

The Strange Case of Rio Rico

U.S. citizens once cut off from their country by change in course of river

By RODA GRUBB

For 10 cents, anyone could cross the two-lane, 260-foot suspension bridge A.Y. Baker and Joe Pate (B&P Bridge Company) built in 1928 (according to Bridgemeister.com) to profit from U.S. prohibition. Linking the now nearly-forgotten towns of Rio Rico, on the south end of the bridge, and Thayer, Texas, crossing the bridge across the Rio Grande meant the traveler could enjoy gambling, a dog track, cantinas and bordellos. There was even a small church built at the town square.

"The story goes, in one year they paid back the bridge completely on that 10-cent fee. That's how many people went over there," said Laurier McDonald, retired Edinburg attorney and local historian. "That was back in the prohibition days."

It was the 1930s and prohibition was in full force. For the likes of Al Capone (rumored, but never substantiated to have visited) this was a haven. Visitors would traverse the bridge in all their finery for a day of fun, food and firewater. At the end of the day, they would cross the bridge again to stay along the north side of the Rio Grande to await the next day - to do it all over again.

Ironically, Rio Rico was manned by a Mexican policeman, its schools were maintained by the Republic of Mexico as were their roads. With the residents of the area abiding by Mexican conscription laws effective in their area. Yet, it was part of the United States of America. However, no one seemed to remember that little fact.

Back in 1904, the railroad had come to town, and the great alluvial soil from the Rio Grande combined with the climate of the Valley to produce a great draw to the area - *anything* could grow here.

There was just one little thing called "water" which caused great concern. Afraid of not getting enough of this liquid elixir for the land, the American Rio Grande Land and Irrigation Company, formed by a collected group of St. Louis capitalists, set out to solve the problem.

In building their pumping station from 1906 to 1907 east of Mercedes, they were concerned about the curved butternut squash shaped bend in the river. Araid a flood would move the course of the river up to a mile away from their pumps, they decided to take the matter into their own hands.

Legally nothing could be done, according to the Treaty of Guadalupe stating the main Rio Grande river bed as the Mexico-U.S. boundary. Frequent natural

changes in the river caused the Treaty of 1884 to be written, clarifying only the natural changes causing river diversions to be recognized.

Undercover of darkness, using dynamite, they blasted through a piece of land they owned, changing the course of the river - cutting across the neck of that squash and cutting off a 419-acre piece of the U.S. - the El Horcon Tract - home to some farms. In effect, the company straightened out the river and there was no going back.

Alas for Felipe Cantu. He went to bed with water handy for his cattle but awoke with an empty riverbed. And he was not happy about it.

Paying out over \$10,000 in fines (according to a San Antonio Express-News article of June 20, 2004) to various lawsuits, the company was also ordered to pay for markers to show the United States boundary.

"They paid the money for the markers but never authorized the additional money

to actually go out and place the markers," said McDonald. A simple \$200 would have placed those markers, later saving the government millions in law costs.

Eventually the Horcon Tract was forgotten and Mexico took over the governing of the area since it was south of the Rio Grande.

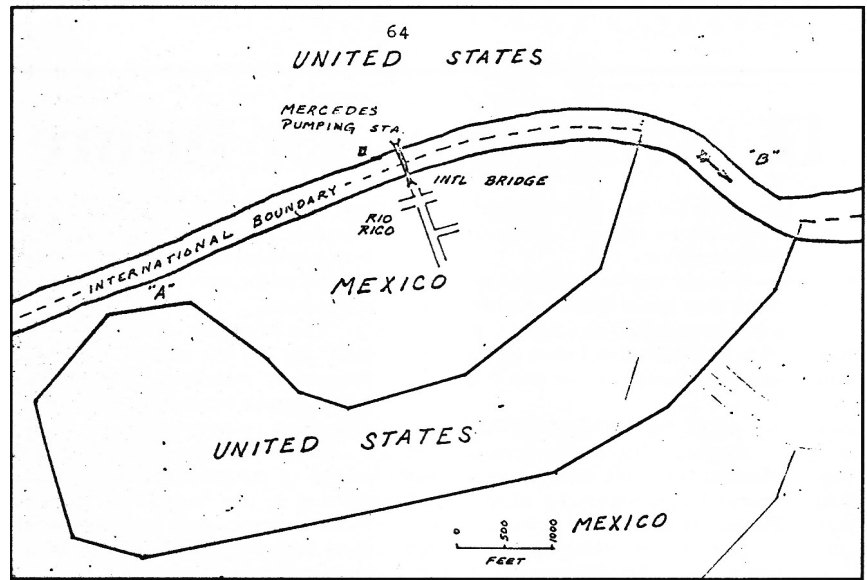
After the bridge was built in 1928, a year later Rio Rico was founded in Mexico, but several floods forced the town to move until it was on a portion of the El Horcon Tract - Texas soil. The town's resort status plummeted at the end of prohibition in the mid-'30s. When a storm washed away the bridge in 1941, the town became just another small border town.

"I remember my grandma would tell me that after the bridge was destroyed, they had a chalan - a hand-pulled ferry - to carry people across," said Joe Martinez, whose grandparents owned land north of the river and Rio Rico. The ferry went out of operation in 1946 when a pontoon bridge was constructed. This proved to be unsuccessful and the current bridge into Nuevo Progreso was begun in 1951, shutting off Rio Rico from the U.S.

All was quiet until 1967 when James E. Hill Jr. was writing a scholarly treatise and stumbled upon the forgotten El Horcon Tract. Calling the tax-assessor of Hidalgo County, Hill asked if they were collecting taxes on the Texas land.

He was told they weren't since the county had no control of Rio Rico because it was south of the river, Mexico territory. Not willing to give it up, Hill went on to Mexico City for a seminar on geography and brought up the land question.

"The Mexican government was perturbed about it, saying Texas is just trying to steal more land from us," said McDonald, recalling the story.



Map from the thesis of Stephen Jay Phelps, El Horcon, 1983.

Though the residents of Rio Rico were nicknamed the Lost Americans, the Forgotten Americans, nothing more was done until Homero Cantu Trevino entered the picture, walking into McDonald's law office to inquire about immigration papers. As fate would have it, McDonald had been talking to the County Tax Assessor and knew of the stories of Rio Rico and the Horcon Tract.

When Cantu stated his birthplace as Rio Rico, McDonald's interest was piqued.

"I had enough information and said, 'As far as I'm concerned, based on what you told me, you're an American citizen,'" McDonald said.

Typing up a signed letter with that information, a happy Cantu was sent on his way. Then came the phone call.

"I have a problem," said Cantu, on the other end of the phone. "The Border Patrol have me."

"Did you show them that letter I gave you?" said McDonald.

"Yes."

"What did they do?"

"They tore it up," Cantu said, talking from a detention facility.

When the dust finally settled, the results were in. In 1970, the U.S. ceded the territory to Mexico in the Boundary Treaty of 1970, the American-Mexican Treaty Act of October 25, 1972 authorized the U.S.'s participation and the handover to Mexico took place in 1977. Cantu was declared an American Citizen by Interim Decision No. 2748 in Hidalgo County with McDonald representing Cantu.

At the announcement of Rio Rico being American soil from 1906 to 1972, Rio Rico became a virtual ghost town overnight as residents flocked to the U.S. to gain their rightful citizenship. From around the world, non-Americans called, claiming Rio Rico as their birthplace hoping for that elusive U.S. citizenship. McDonald helped over 250 claim their legal rights as Americans.

"The Lost Americans have been found," declared McDonald.

If only the land and irrigation company had paid the \$200 for those silly little markers - copious amounts of time and money would have been saved.

Oh, yes... in 1978, Hidalgo County received a check in the amount of \$7,873 for back taxes for Rio Rico.