

A Conjectural Battle Between Good and Evil: Alcohol, the U.S. and Mexico

A Senior Honors Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for graduation
with *distinction* in International Studies in the undergraduate colleges of The
Ohio State University

by

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The Ohio State University
March 2007

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Whites expressed their most revealing emotions about what they considered the moral perversity of Mexicanos during the decades before the Civil War. That was the time when white society was spreading throughout different regions of the state, making direct contact with Tejanos, and discerning the greatest differences between the two civilizations. Just as they found Mexicans biologically and culturally degenerate, so whites also found them a people of moral abandon. Where whites were austere and puritanical, Mexicans were vulgar; where whites were reserved, Mexicans were unabashed; where whites were conscious of moral principles, Mexicans appeared thoughtless of moral prohibitions. As whites saw it, Mexicans expressed emotions and impulses that ought to be suppressed.¹ - Arnolde De Leon

Being a Mexican citizen means carrying the weight of certain stereotypes within the United States. More than a few impressions come to mind when someone says “Mexico” and unfortunately these usually do not include the vibrant scenery or colorful culture. United States citizens have believed these ubiquitous stereotypes since the beginning of the Anglo migration into Texas in the 1820s. The fact that Mexicans were different in color, culture and country inaugurated the conviction in Anglos that Mexicans were inferior. The U.S.-Mexican War followed closely after U.S. settlement in Texas in 1846 and by then many U.S. citizens already lacked respect or compassion toward the Mexican “peons” who they thought owed them money, land and servitude. After the creation of border towns during U.S. prohibition, the United States citizens who already associated “[Mexican’s] character with treachery, cruelty, and servility” seemed to have more proof that the U.S. was “now in the power of men who possessed all the

¹ Arnolde De Leon, *They Called Them Greasers: Anglo Attitudes Towards Mexicans in Texas, 1821-1900* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983), 36-37.

vices of savage life without one of the virtues that civilization teaches.”² Even though these border towns housed prostitution, drugs, and gambling, liquor became the one vice that had the greatest impact. After the U.S. passed national prohibition laws in 1920, U.S. citizens crossed the Mexican border to buy cheap drinks without fear of being arrested. Old taverns became more popular while U.S. entrepreneurs began to invest money in the growing number of saloons and clubs. From these clubs grew other forms of criminality, such as smuggling, thievery and counterfeiting. Alcohol emerged as the scapegoat for many problems that happened in border towns.

Throughout this paper I will argue that the influence of alcohol on the border town mystique created the greatest strain on the social and political relationship between Mexico and the U.S. Understanding the complicated relationship between Mexico and the U.S., and evaluating their historical background, is an essential element of this study. Alcohol during U.S. prohibition was one of the most important links between the U.S. and Mexico, even when one considers the tense history between the two countries beginning with the Texas settlers in the 1800s, Manifest Destiny, the Mexican Revolution, and finally ending with refugee camps on the border. Using alcohol as a tool of analysis to help define the clouded historical perceptions of many U.S. citizens reveals a confusion of cultures that only led to greater gaps of misunderstanding across the border.

² Samuel Truett and Elliott Young, Editors, “Transnational Warrior: Emilio Kosterlitzky and the Transformation of the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands, 1873-1928” *Continental Crossroads: Remapping U.S. Mexico Borderlands History*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 128.

Initial Racism and the Creation of the Border

Ever since the Anglo migration into Texas in the middle 1800s, the co-existence between the two cultures has been a reason for the United States and Mexico to pay attention to each other. In 1821, the government of Mexico granted Anglo settlers permission to enter “Mexico Texas,” and hundreds of Anglos flocked there to establish a home and keep their slaves. The founders of Texas expressed their goal: “to wrest the large and valuable territory of Texas from the Mexican Republic, in order to re-establish the SYSTEM OF SLAVERY; to open a vast and profitable SLAVE-MARKET therein; and ultimately, to annex it to the United States.”³ The colonizers of Texas believed that Texas was vital to their future because it was their last hope in order to keep their livelihood. Stephen F. Austin’s colony brought slaves and stated in 1833, “Texas *must be* a slave country. Circumstances and unavoidable necessity compels it. It is the wish of the people there, and it is my duty to do all I can, prudently, in favor of it. I will do so.”⁴

These settlers believed they needed slavery and the U.S. annexation of Texas. Slavery afforded the opportunity to keep their standard of living and annexation provided that power of the U.S. to maintain supremacy over Mexico and its inhabitants. Many powerful politicians saw it as an expansion of opportunity because like their nineteenth century predecessors, “they entertained a strong belief in themselves and the superiority of their way of life.”⁵ Again, Stephen F. Austin filibustered to “redeem Texas from the

³ Randolph B. Campbell, “Slavery in the Texas Revolution, 1835, 1836” *An Empire for Slavery: The peculiar institution in Texas, 1821-1865* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 35. Caps and italics in original.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁵ Arnaldo De Leon, 2.

wilderness” and advertised that it was in the best interest of the United States that “Texas should be effectually, and fully, Americanized – that is - settled by a population that will harmonize with their neighbors on the East, in language, political principles, common origin, sympathy, and even interest.”⁶ After the many attempts from various Secretaries of States to buy Texas from Mexico (who never put it up for sale) the only way to “save” Texas was to take it by force.⁷

U.S. citizens’ beliefs in their Anglo supremacy and superiority led to profound racism and insensitivity towards Mexicans. Prior to the Mexican American War, early stories of Texans were filled with racist views of Mexico, Mexicans and their culture. Even before Manifest Destiny obtained official political status in the 1840s, there was already a superiority mindset that many in the U.S. believed established a right to rule over nations and initiated disdain of their southern national neighbors.

Mexico’s early colonizers and the color of its citizens’ skin built the foundation of initial prejudices held by Anglos. Initially, the Tejanos were considered to be uncivilized and non-Christian because of their unfortunate connection and experience with Spanish explorers. The Reformed English and Roman Catholic Spanish religions split after Henry VIII’s formation of the Church of England, which prompted bitter conflict between Catholic Spain and the Protestant English from then on. The Inquisition also proved to many that the Spanish were a cruel and truculent people who used tyranny continuously.⁸ Since the Spanish frequently mixed with Indians during their conquest in Mexico, a color

⁶ De Leon. 3.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁸ *Ibid.*

prejudice existed because of the impurity of blood coupled with the “blackness” of skin. Whiteness equaled purity and Christianity, while blackness was equivalent to sin and paganism.⁹ Accordingly, the closer one came to the color black, the further one was from God. Racial stereotypes based on the skin color and anti-Catholic sentiment were already in place and created an open forum for more labels to stick to Mexicans. Arnolde De Leon illustrates this idea with the Mexican communities in El Paso during the 1850s:

Collectively, the many attitudes whites held toward Mexicans went hand in hand with attempts toward oppression. They buttressed the idea that Americans were of superior stock and Tejanos were not, rationalized an elevated place for whites and a subservient one for Mexicans, and justified the notion that Mexican work should be for the good of white society. Those attitudes were at the base of the world that Tejanos had to grapple with in efforts to live a normal life and were among the forces defining what roles those coming from Mexico should assume.¹⁰

This racial prejudice became justified as a popular policy and transformed into an unfair ideology in U.S. politics that threatened Mexican expansion. Manifest destiny was God’s will to impose Christian order into an uncivilized world.¹¹ It bolstered nationalism with religion and gave justification to exclude “inferior” races’ rights to their own land. United States citizens believed that “providence” had willed evangelical expansion as an American objective. As they argued, “All of this will be our future history, to establish on earth the moral dignity and salvation of man – the immutable truth and beneficence of God.”¹² The U.S. soon held on to this ideology as a “mission,” and “it was inconceivable

⁹ De Leon, 5.

¹⁰ De Leon, 103 – *Tejanos* were non white natives of Mexican Texas.

¹¹ Norman Graebner. “Manifest Destiny and the Acquisition of Texas,” *Retrieving the American Past*. (Boston: Pearson Custom Publishing for The Ohio State University – Department of History, 2003), 344.

¹² O’ Sullivan, John L. “Advocating Manifest Destiny.” *Retrieving the American Past* (Boston: Pearson Custom Publishing for The Ohio State University – Department of History, 2003), 359-360.

to them that any neighboring country would decline an invitation to enter the realm of the United States.”¹³ They believed they had the potential after the war with Britain and the victory of a successful Republic to build a vast nation on not only their finer natural resources, but also their matchless skill of politics and innovations of industrialism without the help of a backward Mexico.

During the Mexican American War, the United States used chicanery to obtain more land from Mexico. Manifest destiny and the U.S. – Mexican War came as a joint package. U.S. President James Polk sent troops to encroach on disputed land, and the Mexican-American war soon began in 1846. It took two years for the United States to defeat Santa Anna’s troops and capture Mexico’s capital. In 1848, both countries signed the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo that annexed Texas to the U.S., fixed a boundary at the Rio Grande, and bought New Mexico and almost all of California.¹⁴ Unfortunately, this treaty built walls of war and victory between two different cultures instead of bridges of understanding between neighbors.

The U.S. constantly misrepresented contracts, maps, and treaties so that more land could be taken from Mexico. By the early 1850s, the United States had obtained Texas, New Mexico, California, Arizona, Nebraska, Utah, and portions of Wyoming, Colorado and Oklahoma. John C. Calhoun had bought these territories with only \$15 million and had used disputed boundaries and misleading maps to persuade Mexico to agree. For instance, the maps of Stephen F. Austin never showed Texas extending into the Nueces River, and thus Mexico believed that they had claimed the right territory. Polk dismissed this “loophole” as incompetence of the Mexican government and the ambiguity became

¹³ De Leon, 2 .

¹⁴ Oscar J. Martinez, *Troublesome Border*, Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 14.

the justification for encroachment.¹⁵ This creation of confusion brought the illusion that Mexico was only a pawn to U.S. intelligence, so future concessions could be obtained.¹⁶

After the war the process to establish a permanent border continued. This was also the start of a new era of negativity towards a defeated Mexico. The Mexicans who lived in Texas before the war were allowed to stay, but their daily lives changed dramatically under inhumane treatment. The U.S. now possessed the land and decided to construct railroads, retail and wholesale stores, laundries, and other huge manufacturing plants.¹⁷ An obvious difference already existed between the white homes and the Mexican *barrios* during the initial Anglo migration into Mexico Texas. San Antonio and La Bahía were dense with Mexican *jacales* (tiny, makeshift homes) that consisted of dirt floors and thatched roofs as opposed to the Anglos' multiple room, whitewashed houses.¹⁸ Anglo Texas residents believed that many of the Mexicans, especially on the border, were filthy and greasy from the inside out, and coined the "greaser" nickname.¹⁹

Even though segregation and prejudices abounded wherever U.S. citizens and Mexicans resided, the U.S. – Mexico border towns, such as El Paso - Juarez and San Diego –Tijuana, had more problems of racism because of the proximity of these two cultures. Using El Paso's situation as an example illustrates how border towns were an infamous place for discrimination against Mexicans. Many Mexicans migrated to El Paso in search of jobs, and many stayed after the U.S. possession. The southern half of the city, lovingly coined "*Chihuahuita*" by its residents, was the designated place for

¹⁵ Martinez, 19.

¹⁶ Martinez, 22.

¹⁷ Mario T. Garcia, *Desert Immigrants: The Mexicans of El Paso, 1880-1920*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 148.

¹⁸ De Leon, 6.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 16.

Mexicans since it was closer to the railroad construction and plants.²⁰ U.S. owners wanted Mexicans as workers for cheap labor and wage prejudice ensued because “Mexicans simply did not deserve equal compensation to that of U.S. citizens.”²¹

These low wages inevitably and purposefully kept Mexicans in the lower class with hardly enough food for their families and poor sanitary conditions. In order to show that Mexicans were not going to be forced to live under such impoverished conditions a series of strikes against their white employers for better salaries ensued. Unfortunately, this also deepened the tension between neighbors and played into the perception that Mexicans were violent by nature.²² The strikes proved to be unfruitful, and Mexican workers continued to work for pitiful salaries. Eventually, their penury caused families to resort to drastic measures to meet their needs.

The living conditions, especially on the border, did not provide proper sanitation facilities or ways to control disease. High infant mortality rates and deaths from tuberculosis were common in places like *Chihuahuita*. Since there were no baths, many had to bathe in the Rio Grande.²³ Many drowned, while more were arrested for “indecent exposure,” and soon strict patrols on the river tried to deny the Mexicans only way to stay clean.²⁴ Constant trash and filth from the north part of the city flowed into their backyards while floods from the river demolished their houses. The mayor of El Paso defended the city in saying that it had a great health department, although he refused to take into the

²⁰ Jessica Fleischmann, *The U.S. – Mexico Border in the U.S. Press: 1980-1992*. (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1998), 13.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 11.

²² Mario Garcia, 124.

²³ *Ibid.*, 138.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 136.

account that Mexicans in the south were dying daily.²⁵ By 1906, 15,000 people went hungry and tuberculosis killed more in one week than any other cause. Many Mexicans resorted to thievery to obtain basic sustenance and the majority of the thieves were mothers stealing bread and milk to feed their children.²⁶ When these perpetrators were arrested, they were deloused with gasoline and warned by their wardens (in English) not to smoke. A Mexican man not comprehending his English warning lit a match and twenty-five Mexicans died from the resulting inferno. No wardens were prosecuted but the Mexicans were blamed for disobeying their warnings.²⁷ The daily grind of life led Mexicans to look for a more prosperous life and found alcohol as an answer to impoverished living.

Mexicans were segregated from white society and their only voice came from the corrupted officials and politicians' distorted stories. Thus, skin color was not their only problem, because differences in culture and customs such as daily habits, education and religion seemed to lend credence to the stories, validating they were no better than their skin color suggested. Soon, important characters would appear during the Mexican Revolution, but thanks to graphic photographers and painters they would seem malevolent. Once again, the U.S. believed that their influence was Mexico's only salvation.

²⁵ Garcia., 138.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 146-147.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 148.

The Mexican Revolution

The Mexican Revolution played a part in exponentially eroding Mexicans' already impoverished standard of living, pushing Mexico's people towards stable jobs in saloons on the border while also furthering "greaser" stereotypes with a crooked government and Pancho Villa. When Porfirio Díaz was president for his six terms during 1876-1910, he sold away his peoples' land to investment companies and ultimately left them nothing to sustain themselves agriculturally. Many lived as nomads, searching for jobs from week to week because permanent agriculture places were scarce, especially on the California side of the border where the climate was more dramatic. During the Revolution the economy and central government were both atrophying and the standard of living began to drop with every overthrow or assassination of each president. With corruption seeping into the government and an unstable way of life for each citizen, Mexican natives had to resort to anything to make a profitable and reliable source of income. Border cities were easy places to find steady money and not have to move from job to job. Therefore, Mexicans were willing to earn a stable income to provide for their families and live securely in one place.

When the Mexican Revolution exploded in 1910, the U.S. public had pictures and faces to put to their stereotypes. The war caused a lot of publicity with U.S. journalists, artists and photographers, mainly because of the sensationalism of warfare and shock value that was sure to make money.²⁸ Photographs of Fransico "Pancho" Villa, the feared villain of the Revolution, received lots of press, especially after his attack on American soil. He became the face of Mexico, and his peasantry and ruggedness reflected through

²⁸ James Oles, *South of the Border: Mexico in the American Imagination 1914-1947* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993), 52-61.

his portraits. He never dressed ceremoniously, even to meet the Governor or Secretary of State. In fact, while visiting with the Secretary of State he “dressed in an old plain khaki uniform, with several buttons lacking. He had not recently shaved, wore no hat, and his hair had not been brushed. He walked a little pigeon-toed, humped over, with his hands in his trousers pockets.”²⁹ The northern leader of Mexico with a completely unprincipled look would have no place in U.S. politics and therefore, the image of Pancho Villa further proved the inferiority of Mexico’s people.

The most popular Revolution photographs and pictures also show that the U.S. was interested in finding fault with the Mexican people. The postcards that were most popular were either of the gruesome nature or of the poor. The lynching, hangings, battlefields, and scenes where dead bodies covered the streets sold the most.³⁰ This commercialism of brutality was not only a sign of human curiosity and astonishment, but also played directly into their perception of violence. The Mexican Revolution kept Mexico under a critical light with the U.S., while photographs maintained their shock value and gave visual proof of their stereotypes.

Also during the Revolution, American Texans gained ownership of almost all farmland. Even after the Mexican American war, many Mexican farmers kept their farms as long as they paid dues to the U.S. government. Soon, even with Texas consisting of Mexicans and U.S. citizens, land began to rise in price and became too expensive for Mexican ranchers to keep paying dues to the U.S. while also paying for their land. This

²⁹ John Reed, “Viva Pancho Villa” *Mexico Otherwise: Modern Mexico in the Eyes of Foreign Observers* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005), 158.

³⁰ Oles, 65-67.

resulted in many Tejanos selling their land to Anglos. Prominent Tejano landowners soon began working on their farmed lands under Anglo supervision.³¹

The road to a profitable alcohol business had been laid by keeping Mexicans at the bottom of the social ladder, and soon the relationship between the U.S. and Mexico would become all about the vice of alcohol. By 1915, many in the U.S. already referred to Mexico as the new “Sodom and Gomorrah” with places like Tijuana, Juarez and Mexicali having the reputation of being “the blackest hole of iniquity and sin that ever existed anywhere upon the face of the earth.”³² The United States’ hostility toward these border towns drove some governors and generals to establish stringent prohibition laws on certain municipalities, with penalties as severe as death. The American Consulate and various members in Congress saw their duty to end this corruption of morals and protect U.S. citizens from the clutches of hell through the passing of different laws and restrictions. In 1915, the United States government took strides to end alcohol consumption, and by 1916 twenty-three U.S. states had already declared themselves “dry,” including Arizona and Texas. U.S. officials nudged Mexican officials to do the same. Other organizations also joined the cause to end “the injury to life and property far greater than any devastation which could result from border warfare.”³³ Thus, the door was wide open for a new business to prosper right along the border.

³¹ Samuel Truett and Elliott Young, Editors, “Transnational Warrior: Emilio Kosterlitzky and the Transformation of the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands, 1873-1928” *Continental Crossroads: Remapping U.S. Mexico Borderlands History*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 276

³² Microfilm. Washington, D.C., National Archives: National Archives and Records Service, General Services Administration, 1959. 243 microfilm reels ; 35 mm. (National Archives microfilm publications ; microcopy no. 274), roll 15.

³³ National Archives Roll, 150.

Early attempts of prohibition in Mexican states and also the many stories of successful entrepreneurs in 1916 illustrate the beginning prosperity of the border town businesses. The Provisional governor of Durango, Mariano Arrieta, was in favor of this action since soldiers and other tourists continued to disrupt society and were bad examples to the youth.³⁴ Finally, by 1915 - 1916, "all the saloons in the State [Durango] were closed and while beer was still permitted to be sold, the lessening of drunkenness through the state was very noticeable."³⁵ Despite U.S. officials' efforts to persuade others of prohibition's success, this isolated prohibition only lasted for two years before opening up again to willing U.S. tourists. The American Consul predicted that "there will naturally be many persons from the American side of the line who will cross solely for the purpose of obtaining liquor and it may be expected that there will be brawls and probably shooting affairs before long. It is quite probable that serious trouble will follow the re-opening of drinking places in Sonora."³⁶

The profitable saloons of Colonel Esteban Cantu, the Mexican Military Governor of Lower California, also illustrated the already prosperous border business.³⁷ Colonel Cantu received between 30 to 35 million dollars a month from the rewarding business of selling liquor and gambling halls from which he was able to pocket for his own private share.³⁸ Tijuana and Mexicali were his principal resorts along the border where "saloons [were] in practically every house on main street."³⁹ The American Consul of 1916 said in one of his reports, "It is to be hoped that the present decree will be enforced and that

³⁴ National Archives Roll 100.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ National Archives Roll 135.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

some other source of income to the State will be found to supply the loss of the small tax collected from distilleries and saloons, since the tax was the sole and only excuse that I have ever heard offered by government officials...”⁴⁰ He believed that if all of the saloons were shut down and the international boundary closed, then Mexico would have to find another way to make a living, and thus the problem would be solved forever. In actuality, there are few statistics during this time period that evaluate prosperity in these contemporary border towns, but rather it is the reactions from U.S. officials and U.S. citizens that shows the intense impact of these towns.

For instance, religious groups, leagues, government intervention, police and even petitions from various clubs all played a role in combating the evils on the border. On April 9, 1915, the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union petitioned the national government to “bring such pressure to bear on the proper Mexican authorities as will close these saloons along the Boundary.”⁴¹ The police department of San Diego wanted to close the boundary line between San Diego and Tijuana from 6 p.m. until 6 a.m. to control the traffic of liquor and drugs and also for the safety of the city.⁴² The editor of the Los Angeles Tribune, Edwin T. Earl, replied that he would try everything in his power to close that “hell hole” both day and night for the safety of the citizens.⁴³ Earl also wrote to the Secretary of State, Robert Lansing, to describe how bad the situation was in Tijuana and Mexicali to reinforce how corrupt the city of San Diego was going to become if nothing was done. “[Tijuana and Mexicali] are infamous places which are corrupting the manhood and woman hood of California and other states... Young troops

⁴⁰ National Archives Roll, 100

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² National Archives Roll 150.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

are on the border now and they are camped within reach of these cesspools of vice, and many a young man will be corrupted and diseased, and ruined for life...”⁴⁴ The American Vice Consul wrote a report in 1916 describing the status of vice in Durango. He believed that “More than 90 percent of the crimes of violence could be traced directly to drunkenness.”⁴⁵ The American Vice Consul used the example of Francisco Villa, a rebel in the eyes of the U.S., but a radical who saw the evils of alcohol. The following quote used by the American Vice Consul was supposed to make alcohol seem bad even through the eyes of a “dirty Mexican” rebel, which the Consul believed to be proof that alcohol should not interfere with the United States.

Just as a matter of history, it should be recorded that Francisco Villa, anomalous and curious as it may seem considered in conjunction with his life’s story, first learned the secret of the military advantage to his army and put into practice the closing of the saloons and prohibited the sale of intoxicants to his soldiers as soon as he captured a town. From a military standpoint this little move came near making Villa’s army invincible and perhaps its importance is not yet fully realized in its relation to his career.⁴⁶

In 1919 a movement by the National Anti-Alcoholic League attempted to prevent the spread of the “liquor habit” by attacking Mexican-based distillers. The U.S. had moved their businesses to Mexico where they were received with open arms. This campaign wanted to “combat the sale of liquor to the lower classes especially and to overcome if possible the results which are sure to follow from the cheapening of liquor and its more general sale.”⁴⁷ Unfortunately, they were unsuccessful and the re-opening of saloons began to flourish in spite of their efforts to make drinks high-priced.

⁴⁴ National Archives Roll 100.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ National Archives Roll, 148.

Furthermore, more resorts were established in 1919 due to the re-opening of an unlimited border after war precautions died down and the rich entrepreneurs accumulated since the state prohibitions.

The Women's Civic League of San Diego conducted another effort to combat the popularity of alcohol sales and its effect on San Diego's population. The meeting had more than 800 women who wanted nothing more than to see Tijuana close because the "city was overrun with crooks, touts and prostitutes."⁴⁸ A petition signed by about 30 U.S. citizens of California wrote to Lansing for their opinion on the matter: "If these resorts are permitted, Americans will furnish the money, the men and the women, for a veritable hell of iniquity. We will reap only the natural aftermath of poverty, grief, crime and disease."⁴⁹ The outcry against border town business was enough to scare U.S. politicians to counter this immoral action in a legal and binding law.

Prohibition Hits

The eighteenth U.S. Amendment that prohibited the sale of liquor that contained more than 0.5 percent alcohol was ratified on March 5, 1918, starting in Texas and finally reaching the national level by January of 1919. National prohibition of alcohol was achieved by January of 1920 after the Volstead Act was passed to enforce the amendment, which instated the 0.5 percent rule.⁵⁰ Thus, began the era of prohibition from

⁴⁸ National Archives Roll, 148.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Dominique Ahedo, Valerie Pena, Yvette Barraza, Mirna Gonzalez and Sonia Carrasco, "Prohibition Stimulated Economies of El Paso, Juárez" *Borderlands* [journal on-line] (El Paso, TX: El Paso Community College, 2001, accessed 1 Aug. 2006); available from http://www.epcc.edu/ftp/Homes/monicaw/borderlands/19_prohibition.htm; Internet.

January 16, 1920 until December 5, 1933.⁵¹

Alcohol is defined as the initial problem in border towns. In many cases, embassy workers defined types of liquor for the “lower class” and mainly feared that U.S. citizens would be degraded if subjected to such peasantry. It was an early scare to many that alcohol would mean the demise of United States citizens and that is why such lengths were taken to kill the chances of falling into a corruption. National prohibition resulted in increased attention, crime and money from the United States seeping into border towns. Prohibition was the experiment to “reduce crime and corruption, solve social problems, reduce the tax burden created by prisons and poorhouses and improve health and hygiene in America.”⁵² Unfortunately, it would seem that prohibition backfired only creating more strife, including the increase in crime, the corruption of public officials, and the turn to drugs as a substitute.⁵³ U.S. citizens crossed the border to drink, gamble and have sex, activities which were morally wrong in the “sleepy puritanical U.S. Southwest.”⁵⁴

The fact that the United States could not enforce prohibition on its own soil, questions the idea that the U.S had any power across the border. Even at the beginning of prohibition in the Northeast of the U.S., alcohol was available in *speakeasies* where these underground liquor holes outnumbered the closed saloons two to one.⁵⁵ Cities, such as Chicago, New York and Boston, consumed more gallons of alcohol than before

⁵¹ Ahedo, Internet.

⁵² Mark Thornton “Alcohol Prohibition was a Failure” *Cato Policy Analysis* [article online] (Washington D.C.: Cato Institute, 1991, accessed 2 Aug. 2005); available from <http://www.cato.org/pubs/pas/pa-157.html>; Internet.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Fleischmann, 12.

⁵⁵ Thornton.

prohibition. Other things during prohibition also promoted more “legitimate” sources of alcohol. Physicians and hospitals supplies doubled between 1923 and 1931 while medicinal alcohol sold to patients increased by 400 percent during the same time period. However, citizens of the U.S. ended up spending more for “medicinal” alcohol or substitutes like narcotics and marijuana and always having to stoop to subterfuge. Taking all of this into consideration, U.S. citizens took extra steps to cross into Mexico, which had no limit on alcohol and gave complete freedom.

Since states like Arizona and Texas had already attempted restricting the sale of alcohol before it became national policy, illegal liquor traffic was well on its way. By the 1920s, it had potential to reach greater magnitude. The State Department along the border requested a “prohibition belt” that extended the entire distance of the border between Mexico and the U.S. and at least fifty miles into Mexico to counter it.⁵⁶

The sale of liquor went up enormously in Mexico after prohibition because more tourists began to pour into the border towns in Mexico to drink in freedom with the fringe benefit to spite their government that was only a few miles on the other side of the international boundary. In 1918-1919 the tourists who crossed the border numbered only 14,130. In only a year from 1919-1920 the tourists increased almost 30 times to 418,735.⁵⁷ This dramatic increase is evidence of how profound the effect of prohibition was to both the U.S. and Mexican communities. Prohibition was the driving force of building up border towns and creating them into empires of tourism.

U.S. citizens who wanted liquor were coming in droves and saloons could charge as much as they wanted. The land in Baja California was not agricultural friendly, and

⁵⁶ National Archives Roll 148.

⁵⁷ Ahedo.

most Mexicans were already performing various jobs that were mostly service oriented, which changed from one week to the next. Liquor establishments offered a source of permanent income. Border towns especially began to rely on the alcohol business as a profitable and reliable source of wealth. Mexicali was an example of this where “the principal line of business pursued in Mexicali is the sale of liquor, which in addition to regular saloons, is carried on in the majority of business houses that are engaged in other lines of merchandising.”⁵⁸

Tijuana was also accused of having limited resources and defaulting to liquor sales as a crutch. United States citizens would visit often because of its proximity to San Diego. California had already established itself as a popular place with U.S. citizens because of the beautiful coast and the diverse scenery that was so unlike most of the United States. Now, there was even more of a reason to adventure west and become part of “the majority [of tourists] who probably will find their way sooner or later to Tijuana.”⁵⁹ Tijuana ended up being one of the most “available” places for the people of the U.S. to buy any alcoholic drink legally. Actually, businessmen and service managers used the popularity of liquor sales to their advantage by promoting more tourists to come and experience the foreign culture, which really was enticing them to drink lawfully.

In 1922 Ciudad Juarez had grown to 25,000 inhabitants and the liquor sales and saloon establishments were the main source of income for this area. Juarez not only smuggled whiskey, rum, and beer into the U.S., but also manufactured alcohol to supply

⁵⁸ National Archives Roll 148.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

wholesale houses and meet the demand more readily.⁶⁰ “A six cent street car fare is all it costs to leave the ‘dry’ United States and enter ‘wet’ Mexico.”⁶¹ In 1922, the Chamber of Commerce reported 79 licensed saloons and 11 wholesale houses that limited sales solely to liquor products while only 19 cafes/restaurants and 14 hotels were definitely the minority businesses. It also stated in this report that, “In the volume of retail business done in the city, liquor exceeded all the rest combined.”⁶² In fact, a Texas writer, Edward Langston, commented that liquor merchants controlled the economy in Juárez and that “more than one Juárez family fortune was made during the era of American prohibition.”⁶³

Mexicans were not the only ones caught participating in the liquor business. United States citizens who lived in El Paso operated almost all of the sophisticated and small saloons in Tijuana. Many of the manufacturing companies and distilleries of the U.S. had moved down to Mexico to keep up their business and profits thus, almost all of the beer and liquor sold to saloons were through U.S. firms.⁶⁴ Many of these managers sold their liquor at a high price due to the import price coming from Canada and England, but also because they knew they had customers who would gladly pay for a few moments of bliss in a foreign world.

Just like before, there was obvious opposition to this movement toward border towns and renewed concern that United States citizens were in moral danger. The El Paso

⁶⁰ David Spencer and Kathleen Straudt, “Rebordering,” *The U.S.-Mexico Border: Transcending divisions, contesting identities* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998), 264.

⁶¹ National Archives Roll 135.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Ahedo.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

Ad club decided to take on the city closest to home in Juarez by way of a “clean-up campaign.” One member, Percy Montgomery, was quoted saying that “if Americans would withdraw their support the vice conditions in Juarez could be wiped out in 36 hours.”⁶⁵ There was a consensus that if the gambling and liquor traffic were to cease, Juarez could become an essential place of income and would welcome more decent families and moral comradery. Also, this league of men believed that sport events were losing tradition and popularity due to the fear of many to even attend because of the nightlife and frankly, the saloons were more an attraction than watching a game.⁶⁶ The San Diego County Law Enforcement League knew that the prohibition was becoming unsuccessful and making the border town situation worse. By December of 1920, the San Diego Law Enforcement League petitioned the Secretary of State to persuade the Mexican Government to “entirely obliterate the dens of vice and demoralization that now exist in Tijuana.”⁶⁷ The first sentence of the document states, “Whereas: the vice conditions at Tijuana, Mexico which are conducted almost exclusively by citizens of the United States for the purpose of carrying on practices that have been outlawed in the United States and the state of California and, the patronage of these places of vice and demoralization is dependent almost exclusively upon citizens of the United States.”⁶⁸ Statements like this blaming Mexico for providing such places to United States citizens to fall into sinful vices seems to be a reoccurring theme in most of the documents.

⁶⁵ National Archives 148.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ National Archives Roll 150.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

Other letters from citizens and organizations to the Secretary of State urged the U.S. government to “give relief” from such vices.⁶⁹ Proposals to restrict passports, create dry zones, and even a curfew that would shut down the international line were streaming into the state department requesting immediate action. Bold language and pure fear of this immorality infecting their cities and ruining their families was the norm in these notices and pleas. One example was a letter to the new secretary of state, Bainbridge Corby, who had only recently been in office. It stated, “The Tijuana situation is becoming worse every day. Bull-fighting, gambling, prostitution and unrestricted liquor selling are running rampant there, by instigation and participation of a criminal class of American citizens, to the disgust of every decent Californian, and in evasion of laws of California and of the United States.”⁷⁰ Another letter had this to say, “Conditions of vice in Tijuana are peculiarly obnoxious, obscene photographs being peddled in the streets and prostitutes soliciting in the open. Advertising of Tijuana does not depict its real character but is of such a nature as to indicate that nothing vicious is in operation. The city of San Diego has been greatly plagued with crime and disease because of Tijuana.”⁷¹ Some of the letters also appealed to the U.S. Congress because the authors did not believe that Mexican officials were going to correct the matter. One letter stated “... it seems that the last hope of this has been lost as the governor now states that Tijuana will not be closed because it is patronized by people who can afford to lose their money.”⁷² The obvious worry and actions to demolish all treachery along the border is seen in many instances through letters to head politicians during this time of prohibition.

⁶⁹ National Archives Roll 150.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² National Archives Roll 148.

There is no mistaking that prohibition led many U.S. citizens to Mexico, creating more income in these border cities to establish more tourist attractions and money to burn on other things. The damage was done. Border towns had made a name for themselves with the help of U.S. laws and citizens. The gate was open to experience a new country, but it was abused and soon led to disfavor and even worse, presented more evidence that their racist assumptions were true.

Other vices became the norm after so much was invested in this erotic nightlife. Gambling emerged as one of the main vices that became coupled with saloons and soon became just as common as liquor. It became an important factor that needed to be controlled as well if there was going to be any success to shut down these treacherous border towns. Gambling was around before prohibition, but it seemed to gain more recognition by the U.S. in the 1920s when underground halls were attached to prosperous saloons.⁷³ Mexican officials were even accused of buying into the gambling business for a share of the profit. For example, President Obregon was accused by U.S. embassy workers of “securing a 50 percent share of the revenue derived from gambling concessions granted in Juarez.” The President denied this quite vehemently, but there was no real resolution on who was speaking the truth.⁷⁴ Gambling seemed to be everywhere: horse races, cock fights, card tables, slot machines and dice where people spent their time and money on what some believed as “the greatest curse” in which U.S. citizens lost “millions of dollars” each year. One story consisted of a U.S. citizen buying 200 gambling machines for one city.⁷⁵ The “Monte Carlo” in Tijuana had 74 gambling tables

⁷³ National Archives Roll 148.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*,

⁷⁵ National Archives Roll 150.

that included roulette, wheel of fortune, craps, poker and birdcage.⁷⁶ Gambling was a powerful influence on the success of border town business but it accompanied liquor in the same establishments.

Drugs were also of concern since many Americans used them as a replacement for alcohol in the United States and there were more chances to obtain some in Mexico if one desired. Before prohibition took effect, there was a collision of Mexican officials in drug trafficking in 1910 that turned out to be quite violent. The U.S. had passed a Pure Food and Drug Act and the Harrison Narcotic Acts, which made heroin and marijuana illegal. As seen with liquor, these policies drove up drug prices and made drug production and trafficking a thriving business.⁷⁷ Opium dives and narcotic smuggling became popular in border towns. Opium houses were connected with prosperous saloons while narcotics were mainly sold through the black market and concealed from U.S. custom officials. Narcotics, morphine and similar drugs could be freely bought for \$35 an ounce in Mexico while in Los Angeles or elsewhere in the U.S., these drugs would sell for at least \$100 an ounce, so it was a profitable business that was definitely worth the risk. It was not uncommon for police to arrest drug addicts, many of whom were U.S. citizens, who only stayed in Mexico to get their “fix” and live on the streets until they found enough money for the next one. These addicts were illustrated in the most pitiful sense and were shamed by their home country.⁷⁸

Prostitution was also associated with these saloons and gambling halls. In fact, it was during the era of prohibition that this practice was made illegal in the U.S. and

⁷⁶ National Archives Roll 150.

⁷⁷ David J. Bellis *Comparing Mexican and U.S. Street Prostitutes: Factors in HIV/AIDS Transmission* (New York: The Haworth Press, 2003), 42.

⁷⁸ National Archives Roll 148.

Mexico and many *bordellos* were closed in order to stop immorality.⁷⁹ This eventually led to more “street-level” prostitution and prostitutes did not have to go through medical examinations or have a license to practice.⁸⁰ Prostitution became a regular reason to cross the border for many U.S. citizens. Many U.S. sources held a double standard by considering it worse for women to participate in prostitution or to even be present in these border town establishments than alcohol or drug abuse by men. They believed women should never be associated with any type of vice but rather maintain their virtue through traditional maternal obligations. So when resorts such as, “The Owl” and the “Monte Carlo” advertised rooms that were specialized for prostitutes who carried on their business, the uproar and recognition it received from the U.S. side was tremendous.

Prostitutes were actually licensed with the saloon or resort and had to undergo weekly medical examinations and also, kept under close police supervision. Procurers were the men who reaped the profit of prostitutes, and these men were bartenders, owners and for the most part, U.S. citizens.⁸¹ They advertised women of various ages, some under 20, some between 20 and 30 who gave their services to anyone no matter the race, color or cleanliness. One specific request made from a plethora of churches, temperance leagues, and law enforcement to the state government of California made it clear that “A constant effort is being made to induce American girls to go across the line for use in the houses of prostitution and in selling drinks on commission. Many of these girls are very young and have returned to the California side in need of hospital treatment.”⁸² Many descriptive images of women “rolling around barely sober enough to hold their cigarettes

⁷⁹ Bellis, 4.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ National Archives Roll 148.

⁸² National Archives Roll 150.

in their mouths,” certainly defaced the innocent perception of women and to many were clear-cut proof that these border towns had corrupted a vital member to raise a proper family. Prostitutes also were able to “payoff” the police who were supposed to watch their work and make sure they had weekly check-ups. Rather, these cops did not give them the proper attention, and many of these women were found infected when their procurers tried to pass them across the border and they fell into the hands of U.S. authorities.⁸³ Prostitution was a big part of the border town persona and grew to become a staple with the influx of U.S. citizens and the thriving businesses of sin.

Other sorts of crime also became a problem in these cities. It was believed that it was easier for criminals to pass between Mexico and the United States and therefore, effortless to live off of the wealthy visitors. Arrests by Juarez police soared in number with 391 in one month all due to drunkenness.⁸⁴ In one report made by the Consular District, “American tourists or other foreigners visiting this city do not dare to venture from the main thoroughfare for fear of being robbed or murdered, since very little, if any, protection is afforded by the local Government. In many instances offences as above mentioned are committed by local policemen who must, in order to live, rob and accept bribes, since their salary is only fifty cents a day.”⁸⁵ Not only was the crime bad, but it seemed to be intensified by the fact that the force that was responsible for stopping it was engaging in it. Other dangers were believed that bartenders began using “knock-out drops” in the drinks, which reportedly killed one American.⁸⁶ Even though no sufficient evidence of these “knock-out drops” was discovered and the bartenders who practiced it

⁸³ Bellis, 55.

⁸⁴ National Archives Roll 150.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ National Archives Roll 148.

were never identified with a U.S. or Mexican nationality, it showed the increased danger of drinking in the border towns and the concern of dying from dropped drugs.

New laws and law enforcement came in the midst of this prohibition trouble and could have possibly have been the answer to the cry for help for so many who were battling this infectious way of life. The creation of the Border Patrol and the National Origins Act in 1924 might have had an influence with what was going on across the border. The U.S. established Border Patrol on May 28, 1924. The Border Patrol was built on principles as “an agency entrusted with upholding immigration laws and protecting the perimeters of the nation-state.”⁸⁷ Closing the international border rather just placing a curfew on U.S. tourists, occurred soon after the Border Patrol was established. There might not be much of a correlation in history books but there was a dramatic increase of Mexicans from 50,000 per year to over 150,000 per year throughout the 20s.⁸⁸ Mexicans were going across the border to U.S. cities such as El Paso and San Diego and since U.S. citizens populated many of border towns, Mexicans continued to venture out further to look for new homes. Plus, it is quite possible that these U.S. tourists made the United States more appealing through stories of success and stable life while in the midst of the border cities. Also, the drug and liquor trafficking that was so popular during this era was a chance for Mexican natives to see a glimpse of the U.S. way of life and business. Thus, border town business and the life between the twin cities of the U.S. and Mexico could have had a hand in promoting the influx of immigrants to the U.S.

Closing the international line and immigration act represented policies that played on the stereotypes that exist today with Mexico. On February 12, 1924 there was a

⁸⁷ Truett, 306.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*,

proposal to close the international boundary from 9 P.M. to 6 A.M. daily. There were other attempts to try and shut the line down completely in the past but now they had more manpower to enforce it. In one order made on March 10, 1924 when an U.S. boy was held up in a convenient store by a Mexican gang, the father wrote the Secretary of State, Frank Hughes, in distress asking Hughes to warn other U.S. citizens of the danger. He added that, "It seems to me, some of our Secret Service men could easily locate and catch any of our people who are mixed up in this dastardly scheme. I suppose there is nothing we can do with the Mexicans."⁸⁹ Soon after this notice was received, Hughes assured the distressed father that U.S. citizens would be warned about this incident and asked to be aware if visiting. Attempts and efforts had been made to close California borderlines completely.

Churches, such as the Presbytery of Southern Arizona and other protestant churches along the border, began to petition for a dry territory that would extend fifty miles south into Mexico. There was a consensus among the churches that these vices across the border were having a negative impact on the United States. Apparently, the government believed the same thing and the Border Patrol and Immigration Act was introduced to try and settle this influx of immorality coming into the U.S. Unfortunately, these motions brought about misunderstanding and a naivety of a culture that continues today.

⁸⁹ National Archives Roll 148.

Conclusion

The effect of U.S. prohibition still lingers in Mexico border cities with the firm influence of the U.S. constantly present. Drugs and prostitution, two things that seemed to emerge with the popularity of more saloons, are more contemporary issues of today since drinking in Mexico no longer holds the same purpose. Mexico still has the reputation of having some of the largest and violent drug cartels in the Americas, even though the actual drug use among its population is low. In 1988, a Mexican national household survey found that drug use in Mexico was only about a tenth of that in the United States. Furthermore, the highest percentage of drug use in Mexico among adults is marijuana, since heroin and cocaine are simply too expensive for the average Mexican income to afford.⁹⁰ In 1975 Mexico supplied almost 87 percent of heroin and 95 percent of marijuana that was consumed in the U.S. Since 1997, the Mexican drug trade is over a \$40 billion annual business with oil sales coming in a far second with only \$7 billion.⁹¹

Today, prostitution in Mexico is legal with health exams in most parts of Mexico. Places like Tijuana and Juarez still allow for many women to have a livelihood. Tijuana as of 2003 still looks like this according to sociologist David Bellis:

One Saturday night I counted 391 street prostitutes in a two-square block area of the red-light districts. This did not include women in the bars, of which there were probably twenty to thirty. A good portion of these sex workers, with no employment skills and low educational levels, fell into prostitution.⁹²

Like Tijuana, Juarez has the same problems with crime, drug trafficking and prostitution. Prostitution in Juarez has not changed much since prohibition in the U.S. and

⁹⁰ Bellis, 42.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁹² *Ibid.*

there is still “a line of cabs [that] waits on the Mexican side to take Americans to brothels to see or engage the women, for which the cabbies get a cut. These *taxistas* charge \$3 to \$5 U.S.”⁹³ Because of Juarez’s proximity to El Paso, there is also the 12,000-troop army base at Fort Bliss not to mention the thousands of male college students in Texas and New Mexico.⁹⁴

Heads turn in the direction of trouble, like always, and inevitably the finger begins to point toward the one who is farthest away. Whether that distance is based on strangeness, foreign culture, color or comradery among ethnic groups – the blame always rests on the person who is most different or the easiest to dismiss due to limited company. As seen in the literature and documents, alcohol was the reoccurring theme in all that was “evil” about Mexico. It was the root of all problems, even before U.S. prohibition was established. A certain freedom still lingers with Mexico and its border towns that a younger crowd of college students ventures to the Yucatán for Spring Break. It certainly did not help the people of Mexico become understood and certainly reinforced their ideas that there was nothing in common with people who live off of other’s sins. The backgrounds and culture were definitely on separate pages to begin with and since there was no reason to believe that the people of the U.S. could become like “savages” and there was no reason to associate with them. Alcohol brought their ignorance to reality. It gave them a leg to stand on for support in a critical world.

⁹³ Bellis, 59.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 58.

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