

THE DISTRIBUTION OF POPULATION IN THE LOWER RIO GRANDE VALLEY OF TEXAS

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The Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas represents one of the most densely populated areas of southwestern United States. Its average density, 40.9 people per square mile, is nearly twice that for the state as a whole. The four counties of the Valley area include large tracts of nearly vacant ranch country. Were figures available for the irrigated area alone, the average density per square mile would be much greater. The following table reveals the salient population figures for the four counties according to the 1930 census¹.

County	Area	Population	Density
Cameron	840	77,540	92.3
Hidalgo	1,555	77,004	49.5
Starr	1,348	11,409	8.5
Willacy	574	10,499	18.3
Total	4,317	176,452	40.9

Cameron County, with a minimum of ranch land and a higher percentage of irrigated area, shows a population density of 92.3 people per square mile, which might be considered as approximately the average density of the irrigated areas of the Valley.

The distribution of the population in the Valley according to the 1930 census figures, tabulated and plotted on the population map (Fig. 1) by enumeration districts², reveals a unique concentration. The striking feature of this distribution is that the towns seem to contain a large portion of the people. This can be explained by the fact that many of the irrigation farmers live in the small towns and go out to work their farms each day. Another feature shown on

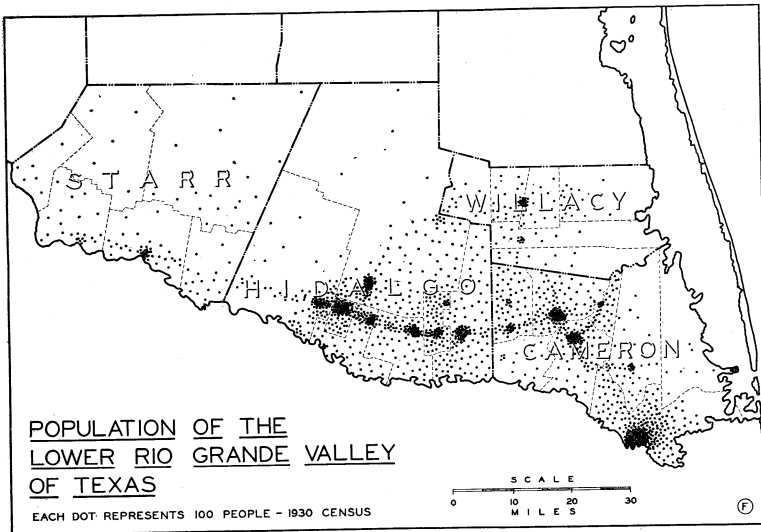


Fig. 1. The distribution of population in the four southernmost counties of Texas. Note the concentration of population along the slightly curving line of the Mission Terrace about ten miles back from the river. Compare with the physiographic map in *Pan-American Geologist*, Vol. 57, p. 264.

the map is the concentration of the towns and the densest population along a line parallel to the Rio Grande but about ten miles from the river. This line marks the outer edge of the Mission Terrace³. At the time when all of the towns of the Valley, with the exception of Brownsville, were established, the slightly higher land provided by this river terrace was selected because of its relative freedom from floods. The railroad naturally utilized the same feature, and later the main highway was built along its edge. The location of the railroad and highway stimulated urban growth, hence today most of the Valley towns are found along the edge of the Mission Terrace. Cities not on the terrace include Harlingen, San Benito, and Brownsville, all in Cameron County, and all on the delta of the Rio Grande. These cities, together with Mercedes near the edge of the terrace in Hidalgo County, have had to spend large sums of money in constructing dikes and levees for flood protection.

In areas of rugged or rolling topography, population tends to concentrate in the lowlands with the upland or rugged country remaining almost barren of settlement. A distribution of that type would be expected in a maturely dissected country as in western Pennsylvania, or in the uplands of central Massachusetts, but to find such a distribution as shown in the Lower Rio Grande Valley area on an almost level plain is unusual. Here again, topography is the controlling factor in the distribution, concentrating the people at the edge of the terrace where they are free from floods, yet near enough to the river to obtain irrigation waters for their crops.

¹Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930, Population Bulletin, First Series, Texas, Washington, 1930.

²Enumeration districts furnished by C. E. Batschelet of the Bureau of the Census.

³Foscue, Edwin J.: "Physiography of Lower Rio Grande Valley", PAN-AMERICAN GEOLOGIST, Vol. 57, pp. 263-267. (See map, page 264.)