

Texas Observer  
December 7, 2020

Dear Editorial Staff,

In perusing some of your recent articles, it seems your publication covers underrepresented issues. Most of the pieces are backed up with facts and sources, except for "The Racist History Behind El Paso's XII Travelers Memorial. As the Executive Director of the Tom Lea Institute, my focus is on the inaccuracies about Mayor Lea (Tom Lea, Sr.) and his son, artist Tom Lea. It is essential to set the record straight and correct misinformation about the El Paso region's history. We hope you agree that this is responsible journalism and will help us with this task.

Quote: "El Paso Mayor Tom Lea, Sr., who in 1915 proposed the construction of a 30-foot-high monument made of marble or granite stone in honor of white "pioneers who made El Paso." Notice the quote omits the adjective "white" because it was not included or part of Mayor Lea's proposal, nor was it his intention. Romo does not cite his source because it would conflict with his narrative.

Quote: "The [largest race riot in the city's history](#) took place during Lea's administration." In an attempt to vilify Lea, Romo does not cite that the "bath (race) riots" occurred on the Santa Fe bridge between the Juarez and El Paso border, which was under the Federal Government's jurisdiction. Romo gives the impression that the Mayor and the City of El Paso are responsible for the disinfecting stations of people traveling from Juarez to the US. The Federal government enacted this policy in response to the typhus epidemic raging in Mexico. Mayor Lea had no jurisdiction or influence on the decision of the Federal government. The riots were against the federal government policy, not Lea or the City of El Paso. Romo's characterization is misleading.

Quote: "Lea was one of the city's most prominent members of the Ku Klux Klan at a time when the Klan focused its recruitment efforts on the most influential citizens of the white community." In the Klan's initial, flashy recruitment effort, Lea and many others joined the Klan under false pretenses. The Klan represented themselves as a community organization, like the Kiwanis Club, Lions Club, and Rotary. Lea and others quickly realized the Klan's real agenda of prejudice against Mexicans and Catholics (since there were so few African Americans in El Paso). "Several respected and prominent El Pasoans, including former mayor Tom Lea and Dr. Brady, had joined the Klan, but after realizing its purpose, resigned and fought its activities." (Pg. 9, Edward F. Sherman, "The Ku Klux Klan and El Paso Politics Following World War I"). The Klan did not get a strong foothold in the City as a result. To further prove the point about Mayor Lea's lack of prejudice, his second wife was a Mexican woman from Juarez. Romo presents a misleading version of the story to suit his narrative, not the real history of El Paso.

Quote: "In 1936, the local Texas Centennial committee commissioned Tom Lea, Jr., the son of the former mayor, to do a bas-relief sculpture at the Centennial Museum at the College of Mines (today's University of Texas at El Paso) commemorating the first European man to visit the area. It depicted Indigenous people submissively greeting the Spaniards. Tom Lea, Jr. went on to gain

national recognition for public art projects that pushed the popular narratives of European discovery, westward expansion, and Manifest Destiny."

In his book about his travels in North America, Cabeza de Vaca describes his relationship with the natives in detail due to surgically removing an arrowhead from the chest of an Indian. "And this cure gave us such standing throughout the land that they esteemed and valued us to their utmost capacity. (La Relacion pg. 80) Romo's lack of scholarship related to the relief is astonishing. The natives were not "submissively greeting" Cabeza de Vaca; they willingly traveled with him and prayed for him as a great healer. Throughout his travels, de Vaca was gladly accompanied by hundreds and sometimes thousands of Indians. Tom Lea depicted the surgery in his work "The First Recorded Surgical Operation in North America." Then he commemorated the travels of Cabeza de Vaca and the Indians in the relief at UTEP.

Quote: "Lea, Jr. also painted a mural called "The Pass of the North" at the newly constructed El Paso Federal Courthouse; the mural served as a blueprint for the "Calendar of Twelve Travelers Through the Pass," first published in 1946, which in turn inspired the Oñate statue. Both the calendar and the mural celebrate European and Anglo men who settled the Paso del Norte region as "enterprising, courageous, and intelligent" individuals who opened up the region for so-called progress and civilization."

Just by looking at the mural, one can see Romo's assertions are inaccurate. The diversity of people depicted in the mural is extraordinary for the 1939 WPA project. The mural's purpose was to represent "the old giants" who walked this earth (El Paso). Among those giants are two Apache Indians, a Mexican charro, a strong pioneer woman, a miner, postman, and soldier.- hardly the portrayal of only European, Anglo men who came to conquer. Amazingly all the figures are depicted with the same prominence and noble bearing.

Quote: "Tom Lea, Jr. went on to gain national recognition for public art projects that pushed the popular narratives of European discovery, westward expansion, and Manifest Destiny—racialized worldviews historically used to justify the dispossession and erasure of non-white populations."

Again, Romo's assumptions are false. Lea's mural "Comanches" is described by the Postmaster as "Comanches skillfully riding their horses bareback." Lea says the selection of the subject matter for the Seymour post office "is in the heart of the former marches of the wild Comanches...so it is natural to paint them on horseback-wild and free..." (*The Texas Post Office Murals* p. 98) Indeed, it was a celebration of the Native Americans, not the depiction of manifest destiny. Another Texas WPA mural is the "Stampede" in Odessa. It depicts a herd bolting in mad excitement while a cowboy is tossed off his horse to certain death. Also, Lea created a triptych. One with an Anglo design, the second an Indio design, and the third a Latino design, all show daily life. (*A Picture Gallery* p. 14) Typically, Lea painted stunning landscapes and the people of the Southwest and Mexico-Anglos and Mexicans in equal measure both from history and the current day. Romo's assertion that Lea gained recognition for projects that pushed European discovery is proven wrong by merely looking at his murals.

Romo's article is replete with unsubstantiated depictions and assumptions about the history of El Paso. We feel it is not up to the journalistic standard of "The Observer," and we ask your publication to remove the article from your website.

Please know I am always available to discuss this further and/or answer any questions you may have. We appreciate your attention to this critical matter.

Sincerely,

Holly Packard Cobb  
Executive Director  
Tom Lea Institute