

A BORDER BALLAD & ITS HERO by Américo Paredes

Now a Motion Picture, "The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez"

With his pistol in his hand



10TH PRINTING

"With His Pistol in His Hand"

A BORDER BALLAD AND ITS HERO



by Américo Paredes

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*“With His Pistol
in His Hand”*



Gregorio Cortez

To the memory of my father,
who rode a raid or two with
Catarino Garza;
and to all those old men
who sat around on summer nights,
in the days when there was
a chaparral, smoking their
cornhusk cigarettes and talking
in low, gentle voices about
violent things;
while I listened.

Acknowledgments

This book was made possible with the help of many persons, more than I could name in one short page. To the ballad singers of the Lower Rio Grande, who have shared their songs with me over the years, I owe a debt that I could never repay. A few of them are mentioned in the references made to particular variants of *Gregorio Cortez*. I am indebted to the many people who helped me collect information on Cortez. Those who told me their own experiences are mentioned in the bibliography, but I would especially like to express my appreciation to Mr. Valeriano Cortez, who gave me important information about his father, Gregorio Cortez.

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Most especially I would like to acknowledge my debt to Dr. Robert C. Stephenson, who supervised my folklore studies for five years. This book took its initial shape as a doctoral dissertation under his direction, and it owes a great deal to his guidance and encouragement.

AMÉRICO PAREDES

Austin, 1958

Introduction

This book began as the study of a ballad; it developed into the story of a ballad hero. Thus it became two books in one. It is an account of the life of a man, of the way that songs and legends grew up about his name, and of the people who produced the songs, the legends, and the man. It is also the story of a ballad, *El Corrido de Gregorio Cortez*, of its development out of actual events, and of the folk traditions from which it sprang.

Corrido, the Mexicans call their narrative folk songs, especially those of epic themes, taking the name from *correr*, which means “to run” or “to flow,” for the *corrido* tells a story simply and swiftly, without embellishments. *El Corrido de Gregorio Cortez* comes from a region, half in Mexico and half in the United States, known in this book as the Lower Rio Grande Border, the Lower Border, or simply the Border (with a capital B). Some people call it the Rio Grande Valley, but this name is also given a New Mexican area. In Texas, only the American side is usually called the Valley, and the name is associated with cotton, grapefruit, and the tourist industry.

El Corrido de Gregorio Cortez, then, is a Border Mexican ballad, “Mexican” being understood in a cultural sense, without reference to citizenship or to “blood.” But we must stress “Border” too. It is as a border that the Lower Rio Grande has made its mark: in legend, in song, and in those documented old men’s tales called histories.

Borders and ballads seem to go together, and their heroes are all cast in the same mold. During the Middle Ages there lived in some parts of Europe, especially in the border areas, a certain type of men whose fame has come down to us in legend and in song. On the Scottish-English border there were heroes like Wallace, the rebel against English domination, like Jock o the Side, Hobie Noble, Willie Armstrong, and other Liddesdale and Teviotdale raiders, whose favorite occupation was defying the power of England.

Spain had its popular heroes too, as did Russia, during the periods when each of those countries held a border against the warlike tribes of the East. And if one goes back to the fall of the Roman Empire, one hears of Digenis Akritas, who lived and fought on the borders between the Eastern Empire and the Saracens.

People composed ballads about men like these; legends grew up about them, and they became folk heroes, to be studied and argued about by generations of scholars. To this same class belongs Gregorio Cortez, who lived not in Europe of the Middle Ages but in twentieth-century America. This is his story, the fact and the legend of it: Gregorio Cortez, who defended his right with his pistol in his hand.

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*“With His Pistol
in His Hand”*



Transcribed by Hally Wood

El Corrido de Gregorio Cortez

In the county of El Carmen
A great misfortune befell;
The Major Sheriff is dead;
Who killed him no one can tell.

At two in the afternoon,
In half an hour or less,
They knew that the man who
killed him
Had been Gregorio Cortez.

They let loose the bloodhound
dogs;
They followed him from afar.
But trying to catch Cortez
Was like following a star.

All the rangers of the county
Were flying, they rode so hard;
What they wanted was to get
The thousand-dollar reward.

And in the county of Kiansis
They cornered him after all;
Though they were more than three
hundred
He leaped out of their corral.

Then the Major Sheriff said,
As if he was going to cry,
"Cortez, hand over your weapons;
We want to take you alive."

Then said Gregorio Cortez,
And his voice was like a bell,
"You will never get my weapons
Till you put me in a cell."

Then said Gregorio Cortez,
With his pistol in his hand,
"Ah, so many mounted Rangers
Just to take one Mexican!"

PART ONE

Gregorio Cortez, the Legend and the Life

