

Chamizal

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Chamizal National Memorial



The Flowing Border



Along the Rio Grande, looking southeast towards El Paso and the Franklin Mountains. Here the Rio Grande serves as the border between Texas and New Mexico

before entering El Paso, where it will become the international boundary between the United States and Mexico.

In 1848, the Rio Grande/Rio Bravo was named as the boundary between the United States and Mexico by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. For the next hundred years, this border-defining river would meander, flood and retreat; changing maps, and lives, as it moved. In 1964, after over a century of dispute, the Rio Grande/Rio Bravo was permanently settled into man-made canals; thus ending the ever-shifting border. This is the story of the taming of a once wild river.

1860s



The instability of the river - its meanderings, flood plains, and seasonal dry spots - made for an unstable border. Property ownership, law enforcement jurisdiction, and government authority were questioned as the river and, consequently, the border moved. As the population grew along the border, problems grew as well.

Several attempts were made at answering these tough border questions until finally the International Boundary Commission (IBC) was formed. This commission, jointly run by Mexico and the United States, would resolve disputes and settle the border.

1890s



Early in its existence, the IBC ruled that cuts, such as the one made in the 1890s, would not change the international boundary even though the river changed courses. This 1890s cut was made to stop seasonal flooding. The upper riverway dried leaving a 400 acre borderless region of Mexico north of the river. This region was named Cordova Island as it formed a political island surrounded by the United States. Residents of borderless regions, like Cordova Island, began to feel the effect of being on the "wrong side" of the river. Law enforcement was minimal and the smuggling of illegal goods was becoming a problem, especially during the prohibition of alcohol in the '20s and '30s.

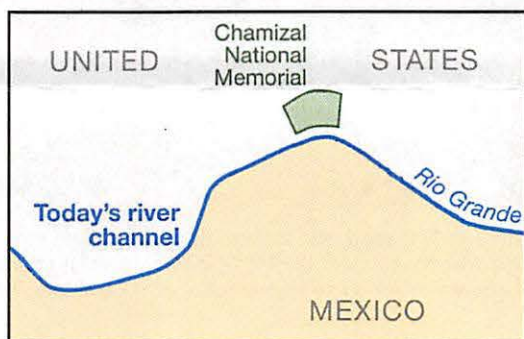


For more than 50 years, off and on, the two countries negotiated these contested areas without success, and the river continued shifting south. As El Paso and Juarez continued to grow in size and population, the need for resolution grew as well.

A solution was reached in 1963 when Presidents John F. Kennedy and Adolfo López Mateos agreed on confining the river to a concrete channel, cementing the two nations' boundary forever. The relocated river would solve the troublesome Cordova Island issue and straighten the border between the two cities.

The treaty gave the northern half of Cordova Island to the United States and land to its west and east to Mexico. For a final time, property lines and jurisdictions would be rewritten, displacing thousands of residents while simultaneously ending a century-old international dispute.

The River Channel Today



Today the river flows along a fixed course. A permanent boundary between two countries, the Rio Grande/Rio Bravo represents the friendship, the cooperation, and the peaceful resolution to a long-standing argument. No blood was shed; no lives were lost; no enemies were made.

Chamizal National Memorial stands on what was once Cordova Island as a reminder of what two nations can achieve through friendship. The site commemorates a specific chapter in America's story and tells of the taming of a once wild river.



Aerial view of Rio Grande/Rio Bravo. Ascarate Park of El Paso, Texas is visible to the left and Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, Mexico is visible to the right.

Photo by: BuffaloPundit www.flickr.com