

Jane M. Rausch
From Frontier Town to Metropolis:
A History of Villavicencio, Colombia, since 1842

Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007. 244 p.

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Like many of the migrants to the Llanos it describes, Jane M. Rausch's history of Villavicencio is something of a pioneer. Not only is this study the first long-term history of Meta's capital to be written in English, it is also perhaps the first such history of any Colombian city in English. As a single-volume synthesis and reevaluation of a wide variety of scholarship about the Llanos—including at least three books by Rausch herself—this history will be valuable to any scholar who wants to understand this important and historically marginalized Colombian region.

The stated goals of this volume are twofold. First, it sets out to construct a longitudinal study of Villavicencio and its surrounding territories from 1842 to 2005, demonstrating how what was once just a tiny *llanero* outpost grew into a modern city of over 270,000 official residents. Second and equally important, Rausch seeks to discuss the changing conceptions of the Llanos over time and to show the extent that this region was a frontier in the sense that the historian Frederick Jackson used the term.

The book achieves both of these objectives handily. Throughout its eleven chronologically organized chapters, the reader revisits Villavicencio and its surroundings through key stages of Colombia's history. Each chapter provides a wide variety of information about Villavicencio and the Llanos, exploring, among other topics: population, colonization and immigration, government, the Church, economic growth, communication, transportation, sanitary conditions, education, and public works infrastructure. In a parallel narrative to these details, Rausch document shows how a variety of Colombians and foreigners conceived of the Llanos during these different epochs.

In achieving these goals, Rausch describes what may be the central paradox of the Llanos. On one hand, the territory was—and remains—a region pregnant with future possibility, attracting attention from technical experts, government officials, as well as an abundance of refugees and fortune seekers. On the other hand, the region only rarely received adequate investment or government support. The result has been a fragile existence for most *llaneros* in the region. Exceptions to this neglect include the period of Conservative Party hegemony following Rafael Reyes' *Quinquenio*; *La revolución en marcha* of Alfonso López Pumarejo; and the early years of Lt. Gen. Gustavo Rojas Pinilla's military dictatorship. Considering these three periods of greater government involvement, Rausch convincingly demonstrates that it was the López government that had the greatest impact on the region with developmental efforts that had at least the potential to transform the lives of the *Villavicencenses*. When these efforts were cut short by López's inability to maintain his Revolution's

momentum at the national level, the region and city both suffered. The penultimate chapter covers how private narcodollars helped to improve the city's infrastructure even as the violence associated with drug culture contributed to a massive influx of refugees that the city could not accommodate.

The volume ends with a penetrating examination of recent Colombian scholarship on Villavicencio's development. Drawing on these author's arguments, Rausch contends that the city's development has been fundamentally unequal and that a lack of industrial development threatens to reduce it to a mere suburb of Bogotá. At the same time, the city's residents struggle to preserve their independent identity by embracing what they perceive to be authentic *llanero* culture.

Despite the wealth of information in this book, readers who are unfamiliar with Colombian history will find that the whirlwind tour of Colombian history does not provide sufficient context on most of the national events or explain the country's basic historical periodization. Similarly, and perhaps of greater importance, the book offers no systematic examination of the simultaneous, meteoric growth of Bogotá—a phenomenon critical in the development as of the Llanos' rise as a supplier of foodstuffs for the capital.

The study suffers from a lack of context in other areas as well. For example, the treatment of *Regeneración*-era plans to encourage growth in the Llanos would have benefited from brief discussion of Rafael Núñez's Positivist interpretation of national development and the section on Rojas might have included a deeper discussion of populism. Mentions of telegraph lines in Villavicencio, as well as an account of the introduction of air traffic between Villavicencio and Bogotá would both have been improved with historical detail and a contextualization within national trends.

Finally, although the book discusses multiple Colombian political leaders who lauded the Llanos as Colombia's equivalent to the Argentine Pampas or the U.S. Great Plains, there is no discussion of whether these lofty comparisons account for the environment of the Llanos. Ecologists and ecological historians have noted that these regions are different kinds of biomes. Whereas the Pampas and the Great Plains are temperate grasslands and can easily support intensive agriculture, the Llanos are a tropical savanna, a more delicate biome that is much harder to cultivate and irrigate. In short, the perennial dreams about capitalizing on the richness of the Llanos may not have been built on a factual foundation.

Such criticisms do not detract from the fundamental utility of this book to Colombianists. In fact, any lacunae in this work should inspire more scholars to follow in the footsteps of pioneering historians like Rausch in continuing to study the Llanos and other historically marginalized Colombian regions.