

# Petra's Legacy: The South Texas Ranching Empire of Petra Vela and Mifflin Kenedy by Jane Clements Monday, Frances Brannen Vick.

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## ***Petra's Legacy: The South Texas Ranching Empire of Petra Vela and Mifflin Kenedy* by Jane Clements Monday, Frances Brannen Vick (review)**

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Southwestern Historical Quarterly

Texas State Historical Association

Volume 112, Number 3, January 2009

pp. 323-324

[10.1353/swh.2009.0132](https://doi.org/10.1353/swh.2009.0132)

REVIEW

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### **In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:**

Petra's Legacy: The South Texas Ranching Empire of Petra Vela and Mifflin Kenedy. By Jane Clements Monday and Frances Brannen Vick. (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2007. Pp. 444. Illustrations, maps, notes, bibliography, index. ISBN 978-1-58544-614-8. \$35.00, cloth.) For many years, the prominent or significant figures in Texas history books were mostly men—notable white men such as Sam Houston and Stephen F. Austin. Thanks to the rapidly growing field of women's history, however, that longstanding

tradition is changing. In the cases of Mifflin Kennedy and his lifelong friend Richard King, founders of the legendary Kennedy and King ranches, both men owed much of their success to their spouses, Petra and Henrietta. In South Texas immediately after the Mexican War, a number of women played pivotal roles in bridging the cultural differences between Anglos and Mexicans. Petra Vela Kennedy was such a person. A devout Catholic born in Mier, Mexico, she and her husband, Pennsylvania Quaker Mifflin Kennedy, and their children represented “the successful uniting of two cultures to create a new vibrant generation to help settle the land known as Texas” (p. 4). As the authors convincingly argue, Petra Kennedy and Henrietta King were full and active partners in the day-to-day operations of the famous Kennedy and King Ranches of the Rio Grande Valley. Monday first considered writing a biography of Petra Kennedy while working on *Voices from the Wild Horse Desert: The Vaquero Families of the King and Kennedy Ranches*, published by University of Texas Press in 1997. Monday then invited Frances Brannen Vick to join the project and help steer it towards publication. In *Petra’s Legacy*, the authors skillfully keep their subject in the foreground of the narrative while seamlessly moving her through the rich and fascinating story of nineteenth-century South Texas. The authors demonstrate excellent command of the region’s multilayered and complex history, from Spanish colonial times up to Petra Kennedy’s death in 1885. *Petra’s Legacy* presents an authentic, unvarnished look at the Kennedy and King empires. Although the focus is on Petra and the Kennedy family, there is also much discussion of the Kings, since the two families were so interconnected, both personally and financially. The authors’ frank, finely detailed portraits of these families, their business dealings, their victories, and their losses resonate with the reader, making this, above all, a compelling human story. In crafting their study, Monday and Vick incorporate a number of new primary sources from both Texas and Mexico. The result is a fresh and engaging interpretation of the King and Kennedy histories, which is even more remarkable when one considers how much Kennedy material is still unavailable to researchers. The book’s production values are first-rate. Nancy Tiller’s maps help orient the reader to the South Texas story. Images and photographs receive careful attention and are well reproduced. The cover design is simple yet elegant. Perhaps the book’s only flaw is the authors’ failure to bring the story full circle in their epilogue by restating their thesis with as much detail and clarity as they do in their introduction. The reader needs to be reminded of Petra Kennedy’s context to the region and Texas, and why her story is important.

2009 Book Reviews 323 \*jan 09  
11/26/08 12:00 PM Page 323 This book spotlights a glaring void still waiting to be filled in South Texas history: a comparable, scholarly biography of Henrietta King is sorely needed. In 1986 Mary Virginia Fox wrote *A Queen Named King: Henrietta of the King Ranch*, a seventy-six-page work published by Eakin Press, aimed at the juvenile book market. In 2005 Judy Alter authored a second juvenile history, *Henrietta King: Rancher and Philanthropist*, a seventy-two-page paperback issued by State House Press. One hopes that *Petra’s Legacy* will now inspire a similar, well-researched, full-length adult study of this important South Texas matriarch. Jane Clements Monday and Frances Brannen Vick’s book exemplifies women’s studies (and Texas history for that matter) at its finest. For those considering research or a career in women’s history, *Petra’s Legacy* provides...

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