

BOOKS

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TEXANA | MIKE COX

Historians tackle right to drink the water

The history of Texas through the end of the Indian wars in 1880 had to do with who owned the land. The next epoch saw the development of that land. Future historians looking back at the 21st century doubtless will have a variety of issues to study, from the Great Oil Disaster of 2010 to the enforcement of immigration law along the border, but a big part of the Texas story will have to do with water — or the lack of it.

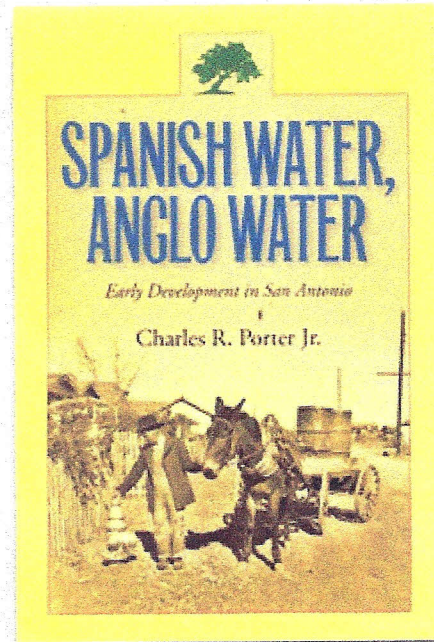
Last summer's drought stands as a good reminder of what happens to the landscape when water runs short. Even in months with normal or above-normal precipitation, Texas' continuing growth means that demand for water is steadily moving toward surpassing supply.

Two recent books deal with Texas' water history, including one that sets a standard in scholarship on the subject, **'Spanish Water, Anglo Water: Early Development in San Antonio'** by Charles R. Porter Jr. (Texas A&M University Press; \$34.95). The other book is **'Conflict on the Rio Grande: Water and the Law, 1879-1939'** by Douglas R. Littlefield (University of Oklahoma Press; \$39.95). It, too, is an important contribution in a rather shallow pool of water-related Texas books.

"Spanish Water, Anglo Water" overflows with insight into the story of water and water rights in the Alamo City, including some "well-I'll-be-dangeds," like the

fact that the springs at the head of the San Antonio River once were considered one of the largest spring systems in the known world and that the Spanish-built acequias constituted the first municipal water system in what is now the United States.

While thoroughly researched, Porter's book is readable history as well. And though the focus is on San Antonio, it is a natural starting point for an overall understanding of water matters in Texas because Texas water law has been much influenced by Spanish law.



Littlefield's book examines the water rights issues between New Mexico, Texas and Mexico, a legal tussle that led to the development of important precedents in water law. While water law is something of a dry issue compared with other subjects, it is important and will be more important as times goes on.

"Conflict on the Rio Grande" and "Spanish Water, Anglo Water" are as valuable as bubbling springs in the desert when it comes to understanding the complicated issues swirling around the natural resource that is so crucial to the continuing well-being of Texas.

To get back to water, one more swallow from "Spanish Water, Anglo Water": "The acequia system and the pure spring waters of San Antonio unified the community from its earliest days and actually allowed its creation. Then as now, the water rendered the land its value."

