what Josefina did was to obtain for me a security clearance with her sister-in-law. Archival windfalls are to historians what sick patients are to physicians; both practitioners appreciate the benefits of unexpected events. Subsequently, I joined the faculty of Pan American College. That summer in earnest I commenced a self-imposed research project on the life and times of Don Carlos, whom I envisioned as a knight without armour.

In the summer and autumn of 1970, I tapped all available sources in the Río Grande Valley, including oral history interviews. Of more immediate priority was fine-tuning a manuscript that ultimately became *Tragic Cavalier: Governor Manuel Salcedo of Texas, 1808-1813*, for which José Cisneros provided original illustrations (as he did for an even more beautiful reprint edition by Texas A&M University Press). Just before the Christmas holidays, I received an attractive employment offer as visiting associate professor of history at the University of Texas at Austin. Here were several windfalls. Residing at the state capital I found time to delve into the Eugene C. Barker Papers and the Castañeda Biographical File in the Texas History Center (now called the Center for American History). Off campus, I scheduled appointments to examine the private papers in the possession of Doña Elisa Ríos de Castañeda, as well as the extensive Knights of Columbus Correspondence File stored at the Catholic Archives of Texas in the Chancery of Austin. Unlike in recent years, with adequate lighting, acid-free file folders, climate-control, work tables, chairs, and other accouterments of modern records management, the Catholic Archives of Texas in 1971 constituted a dark, dusty storage area in the basement of the chancery, guarded by two feisty Chihuahuas belonging to Bishop Louis J. Reicher, and illuminated by a suspension electric bulb above a small wooden table. Surrounding the table were several rows of metal shelves containing the primary sources Castañeda had used in writing *Our Catholic Heritage in Texas* and a multitude of correspondence boxes, hastily labelled *Sent* and *Received*.

Research experiences with the public and private papers found in Austin gave to me a modicum of perception into the multifarious activities of Don

Carlos, particularly his on-the-job training as librarian of the Latin American Collection. With massive chunks of information extracted from the foregoing depositories, I was able to reconstruct the first quarter-century of his life: How he had arrived with modest resources and without a scholarship at the Austin campus, and how through the benevolence of the Paulist Fathers in charge of the Newman Club he found room and board. Like a detective finding clue after clue, I assembled sufficient evidence to support a scholarly paper presented at the 1971 annual meeting of the Texas State Historical Association.

Aware of my enthusiastic research initiative, Professor Robert C. Cotner, a soft-spoken, courteous gentleman and scholar, tendered this advice: "Do not be too surprised," he said, "if you happen to find familiar parallels in your life with that of Carlos Castañeda." For more than two decades I have tried to decipher that cryptic message.

At the end of the spring semester, I left Austin and returned to San Antonio, negotiating in the process a firm agreement with Dr. Arleigh B. Templeton, first president of the University of Texas at San Antonio (who later migrated to El Paso), to join the history faculty in 1973 when the new institution would open its doors to graduate students. In the meantime, President Templeton encouraged me to acquire administrative experience with a local school district and, from time to time, to represent UTSA at history conferences.

During that interlude in school administration, on the recommendation of Dr. José Roberto Juárez of Laredo (then teaching in California), Norris Hundley, editor of *Pacific Historical Review*, invited me to submit the Castañeda essay presented at the TSHA meeting for a topical issue. That publication catapulted the Castañeda story to a vast regional audience. Either by correspondence or by telephone I came into contact with other scholars who expressed interest in the ongoing project, or who offered insightful recollections of Don Carlos. At meetings of the Southwest Social Science Association and the Southern Historical Association, I interviewed some of Castañeda's former students. In rapid succession in the mid-1970s, I wrote essays on different aspects of his life that appeared in *Red River Valley Historical Review*, *The Social Science Journal*, and *The Journal of Library History*.

After I joined the faculty of the University of Texas at San Antonio, the college dean sent me on recruiting trips to various cities, including Washington, D.C. By judiciously budgeting my time and money, I successfully conducted a round of oral history interviews and consulted the files of

the President's Committee on Fair Employment Practice in the National Archives. I also visited the Academy of American Franciscan History, then located in Potomac, Maryland, where I received access to the Castañeda correspondence file. At Catholic University of America, I also received support of the president's office in consulting a similar file. Across the continent, at Berkeley, California, Father John Francis Bannon, S.J., of recent memory, while conducting research for his own biography of Herbert E. Bolton, arranged for me to secure copies of the Castañeda-Bolton letters from the Bancroft Library.

In Cerrillos, New Mexico, Marc Simmons read about my project in *Riding Line*, occasional newsletter of the Texas State Historical Association, and cheerfully shared pithy recollections of when, aboard a Dutch freighter, he brought to Don Carlos a special honor from the Government of Spain — Knighthood in the Order of Isabel la Católica. Dr. Simmons, who received the same accolade last year in Santa Fe, called my attention to an exchange of correspondence between France V. Scholes and Castañeda in the Zimmerman Library at the University of New Mexico. Another strand of the paper trail originated in Waco, Texas, where Henrietta Henry, long-time pillar of the Texas Old Missions and Forts Restoration Association, offered to let me borrow a sheaf of Castañeda letters in her father's possession. A former student, Omar Wayne Poorman, of Rosenberg, Texas, was especially helpful in conducting oral interviews and in compiling a photographic file to illustrate the biography — if somehow I could expedite the project toward publication.

Greeted by a host of friends and associates, in 1983 I joyfully celebrated my half-centennial birthday. At the time I was immersed in a research project for the National Park Service, studying the land tenure system of San Antonio's old Franciscan missions. As soon as NPS had accepted the final report, I returned to Castañeda, mainly to reorganize an enormous file of research notes gleaned from diverse sources. My soul was restless. After more than a decade, all that I had created was a cardboard model of Don Carlos. What troubled me was the realization that I had to start over, discarding from memory conclusions written in earlier essays. To do justice to the memory of this charismatic historian-librarian-public servant, I concentrated on finding precise words to breathe life, poetry and energy into his colorful story.

With a resurgence of commitment, I reviewed the research notes, rearranged the sequence, projected chapter divisions, drafted tentative titles, and moderated the activities of the Bexar County Historical

Commission. In brief, I correctly performed all requisite duties before the threshold of actual writing, but I could not proceed far beyond that demarcation.

In September, 1987, the Holy Father, John Paul II, came to Texas. On account of a theater performance in which I had played the role of the Right Reverend Jean-Marie Odin, first Bishop of Texas, I got recruited to chair a Mexico Relations Committee for the Papal Visit which involved shepherding a group of visiting prelates for an entire weekend. The honor that my bride Dolores and I received in meeting His Holiness (not once, but twice in the course of a long day) was so spiritually uplifting that I resolved to write that biography that had been eluding me for years. To gain perspective, I carefully read the essays in James Veninga's edition of *The Biographer's Gift* in which several of the contributors counselled that it was natural — in fact, desirable — for a writer to wait ten, fifteen, or even twenty years before committing to print the story of an individual.

Sometimes researchers complain about not finding enough material to support a major essay or book. My complaint — more in the form of an observation than a criticism — is that I have uncovered too much material. Castañeda was a prolific letter-writer. The challenge for me has been one of extracting precious nuggets from a huge rock pile. To find the nuggets I have examined every stone and pebble, not to mention sifting through tons of sand. In comparing the bulk of research notes that I accumulated for writing *Tragic Cavalier*, the magnitude of reference material for Castañeda easily could support three dissertations. It is not so much the excessive number of notes, but the quality of information they contain. Having isolated the nuggets I now find myself like a creative artisan, busily but patiently constructing an attractive center piece.

Then there was the problem of sorting out personal and professional relationships. Castañeda's identity with the Boltonian school was through Charles Wilson Hackett, but, ironically, they were not particularly close colleagues. The two gentlemen were cordial, civil, and cooperative, but not especially friendly and sharing as co-workers. On the other hand, with Eugene Campbell Barker there was genuine friendship, often manifested by the elder historian in assisting his protégé overcome whatever obstacles blocked the career path.

In studying for the doctorate, Castañeda consistently leaned in the direction of Latin American history (which was Hackett's field), but when he had to designate a thesis director, remembering the moral support given by Professor Barker and Father John Elliot Ross during the undergraduate

years, he chose the Texas historian. In the utterly nasty discrimination that Carlos endured in 1933, when the Texas Legislature slashed his librarian's salary far below the level of other state employees, it was Barker who remained steadfast in friendship and loyalty. Library Director Ernest William Winkler and President Harry Yandell Benedict were equally supportive. This was the crisis of survival that forced Carlos to take leave of absence in order to become superintendent of the San Felipe Public Schools in Del Rio. The sensitive nature of that episode in Don Carlos' life compounded the writing task. Then there were the unsuccessful, yet troublesome, lawsuits attempting to block Castañeda from the superintendency that had to be untangled by securing documents from the district clerk's office in Val Verde County. As Joe B. Frantz remembered, Castañeda's life was cluttered with several items floating in mid-air about to drop down on him!

Also difficult to handle, but unavoidable, was the controversy surrounding the Rev. Dr. Francis Borgia Steck, O.F.M., renowned Franciscan scholar whom the Texas Historical Commission of the Knights of Columbus recruited to write the initial volume of what was then described as the Catholic Church's contribution to the Lone Star Centennial. As general editor of the project funded by the Knights of Columbus, the Rev. Dr. Paul J. Foik, C.S.C., of St. Edward's University, simultaneously invited Castañeda to research and write the second volume. As brother historians in Clio's fraternity Castañeda and Steck behaved splendidly. Foik and Steck, in sharp contrast, generated conflicts that perhaps with better communication and cooperation at the outset could have been prevented or resolved. Sadly, as the controversy got out of control, culminating in the severance of Dr. Steck's contract, some members of the Franciscan community blamed Castañeda because he remained as the sole participant in the project. Ironically, a half-century later, another Franciscan scholar provided incalculable guidance in finding heretofore unknown sources to qualify the controversy. A fellow alumnus from the University of New Mexico, Rev. Dr. Barnabas Diekemper, O.F.M., then a faculty member at Quincy College in Illinois, persuaded the archivist at the Brenner Library to make available copies of the Steck-Castañeda correspondence that documented how the two historians not only respected and supported each other's work, but remained friends across the years.

In between directing the instructional program of the San Felipe schools in Del Río, frequently commuting to Austin and San Antonio for research

materials, Castañeda terminated the second volume. During two summer sessions in San Antonio, the paper trail detoured to Our Lady of the Lake College where Don Carlos taught history classes in the morning. In the afternoon and evening he routinely ensconced himself in the library to work on his manuscripts.

Upon returning to Austin and the curatorship of the Latin American Collection in 1935, he completed the first volume. The Von Boeckmann-Jones Company published both volumes in time for the celebration of the Texas centennial. The other volumes came in reasonable succession after the initial breakthrough; the final and seventh volume Castañeda revised and edited on his sickbed. Like a knight bound by the code of chivalry, honor, and duty, by 1958 he had discharged all outstanding obligations to his editor and publisher. He died on Good Friday, April 5, 1958, at Seton Hospital in Austin.

After the Papal Visit in 1987, I sustained a moderate rate of progress with my writing. By early 1988, more than half of Castañeda's biography had been written, totalling about 300 double-spaced pages. Then, just before leaving for Argentina as Senior Fulbright Scholar, in the spring and summer I shifted gears to proof-read galley sheets for another book entitled *The San Antonio Missions and Their System of Land Tenure*. Then, from August to November, travelling across the vast *Pampas* of Argentina on the lecture circuit, I spoke at the Universidad Nacional del Cuyo in Mendoza, situated in the heartland of the wine country in the foothills of the majestic Andes. Little did I realize that in the early 1950s, Carlos Eduardo Castañeda had performed a similar duty at the same university! José Cisneros shared copies of terse messages scribbled on post-cards that Don Carlos mailed from Argentina. After returning home, early in 1989 at the Barker Texas History Center, I found additional documentation to confirm the historian's presence in Mendoza. Culling through the non-current records of the University of Texas President's Office — History Department, I felt a chill in my neck when I read Castañeda's letters from Argentina. It was almost as if Don Carlos were asking: "Don Félix, when are you going to finish my biography?"

To avoid internal accounting headaches, in the spring of 1989 I arranged with a friend in public relations in New Mexico, to organize a business venture styled Borderlands Missions Research Associates. With myself designated as principal investigator, we submitted a bid-proposal to the National Park Service to research and write a two-volume history of the San Antonio missions. Awarded the contract in the summer, I alternated my schedule of

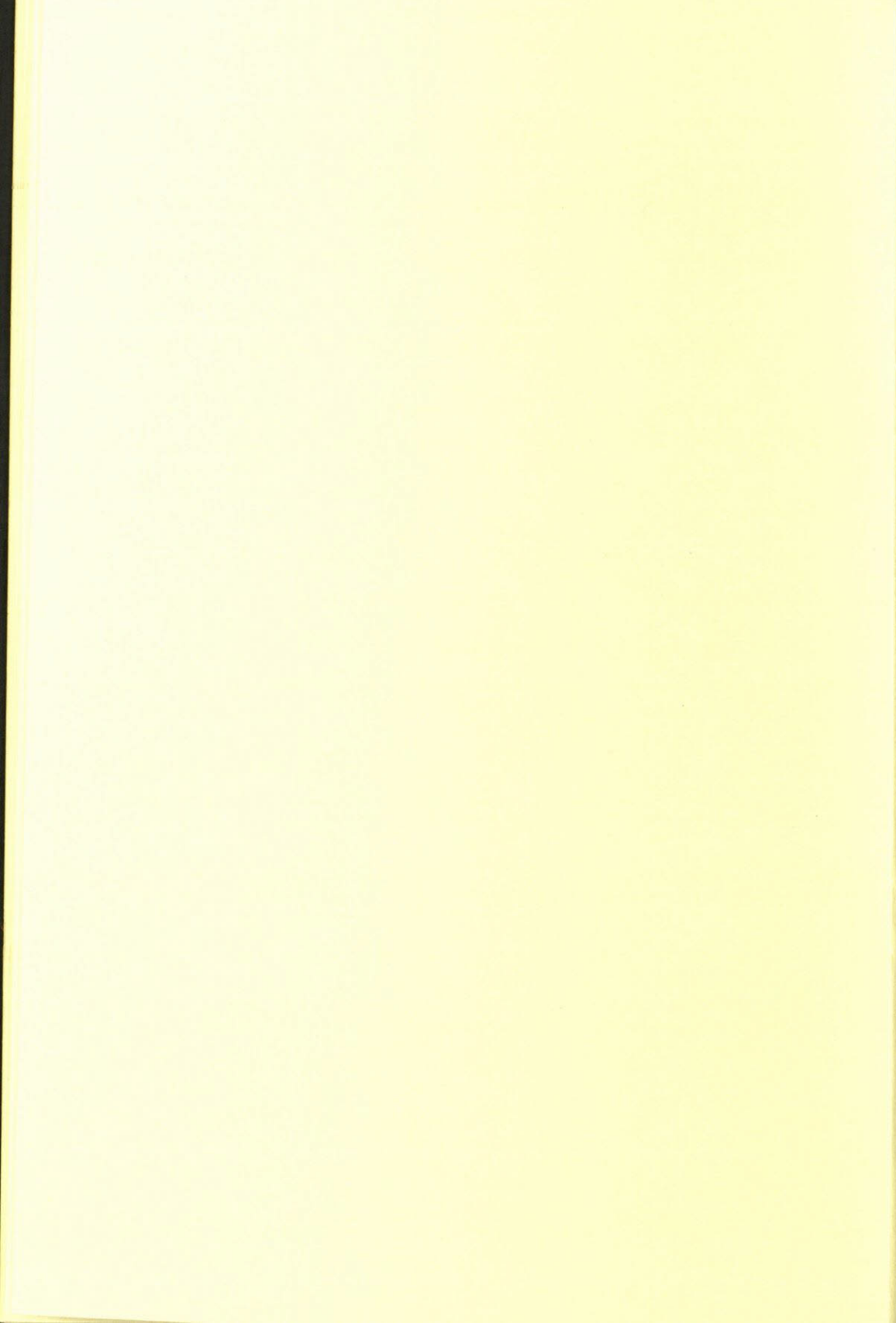
creative writing to accommodate Castañeda on weekends and to conduct research on the missions between classes at UTSA during the normal work week. Admittedly, to advance the Castañeda story to the end of chapter eight, coinciding with his affiliation with the Fair Employment Practice Committee, I deferred writing rough drafts for the missions history until the winter of 1990. By then productivity on the Castañeda story topped 700 pages.

In the summer of 1991, the National Council of La Raza hosted a Columbus Quincentennial planning conference in Washington, D.C. In close proximity with that meeting was a humanities conference on Latin America at John Marshall University in Huntington, West Virginia, in which I had agreed to participate. Encouraged by the dual invitations, and nudged by my conscience that we had not planned a vacation, I persuaded Dolores to accompany me to Washington. After the Quincentennial conference, we rented a car and drove south to Williamsburg, Virginia, for three days of sight-seeing and a little bit of research in the archives of the College of William and Mary. Unknown to a youthful archivist was a cache of letters and other materials written by Castañeda in the 1920s when he worked as associate professor of Spanish in the department of foreign languages. Crucial to the biography were Castañeda's letters and reports associated with two faculty-directed summer school trips to Mexico during the turbulence of the Cristero Rebellion, a bitter conflict between the Catholic Church and the anticlerical government of Plutarco Elías Calles that greatly alarmed foreign journalists. Castañeda's paper trail extended to New York, Havana, Veracruz, Mexico City, Austin, and back to Williamsburg. From William and Mary we drove to West Virginia, relaxed and pleased that the stopover at the Earl Gregg Swem Library had been highly productive, resulting in a discovery of several files of heretofore "lost" materials which enhanced productivity by another fifty pages.

Equally exciting as the paper trail, and at times just as frustrating, has been the quest for photographs to illustrate this voluminous biography. Now that the second volume of the San Antonio Missions history is on the brink of termination, Castañeda's biography has resumed its rightful priority. Two subvention grants to underwrite production costs of this hefty biography, and an unusually patient editorial staff at College Station, have generated proper motivation for me to bring closure to this project of extremely long duration.

Exploring the paper trail of Carlos E. Castañeda has been a series of instructional episodes in patience and perseverance. It has also been a

labor of love. Not surprisingly, the experience of pursuing Castañeda has also created a plethora of Almaráz Papers in search of an archival depository.

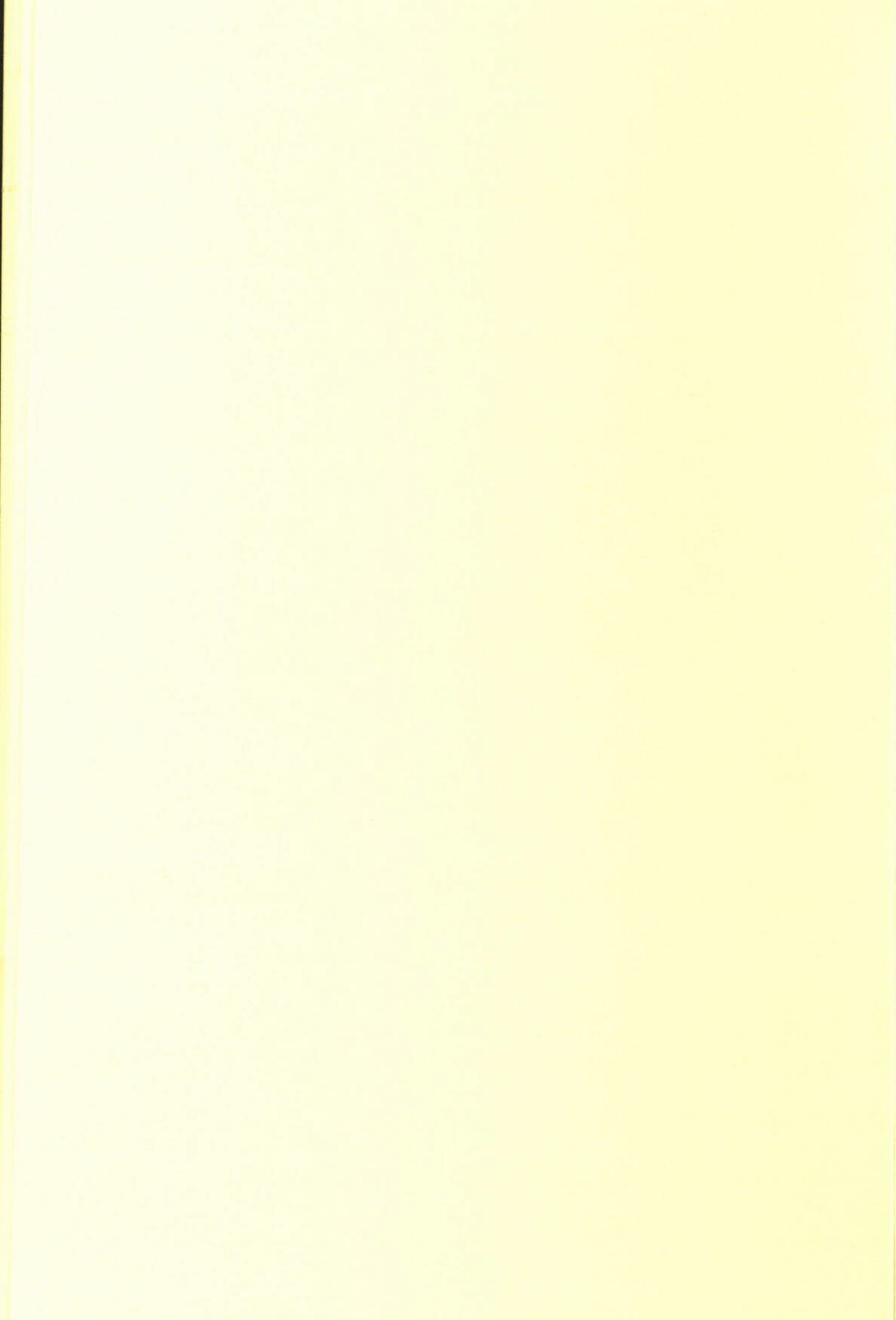




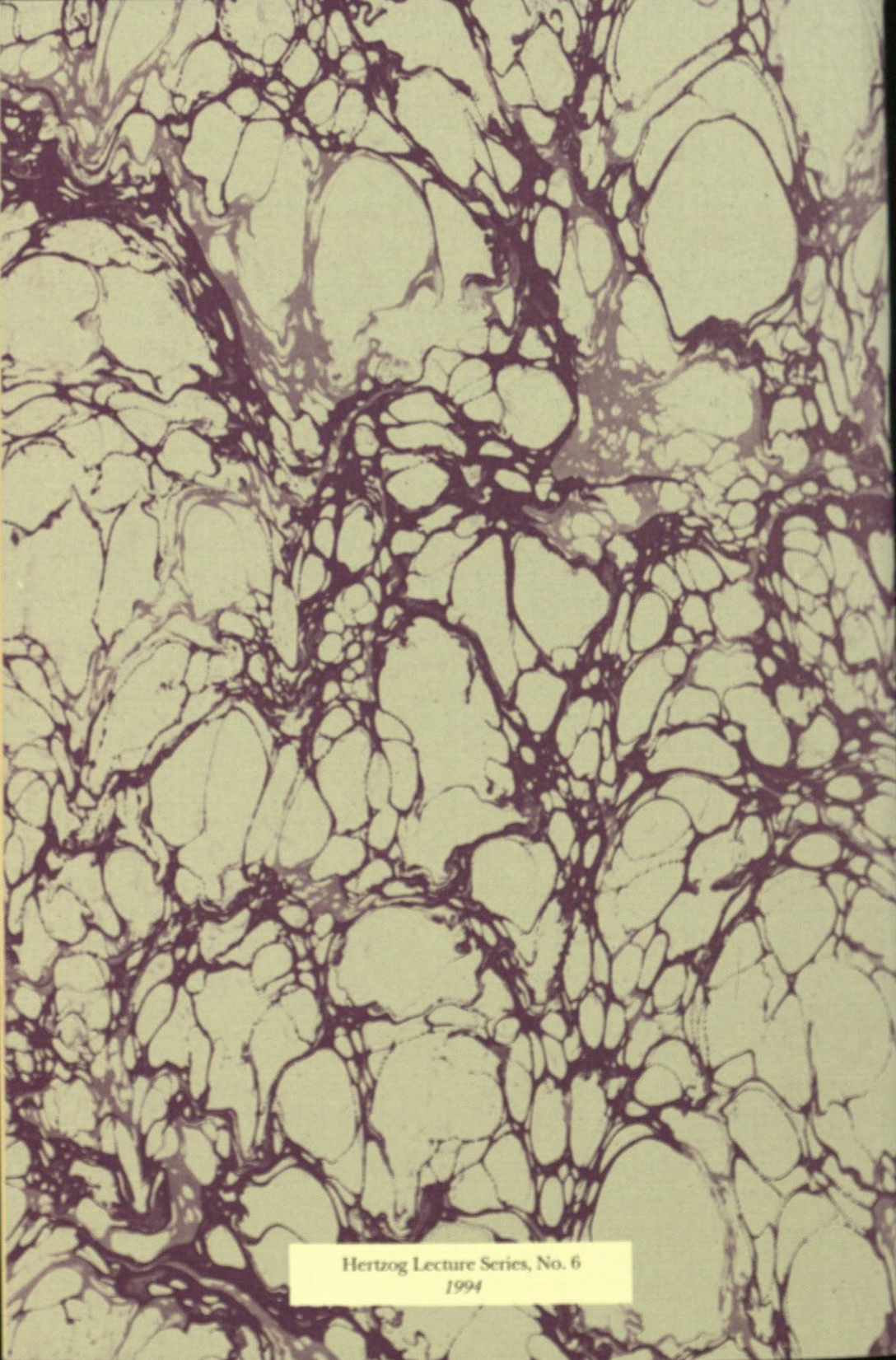
Félix D. Almaráz received his B.A. and M.A. from St. Mary's University and his Ph.D. from the University of New Mexico. He is a Professor of History, Division of Behavioral and Cultural Sciences at the University of Texas at San Antonio. Almaráz has served as Chairman of the Bexar County Historical Commission, President of the Texas Catholic Historical Society and Second Vice President of the the Texas State Historical Association.

He is the author of numerous monographs, articles and books, including *Tragic Cavalier: Governor Manuel Salcedo of Texas, 1808-1813*; *Crossroad of Empire: The Church and State on the Río Grande Frontier of Coahuila and Texas, 1700-1821* and *The San Antonio Mission and Their System of Land Tenure*. He is currently working on a biography of historian Carlos E. Castañeda.

His many awards include the Presidio La Bahía Award in 1965 and in 1975, the Award of Merit from the San Antonio Historical Association, both for *Tragic Cavalier* and a Senior Fulbright Lectureship, Republic of Argentina in 1988. Almaráz is a native of San Antonio, Texas where he resides with his wife, Dolores Marie Cardona de Almaráz.







Hertzog Lecture Series, No. 6
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