



The Chamizal and Cordova Island Land Disputes 1911 - 1960

Not one inch of Texas for Mexico – U.S. Senator Tom Connally

Starting in the summer of 1911 and continuing until 1963, Mexico had a sour taste in its mouth. There had been an arbitration commission set up jointly by the U.S. and Mexico to resolve the Chamizal dispute once and for all. In the first months of 1911, the commission reached its verdict, but the U.S. federal government rejected it. Although a Mexican farmer by the name of Pedro Garcia had clear title to the Chamizal tract, the land was on the U.S. side of the river, so U.S. residents settled on it.

Also, just east of the Chamizal tract was another piece of Mexican land known as Cordova Island. Cordova Island was not an island but rather a “land peninsula” surrounded on three sides by the U.S. From 1864 until 1963, the Chamizal tract and Cordova Island (the two were collectively known as the Chamizal dispute) acted as thorns in the relationship between Mexico and the United States. As the essay entitled “The Rio Grande Floods” discusses the first half of these issues, this essay will discuss the issues of the Chamizal tract and Cordova Island from 1911 up until roughly 1960.

Soon after the Arbitration of 1911 failed, the dispute regarding the Chamizal tract (the dispute revolved around the question of which nation owned the tract of land) became a stalemate due to the Mexican Revolution. Mexico was too busy with war, coup d'états, and assassinations to focus on their lost land. Cordova Island, on the other

hand, had its fare share of problems in the early 20th century. Since 1899, Cordova Island had essentially been a Mexican enclave in the U.S. Starting in the 1920s and somewhat due to Prohibition, Cordova Island was a trouble spot. In 1920, alcohol was made illegal in the United States. Conveniently for booze-hungry U.S. citizens, there was a bar and nightclub, called the *Hole in the Wall*, on Mexico's Cordova Island. Being a thirty second walk from U.S. soil, the Mexican bar made unprecedented profits from U.S. citizens. This ticked off some local officials, but drinking was perfectly legal in Mexico, so they could not do anything.

The 1920's also saw the rise of drug trafficking across the border. Moreover, especially after the Immigration Act of 1924, thousands of illegal immigrants attempted to enter the “land of the free.” Signed into law by President Calvin Coolidge, the act significantly limited the number of immigrants allowed into the U.S. The act also excluded all Asians from immigrating to the U.S.

Entering the United States illegally by way of Cordova Island was relatively easy due to the fact that there was little in the way of an actual border (no fence, river, etc.). Also, the area was thick with brush that one could hide behind easily. As a result, drug traffic and illegal immigration turned Cordova Island into a “No Man's Land.” Firefights between border patrol agents and unlawful Mexicans became common. In 1930 alone seven U.S. civilians were killed on the island.



Stanton Street Bridge and the Chamizal tract, circa 1910
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Chamizal National Memorial is actually located on historic Cordova Island (not the Chamizal tract). In the 1920s and 30s, some people claimed that Cordova Island was the most dangerous spot along the entire 2,000 mile long U.S.-Mexico border.

Raymond Stover, a journalist for the El Paso Times, reiterates these points in an article he wrote in 1930:

“No Mans Land. To the soldier who fought in France [in World War I] that name recalls battle-scarred fields over which he waded in mud and blood ankle deep in a fight against German imperialism. To the immigration border patrolman and the mounted customs officer it is a name to be thought of as the bloodiest section of the entire United States-Mexican border. . . They think of their brother officers who have fallen before smuggler bullets, and of the countless smugglers who have forfeited their lives in vain attempts to cross the international border with liquor, narcotics, and aliens from Cordova Island (The El Paso Times: “No Man’s Land Cordova Island, Smuggler Hotbed,” December 30, 1930).”

Recall that the other thorny issue politicians and civilians on both sides of the border were dealing with was the Chamizal tract. Pedro Garcia, the Mexican farmer who had title to the land, died in 1911. Pedro’s wife, Beatriz Azcarate de Garcia, then became the property holder. After Beatriz’ death in 1925, her son, Raymundo S. Garcia, became the official property owner of the Chamizal tract. Of course, since U.S. citizens had settled on his land, Raymundo Garcia couldn’t live or work on his property. Raymundo had a son named Pedro N. Garcia. In 1972, Pedro N. Garcia inherited the title of the Chamizal tract. The name Pedro N. Garcia will come up again at the end of the Chamizal story (specifically, in the essay entitled “The Chamizal Residents”).

With the waning down of the Mexican Revolution, the Chamizal tract became a hotbed of tension between Mexico and the United States. For Mexico, according to Joaquin Bustamante, an employee of the International Boundary and Water Commission (IBWC) Mexican Sector from 1944-1985, the Chamizal issue was mainly a matter of pride.

Mexicans “felt that the land had been legally adjudicated to them by the Arbitration of 1911,” and they were getting the raw end of the deal (Interview with Michelle L. Gomilla, Chamizal Oral History Project, UTEP, April 12, 1994). Mexico wanted the Chamizal tract back; this is why the issue was brought to the attention of every U.S. president from 1911 to 1963.

In 1932, under the Herbert Hoover administration, the U.S. offered to buy the Chamizal tract in a strange bargain deal. The Mexican government owed 1.4 million dollars to the Roman Catholic Church of California (the Pious Fund Controversy). The U.S. offered to wave this payment if it could have clear title to the Chamizal. But Mexico remembered that it had lost more than half of its country to the United States in the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, and it did not want to give up any more land. With this in mind, Mexico said no to the deal.

It should be noted that throughout the era there were many Texans who adamantly opposed giving the Chamizal tract back to Mexico. Tom Connally, a Senator from Texas and also the Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee from 1941 to 1947 and from 1949 to 1953, was at the forefront of this group. Joseph F. Friedkin, the U.S. Commissioner for the IBWC at the time of the Chamizal Treaty, remembered Connally’s famous saying which he repeatedly declared: “not one inch of Texas for Mexico (Chamizal Oral History Project, April 6, 1994).”

In 1954, Senator Lyndon Baines Johnson (LBJ) of Texas introduced legislation to form the Special Chamizal Advisory Board. Johnson picked the recently retired IBWC Commissioner, Lawrence Lawson, to be the chairman. LBJ also wrote a letter to President Eisenhower stating that the Chamizal dispute needed to be peacefully settled. Unfortunately, Johnson’s legislation did not pass,



Cordova Island, circa 1960. Why does the island look like an easy place for drug traffic and illegal immigration?

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nor did his note to Eisenhower persuade the president to take action in ending the Chamizal dispute. Nevertheless, history would show a decade later that Texas's very own LBJ would play a significant part in resolving the Chamizal dispute.

By 1960, the Chamizal dispute was in its 96th year. The Chamizal tract itself had 5,600 U.S. citizens residing on it. Cordova Island was still a geographical oddity—it was a

Mexican tract of land surrounded on three sides by U.S. soil. In just a few years, the lives of the residents and business owners of the Chamizal tract and Cordova Island would change forever. The land itself would change forever. Most importantly, the Chamizal tract and Cordova Island disputes would be solved forever. However, in 1960, there was still one question that remained: would the Chamizal dispute be solved by bloodshed and war or by diplomacy and peace?



Lyndon Baines Johnson tried to get the Chamizal dispute settled when he was a U.S. Senator in the 1950s
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