

# VIVA

# ¡VIVA!

— LOS ESTADOS UNIDOS —

# ¡VIVA!

— MATAMOROS —

# ¡VIVA!

— BROWNSVILLE —



## Brownsville's Charro Days Fiesta takes friendship and unity across the border and back

By Tracy L. Barnett 📷 Photographs by Larry Ditto

On a sunny February afternoon in Brownsville, Beatrice “Chickie” Samano stood on a covered stage and surveyed the crowd as she had done countless times over the decades. Serious in her serape-striped director’s vest, she held a microphone and awaited her cue. Then, as violins began to soar, she took a deep breath, leaned back, and let out a shout so loud and so long it could surely be heard across the Rio Grande in Matamoros: “Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Whoops and hollers arose from the crowd. Samano finished with a classic Mexican cackle and sharp cries of “Aayy! Aayy! Aayy!”

By then, she was smiling from ear to ear, and the audience was roaring its approval. “¡Viva México!” shouted the emcee. “¡Viva!” yelled Samano, her fist upraised. “¡Viva los Estados Unidos!” “¡Viva Matamoros!” “¡Viva Brownsville!”

With that, the 80th annual Charro Days Fiesta was officially under way. Launched in 1938, while the nation was in the throes of the Great Depression, the festival was conceived by Brownsville civic leaders to lift peoples’ spirits and celebrate the town’s Mexican flavor, as well as its friendship with Matamoros, the bustling metropolis across the Mexican border. Organizers named the event for Mexico’s skilled horsemen—*charros*—and the elegant culture epitomized by their mariachi-style braid-trimmed leather ensembles and wide-brimmed sombreros.

From its humble beginnings, Charro Days has evolved into a weeklong polychromatic explosion of border culture that draws upward of 200,000 people. Among the many highlights, festivalgoers from both sides of the border gather on the bridge that connects the two countries. There’s a three-day Sombrero Festival—a sort of festival within the festival—that features concerts and competitions. Brownsville kids perform traditional dances and music from different Mexican states; a Mexican political or cultural leader makes special appearances; and no fewer than three grand



Parades embody the spirit of the annual Charro Days Fiesta.



(From left) Beatrice “Chickie” Samano kicks off last year’s celebration with an introductory shout; the Grand Order of the Brush, a.k.a. the Beard Posse, spreads joy in the festival parade.

parades make their way through downtown.

“I don’t think I’m exaggerating to say it’s otherworldly, if you’re coming from a place other than the border,” said Brownsville native son and nationally recognized author Oscar Cásares. “This is it, in Technicolor and 3D Blu-ray; it’s full-on wow—part of it is parade, part of it is Sombrero Festival, and it sort of takes over the city in this whole other way.”

I came to Brownsville last year to immerse myself in the full-on wow. I was also curious to see how the national debate about building a longer border wall was affecting an event so rooted in cross-border friendship. I soon met Samano, the pixie-faced retired folkloric dance teacher who gave the opening shout. At 80, she’s the festival’s grande dame, having attended the very first celebration when she was only 2 months old. “Charro Days makes me feel young,” she said when we chatted on the festival’s second day, her mood seemingly unaffected by the political discourse. “I danced all day yesterday, and nothing hurts. I feel like I’m about 15.” Then she thought about it and broke into an impish grin. “Except when it’s over. Then I feel like I’m 150.”



## CONNECTION

“We love our Mexican neighbors!” exclaimed Danny Loff, also known as “El Jefe.”

Brownsville’s cultural—and in many cases biological—connection with its cross-border neighbor runs close to the heart, and never more so than during Charro Days. It’s a week when everyone in Brownsville celebrates their Mexican heritage, whether their name is Martinez or Miller, and when an Anglo such as Loff is as likely as his Latino neighbors to don a sombrero and a serape.

I caught up with the blue-eyed and bearded Loff and other bewhiskered men during Sombrero Fest as they were relaxing at the Frijolympics Bean Cookoff. They wore sombreros, red bandannas, and white embroidered Mexican campesino shirts. Nearby, a WANTED poster showed a lineup of the posse and their aliases. Among them: Mariano “El Bean” Ayala, head of the Convention and Visitors Bureau; businessman Alonzo “Little Mr. Amigo” Barrientes; and banker Bob “La Plancha” Walker.

The Grand Order of the Brush, otherwise known as the Beard Posse, is a self-appointed crew of rabble-rousers. Their role is to enforce a

citywide directive dating back to the first Charro Days that requires all local men to grow beards. The purpose is to infuse the town with Charro Days spirit and remind buttoned-up professionals of this region’s rugged heritage.

Loff helped revive the Beard Posse because the group, like Charro Days itself, he says, had gone into something of a decline in the 1960s and ’70s. He got the idea to launch the Sombrero Festival back in 1985, several years after he came home from college and discovered that locals had stopped dressing up for Charro Days and would show up only for the parade. Loff wanted to keep the celebration going, and to give out-of-town visitors more reasons to come.

By all accounts, the strategy has worked. These days, an average of 50,000 people participate in events like the hotly contested Chili Cookoff and the Frijolympics, which just might be the world’s only charro bean cook-off.

Sombrero Fest also might be the only gathering in the world where you can observe a waiters’ relay race, a tortilla toss, a jalapeño-eating contest, and a grito competition all on the same day, and then sample 60 dishes using pinto beans.

“I tell people: Bring your camera, and bring your appetite, because we’re on the border, and people cook around here,” Loff said. “The pageantry, the color, the mood of the people—it’s just not like anything else.”

## CELEBRATION

Every year as the festivities approach, Chickie Samano and her daughter Celia Galindo, 56, like so many Brownsville natives, survey their wardrobes and consider what to wear during the weeklong festivities. In the Brownsville house that her mother bought in 1953, Samano opens the cedar closet and pulls out three cedar chests containing more than 80 dresses, skirts, jackets, and blouses from different parts of Mexico.

Many of the dresses belonged to Samano’s mother and represent 29 of Mexico’s 31 states. All are handcrafted originals—for example, the white wool charra ensemble with gold embroidery; the lacy black hand-embroidered skirt; and the sparkly, sequined *china poblana* from Puebla. But Samano’s favorite, a quirky counterpoint to all the beauty, is a pair of *viejitos* (“little old men”)

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(From top) A couple makes a quick change into "authentic" Mexican clothing; comfort food, colorful dress, and an Instagram-worthy scene at the Charro Days Fiesta.

costumes, complete with the caricatured masks typical of the state of Michoacán. One of those landed her on the front page of the *Brownsville Herald* once after she led her troop of young dancers from Russell Middle School in the children's parade.

Among other pieces, Samano selected a dress from the Yucatán and another nontraditional number with an animal design from Oaxaca. Galindo chose a charra ensemble with a long skirt. Like her mother, Galindo has been a key player in Charro Days for years. During the festival, she worked behind the scenes at her restaurant, La Escondida, and her catering business, Gourmet Central, creating the menus for a dozen Mexican-themed parties and overseeing her staff, which grows from eight to 32 to accommodate the demand.

During much of the year, she cooks the usual dishes—nachos, fajitas, enchiladas—but catering the private parties held during Charro Days gives her a chance to explore more gourmet possibilities. For example, last year, her chiles rellenos featured



shrimp, *nopal* cactus, and *queso panela*, a fresh Mexican cheese. Another favorite was miniature sopos, thick, fried tortillas with pinched-up edges, and topped with *tinga de pollo* and *chorizo con papa*.

Like so many other Brownsville kids, Galindo grew up going back and forth across the border—especially during Charro Days, when she dressed up for the parties, parades, and dances. Her grandfather was the chairman of Charro Days for many years, and she was 17 when she first donned one of her grandmother's dresses and rode in a parade.

She recalled with sadness when the rule that allowed Mexican citizens to cross the border for the festival with only their Mexican identification ended in 1972. Up until then, Matamoros residents had flocked to the festival, she said.

"Downtown was like a mall in those days, with the streets closed down," she said. "And so when the stores would close, the party would start, and we would all dance in the streets. When the parties would begin, the friendships would form."

Back then, the parades would go back and forth across the bridge. Nowadays, Matamoros floats still come across, along with the dignitaries who ride them. And some Matamoros residents



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(From left) A young folklorico dancer gets ready to perform; an elegant rider in full charro regalia.

continue to make the trip—among them, friends of the Samanos.

I caught up with them on Saturday, the festival's climactic day, on a balcony high above the Grand International Parade, where the old guard from Matamoros and Brownsville mingled. "I'm just a big mixture of both sides of the border," said Galindo, whose freckled face points to the German-Irish side of her Mexican-American heritage. "We never saw the difference between Mexican and American. We're just friends."

I asked Galindo how the debate about the border wall was affecting Brownsville, and Charro Days, in particular. "We're sad about everything that's going on—but we're just carrying on like nothing is happening," she said. "We're doing everything we can to try to keep that [cross-border] friendship alive. That's our goal, and I don't think that's something that we will ever lose. We've been united our whole lives, and this will not change us."

On the street below, the scene unfolded as it had for decades: An extravaganza of color and rhythm passed by as mariachi bands, a giant Aztec warrior, and plumed Aztec dancers made their way down Elizabeth Street. The stars of the parade, of course, were the charro Mexican riding clubs. The Adelitas—horsewomen named for the

female soldiers in the Mexican Revolution—were riding sidesaddle in their long ruffled *escaramuza* dresses, followed by their equally elegant male counterparts in full charro regalia. The braided and beribboned horses "danced" their best *piaffe* and *paso español*.

On all sides of the festival—from the cooks making *tacos piratas* in the food booths to the girls in their folklorico dresses; and from the U.S. Border Patrol chili cook-off team to the Tejano band made up of U.S. Border Control agents—border culture was in full bloom.

As I surveyed this scene, utterly immersed in this world, I thought about something the writer Cáseres had said to me about Charro Days: "It's one of those things that needs to be seen to be understood. If you place it in our current context in this country, there is this sense that we're shuttering ourselves off. This week, it's a release from that, and it's a wonderful way of showing how we are still in a multicultural world and no one is going to change that. This is a full acceptance of that, and a coming home."

*Tracy L. Barnett is a freelance writer based in Guadalajara, where she has seen many first-rate celebrations of Mexican culture—but none more enthusiastic than Brownsville's Charro Days.*



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