



IV Press documents life on the border for 100 years

By AARON CLAVERIE, Staff Writer

A tired and thirsty member of an expedition party trekking through Valle del Diablo collapses in the shadow of Mount Signal...

Teams of workers with sunburned forearms and necks move earth south of Bond's Corner, tapping the Rio Colorado, bringing water to the desert.

The sign spanning Heffernan Road bearing the words "United States" is erected.

Hollywood celebrities in Packards with white-wall tires and chrome bumpers drive across to drink legally during Prohibition.

A quinceañera is staged in Holtville uniting a family that shares ancestry on both sides of the border. A fedora-wearing photographer, holding a strobe flash, takes a family picture.

As a newsreel announcer announces the end of the World War II, a theater in El Centro full of people from two countries applauds.

Workers with hair to their shoulders return "home" to Mexicali after finding out they are no longer welcome in the fields they harvested.

Fiestas are celebrated to honor Cinco de Mayo and partygoers in Heber dance to the strains of ABBA and Santana.

Teenage boys in Camaro IROCs drive across to drink legally during spring break as their dates lean out the window of the car waving to friends.

Agents near Seeley can do nothing but wave as a family, holding hands, floats together up the New River

The new Port of Entry is opened east of Calexico and seven years of bi-national cooperation is celebrated with a grand ceremony.

For 150 years a valley has been divided into two countries by the international border.

The Imperial Valley Press has told the story of the border for 100 of those years.

Sometimes the story is heartwarming: A Border Patrol agent saves the life of a man wandering through the mountains near Ocotillo.

Sometimes the story is tragic: Men who tried to cross the All-American Canal are found hours later washed up along its banks.

We've run features on the people who live and work near the border and published editorials or letters concerning immigration policy.

Whatever the story, the constant is an imaginary line; borne of a compromise between two countries.

This is the story of how the line that runs from the Rio Colorado, across the division line between Upper and Lower California to the Pacific Ocean was created, how it has affected the lives of Imperial Valley residents for the past 100 years and how it will affect their lives for the next 100.

The story will be told by those who wrote the treaties, the historians who chronicled the Mexican-American War, local professors and the current consul of Mexico in Calexico, Rita Vargas Torregrosa.

Torregrosa taught for 14 years in Mexico City on the history of Mexico-U.S. relations and since 1991 has focused her attention specifically on international border issues as the coordinator for the Mexican side and consul in Calexico for the past three years.

The Past

Remember the Alamo.

The history of the 1,800-mile border between Mexico and the United States has its roots in Texas.

In 1836 Texas declared independence from Mexico after William Travis' forces were routed at the Alamo in San Antonio.

After a series of skirmishes the war for Texan independence was won at the Battle of San Jacinto.

"Mexico hated losing Texas," according to Cecilia Barba, a Mexican history teacher at Imperial Valley College.

While Mexico was embarrassed after the loss, she said the country made no attempt to regain the new Republic of Texas because there was an understanding that Mexico would be "OK" with Texas independence as long as it didn't become part of the U.S.

Nine years later, in an act of Congress on March 1845, Texas was annexed and added to the union. This was considered "the equivalent to a declaration of war by Mexico," according to the Dictionary of American History.

Carlos Herrera, a history professor at San Diego State University-Imperial Valley campus, explained why Mexico considered the annexation of Texas a “declaration of war.”

“Mexico liked the idea of Texas being a buffer zone between the United States and Mexico,” Herrera said.

He said Mexico was cognizant and wary of the United States’ “manifest destiny” and felt the annexation of Texas was a foreboding “sign of things to come.”

Manifest destiny for the United States was the explanation that leaders and citizens of the country use to this day to justify addition of land and territory at the expense of indigenous people, according to Herrera.

Mexico was worried the United States wouldn’t stop with Texas but would go farther south and attempt to acquire the rich deposits of silver in northern Mexico.

In December 1845 the U.S. added even more land when it annexed an area between the Nueces and del Norte rivers.

This was another step south for the United States and this time Mexico stepped up to meet the U.S.

The land between the rivers had been leased to Sam Austin by the Mexican government so he could build a settlement.

Herrera said Austin had agreed to learn Spanish and convert to Catholicism, among other things.

The land he settled on was a rich agricultural area and prized by both countries, according to Barba.

When the Mexican government made the agreement with Austin, it didn’t expect the land to be summarily added to the U.S. along with the rest of Texas, Torregrosa explained.

Mexican forces were dispatched to defend the land and push the border back to the Nueces.

In response, President James K. Polk moved U.S. troops from Corpus Christi to the Texas border.

Polk explained in an address to Congress that the reason he sent troops was to prepare for a “threatened invasion of Texas by the Mexican forces.”

In that speech to Congress on May 11, 1846, Polk said, “The invasion was threatened solely because Texas had determined to annex herself to our union and under these circumstances it was plainly our duty to extend our protection over her citizens and soil.”

On April 12, 1846, Mexican forces camped near the Del Norte told the American forces to break camp within 24 hours and retire beyond the Nueces River.

Two weeks later, 63 American soldiers ventured up Rio del Norte to “ascertain whether the Mexican troops had crossed or were preparing to cross.”

The Mexican troops had crossed and killed 16 American men in a short battle, and surrounded the rest.

After hearing of this, Congress declared war.

When war was officially engaged, Polk dispatched a larger battalion of forces, enough for an invasion the Mexican mainland, in an attempt to force Mexico to surrender and sell her land.

Mexico refused to surrender and for the next two years battles were fought in Veracruz and along the Pacific coast.

In April 1847, Nicholas P. Trist, a clerk in Polk's State Department, was sent to accompany Gen. Winfield Scott's invading army.

Mexico was vulnerable. It had been weakened after two years of battles and a naval siege on the Gulf of Mexico.

As Scott's forces fought their way south of the border, Trist tried to work out an armistice in September 1847 under Polk's direction, but his offer was rejected by Mexican officials.

This forced Polk's hand.

Scott, after hard fighting on Sept. 7-11 at the battles of Molino del Rey and Chapultepec, marched into Mexico City.

After a bloody battle, the American flag waved over the Castillo de Chapultepec in Mexico City.

After the victory in Mexico City, Trist was recalled to Washington, D.C., where partisan battles were being waged over the spoils of Mexico.

He didn't go.

Milton Cantor, a professor of history at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, said Trist stayed near Mexico City working out a treaty because he "thought a peaceable end was possible."

"It was the reason Polk had sent him along with Gen. Scott, even though Scott had not requested him," Cantor said.

In the winter following the September victory, Trist worked with "Mexican moderates" in Mexico City to fashion a treaty.

On Feb. 2, 1848, in the city of Guadalupe Hidalgo, the treaty was signed.

Herrera said there were many Mexican's then and now who think Mexico should never have signed the treaty.

Barba said the reason the treaty is called "Guadalupe-Hidalgo" is because the "moderates" who signed it were ashamed and didn't want their name on it.

The history of the border is the final chapter of the war with Mexico (1846-48). But it is the final chapter only because of the work of Trist, Cantor said.

If it weren't for Trist's efforts, there might not be a border running through the Imperial Valley. The Mexican-American War could have escalated into years of bloodshed on par with the Civil War or Andrew Jackson's annihilation of Indians in the Southwest.

"Many officials in Washington, D.C., were seeking harsh terms, including annexation of all Mexico Ñ even the extinction of the Mexican people," Cantor writes in "Words That Make America Great" (1997).

While Trist had disobeyed a direct order, Polk decided against further attacks and accepted the treaty because it gave the United States what he had set out to get Ñ California.

Polk was most likely under pressure to end the war because of a burgeoning anti-war movement in the country, Herrera said.

One of the leaders of that movement was an up-and-coming politician from Illinois, Abraham Lincoln.

When the treaty was signed on Feb. 2, 1848, it added to the United States the area from Texas to California, which now includes New Mexico and Arizona and parts of Colorado, Utah, Nevada, Wyoming Ñ 1,193,061 square miles.

Polk had attempted to buy California and New Mexico in September 1845 for up to \$40 million but Mexico had refused to open negotiations.

As part of the Guadalupe-Hidalgo treaty, Mexico was given \$15 million.

Torregrosa said Mexico never got that money.

The Mexican-American War and resulting land grab is regarded by some as a dark stain on American history.

The 18th president of the United States, Ulysses S. Grant, called it the most unjust war in American history. Grant was a lieutenant in that war as a part of Scott's forces.

There are some who regard the annexation of Texas that led to the Mexican-American War, the resulting control of trillions of dollars worth of land and the completion of the United States from sea to shining sea, as the epitome of manifest destiny.

This split in opinion concerning the border exists today.

The signing of Trist's Guadalupe-Hidalgo treaty of 1848 was an attempt to heal the wound.

"The United States of America and the United Mexican States, animated by the desire to put an end to the calamities of war which unhappily exists between the two republics, and to establish upon a solid basis relations of peace and friendship which will confer reciprocal benefits upon the citizens of both and assure the concord, harmony and mutual confidence wherein the two peoples should live, as good neighbors, have for that purpose signed this treaty." Ñ introduction to the treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo.

In addition to creating the border dividing the two countries, the treaty gave Mexican citizens who found themselves living in the United States the choice whether to stay and be Americans or leave their homes behind.

If they did stay they had to prove they owned the land. For some that chose to stay this proved to be troublesome, Herrera said.

"For Californianos, or Nuevo Mexicanos, possession of the land wasn't a piece of paper. It was spiritual and tied together with your place in society and your status as a family," he said.

Barba said a large number of Mexicans packed up their possessions and left their property to return to Mexico.

This migration south added population to Tijuana, Ciudad Juarez and the area that would become Mexicali.

"When the line was drawn many towns were created," Barba said.

Herrera said the ones who stayed were the elite of the new American territories.

"They stayed because they saw the economic advantage," he said.

After everyone moved or stayed the following years were comparatively peaceful for the two countries, according to Cantor.

"The exception would be Gen. Pershing's hunt for Pancho Villa in 1916," Cantor said.

That expedition by Gen. John J. Pershing caused nationalistic flare-ups all along the border, including the Imperial Valley.

The Pioneers' Museum in Imperial has pictures of the conflict in Calexico.

Aside from that incident, the border has been a relatively peaceful part of the Imperial/Mexicali Valley's growth from a desert to an agricultural and industrial area of well over 1 million people.

For the 50 years after the treaty the border was not a big part of the lives of Imperial Valley residents because there weren't many residents.

When water arrived at the turn of the century, towns were founded and the border as we know it took shape.

Mexicali became the gateway for Mexican residents to get to Los Angeles in a direct route. Calexico grew as its sister city to the north.

During the first decades of the Imperial Valley the border was much easier to cross and citizens of both countries helped each other during droughts and plagues of boll weevils.

From 1910-20 there was a sharp increase in immigration from Mexico because of the Mexican Revolution.

Barba said this brought two distinct types of people into the U.S.

"It brought the poor, who were faced with little to no economic chances in the chaos of the revolution, and the elite, who had their belongings stripped away," Barba said.

In 1921 the United States drastically overhauled immigration policy with the passage of the Nation of Origins Act.

In the following years, activity at Ellis Island would slow to a trickle and the act, which restricted the number of immigrants from specific countries, made the border much less elastic.

In 1924 the U.S. Border Patrol was created to manage the newly enforced border. This created an influx of federal jobs that helped the Imperial Valley grow, Barba said.

Another factor in the Valley's growth during that time was Prohibition.

"That was the heyday for the Imperial Valley," Barba said.

She said people from all over the state would plan trips to the Imperial Valley to imbibe legally across the border in Mexicali.

When the Great Depression hit following the "Roaring '20s," anti-Mexican sentiment grew along with disgust for "Okies" and other immigrants to the state.

Herrera said the combination of the Depression and the Mexican Revolution would stunt Mexico's growth for decades.

During World War II, industry in Los Angeles hired millions of Mexican laborers to replace the men serving in the armed forces.

Latinos were welcomed back to the country that had persecuted them during the "Zoot Suit riots" and the Depression.

The Imperial Valley became a stop on the way to Los Angeles factories or Central California farms in the "Of Mice and Men" era of California.

After World War II, the Mexican government in cooperation with California and U.S. governments created the Bracero program, which gave workers the right to stay in the U.S. after the war and continue to work.

“It was a way to keep the development of the two countries strong after the war,” Torregrosa said.

In 1964 the program was killed.

Millions of Mexican workers were deported and border cities such as Mexicali, Tijuana and Ciudad Juarez grew to levels they could not support.

“Then you had the problem you have now,” Barba said, referring to the waves of people who try to enter the U.S. illegally.

To keep workers in Mexico, the Mexican government tried to use the end of the Bracero program to its advantage by starting maquiladoras along the border.

To give businesses incentives to move their operations from the area surrounding Mexico City to the border areas, the government gave huge tax breaks.

The policy that built the factories also made it attractive for international firms to work with Mexico.

In the 1970s and ‘80s the factories were the only thing that kept the border areas going during dire economic times, which included the collapse of PEMEX, Mexico’s national oil company, and the devaluation of the peso.

In the past decade agreements such as the North American Free Trade Agreement have helped Mexico grow stronger and brought them closer, economically and culturally, to the U.S. than ever before.

But the border continues to be a lightning rod for controversy.

Recent episodes such as the passing of Proposition 187 here in California or Pat Buchanan’s failed attempt to rally support for a Berlin Wall-esque edifice have only steeled the resolve of those who view the border as oppressive and those who would want to seal it.

The Future

“To this day Mexicans have very strong feelings about the loss of half of their country,” Barba said.

“In spite of that, the nations have worked together to make lives better for both of their citizens throughout the years, over and over again. This is a fact,” Barba said. Torregrosa thinks the U.S. and Mexico have fulfilled the promise of Trist’s treaty but the harmony and concord between the two nations goes unreported.

“No one ever talks about the efforts we have made to build bridges, to open ports of entry or to work together,” she said.

“We never talk about the cooperation and the results or the thousands of trucks that cross the border. “This is important because of the cooperation. The border should not be defined as a man dying in the desert.”

She said in the future the border won’t be known for just illegal immigration or drug busts. “It will become a dynamic border focused on trade and cooperation between the two nations,” Vargas said.

She said as border cities get bigger they will come to depend on each other more and by doing so will be forced to improve the lives of each other’s citizens regardless of the border.

Barba said the symbiotic relationship is called the “twin city” phenomenon. Barba said the entire Imperial Valley is tied to the fortunes of Mexicali, more so than it is to California or even the U.S.

This relationship works the other way as well all along the border.

Torregrosa said this relationship will only grow stronger in the coming years.

“The border is a part of our future and since we share the border we will share the responsibility of its development,” Barba said.

One of the examples she used is the electricity Mexico is sending to California and the water and gas the United States sends Mexico’s way

Another way the border will change will be in how workers are used by maquiladoras in Mexico and how workers are used by industry and agriculture in the U.S.

She envisions a relaxed policy of green cards and work visas that would allow the passage of workers across the border from either side.

Cantor agrees with her contention that the future will hold more trade and greater cooperation between the two countries.

“There is no question that President Vicente Fox is encouraging greater trade,” Cantor said.

He stopped short of saying the Mexican-American border would ever approach the relaxed nature of the Canadian-American border. Cantor thinks the relationship between the two countries will never become as fruitful as Trist envisioned.

“I doubt that simply because there is residual resentment from a great number of American citizens to welcome in Mexicans,” Cantor said.

Herrera says the reasons for this run deep into the essence of what makes a Latino a Latino and what separates that man from a European.

“The Catholicism versus Protestant split is probably one of the most significant differences,” he said.

Familial issues such as birth rate, the role of the woman in society and nature of inheritance all keep the two races separate.

This is in spite of the culturalization of Latino youths growing up with the Backstreet Boys instead of Menudo or their grandparents eating at Hometown Buffet for a break from traditional comida.

Barba agrees the two cultures will never fully mesh but says that dynamic is not particular to the border.

She said the issues along the border are misconstrued as Anglo versus Latino.

“It’s not Anglo/Mexican. It’s the haves and the have-nots.”

She gave examples of areas all throughout the world that have the same border issues the U.S. and Mexico address.

“In Spain, Africans try to swim across the Mediterranean Sea like the immigrants try to swim over the canals here.

“Every night on the news there would be reports of ‘survivors’ being pulled from the sea and then stories of the ones that didn’t make it,” she said.

She wishes things didn’t have to be this way but said the reason is corruption that she calls “endemic.”

“When you have a police officer making \$300 a month, how do you expect him to make ends meet and support his family?”

Herrera says the Mexican Revolution and the damage that 10-year war inflicted still reverberates throughout Mexican society.

He said it has created a society that is accepting of a level of corruption that other societies might not accept and a society that isn't designed for economic success.

That could change, though, and if it does it will be because women will have made the change. “Right now the role of a woman is changing in a Latino household. As women go out and work and support themselves, the whole model of the traditional Catholic family that Mexican society is built on fundamentally changes,” Herrera said.

As those mores change it might be possible for the two cultures to work together and become more “American.”

“My father used to tell me a story about a man he knew who would tell him, ‘You know what the problem is with your people? ‘You’re not American.’”

Herrera said that statement bothered him more than just because of the surface nationalistic bravado.

He feels “American” is more than a culture or a border or a race.

“It’s spiritual and encompasses all of the ideals of freedom and equality and justice that the United States was founded on.”

Herrera said as long as the United States stands for economic opportunity, freedom and all of the things that make the country great, the border will not be a boundary dividing the nation from Mexico.

“It will be an organic part of the lives of the people that live near it and the people that want to cross will always find a way.”