

# The Geographical Review

VOLUME 91

April 2009

NUMBER 2

## INVENTING THE “MAGIC VALLEY” OF SOUTH TEXAS, 1905–1941\*

CHRISTIAN BRANNSTROM and MATTHEW NEUMAN

**ABSTRACT.** In this article we examine the invention of the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas as the “Magic Valley.” To sell land and water, early-twentieth-century land developers and boosters created the Magic Valley as a place myth comprising claims of abundant irrigation water, pliant and abundant labor, and modernity overtaking wilderness. We use a conceptual framework developed from place-making and place-marketing literatures in which language, iconography, and performance are simultaneously deployed in the creation of place images and place myths. Textual descriptions, visual imagery, and performances relied on material transformations of the landscape. We describe the changes in the Magic Valley place myth, emphasizing characterizations of labor, nature, the good life, and security of investment. Two perspectives are adopted, one that considers a range of promotional literature and one that centers on a prominent individual. *Keywords:* agriculture, Lower Rio Grande Valley, place, Texas.

In the first decade of the twentieth century land developers and boosters promoted the Lower Rio Grande of Texas as the “Magic Valley,” a place for Anglo farmers to obtain water for irrigating vegetable and citrus crops and to exploit Hispanic labor. A railroad line between Houston and Brownsville, finished in 1904, connected a place widely considered only a few years earlier as an economically worthless and culturally backward desert. The Magic Valley idea, which we consider a place myth (Shields 1991), attracted thousands of Anglo settlers to practice irrigated agriculture in a place that quickly developed into a major horticultural and citrus-producing region sustained by impoverished and segregated Hispanic workers. The Magic Valley place-name would persist for decades (Jordan 1978), even after civil rights activism and water adjudication began to erode the material basis for the place myth in the 1940s and 1950s.

We analyze the invention of the Magic Valley as a place-making process rooted in the imperative for land and water sales in the Lower Rio Grande Valley. Building on recent literature on place making (Davis 2005), we focus on the origins and ele-

---

\* We thank Janette Garcia for assistance with the Shary Collection, Anne Willis for pointing us to useful sources, and Jonathan Smith, Reuben Rose-Redwood, Wendy Jepson, Casey Walsh, Craig Colten, and two anonymous reviewers for comments on previous drafts of this article.

✪ DR. BRANNSTROM is an associate professor of geography at Texas A&M University, College Station, Texas 77843, from which MR. NEUMAN received a bachelor’s degree in environmental geosciences.