The HARNESS MAKER’S DREAM

Nathan Kallison and the

Rise of South Texas

Nick Kotz

A joint project of the Center for Texas Studies at TCU and TCU Press

Fort Worth, Texas
CONTENTS

FOREWORD./.
INTRODUCTION / 1

ONE: To Freedom / 5
TWO: Chicago / 17
THREE: Deep in the Heart / 37
FOUR: The Land / 55
FIVE: Tradition! / 65
SIX: War, Peace, and Prosperity / 89
SEVEN: The Great Depression / 109
EIGHT: The Ol’ Trader / 137
NINE: World War II: The Texas Home Front / 151
TEN: The Best Years / 167
ELEVEN: The Brothers Kallison / 181
TWELVE: All in the Family / 199
THIRTEEN: No Business for Sissies / 215
FOURTEEN: Changing Times / 237
EPILOGUE / 253
AUTHOR’S NOTE: The Questions We Never Asked / 257

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS / 267
CHRONOLOGY / 271
NOTES / 285
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY / 316
INDEX / 321
THE CENTER FOR TEXAS STUDIES at TCU was delighted when approached about partnering with the TCU Press to publish Pulitzer-prize winning journalist Nick Kotz's outstanding story of an immigrant's move to and life in Texas in the early twentieth century. The Center's mission is to celebrate all that makes Texas distinctive. Nathan Kallison is among the distinguished individuals—from Native Americans to the "Old 800" and many others who followed—who have helped to form the culture of honor, entrepreneurship, courage, and resilience that characterize the State of Texas. They are at the heart of what we celebrate.

I wish to thank those many organizations and individuals who have contributed to the support of the Center for Texas Studies, in particular the Burnett Foundation, the Lowe Foundation, the Jane and John Justin Foundation, and the Summerlee Foundation. Without their sponsorship, worthy projects that celebrate Texas would not be possible.

—Mary L. Volcansek
Executive Director
INTRODUCTION

In the dark of night, Nathan Kallison embraced his widowed mother and, for the last time, slipped away from their village in Czarist Russia. At the age of seventeen, he was heading out alone—first by foot, then oxcart, and finally on a train over thirteen hundred miles of hostile land—to board a ship in the German port of Bremen. That journey began in 1890. It would take him over an ocean and halfway across another continent to a future he never could have imagined, into a century where ideas and honest labor might grow fortunes and where dreams might become dynasties. He would find his family’s own in Texas—almost a country within a country.

This is a story of twentieth-century America and the vast state of Texas, and a boy who fled the marauding Cossacks to build a new life there. In 1899, seeking a better future for their family, Nathan Kallison and his young wife Anna then moved from Chicago, their first home in the New World, to San Antonio, just as that Wild West city on the edge of Texas Hill Country was beginning to reinvent itself. Like San Antonio, the home he grew to love, Nathan, too, reinvented himself. The young immigrant became an innovative city retailer and a path-breaking pioneer rancher—the latter a rarity among Jews in America at the time.

His small and unlikely empire began with his skill as a harness maker, and then, propelled by his vision and hard work, developed into a dynamic and unusual dual enterprise: Kallison’s store—which he built into the largest farm and ranch supply business in the Southwest—and Kallison Ranch, where he demonstrated to a suspicious and tradition-bound countryside the latest scientific methods in modern agriculture.
Nathan Kallison’s path in his adopted country was shaped by bitter memories of the Russia he had escaped—a society where landless Jews and peasants were pitted against each other as each group struggled to survive under autocratic landowners and the iron thumb of the czar. In South Texas, this young immigrant saw an opportunity to create a different kind of society—one in which independent farmers and ranchers who had clashed bitterly over land use lived harmoniously with each other, as well as with those in the cities. Nathan believed that he and his neighbors could prosper together as they cooperatively planted their futures on the edge of an already shrinking western frontier—a prospect that offered great opportunities for those who were bold, hardworking, and wise enough to seize them. He saw, too, a progressive government to be embraced, not feared—one that could be a partner with private enterprise in developing the Southwest. It was a giant leap of faith. He was surrounded by many ready to “circle their wagons” against newcomers with new ideas, just as their pioneer ancestors had closed ranks against attackers.

Kallison and the wiser of his neighbors prospered as they embraced new ways to farm the land. In his store, he displayed the supplies and equipment with which they improved their livelihoods. With an uncanny sense of the future, Nathan took risks—always a step or two ahead of the fast-changing currents and trends in American commerce. More than fifty years before giant “box-store” discounters changed the retail landscape, he created a unique enterprise that offered, under one roof and at rock-bottom prices, a diverse inventory designed to meet all the needs of rural Texans—not only for their ranching and farming operations but for their homes and lives as well.

Building his family’s future, Nathan never forgot his humble roots nor lost his moral compass. Embracing the ethical teachings of Judaism, he nevertheless abandoned the orthodox rituals he had practiced in his youth. Although he was freed from the virulent anti-Semitism of Czar Alexander III’s Russia, in Texas he had to overcome a more subtle but just as deeply ingrained prejudice—not only
against Jews, but also toward many other recent immigrants from Eastern Europe and Mexico.

Over the first two-thirds of the twentieth century, Kallison’s family enterprises played significant roles in the rise of South Texas and its agribusiness economy, as well as in the civic, cultural, philanthropic, political, and religious affairs of their community and region. Nathan’s two sons would carry his vision forward and expand on it: Morris, a crusader-developer for downtown commercial revival as well as a political kingmaker; and Perry, the relentless champion of the family farmer—a rancher, humanitarian, and dedicated conservationist whose early morning radio program won him praise as “the Voice of South Texas.”

The Kallisons’ saga is but a single thread woven into the fabric of a country that called itself “a nation of immigrants.” Nathan was only one of twenty-three million men, women, and children—two million of them Jews from Russia and Eastern Europe—who surged into the United States from 1880 through 1920, adding muscle and brainpower to the nation’s explosive growth during an industrial age that spawned burgeoning factories, steel mills, railroads, and unheard-of wealth. The story of the Kallisons’ rise weaves its way into the warp and woof of the entire twentieth century—through wars and peace-time, flood and drought, boom and bust. The family’s influence reached beyond San Antonio to impact all of South and Central Texas.

Nathan Kallison’s dreams would be well realized and well rewarded over several generations. More than a century after the young harness maker from the Ukraine stepped off the ship, his story still resonates today as millions of new immigrants with dreams of bettering their own lives seek to become Americans.

Nick Kotz

June 1, 2013

Broad Run, Virginia