

SAN ANTONIO TALK

We do not have to travel very far west of San Antonio to find the desert southwest terrain of the United States. Part of that terrain includes isolated hills or mountains, with little or no plant life. The steep, rocky sides of these little mountains seldom have paths that horses or vehicles can use. Access to the top requires a lot of climbing, often with ropes. The tops of these little mountains look like table tops; they look like they have been flattened out by the big bulldozer in the sky.

Do you know the terrain I am talking about? If so, what do you call it, or them? highlands? Flat lands? High, flat lands?

Hmm. Well, the most popular term in Texas, *high, flat lands*, sort of gives people away. That term exists almost exclusively in east and northeast Texas. That's a Dallas, Fort Worth word; an Austin word; a Houston word; a Tyler, Longview, Marshall word.

Other terms used in Texas (yes, even by folk in east Texas) include *mesa, plateau, table land*, and *plains*.

If you envision a map of Texas and draw a line between Victoria (south of Houston) to the southeastern edge of the panhandle, that line will pretty much tell you where the term *high, flat lands* ends and where the word *mesa* starts to dominate.

San Antonio Talk definitely favors *mesa*, although our youngsters seem to favor *plateau* and our elders to favor *table land*. We have to move a bit further west, like to Ft. Stockton and that area before we hear *plains* in the talk.

I get mixed messages from the Spanish language scholars about

that word *mesa*. Clearly we English speakers have borrowed the word from Spanish. In English language dictionaries, *mesa* refers to an isolated hill or small mountain, with abrupt or steeply sloping sides, with a level top, and consisting mostly of rock and little vegetation.

Not only that but a *mesa* is smaller than a *plateau* but bigger than a *butte*. (People who create English have no pride whatsoever, we stole the words *plateau* and *butte* from Middle French speakers.),

Anyway, I just assumed that in Spanish *mesa* meant a lonely, flattopped, mountainette. Naked in the sun.

Well, apparently it does. In Europe. In European Spanish a *mesa* refers to a plateau of any size. But not in the American Spanishes. In Mexico, at least, a *mesa* refers simply to a table, a piece of furniture inside your house.

In Mexico that hunk of terrain that squats out there looking down on you as you drive by is known as a *meseta*.

Confusing a table with a mountain, in other words, marks San Antonio talk. Our east Texas friends, with their *high, flat lands*, and our Mexican neighbors, with their *meseta*, know better.

We San Antonians, however, can take some comfort, I guess, in knowing that we share this linguistic mistake, *mesa*, with the rest of the Southwest U.S. Hey, even in California.

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