

**Tomás Ojeda Ojeda, *Villavicencio entre la documentalidad y la oralidad, 1880-1980*, Villavicencio, Edición Corocora Orinoquense, 2000, 357 págs.**

In 1940, Villavicencio, "El Portal de la Llanura," was an isolated frontier outpost with a population of some 28,000 people. By the 1990s, in just over sixty years, it had become a metropolis of 273,511 inhabitants, a phenomenal growth rate even by Colombian standards. Yet despite this amazing expansion in the midst of nearly constant violence in the surrounding plains, and Villavicencio's significance as the major urban settlement in Colombian Orinoquia, the number of scholarly works concerning its twentieth-century development can be counted on one hand. For that reason alone, Tomás Ojeda Ojeda's compilation of documentary evidence and oral testimonies detailing one hundred years of the city's evolution is an important contribution for scholars who write about Colombian urban history, as well as for those concerned with the regional develop-

ment of the Llanos. His book is crammed with helpful facts and insights, but the fragmented organization of the material and author's haphazard use of oral interviews combine to make it a frustrating as well as an illuminating source.

Ojeda Ojeda is well positioned to chronicle Villavicencio's recent history. Born in Meta, he graduated from the Colegio La Salle de Villavicencio and later earned a Licenciado in philosophy at the Universidad Simón Bolívar, a Masters in Education at the USTA and a diploma in Docencia Universitaria at ESAF. Between 1987 and 1991 he taught courses in education at the Unillanos, and he has held the Cátedra de Historia Socioeconómica de Colombia at Unimeta. To collect information for this monograph, Ojeda Ojeda made ample use of documents from the Archivo Gene-

ral de la Nación, the Archivo del Consejo de Villavicencio, the Archivo de la Notaria Primera de Villavicencio, and periodicals such as *Llano 7 Días*. His bibliography reveals an excellent command of published secondary sources concerning Meta and its capital city. In addition, he interviewed dozens of villaviccences, and incorporated their insights and opinions into his narrative.

Since the book has neither an introduction nor a conclusion, it is not clear exactly what Ojeda Ojeda hoped to accomplish, but one may infer that his intent was to provide up-to-date information on a variety of subjects concerning Villavicencio that might be of use to scholars in the future. Accordingly, he divided the work into eight chapters, each dedicated to a single theme and arranged in the following somewhat illogical order: "Vías de Comunicación," "Colonización," "Los Desplazados," "La Educación," "Economía," "La Violencia," "Rostro de Villavicencio," and "Servicios Públicos." Conspicuously missing are any extended discussions regarding the Catholic Church (whose missionaries dominated the city from its founding in 1842 until 1960); the battle against debilitating tropical diseases that have enabled thousands of migrants from the interior to relocate in the Llanos; or Villavicencio's identity crisis, an issue that is so well outlined by Nancy Espinel

Riveros in her book, *Villavicencio, dos Siglos de Historia Comunera 1740-1940* (2nd ed. Villavicencio, 1997).

Ojeda Ojeda begins each chapter by incorporating material derived from archival and published sources to sketch the background of the topic. He then augments these data by interpolating verbatim interviews with residents of Villavicencio who offer their personal insights into the subject. The latter accounts include fascinating details, but they are difficult to evaluate since Ojeda Ojeda provides no background information about his informants beyond their names. In addition, since the first-hand accounts are not organized in any particular chronological order, some merely recapitulate similar points, while others offer new information. The chapters on "La Violencia" and "Los Desplazados" refer only in a cursory way to the impact of the FARC guerillas after the 1970s, while four of the stronger sections in the book, "Vías de Comunicación," "Economía," "Rostro de Villavicencio," and "Servicios Públicos" succeed in presenting a more complete analysis of the changes that have taken place over the last sixty years.

In "Vías de Communication" Ojeda Ojeda highlights improvements in the Bogotá-Villavicencio highway; the ambitious plans for the Troncal del Llano, that would link the

city with Peru, Ecuador and Venezuela; the decline of the Meta River as a medium of commercial trade due to ecological difficulties; and the aspirations for an international airport that could eventually be used as an alternative landing strip to Bogotá's overextended El Dorado. In the chapter on economy, he discusses the obstacles hindering profitable ranching in the Llanos, the impact of the petroleum boom and extractive agriculture, and the critical problem of finding employment for the hundreds of displaced people who have arrived from the Llanos Adentro seeking refuge in Villavicencio. In "Rostro de Villavicencio" he outlines by decades, from 1900 to 1990, the developments that have taken place in the capital, covering such varied topics as the changing configuration of the streets and businesses, the problem of excessive noise, the campaign to increase tourism, the modernization of daily life, and the survival of traditional

customs. The section on "Servicios Públicos" celebrates the introduction of television and cellular telephones, and explores the perplexing problems of supplying electricity, sewers and water to satisfy the ever expanding needs of the city.

In the end the image that emerges from *Villavicencio entre la Documentalidad y la Oralidad* is one of a vibrant city that faces major problems now and in the future but which has not lost the dynamism that has made it the "Portal de los Llanos." Ojeda Ojeda has provided us with a groundbreaking source for a history of Villavicencio in the twentieth century. One can only hope that others will take up the challenge and fill in what appear to be some critical gaps.

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