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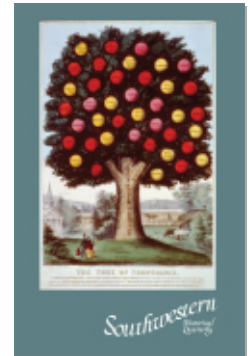
*Gray Ghosts and Red Rangers: American Hilltop Fox Chasing*  
(review)

Lonn Taylor

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## Book Reviews

JESÚS F. DE LA TEJA, *Editor*

*Gray Ghosts and Red Rangers: American Hilltop Fox Chasing.* By Thad Sitton. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010. Pp. 250. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. ISBN 9780292723023, \$30.00 cloth.)

Thad Sitton has written several good books about various aspects of life in the southern backwoods during the first half of the twentieth century. His most recent, *Gray Ghosts and Red Rangers*, is about backwoods foxhunting. This is not the type of foxhunting that involves mounted men and women in red coats jumping Virginia fences. Sitton's foxhunters wear windbreakers and billed caps, go to the hunt on foot or in pickup trucks, and do not chase the fox themselves but stay up all night by a campfire listening to their hounds chase it. The foxhunting Sitton writes about is not so much a sport as a nocturnal obsession, and Sitton, an oral historian with an anthropological bent, is as sensitive to its mystical aspects as he is to its techniques and rituals.

It may come as a surprise to some to learn that the point of the kind of foxhunting Sitton writes about—he prefers to call it by its traditional names, fox chasing or hilltopping—is not to catch and kill the fox but to listen to the dogs as they chase it in a wide circle and determine where they are by the sounds they make. He describes the process as “an intense conversion of auditory information into visual.” The chases always take place at night, and some can go on for ten or twelve hours and cover twenty or thirty miles. The best ones end with the fox circling back to his den, ready to run another day, and the dogs limping back to camp at dawn.

Sitton's material is organized into five chapters and an epilogue. With the exception of chapter two, which deals with the history of foxhunting (the red-coat kind) in England and America and with the types of foxes (gray and red, thus the book's title) and the breeds of dogs involved, most of his sources are gleaned from readers' contributions to three foxhunting magazines, *Red Ranger*, *Chase*, and *Hunter's Horn*. Sitton describes these contributions as “an outpouring of primary sources from forgotten men in nameless communities at the end of the county roads.” He makes excellent use of them.

The most interesting and most poignant chapter in this book is the penultimate one, in which Sitton describes the decline of fox chasing in the rural South after World War II. He attributes this to the reintroduction of deer into the countryside by state game and fish agencies, which led to regulated hunting, perimeter fences, and the erosion of traditional “hunters' rights,” meaning the custom of running dogs across other people's property in pursuit of foxes. Fox hounds cannot resist chasing deer, and this led to the “dog wars,” confrontations all over the rural South between fox chasers and landowners whose income derived from

deer-hunting leases. Some of the most intense were in East Texas, where this reviewer once saw a dog collar pinned up on a bulletin board in a general store on the edge of the Big Thicket, with a note under it that read, "I will pay \$500 for the name of the man who killed this dog." Eventually the fox chasers, tired of having their dogs shot, gave up.

If this book has a flaw, it is repetitiveness. A few of the stories Sitton garnered from his sources have slipped into the text twice. But who is to say that a good story should not be retold? This book will especially appeal to folklorists, anthropologists, historians, and anyone who savors being in the woods at night.

Fort Davis, Texas

LONN TAYLOR

*Handmade Brick for Texas: A Mexican Border Industry, Its Workers, and Its Business.*

By Scott Cook. (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2011. Pp. 284. Illustrations, maps, tables, notes, bibliography, index. ISBN 9780739147979, \$95.00 cloth; ISBN 9780739147986, 36.95 paper.)

Scott Cook's *Handmade Brick for Texas* is the sequel to his earlier work *Mexican Brick Culture in the Building of Texas, 1800–1980s* (Texas A&M University Press, 1998). In his latest book, Cook expands on his earlier work, specifically focusing on the handmade brick business in Reynosa, Tamaulipas. Aside from "cementing" his position as the foremost authority of border brick culture, Cook's latest work contributes greatly to our understanding of the social history of the border. Relying heavily on interviews, Cook's conversations with brick workers and managers fill the pages with life, while also illuminating the labor, business, and migratory history of border people. Cook's tactful composition of the more technical aspects of brick-making, coupled with extensive photographs and maps, also makes his book a must for those interested in the subject.

Cook shows how brick-making on the border is more than a business, but a legacy and a craft handed down for generations. Although they may work barefooted in the heat and the clay, experienced workers are artisans "not *peons*" (7). Locals address them as "*maestros* or masters" out of respect (7). Making brick is physically taxing and takes skill. Workers do not gather mud from the banks of the Rio Grande at random, but choose for the quality of clay. Once selected, workers mold the bricks "in an almost choreographed sequence" of an "unbroken interactive process" (8). After molding, the brick are fired using either gas or wood-burning kilns.

Using inexpensive labor and materials while offering a sturdy and aesthetically pleasing product, the handmade brick business boomed in the 1960s, '70s, and early '80s. A veritable "Brick Fever" took hold as Texas builders bought "MEXICO" stamped brick by the hundreds of thousands. This boom continued until peso devaluations in the early 1980s coupled with a negative advertising campaign led by Texas brick producers resulted in the collapse of all but the hardiest of Mexican brick producers. Despite these challenges, the earthy appeal of handmade brick continues in Texas, and Cook maintains that as long as it does so the brick culture of the border will endure.

In addition to informing readers about the mechanics of making brick by hand, Cook fills his pages with vignettes and asides from his interviewees that make his