

chamizal

A memorial to international cooperation and goodwill stands today on the Chamizal plain. It's strange that this should be so, for this tract of land long stood for controversy and distrust.

More than a century ago, Chamizal was cut off from Mexico when the Rio Grande changed its course between the small settlements that grew into El Paso and Ciudad Juarez. Beginning in 1895 Mexico laid formal claim to the tract, a seemingly insignificant piece of land less than 3 square kilometers (1 square mile) in extent. But the Mexican claim spawned counter-claims by the United States, and over the years the dispute became a major impasse.

To be understood, the Chamizal controversy must be placed in the historical context of U.S.-Mexico relations. The early 20th century was a time of turbulence and hot words on both sides of the border. Pumped up by an atmosphere heavy with pride and distrust, Chamizal became a symbol of disharmony—a rallying point for Mexican nationalism, a locked gate in U.S. policy. The controversy prevented the cooperative mechanisms that had solved scores of similar problems along the border from working. Not until the 1960s could the issue be reduced to the technical problem that it really was. Only then could it become a part of another kind of history along the border.

Silently paralleling the clashes and conflicts that made headlines is the quiet and undramatic, yet continuing story of many people from both sides of the border who daily come together for business, for the sharing of music, art, drama, food, and a joke or two. At Chamizal National Memorial this other, quieter history is told and played and dramatized. Artists and craftsmen display their wares and demonstrate their skills. Thus language, music, and dance become cultural bridges as strong as the concrete spans that cross the Rio Grande.

Establishing an International Boundary

A most important facet of the quiet, undramatic events concerns the history of cooperation and mutual respect along the international boundary. The first Joint Boundary Commission was formed in 1849 to survey the new boundary, the result of the Mexican War. The survey was a significant accomplishment of both nations for, besides fixing the international boundary, it gave cartographers and the maturing scientific communities of both nations information on the topography, geology, botany, zoology, and ethnology of a little-known area.

Surveying the boundary was not easy. The climate and terrain were hostile to man, beast, and the fragile instruments. The surveying parties had to penetrate deserts, mountains, and canyons that other travelers could avoid. They had to find water in a nearly waterless land. They had to supply themselves by wagon or mule from distant bases over long stretches of difficult country. They had to keep alert for

groups of Indians resentful of this invasion of their homeland and be prepared at all times to defend themselves. Despite these difficulties, Maj. William Hemsley Emory of the United States and Maj. José Salazar y Larrequi of Mexico and their parties marked the common border on maps and on land.

The Emory-Salazar surveys disclosed that the United States and Mexico faced each other

along a frontier of over 3,100 kilometers (1,900 miles). Nearly 1,100 kilometers (675 miles) was a land frontier; over 2,000 kilometers (1,248 miles) of the Rio Grande and 37 kilometers (23 miles) of the lower Colorado presented river frontiers. The river frontiers accounted for most of the boundary difficulties that plagued the United States and Mexico for more than a century. The explanation lies chiefly in the character of both rivers. The two mud-filled

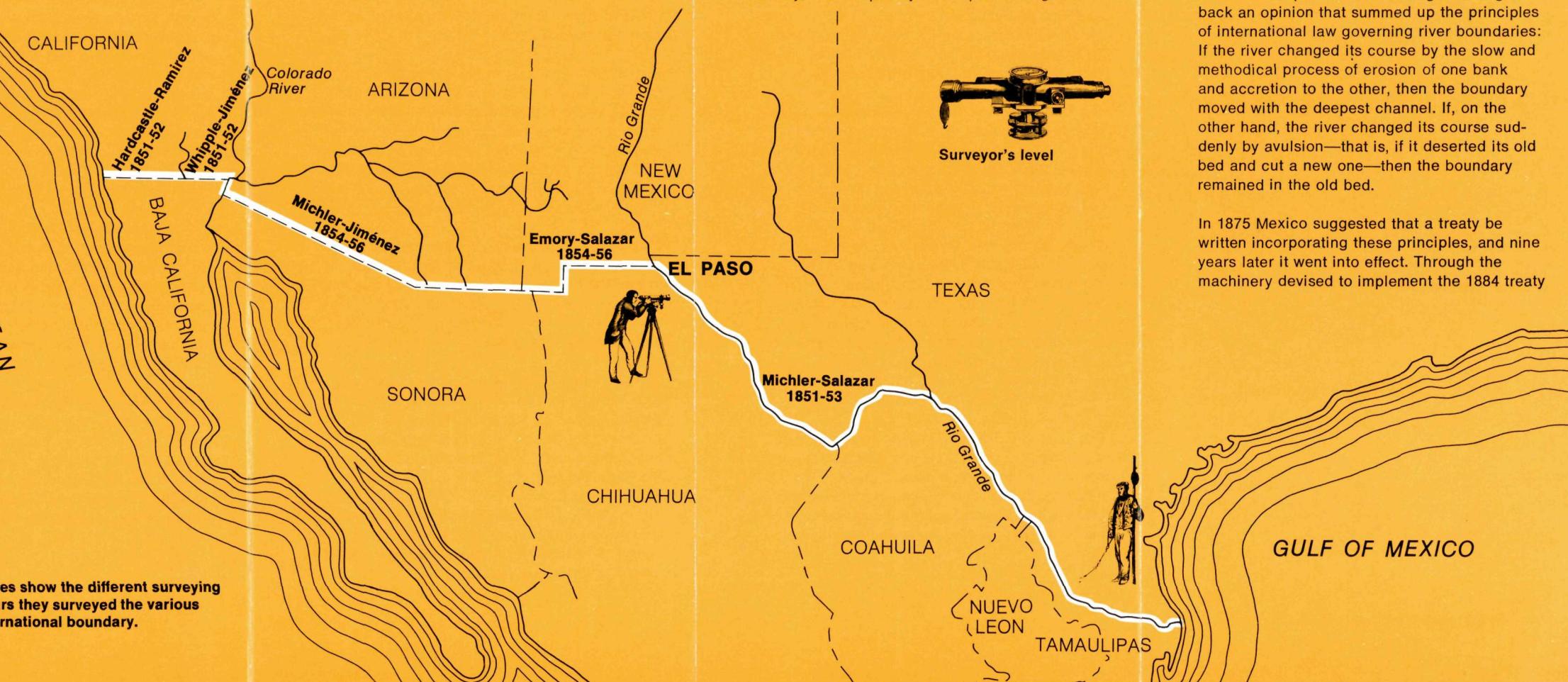
streams meandered like lazy snakes across their flood plains, changing courses and channels with every flood season. Their ever-changing courses placed the exact location of the boundary frequently in doubt, with consequent uncertainties for property owners, governmental authorities, and law enforcement officers of both nations. With the increase of population along the frontiers of Mexico and the United States in the last years of the 19th century, the complexity of the problems grew.

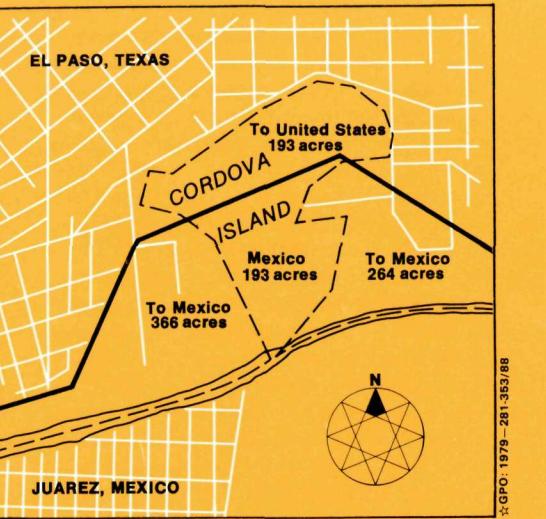


Surveyor's level

As early as 1856, when the Rio Grande still flowed through almost unpopulated country, Major Emory had glimpsed something of the troubles that could develop as more people settled on the river boundary. One of the founders of El Paso, James Wiley Magoffin, wrote to Emory that the Rio Grande threatened to change its course in El Paso Valley. What, he wanted to know, would this do to the boundary line so recently surveyed? Emory referred the question to Washington and got back an opinion that summed up the principles of international law governing river boundaries: If the river changed its course by the slow and methodical process of erosion of one bank and accretion to the other, then the boundary moved with the deepest channel. If, on the other hand, the river changed its course suddenly by avulsion—that is, if it deserted its old bed and cut a new one—then the boundary remained in the old bed.

In 1875 Mexico suggested that a treaty be written incorporating these principles, and nine years later it went into effect. Through the machinery devised to implement the 1884 treaty





The thorny problem of making a fair settlement in the Chamizal was solved by putting the Rio Grande into a concrete channel from which it cannot stray. The dotted line shows the border before the settlement, and the solid line, the present-day boundary.

For a century the boundary rivers thrust upon the United States and Mexico a wide range of complex problems that caused much international discord. The treaties that grew out of these problems were solid diplomatic achievements as were the implementing activities of

and its successors, especially the International Boundary Commission formed in 1889, both nations have gone beyond mere response to river vagaries. River rectification and flood control programs changed the Rio Grande and Colorado from rogue rivers to benefactors of the people who teem their banks. These accomplishments did not come about without difficulty. Hard bargaining enlivened the hundreds of sessions that hammered out agreements arrived at in an atmosphere of peace and understanding. And it is precisely because the problems were knotty, because the stakes were high, that this story is more fascinating and remarkable than the more dramatic disputes.

From 1889 to 1944 the International Boundary Commission quietly and carefully dealt with the problems caused by the wandering rivers. By the 1930s the solution of these problems had become almost routine and the commission began to turn its attention to the growing problem of water apportionment. The Water Treaty of 1944 transformed the commission into the International Boundary and Water Commission and clothed it with vast new powers and responsibilities, mainly to plan, supervise construction, operate and maintain three international dams and such hydroelectric power and additional flood control works as might prove desirable. To date, two dams, Falcon and Amistad, have been built.

Compounding the already complex issue was the tract known as Cordova Island, a detached part of Mexico on the north side of the Rio Grande. This "island"—the result of an early flood control effort—adjoined the east side of the Chamizal tract. With title to Chamizal clouded and Cordova projecting incongruously into El Paso, the orderly development of both cities was hampered. In 1962 Presidents John F. Kennedy and Adolfo Lopez Mateos moved to break the deadlock.

the various commissions. Although overshadowed by the more spectacular incidents of violence along the border, the spirit of international cooperation represented by these accords—largely unnoticed by most people of the two nations—established a trend that culminated in the Chamizal Treaty of 1963.

The Chamizal Problem

Chamizal's story is on two levels: One technical and legal, subject to negotiation; the other, and the more important, concerns the minds of men and the attitudes of nations.

At first Chamizal looked like a simple enough question, for the principles formalized in 1884 ought to have applied. But the testimony of old settlers and the investigations of commission engineers showed that the change in the river channel could not be definitely ascribed either to erosion or to avulsion but rather to a process that fell somewhere between the two.

This technical impasse led to prolonged negotiation, arbitration and further disagreement in the first half of the 20th century. By this time Chamizal had grown into an international issue that made the continuing technical and diplomatic negotiations fruitless.

In recognition of the 1963 settlement, Congress set aside a portion of the land acquired from Mexico to commemorate the harmonious resolution of the long-standing boundary dispute. Here the National Park Service relates the history of the international boundary, and

The two presidents directed their diplomats and engineers to develop "a practical and just solution." The result was a new concrete-lined channel for the Rio Grande that cuts through both Chamizal and Cordova. All land south of the center of this channel is now in Mexico; all to the north, in the United States.

Chamizal Commemorative Park of Mexico

Directly across the Rio Grande, the republic of the United Mexican States has established a companion park on a portion of Mexico's Chamizal land. Administered by the Federal Board of Public Works, its 283 hectares (700 acres) of handsomely landscaped grounds include formal gardens, outstanding architectural structures, and statuary. You are cordially invited and encouraged to visit the park.

Visiting the U.S. Park

The park is located in south-central metropolitan El Paso immediately adjacent to the international boundary. Enter the park from either San Marcial Street or Delta Drive. A lighted parking area is provided on the grounds. Picnicking is permitted, but there are no overnight camping facilities. The park is open year-round from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. except on days of scheduled performances, when the park is open until 11 p.m. No entrance fee is charged, but tickets are sold for some special theater performances.

Establishing the Memorial

A bilingual, uniformed employee of the National Park Service is always on duty in the visitor center and will be happy to help you in making your visit enjoyable and to provide advice on travel to other national park areas and to sections of the Southwest and Mexico.

The Park Program

The story of the boundary surveys and development of goodwill between Mexicans and Americans is told in the museum displays and by a documentary film, "This Most Singular Country." The film is shown at regular intervals throughout the day with narration alternating in English and Spanish.

Chamizal National Memorial

The park is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. The superintendent's address is 620 First City National Bank Building, 300 E. Main Drive, El Paso, TX 79901.

As the Nation's principal conservation agency, the Department of the Interior has responsibility for most of our nationally owned public lands and natural resources. This includes fostering the wisest use of our land and water resources, protecting our fish and wildlife, preserving the environmental and cultural values of our national parks and historical places, and providing for the enjoyment of life through outdoor recreation. The Department assesses our energy and mineral resources and works to assure that their development is in the best interests of all our people. The Department also has a major responsibility for American Indian reservation communities and for people who live in Island Territories under U.S. administration.

For Your Safety

Please be careful of traffic while walking across the roadways and parking areas. Also remember to be especially cautious on theater stairs; please use the handrails.