



Crossing the United States-Mexico border at Tijuana in 1923. Library of Congress

PANEL: Border Narratives: A River of Stories

By Ollie Reed Jr.

In Sam Peckinpah's 1969 movie *The Wild Bunch*, an outlaw gang on the run from a failed robbery pauses on the American side of the Rio Grande before riding across the river into Mexico.

"Mexico lindo [beautiful Mexico]," sighs Angel, the young Mexican member of the bunch.

"I don't see nothin' so lindo about it," growls gringo hardcase Lyle Gorch.

"Just looks like more of Texas far as I'm concerned," says Tector, Lyle's brother.

And that's the way it has always been with the U.S.-Mexico border – different things to different people. Malevolent to some, magnificent to others. Hell or haven.

Susan Compo, author of *Warren Oates: A Wild Life*, about the actor who played Lyle Gorch, said that in cinematic depictions the border can be a dangerous place that prompts escape or a beautiful, pastoral place that invites settlement.

Compo was among the members of the panel, moderated by past WWA president Kirk Ellis, in which panelists explored the ways the Southwest borderlands have been portrayed in fiction, nonfiction and film.

Certainly, the border has been the source for countless Western stories, movies as different as Peckinpah's graphically violent *Wild Bunch* and Gene Autry's fiesta-frilled *Down Mexico Way* (1941), novels ranging from Tom Lea's *The Wonderful Country* (1952) to Don Winslow's *The Border* (2019) as

well as significant works of nonfiction such as Francisco Cantú's *The Line Becomes a River: Dispatches From the Border*, a double Spur winner this year.

Cantú, also a panel member, said recent developments – dramatic increases in the numbers of people attempting to cross the border north into the United States and President Donald Trump's resolve to build a wall to hold back that human tide – have resulted in a lot more stories about the border being published but also threaten to choke out one popular storyline.

He said a border wall would mean the end of the myth of the new frontier, which envisions America as a wide-open land of unlimited opportunity for those strong and determined enough to seek it out.

In his Spur-winning book, Cantú, a Spanish-speaking grandson of a Mexican immigrant, recounts his life as a Border Patrol agent and the way the harsh realities of that job haunt him even after he leaves it.

"I grew up with an understanding of the desert landscape," he said. "I think about the landscape as a cultural landscape. In the borderlands, one of the beautiful things to my ears is Spanglish spoken very fluently. But there is the issue of the landscape holding a lot of violence, people setting out on foot for 50-mile or 100-mile journeys without access to water."

Jay Dew, editor in chief of Texas A&M University Press, said border issues are not new to the press.

"We publish lots of books on borders and borderlands," Dew said, noting *The River and the Wall*, a 2019 Texas A&M book about five people who follow the Rio Grande in an effort to find out how a wall will affect life along the river.



Texas A&M University Press editor Jay Dew and moderator Kirk Ellis.

"What happens when you put up a big fence in an area where animals have crossed for generations to get water or do whatever animals do?" he said. "There is not much public land in Texas. There are a lot of people not happy about selling their land [for use as a site for a barrier]. The wall would change the shape of Texas."

Audience member Jane Little Botkin, a 2018 Spur winner for best Western biography, took exception to references made by panel members to the "militarization of the border." She said many people along the border want security.

"I like our Border Patrol," Botkin said. "The system is broken. There are victims on both sides."

A former teacher, Botkin told how members of Mexican gangs crossed the border into El Paso to forcibly recruit Mexican students attending Bowie High School in that city. "It's simplistic to say 'Look at the beautiful landscape, look at the beautiful river,'" Botkin said. "There are so many serious issues."

Cantú agreed.

"Our biggest challenge is to capture the complications of the place," he said. "We as writers should resist the temptation to simplify these issues."