

## The Banco Monuments and the Rio Grand When the River and the Border Merged



PICTURE 1: REFERENCE POINT (RP) MARKER, MARK L. HOWE

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Water - is a source of critical need by all living entities that is sometimes taken for granted. A river is one course where water flows from higher elevation and where it ends in the ocean. However, it can likewise be used as a demarcation line for an international border between two formerly opposing countries to establish a peaceful relationship. A land border is easy to resolve as it is fixed and set in place, however, a fluvial border can move from many factors including human endeavors but generally it is by nature itself. The questions we are examining in this article is how an established and permanent border by international treaty, can change and how do the countries whose border this is resolve what nature dictates? How can a new border be reestablished and how do the countries complete this without either losing their sovereign land? This scenario is what happened between the United States and Mexico along the Rio Grande/Rio Bravo from 1848 up to 1970 when a new treaty was established dealing with these issues (IBWC, 2023a-b).

As a historian, I find many interesting and unpublished maps, photos, monographs, and reports of the International Boundary Commission (IBC) as part of my position and research. At the United States Section, International Boundary and Water Commission (USIBWC), my occupation is in Cultural Resources, History, Environmental and Archeology. In 2021, I was in our vault at American Dam in El Paso, Texas and found old 3x5 inch negatives pertaining to many different projects and events of the IBC. They were in disarray, but I collected and scanned them to try to find where, when, and what projects they belonged to. Some of these negatives were of the Bancos and the work completed during the IBC period (pre-1944) of which have never been seen before or published. These negatives are about the early days of the Commission and the important work completed on both sides of the border and together by each section of the IBC.

The IBC was the first name of today's International Boundary and Water Commission (IBWC), a binational Commission set as a formal Commission in 1889 composed of American and Mexican sections (Howe, 2020; IBWC 2023a-b; Pool and Howe, 2023). On February 3,

continued on page 60 <sup>iii</sup>

## « Banco

continued from page 59

1944, the name was officially changed to the IBWC under the Water Treaty (IBWC 2023a-b). However, before the name change the IBC had completed a multitude of important projects on both sides of the Rio Grande River before, during, and after the Great Depression of the 1930s (Howe 2015; Pool and Howe, 2023). One important project based on one IBC treaty that people today do not know about is the Convention for the Elimination of the Bancos in the Rio Grande in 1905 (IBC, 1910; NPS 2023a).

### The Fluvial Border

After the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo ended the United States – Mexican War in 1848, the international border for the two countries had to be formally established (USIBWC, 2023a). The river border was not so simple. The Rio Grande, as known in the United States (U.S.), and the Rio Bravo as it is still known in Mexico tended to seasonally migrate. This migration changed the international border but also the lives of those along the border. Conversely, the new land border near present day Las Cruces, New Mexico on the Rio Grande was initiated west from here as dictated under the Treaty. This continued to the first branch of the Gila River, following to the Colorado River and then on land and ending at the Pacific Ocean (USIBWC, 2023b). However, the western land boundary was later brought south to present day El Paso, Texas with the Gadsden Purchase / Treaty of 1853 (USIBWC 2023b). The treaty moved the border south to its present land boundary location at El Paso, Texas, Sunland Park, New Mexico and Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua, Mexico, in a nexus point in the middle of the deepest channel of the Rio Grande (Howe, 2015, 2020; USIBWC, 2023a). Nonetheless, the river was not contained and moved seasonally. Which leads to the question of new borderlands of the two countries and the demarcation of them.

### Reference Points

Along the river, there are many established and forgotten Reference Point (RP) markers. These consist of a concrete obelisk topped with a brass marker (IBC + C DE L) and handwritten in concrete with the number of the RP (Picture 1) (IBC, 1910:13; 1933). This picture shows one of those Reference Point markers north of Presidio, Texas on the U.S. side of the river



PICTURE 2: FLOODPLAIN MAP, MARK L. HOWE

border. At the Socorro Mission in Socorro, Texas, one of these monuments from the 1910s can be found at the southwest corner of the church (El Paso County Historical Commission, 2020). Numerous markers may be found on both sides of the river as they were constructed by both countries in prominent and elevated locations above the floodplain as seen in this map (Picture 2) from February 7, 1933, of the Presidio, Texas and Ojinaga, Chihuahua areas. These Reference Point markers in the northwestern Rio Grande River valley of the U.S. – Mexico borderlands is only one aspect of border delineation of when the river migrated.



PICTURE 3: LONGOREÑO BANCO, MARK L. HOWE

### Bancos

The Convention for the Elimination of the Bancos in the Rio Grande of 1905 had one purpose, to clarify the river border due to the river constantly changing and re-making a new river border (IBC, 1910:3-5).

As defined in the Convention as to the definition of a banco (IBC, 1910:4).

"Changes in the bed of the Rio Grande due to gradual erosion, with avulsion and where the river now abandons its old channel with a new separation of small portions of land known as "bancos" that are bounded by the old bed (IBC, 1910:4)."

Under Article II of the Convention of 1884, they still remain under the jurisdiction and dominion of the country from which they had separated from (IBC, 1910:4).

As a note, this discussion is only on the Rio Grande and banco's 1 – 58 (IBC, 1910), however, banco's 59 – 89 were discussed in the 1912 publication (IBC, 1912a).

In the Convention, Article I clarified that the boundary line,

"shall follow the deepest channel of the stream – and the dominion and jurisdiction of so many of the aforesaid fifty-eight (58) bancos as may remain on the right bank of the river shall pass to Mexico, and the dominion and jurisdiction of those of the said fifty-eight (58) bancos which may remain on the left bank shall pass to the United States of America (IBC, 1910:5)."



PICTURE 4: LONGOREÑO BANCO #3, MARK L. HOWE

This would settle the new border due to an ever-changing river and this Convention did that. The previous "Convention of November 12, 1884 established the rules for determining the location of the boundary when the meandering rivers transferred tracts of land from one bank of the river to the other (IBWC, 2023b)." To complete this and demarcation of the new border, the engineers of both commissions would mark around the abandoned channel of the river with wooden stakes to later be replaced by permanent concrete markers and mapped (IBC, 1910:12). This marking was started in December 1908 and field work completed in April 1909 (IBC, 1910:9). An interesting picture is the man in the bowler hat with the new Longoreño banco, No. 3, marker (Picture 3; Longoreño Banco, No. 3). In this picture can be seen another man on the bottom right with a camera, presumably from the Mexican Section taking his picture as this photo was taken from the U.S. Section. It would be interesting to find the other picture from the IBWC Mexican Section and have them side by side. This photo also serves as an example of mutual cooperation between countries for the benefit of all along the borderlands.

Construction of the banco markers varied based on the size and population. Article II stated,

"There are hereby excepted from this provision the portions of land segregated by the change in the bed of the said rivers (Colorado River was included) having an area of over two hundred and fifty (250) hectares, or a population of over two hundred (200) souls, and which shall not be considered as bancos for the purposes of this treaty and shall not be eliminated,

the old bed of the river remaining, therefore, the boundary in such cases (IBC, 1910:5)."

In Articles II - IV of the treaty of 1905, the delineation of the bancos changed title or citizenship due to these river alterations.

"Those who prefer to remain on the eliminated bancos, may either preserve the title and rights of citizenship of the country to which the said bancos formerly belonged, or acquire the nationality of the country to which they will belong in the future (IBC, 1910:6)."

In other words, you now live in Mexico or the U.S. and may decide to stay in this new country of citizenship or move and belong to the previous country before banco changes.

As discussed previously about the RP markers in the Upper Rio Grande and due to the large amount of land and constant river changes RPs were presumably used in the northern Rio Grande. RPs were also based on fixed points and delineated by latitude, longitude, meters, and feet, same as the bancos (IBC, 1910; 1933). The bancos and RPs now served to delineate the new border between the two countries that stayed in place until the Treaty of November 23, 1970 (USIBWC, 2023b).



PHOTO 5: ENGINEERS, MARK L. HOWE

### Sovereign Land

The 1905 treaty dictated that traverses be established around the bancos. The Commission, in a report dated March 10, 1910, reported they did this around fifty-seven bancos at this time. As this was no easy task, the Consulting Engineers at this time from both Commissions had met to complete this task. As demonstrated in this picture of Longoreño Banco #3, with the man in the bowler hat in picture three where construction was completed for this one banco monument. Maps of the finished bancos were also in this report with locations marked by latitude and longitude with the date the river moved and the border and directions.

Longoreño Banco #3 is one example of this cooperation of both governments to establish a fair and equitable exchange of lands due to nature thus preserving the sovereign changes in land lost or gained due to the rivers meandering (Picture 4; Longoreño Banco #3). In these fifty-eight bancos, the border was preserved for now, but for how long and what would need to be completed to permanently establish a working and diplomatic border.

### State Lessons

What can we learn from this diplomatic process of State when a river changed the land and borders? The Bancos were a means to keep in check these changes that occurred, not only for the border but also for those affected as citizens at this time in the early 1900s. The 1970 Treaty, known as the Treaty to Resolve Pending Boundary Differences and Maintain the Rio Grande and Colorado River as the International Boundary finally fixed the border problem when the river migrated (USIBWC 2023b). However, before the 1970 Treaty, "fixes" were made to help rectify this and also to control floods as both sides of the border increased in population, commerce, and modernity. Dams were built on the Rio Grande beginning with Elephant Butte Dam in 1916 in New Mexico (BOR, 2023). From here and downstream were constructed other dams or diversion structures over the years. Two dams built by the IBWC under the 1944 Water Treaty helped to control the river even more and reduced the river from seasonally meandering, flooding and changing the border. These were Falcon Dam (completed in 1954) and later Amistad Dam (completed in 1969) (USIBWC 2023a). Now the river was controlled, as one hopes to think.

### Bancos Today

The IBC published the books on the Elimination of Bancos as both sections completed their own reports with both written in English and Spanish. The American Section from 1910 is a chronology of what was completed with maps and pictures of Banco Numbers 1 to 58 (IBC, 1910), as was the 1912 publication but of bancos 59 – 89 (IBC, 1912a). The Mexican Section in their book on the bancos had a picture of the Engineers of which a different negative from the book was found (Pictures 5 & 6) (Comision, 1912; IBC, 1912b). The men in these pictures are not identified, but the second man from the right is thought to be H.P. Corbin, U.S. Section, Consulting Engineer.

continued on page 62 »

## « Banco

continued from page 61



PHOTO © ENGINEERS, MARK L. HOWE

Future work on this man is in progress and the history of his work at the IBC from 1910 until his premature death in El Paso in 1921. These are only a few pictures of the IBC and their work on bancos installation. Over a dozen negatives were found showing people, living conditions, houses, markers and even a boat named Leslie that was used to pull two barges of supplies and a mobile kitchen for camps to establish the banco markers.

The concrete RP structures that were part of the Upper Rio Grande and the Bancos in the early 1900s still exist today in many locations along the Rio Grande. However, they have no standing as the Treaty of November 23, 1970, rectified the border for both the Colorado and the Rio Grande rivers (USIBWC, 2023b). What we see today are now historic structures that are eligible under the National Register of Historic Places and may be added in the future to the Register (NPS, 2023). As part of this, a new survey is being conducted to locate as many of the former banco and RP markers, preserve and educate those whose land they are on as a witness to how two countries worked together to distinguish a common international border.

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