



## The Arbitration of 1911

*Arbitration: the process by which the parties to a dispute submit their differences to the judgment of an impartial group of people appointed by mutual consent (American Heritage online Dictionary).*

In 1848 the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo established the border between the United States and Mexico along the Rio Grande. However, some rivers, especially rivers that meander through the desert, shift overtime. The changing course of the Rio Grande created a nightmare in the El Paso-Ciudad Juarez area. The Chamizal tract was a tract of land owned by Pedro Ignacio Garcia, a Mexican farmer. However, in the mid to late 19th century, with the changing course of the Rio Grande, this tract of land shifted to the U.S. side of the river. Which country owned the Chamizal tract? Government officials and El Paso-Ciudad Juarez locals had been debating this question for decades, and in 1910 an ad hoc arbitration committee was created in order to answer this question once and for all.

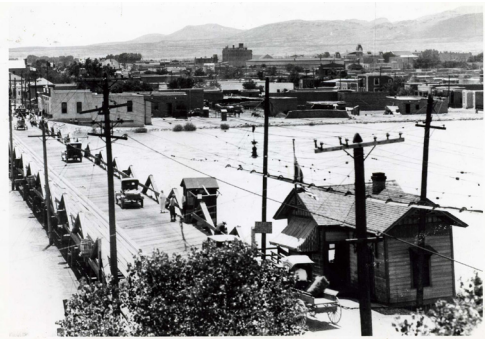
The arbitration committee consisted of three officials: a Mexican, an American, and a Canadian. These three commissioners were Fernando Beltran y Puga, Anson Mills, and Eugene Lafleur, respectively. After debating the Chamizal question, a simple democratic vote would prove whether the Chamizal tract belonged to Mexico or the United States. These three officials met in El Paso in 1911.

Let's back up for a moment to 1884. During this year, the International Boundary Commission confirmed two international laws regarding the Rio Grande and its shifting course. First, if the river shifted gradually and slowly, then the international boundary shifted with the river. Second, if the river changed course quickly, like in a flood for example, then the

international boundary would not change.

Let's fast-forward again to 1911. In the arbitration committee, the three members agreed that prior to 1864, the Rio Grande had moved slowly and gradually through the area. The Mexican and Canadian commissioners then agreed that during 1864, the river changed course rapidly mainly due to a massive flood. This meant that the two commissioners believed that the correct international boundary was the 1863 river channel. Since the Chamizal tract was on the Mexican side of the river in 1863, the Chamizal tract belonged to Mexico. U.S. commissioner Mills disagreed. The three commissioners voted on this issue. It was a two to one vote in favor of the international boundary being switched back to the 1863 course of the Rio Grande. The democratic vote of two to one meant that the majority two won, but...

Ironically, Mills, and thus the United States government, rejected the vote, claiming that it didn't meet the terms set in 1910. Although in the grand scheme of things the Chamizal tract was a small piece of land along the border, Mexico felt mistreated with the U.S. rejection. The arbitration ended in a stalemate, but later on in 1911, the U.S. wanted to renegotiate. However, at this point the Mexican Revolution had started, so Mexico obviously had more important things to deal with. Largely due to the Chamizal tract, there would be immense tension between the two nations until the 1960s.



The Chamizal Tract at the time of the arbitration  
NPS photo