

El Chamizal

Profile of a Displaced Hispano Community

On a sultry summer's morning in June 1962, Air Force One touched down on the runway of Mexico City's international airport. At precisely 11:00 a.m., the youthful President John F. Kennedy, accompanied by his charismatic wife, Jacqueline, and their entourage of American congressional and foreign service dignitaries, acknowledged the largest crowd of Mexican citizenry ever before assembled to welcome a foreign head of state. In greeting President Adolfo López Mateos, Kennedy endeared himself to the enthusiastic crowd saying: "We are both children of revolution, and it is my hope that the spirit of our revolution in the United States is as alive today in our country as is the spirit of your revolution here in Mexico." Within minutes of his arrival, John Kennedy had validated the single most important socio-political event in Mexico's history.

With every deliberate phrase, Kennedy was determined to win the affection of the Mexican people as well as the admiration of their national leaders. During the next 48 hours, the American President aimed to resolve for all time long standing diplomatic differences between the two countries. Foremost among these issues was the century-long problem of *el chamizal*, a political no-man's-land whose miniscule landmass shifted between U.S. and Mexican jurisdiction with each erratic meandering of the Rio Grande. Since 1895, when Pedro Ignacio García, a resident of Ciudad Juárez and one of many landholders in the brush-ridden strip of territory known locally as *el chamizal*, filed his law suit against the United States, the two nations had exhausted decades adjudicating the issue with no concrete resolution. When the Kennedys arrived in Mexico City on June 29, 1962, the infamous Chamizal controversy represented a discordant note in the effort by the neighboring countries to harmoniously coexist.

Behind the enormous hand-hewn doors of the Presidential Palace, John Kennedy and Adolfo López Mateos pledged to resolve the nagging border controversy through formal diplomatic channels. On August 29, 1963, slightly more than one year after the official joint communique was issued in Mexico City, members of both foreign ministries drafted the Chamizal Convention, which

became effective with President Lyndon B. Johnson's signature on December 20.

Under the terms of the Convention, territorial disputes resulting from the erratic flow of the Rio Grande would be forever resolved. The river would soon flow through a man-made concrete channel running 4.3 miles between El Paso and Ciudad Juárez. Affected by this re-channelization, Cordova Island, a small outcropping of land lying immediately east of the disputed territory would be divided equally between Mexico and the United States, each receiving 193 acres. To further compensate Mexico, the United States relinquished two parcels of land fronting the new river channel. These tracts, comprising the zone formerly known as *el chamizal*, totaled 366 acres and 264 acres, or roughly a net gain to Mexico of 437 acres.

All of the stipulations listed in the Chamizal Convention of 1963 were subject to the endorsement of the State of Texas and the City of El Paso. When Pedro Ignacio García filed his claim against the United States in November 1895, the Chamizal was scarcely more than windswept brushland housing a handful of ill-kept farms and hovels. By the time of the international accord, however, the once desolate wasteland comprised several city blocks of downtown El Paso and was home to more than 5,600 predominantly Hispano residents. For this reason, no American diplomatic agreement to date required such intensive consultation with city and state officials before its adoption.

Seizing the opportunity to gain some concessions from Washington for their acceptance of the treaty, El Paso city planners proposed the construction of a national memorial park on Cordova Island as one feature of a more comprehensive civic improvements program. The projected cost to establish the 55-acre memorial park, to channelize the Rio Grande, to construct a four-lane, high-speed "border highway" around the city, and to resettle 5,000-plus residents of the so-called Chamizal Zone in other El Paso neighborhoods, was a staggering \$44.3 million dollars! Despite the cost, President Johnson authorized the International Boundary and Water Commission (IBWC) to initiate the Chamizal Resettlement Program in January 1965.

With the stroke of a pen, a century-old Hispano community was irrevocably altered. The arrival of the railroad to El Paso in 1881 and the city's subsequent industrialization, had lured thousands of Mexican immigrants across the Rio Grande to take up residence in neighborhoods that El Pasoans collectively dubbed "Little Chihuahua." This Hispano barrio, which extended south to north from eleventh avenue to present Paisano Drive, and west to east from Santa Fe Street to San Marcial—adjacent to present Chamizal National Memorial—was in fact several neighborhoods comprising the Chamizal Zone.

President Lyndon B. Johnson and President Adolfo López Mateos unveil new U.S.-Mexico boundary marker at Chamizal, El Paso, Texas, September 25, 1964. Courtesy Chamizal National Memorial.



Within the zone's familiar parameters, thousands of Spanish-speaking residents maintained their humble but neatly manicured homes, attended local schools and churches, shopped in open markets reminiscent of their native Mexico, and found dependable work in well-established commercial and industrial outlets such as: Ziegler's Cattle Company and Stockyards, Peyton Packing Company, Imperial Furniture Company, 3-V Cola Bottling Company, Western GMC Trucking, and the American Smelting and Refining Company. According to one sociological profile of the community, the typical Chamizal resident had lived in the same domicile since childhood, spoke mostly Spanish, lacked a high school education, and supported a nuclear family of four plus one or both parents.

Citizen response to the federal mandate to sell their homes and relocate to different neighborhoods was one of initial shock, deep resentment, and to a lesser degree open hostility. Many of the

homes, albeit modest, were paid for and occupied by senior citizens, who trembled at the prospect of assuming new home mortgages. More disturbing, however, was the potential social disruption resulting from their removal to unfamiliar parishes, schools, and places of employment. Bound by the mandate set forth in the international accord of 1963, the IBWC accomplished its monumental task in less than two years.

Placed in the context of its time, public resentment toward the resettlement of Chamizal citizens seemed justified. Viewed in retrospect, however, the initial trauma caused by relocation resulted in long-term benefits to many of the former Hispano inhabitants of this culturally diverse western city. When questioned about the impact of relocation to other parts of the city, descendants of uprooted Chamizal families responded in more forgiving terms than their parents did. Today, many of them view the re-settlement ultimately as a boon to their own upward social and economic mobility. Without the imposition of the federal mandate, some argued, opportunities for Hispano families to buy homes in predominantly middle-class neighborhoods or educate their children in modernized schools may likely never have occurred. As a result, a new generation of El Paso's doctors, lawyers, accountants, and other professionals are descended from relocated Chamizal families. They, at least, appear to have benefitted from the government's implementation of the Chamizal Convention. Perhaps inadvertently, the Chamizal Treaty imposed a measure of social integration upon the Southwest border community that presaged the Civil Rights Movement that followed later.

An equally significant legacy of the international agreement is Chamizal National Memorial, an urban cultural park that services the needs of El Paso's bilingual-bicultural constituency. Established to commemorate the peaceful resolution of the contentious boundary dispute, the park represents a monument to friendship and international goodwill along the U.S.-Mexico frontier. Each year thousands of visitors from both sides of the international border converge upon the national park to enjoy music, visual arts, stage performances, and outdoor activities that have during the past quarter-century formed a cultural bridge across the indomitable Rio Grande.

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