

## **Caravans of Friendship: History, Tourism and Politics Along The Mexico City-Laredo Highway, 1920s–1940s**

On the afternoon of May 12, 1931, the Mexican Minister of Communications, General Juan Almazán touched an “electric button” and set off a blast, clearing the last “big rock” from the new international highway connecting the Mexican capital and the US-Mexico border. Those present at the ceremony, which took place in the Mexican town of Tamazunchale in the state of San Luis Potosi, included Finance Minister Montes de Oca and the Head of Mexico’s highway system, Sanchez Mejorada, both who applauded the highway’s potential to advance Mexico’s tourist sector.<sup>1</sup> Although opened to American traffic coming from north of the border, the 765 mile-long route to Mexico City would not be completed in its entirety until the summer of 1936.<sup>2</sup> That same year, while dedicating the highway from Laredo, Texas in a show of goodwill, then U.S. Vice President John Garner exclaimed: “this great highway Mexico has made...will bind in perpetual amity all the countries of the American continents. May caravans of friendship ever pass in every direction over this great highway of peace.”<sup>3</sup>

As part of the eventual Pan-American Highway which would traverse both American continents from Alaska to Argentina, the Mexico City-Laredo Highway was Mexico’s first long-distance paved roadway linking Mexico and the United States. At a huge total sum of over sixty-three million pesos, the Mexican government—with the help of tens-of-thousands of laborers—conquered Mexico’s vast mountainous landscape to forge a physical connection with the United States.<sup>4</sup> The American media and U.S. government promoted the completion of the Mexico City-Laredo Highway as a symbol of friendship between the two countries, and caused some north of the border to claim that the highway raised Mexico’s potential to become “America’s annual vacation land.”<sup>5</sup> Through widespread promotion of the highway’s importance for both countries,

the international highway led to an increased tourism across the Texas-Mexico boundary and permitted American motorists for the first time to embark on a “tour of Mexico.”<sup>6</sup> Despite government-led repatriation campaigns that led to the forced removal of Mexican migrants and Mexican Americans during the 1930s,<sup>7</sup> promotional drives in American media began depicting Mexico as the “good, civilized neighbor,” which solidified an economic, political, and tourism partnership between the two nations.<sup>8</sup> Hailed by the *New York Times* in 1932 as “the greatest single item in Mexico’s vast plans for attracting tourists,” Americans recognized the highway’s development as a symbol of Mexico’s modernization process. More importantly, and central to this work, the route was also seen as a tool for greater contact between the two nations.<sup>9</sup> It was said in 1929 by then President of Mexico Emilio Portes Gil that “the more America sees of Mexico, the more Americans will love Mexico and its people!”<sup>10</sup>

While historians and social scientists have produced a considerable amount of material on the social, racial, and economic influences of American tourism along the US-Mexico boundary, they have rarely investigated tourism as a mechanism to improve relations between the two countries. By investigating the promotion of friendship, by way of cross-border tourism between both governments, this paper shows that the Mexico City-Laredo Highway played an important role in mending the strained relationship between Mexico and the United States. Additionally, the completion of the route to Mexico City also led to an increased American presence in Mexico, which was vital to not only combating the negative views of Mexico but had also created a heightened sense of Pan-Americanism. While not an exhaustive study of border tourism, this paper adds to the knowledge of America’s changing ideas and relationship with Mexico between the 1920s and 1940s, while also shedding light on how tourism across the border was inseparable from the realm of international relations. In the first section, this paper describes the planning

and funding for the Mexico City-Laredo Highway as well as how some American media showcased great enthusiasm for the project during the 1920s and 1930s. How the highway was touted as a political symbol of friendship between the United States and Mexico is the focus of the subsequent section of the paper. When coupled with American media this emphasis acted as a magnet attracting American motorists across the border into "Old Mexico" for the first time in large numbers. For well-to-do adventurers, the highway offered encounters with the "exotic" near to America's door step, of course, which was made possible by the Laredo-Mexico City Highway project. The third section emphasizes how new perspectives of Mexico via media descriptions of locales, tourist sites, and towns found along the highway route forged alternative understandings of America's neighbor to the south. In conclusion, the paper makes clear how the highway crossing into the heart of Mexico promoted greater connectivity between the United States and Mexico while simultaneously bringing Mexico closer to the U.S. sphere of influence.

#### *Planning the "Great High Road" to Mexico City*

Mexico's tourist industry away from the border lagged during the 1920s and 1930s,<sup>11</sup> hence the construction of an international highway was seen as vital for greater economic and cultural exchange between the U.S. and Mexico. After a rise in US-Mexico trade from 1923 to 1926, Mexico City devised an ambitious plan to expand its small but evolving highway system north to the border at Laredo.<sup>12</sup> During the 1920s, Mexico's leaders had praised roads and automobile transportation as both symbols of US-Mexican cooperation and the long-term benefits of economic development. For Mexico's state leaders, the relatively large gap in economic inequality and the challenges of sharing a border with the United States had proved prime reasons for the development of better road networks within the country.<sup>13</sup> If motor car traffic, especially coming from the United States, was to figure in to the development of

industrial and commercial life in Mexico, highways between the two countries would need to be constructed. In 1925, Plutarco Elias Calles, then President of Mexico, emphasized the huge social and economic value of good roads for the overall development of Mexico. Calles, who one Texas newspaper dubbed “the strong man of Mexico,” included the development of highways as one of the principal aims of Mexico’s reconstruction program.<sup>14</sup>

The priority of constructing better roads in Mexico was also to attract American and foreign tourism to larger portions of the country.<sup>15</sup> While plans for expanding Mexico’s roadways towards the border were under way, Mexico’s newly formed Mexican Automobile Association, with its separate Mexican and North American memberships, recognized the boom to tourist trade that the development of highways could be. The Association lobbied all levels of Mexico’s government to implement a gasoline tax which would help fund the Mexico City-Laredo Highway project, while also urging government officials to lessen the entry and exit regulations so that tourists could have easier access to Mexico.<sup>16</sup> Taking three *centavos* (three cents) for every liter of gas purchased, the revenues from the gasoline tax, in the first year, 1925, totaled more than 3 million pesos, and would grow to over 13 million a year five years later.<sup>17</sup> In August of 1925, a dispatch from Mexico City confirmed that the Mexican government had given the contract to a Chicago firm for the building and construction of the Mexico City-Laredo Highway, as well as other planned roadways.<sup>18</sup>

When the route for the Mexico City-Laredo Highway was selected by the Mexican government in 1925, both the Mexican people and American tourists expressed surprise. Many wondered why the proposed route did not follow the national railway lines of Mexico, which linked Mexico City with Texas, passing through important cities like Queretaro, San Luis Potosi, and Monterrey (the latter city was connected by the highway). Moreover, many further opined

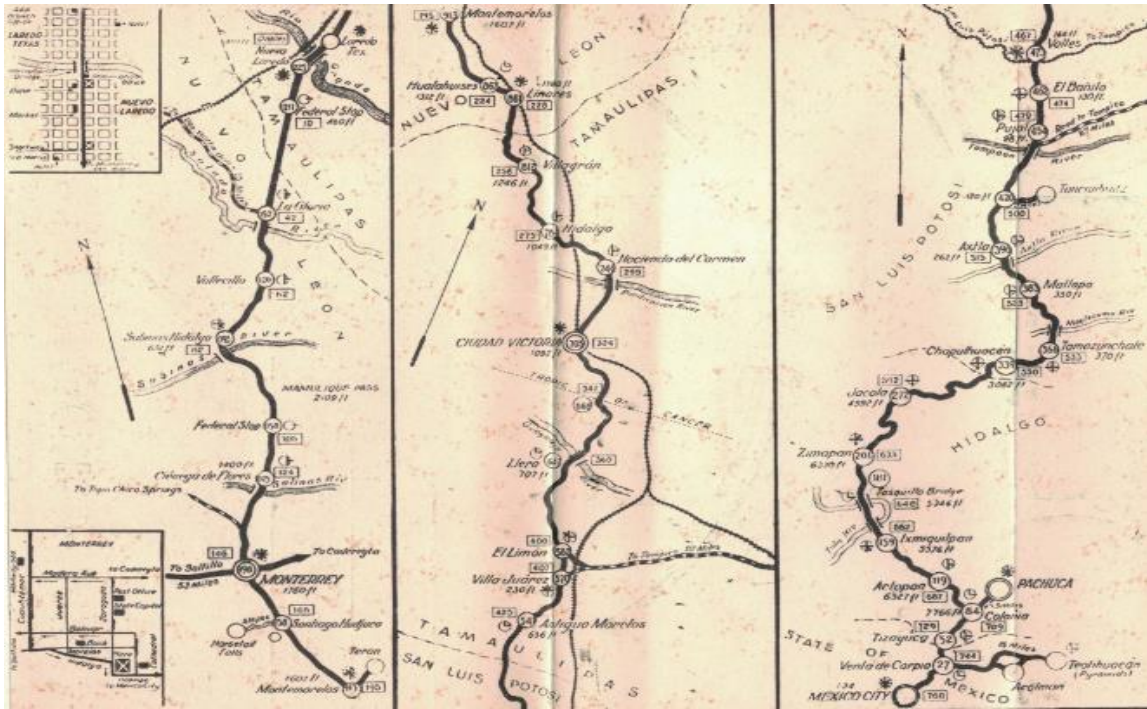
the fact that the vast open desert along much of the stretch would prove suitable for road building due to the openness of the region, as well as lessen the cost of the project.<sup>19</sup> Mexico City replied that the barren desert route in which the railway follows was seen as one of the main “drawbacks” as an attraction for American tourists. The proposed route, as described by the *San Antonio Express*, made available “a scenic landscape that will vie with any natural splendor anywhere offered the tourist.”<sup>20</sup> In sum, Mexico City deliberately planned the route of the highway to follow a path of not only scenic, but varied landscapes that would suit foreign and American autoists.

As construction of the Highway commenced in 1925, U.S. President Calvin Coolidge also pushed for better roads nationwide in America, urging the need for a cross-boundary connection between Monterrey and Mexico City.<sup>21</sup> With the construction of the international highway underway, some American representatives, like former Oklahoma Governor C.N. Haskell, were already pointing towards making proper arrangements for a large movement of American tourists across the border. By the spring of 1926, Haskell had already made a number of trips to Mexico in order to make suggestions and give his backing for the highway project. The former Governor had even gone so far as to try out the barely planned route in order to, according to the *Los Angeles Times*, “blaze the trail for many thousands of automobilists he plans to bring to Mexico in the future.”<sup>22</sup> By mid-1927, the first unit between Nuevo Laredo and Monterrey of the Mexico City-Laredo Highway was complete. As one of the most important sections of the road, President Calles opened the route to tourist traffic that same year, allowing American motorists to travel the 146 miles to Monterrey. Also in 1927, extension of the highway southward towards Mexico City was underway, with 10 million pesos set aside annually for the subsequent four years, and tens of thousands of laborers working on the project.<sup>23</sup>

Although the highway project was only in its beginning phase, American media and organizations praised the route as an iconic symbol not just for Mexico, but for each American continent. In 1928, the Rotary Club's magazine *The Rotarian* claimed the highway "will open up untapped resources" and will bring "immense possibilities for developing international acquaintance."<sup>24</sup> While construction of the project was moving forward, then Mexican President Emilio Portes Gil in April of 1929 exclaimed: "Home of the angels, and of numerous lakes, majestic mountains and winding rivers that run throughout the country. Mexico awaits the American traveler!"<sup>25</sup> In 1931 the entire length of the highway was complete, however, most of the scenic and mountainous regions of the road were not yet paved.<sup>26</sup>



**Figure 1.** The International Bridge in Laredo, Texas crossing the Rio Grande River and serving as the entry point for motorists entering Mexico, circa 1936. Source: Author's personal collection from *High Spots of Mexico-Laredo Highway* (1939) original postcard collection.



**Figure 2.** Tourist map showing the Mexico City-Laredo Highway with major towns and cities along the route with northernmost (left), central (middle), and southernmost (right) stretches of the highway. Source: Author's personal collection from *High Spots of Mexico-Laredo Highway* (1939) original postcard collection.

Although the Mexico City-Laredo Highway had provisionally opened in May 1931, allowing people to go as far as Monterrey, the eagerness of American autoists caused alarm for the protection of the still developing Mexican tourist industry. “The future prosperity of Mexico and the development of the automobile tourist trade are being seriously threatened by certain unthinking people who are prematurely publicizing the Mexico City-Laredo Highway,” said the Mexican Chamber of Commerce. Although the highway’s promotion by American newspapers was seen as being “born from uniform enthusiasm,” the Mexican Chamber of Commerce claimed that “if through premature publicity, tourists start to Mexico City along this highway and if cars need to be abandoned...or goes over the cliffs in the mountainous sections, automobile tourist travel will be set back several years.”<sup>27</sup>

The Mexican government also received aid for the highway's development from American industries and corporations. Negotiating for tax advances to the Mexican government, four large American oil companies doing business in Mexico struck deals with Mexico City. The deal consisted of two phases. Phase one would require all four companies to advance \$10 million to the Mexican Treasury Department on taxes, while phase two called for the advancement of \$400,000 a month for the remainder of 1931.<sup>28</sup> While the highway's completion was expected to occur at the end of 1931, the Mexican government passed no money to carry out the full completion of the roadway.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, it was also announced the following year that many contractors from the United States had defaulted, leaving large sections of "the great high road" to Mexico City unfinished.<sup>30</sup> In September of 1932, the Mexican Communications Department announced that all other road projects would be suspended until the Mexico City-Laredo Highway was complete.<sup>31</sup>

In May of 1936, the Mexico City-Laredo Highway was finally finished. In announcing the completion of the highway, Vicente Cortez Nerrera, Under-Secretary of Communications, wired his chief stating "With great satisfaction I inform you that the Mexico City-Laredo Highway has been completed the entire length."<sup>32</sup> Stretching from the Texas border, the highway crossed Mexico's dry desert northlands, onto a series of subtropical sugar-producing valleys, and then traversing the soaring Sierra Madre Mountains, before descending into Mexico's great valley and arriving at the Mexican capital.<sup>33</sup> After the completion of the highway, newspapers around the U.S. described the great challenges that Mexico had overcome to connect its capital city to the United States. An Ohio newspaper stated "bridging deep gorges, fighting sliding rock, and conquering all other obstacles...Mexico had to resort to odd methods to get the job done."<sup>34</sup> An article from a Mississippi newspaper described the ease of travel into the mountainous



regions claiming that “despite the road crossing the Continental Divide, the stiffest grade is only 6 percent.”<sup>35</sup> The development of the Mexico City-Laredo Highway allowed large numbers of American motorists to venture far beyond Mexico’s border towns, across the rugged landscape, and into the interior of the “Southern Republic.”<sup>36</sup> By placing tourism in a central role, the highway would become a symbol of understanding between Mexico and the United States. It also did much to advance relations between both governments and allow for a growing sense of connectedness between the two nations, even if many American tourists had come to see “old Mexico.”



**Figure 3.** Entering the tropics: American motorists during the late 1930s and early 1940s saw rural life in Mexico as this scene adjacent to the highway near El Limon in Tamaulipas (400 miles from the border) shows, circa 1936. Source: Author's personal collection from *High Spots of Mexico-Laredo Highway* (1939) original postcard collection.



**Figure 4.** A treacherous stretch of the Laredo-Mexico City Highway near Tamazanchule, San Luis Potosi. Among the highest elevated sections of the route it was also the last stretch to be completed, circa 1936. Source: Author's personal collection from *High Spots of Mexico-Laredo Highway* (1939) original postcard collection.

### *The Highway as a Symbol of Friendship?*

The tremendous engineering feat that was the Mexico City-Laredo Highway grew out of a push to bring American tourists into Mexico and improve Mexico's economic situation. It was promoted by both governments as a symbol of friendship between the two countries. A few weeks before the highway's completion in June 1936, a monument in the form of an *exedra* (a semi-circular dome structure) celebrating the conclusion of the highway's construction was erected at the most outstanding point along the highway known as Barranca de San Vicente. The monument, which could be seen from a distance of five kilometers, was to fit in with the "harmony" and the "magnitude of the project and panorama," according to Mexico's then

Minister of Communications General Francisco Mujica. On the other side of the border, the *Laredo Times* also praised the monument's importance as a fitting symbol for the international artery, and for the "mutual understanding and friendship of the peoples of America."<sup>37</sup>

The promotion of friendship between Mexico and the United States—which largely revolved around the highway—would have a profound effect on bringing American tourists and their automobiles to traverse the new international highway. However, tourist promoters in the United States were keenly aware of the poor impression Americans had of Mexico by the 1930s, which was largely due to past promotional efforts had in bringing tourists across the border. Beginning in the 1920s, and throughout much of the Prohibition era, crowds of American citizens could be seen collecting at the border with Mexico in order to participate in the cross-border tourist experience. The adventure-seekers who lined up to cross the border were largely working and middle-class families, as well as upper-class investors and land-grabbers. Yankee tourists crossed the boundary not only to experience the excitement of crossing an international border, but to purchase cheap land, drink alcohol, and gamble. Americans were lured to the border due to tireless efforts made by tourism promoters which portrayed Mexico as a cheap and exploitable region that catered to pleasure-seeking American consumers' needs and wants. Additionally, in the language of Rachel St. John, "Linking shopping for curios, buying real estate, and partaking of prohibited vices, both American and Mexican boosters constructed a consumers' border that offered investment opportunities, exotic experiences, and illicit activities unavailable in the United States."<sup>38</sup> Throughout the 1920s and early 1930s, what drew American tourists to the border was what mostly kept them from journeying far from it—easy access to that which was illegal in America.

Efforts during the 1930s to amend the negative perceptions of Mexico were among the highest priorities for tourist promoters on both sides of the border. During the years before World War II, the American and Mexican governments, along with organizations like Rockefeller's Office of Inter-American Affairs, helped steer American tourists to Mexico and Latin America as a strategy to fortify continental unity. However, efforts to transform the American public's impressions of Mexico via official tourist offices and media sources in the United States were only halfheartedly adopted by tourists who crossed the border during the 1930s.<sup>39</sup> Since the Mexican government was not in an economic position to establish mass publicity campaigns promoting tourism, both the U.S. government and the Mexican tourist industry counted on individuals who had traveled the new international highway to combat America's perception of Mexico as the dangerous and vice-ridden neighbor to the south. These American travelers came in the form of government officials, American motorists, and American travel writers who had experienced the beauty, hospitality, and exoticness of Mexico along the 765 mile-long route to the Capital.

One of the largest supporters of tourism between Mexico and the United States was American Vice-President John Garner. However, for the initial decades following the construction of the highway, most tourism was U.S.-based motorists entering Mexico. During the formal inauguration of the Mexico City-Laredo Highway on July 1, 1936, the Vice-President along, with U.S. Ambassador to Mexico Josephus Daniels, and Texas Governor James V. Allred, met with Mexico's President Lazaro Cardenas and Minister of Foreign Relations General Eduardo Hay as well as other representatives from Mexico at the International Bridge in Laredo, Texas.<sup>40</sup> In a speech to the Mexican delegation inaugurating the highway, Vice-President Garner expressed his and the U.S. government's support for the development of tourism across the

border and the potential for stimulating friendship between the U.S. and Mexico. Vice-President Garner proclaimed:

Over this highway will flow modern vehicles carrying happy citizens on errands of friendship and pleasure. Over this highway will journey merchants, spreading material comforts. And I am happy to say that over this highway will travel messengers of science, culture, and goodwill. This will be no one way street. Our people going southward will pass your people travelling northward, each bringing with them a keen appreciation of the things that are good in the other country.<sup>41</sup>

Following the dedication speech and ceremonies, a fifteen car motorcade with representatives from both countries journeyed down the highway to Mexico City. Vice-President Garner, whose former congressional district was the Laredo area, was portrayed as one of the government's strongest supporters of the bi-national tourist alliance. During the July 1 dedication ceremony, Mexico's Minister of Foreign Relations, General Eduardo Hay stated:

If a nation is traversed by useful highways, these increase in importance when they serve as arteries of communication with neighboring countries...International highways contribute to clear understanding and knowledge of citizens of such countries, and for that reason, serve to weld their spiritual, social and political relations.<sup>42</sup>

In Washington, President Roosevelt congratulated the Mexican government and its people "on the auspicious occasion of the opening of the Mexico City-Laredo Highway."<sup>43</sup> While government officials from both countries were expressing their acknowledgments of friendship, Mexico's tourism planners were working hard to create an improved image of Mexico. In this attempt, the Mexican government tried to beautify the route along the highway in an attempt to attract the kind of American tourists who according to Dina Berger "had only the best of intentions," and did not want to patronize "cabarets, cantinas, and centers of vice."<sup>44</sup> The efforts to convince American tourists to see more of Mexico was reliant on getting them to traverse beyond the border. The promotion of friendship and the highway itself gave ambitious

motorists from the north an opportunity to explore all that Mexico had to offer. It also allowed a greater opportunity for both American and Mexican organizations to better work with each other. The National Automobile Association of Mexico, Mexico's oldest motor club, had made it possible for the U.S. government as well as the American Automobile Association (AAA) to more easily distribute tourist cards which were issued at border checkpoints.<sup>45</sup> By promoting and allowing for an easy entry across the border, Mexico would gain money through tourism to kick start the economy, while U.S. travelers would gain a cheap and exciting tourist destination close to home.<sup>46</sup>



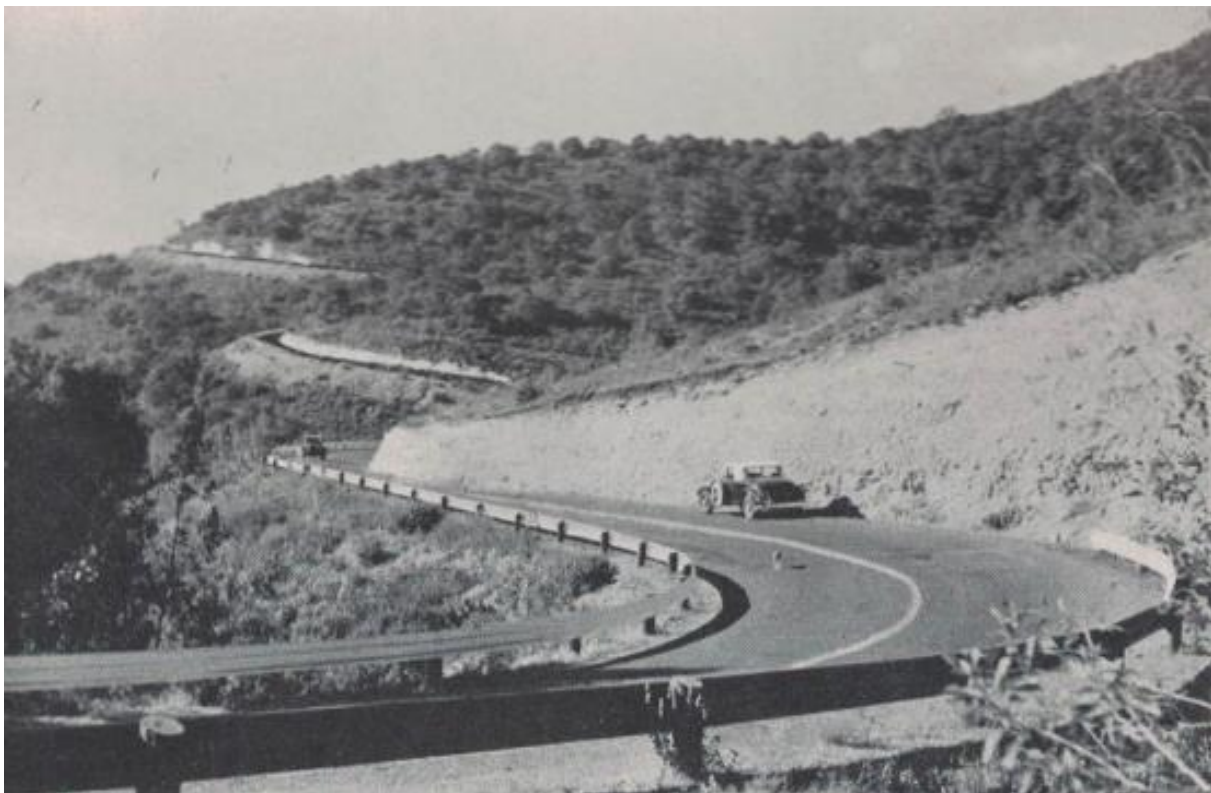
**Figure 5.** Roadside attractions such as the Casa Grande in Ciudad Valles catered to American travelers and their pocketbooks offering food, shelter, gambling, gas, and souvenirs, circa 1936.

Source: Author's personal collection from *High Spots of Mexico-Laredo Highway* original postcard collection.

During the construction of the highway, the Mexican Automobile Association (AMA) pushed to meet the demand for hotels and restaurants along the highway to provide better services to touring motorists (see figure 5). They even appointed four U.S. representatives to



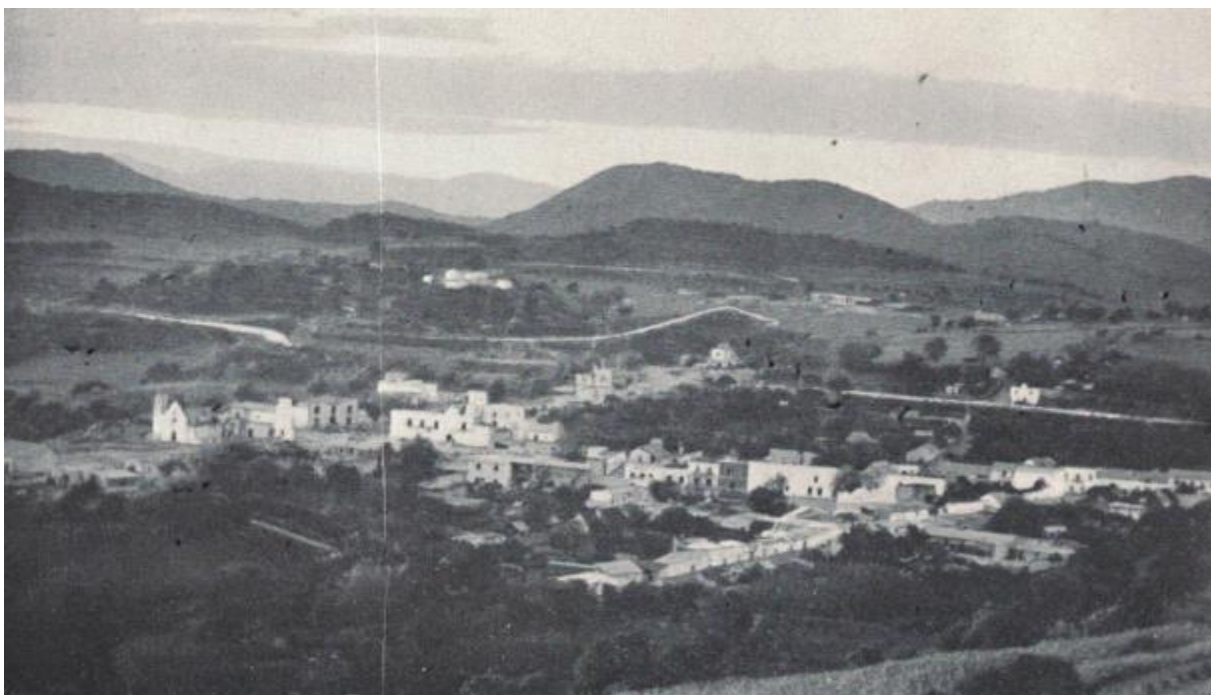
encourage American motorists to travel to Mexico. One representative from Texas, William H. Furlong, toured the United States to promote and introduce the idea of travelling the Mexico City-Laredo Highway. He published a monthly bulletin titled the “Furlong Service,” which reported the advancement and recent developments of Mexico’s road conditions as well as describing the route into Mexico in great detail.<sup>47</sup> Furlong proved to be an important contributor to the AMA as well as a powerful source in the overall growth of Mexico’s tourist industry. He not only defended the safety conditions and comfort of motor travel in Mexico, but with his Furlong Service he prepared American motorists who sought to travel into Mexico for the first time.



**Figure 6.** Five hundred miles south of the border, the image of a stretch of highway near Chapulhuacan shows how the modern highway allowed automobilists to travel Mexico's rugged landscape, circa 1936. Source: Author's personal collection from *High Spots of Mexico-Laredo Highway* original postcard collection.

With the promotion of American and Mexican friendship, and the beautification of the highway, tourist developers in Mexico had further hoped that American motorists would not only led to a successful tourist industry, but would also spread the tourism development process to Mexico City. However, negative publicity still surrounded Mexico after the highway's completion. One year after the Mexico City-Laredo Highway's completion, the *New York Times* published an article titled, "To Mexico by Motor." Unhelpful to both the U.S.' and Mexico's campaign to better the country's image, the article terrified potential tourists by describing the hazards and dangers one could encounter while motoring through Mexico. The article complained that the highway was without guardrails, was slow moving due to construction, and was frequented by crossing cattle, goats, and sheep. Described as "tempting fate," the article went on in great length, portraying the far from smooth ride along the Mexican "road."<sup>48</sup> As Mexican tourism during the 1930s depended on American media to change the perception of Mexico and it was at times providing coverage such as this, the role individual travelers played in describing Mexico was no doubt an important element in bettering not only the Mexican tourism industry but also for changing the American perception of Mexico. With the increase of American tourists crossing the international boundary, some travelers exclaimed a feeling of national connection between the U.S. and Mexico, with a growing yet limited sense of pan-Americanism. American travelers along the Mexico City-Laredo Highway also described Mexico's beauty in their writings that allowed for an alternative view of the country. The Mexico City-Laredo Highway now offered a chance for American tourists to travel away from the border and into Mexico's interior for the first time. Those who perceived Mexico in a positive light used the highway to portray Mexico as an exotic, poor, yet friendly neighbor deserving of American amity.





**Figure 7.** The picturesque town of Jacala in Hidalgo State (230 miles from Mexico City) as seen from the highway above, circa 1936. Source: Author's personal collection from *High Spots of Mexico-Laredo Highway* original postcard collection.



**Figure 8.** American tourists were not only limited to the Laredo-Mexico City Highway itself, but also rougher roads that lead to other urban sites. In this image, two tourists walk along a road connecting Villa Juarez to Tampico. Source: Author's personal collection from *High Spots of Mexico-Laredo Highway* original postcard collection.

### *The Highway Offers Travelers a New Perspective of Mexico*

Travelling into the interior of Mexico allowed for some Americans to create a new image of the country. These new images were created through Americans' experiences of seeing Mexico's beauty, friendliness, and the establishment of a physical connection between the two countries due to the highway's creation. In 1937, one California woman who travelled the Mexico City-Laredo Highway was shocked at how incorrect her assumptions about Mexico were. Published in an article in California's *Ukiah Republican*, the woman exclaimed: "Naturally I had some ideas about Mexico before I left...but they were all wrong!" The article, kindly titled "Mexico is Land of Charm," went on describing the easiness of travel across the border and how there were "English-speaking people at most of the hotels."<sup>49</sup> The article also noted that in 1937, more than 150 cars crossed the border at Laredo daily.<sup>50</sup> Mexico's tourism industry relied on positive press in the U.S. about Mexico, like the piece above, to bring more tourists across the border. With more and more Americans crossing the border, Mexico was starting to earn a more positive image in the United States. Often times, American motorists complimented Mexico for the route's beauty. In Edward Tomlinson's *The Other Americans*, the author states:

Southward from the Texas border, or following the new Pan-American highway that connects the United States at Laredo with Mexico City, one sees a panorama like that of the Holy Land. Powdery desert, arid mountains rising abruptly from the plains, broad fertile valleys dotted with far flung fields of the cactus-like *maguey*, all unfold in a colorful scroll.<sup>51</sup>

Other travel writers who journeyed along the route to Mexico City portrayed scenes of Mexico as being serene and unique in beauty, offering a new perspective of the country. One writer stated:

South of Victoria the highway runs through high mesas thickly covered with underbrush. You'll be amazed at the number of black goats in every herd. Later there are tall, stately palms and lime and lemon trees, as well as mangoes. Swarms of yellow butterflies make miniature clouds. The Rio Sabinas and the Rio Frio are

worth stopping and looking at. You may never see water of such startling blue anywhere else.<sup>52</sup>

The highway began to transform some Americans perceptions of Mexico. Some American motorists had travelled the highway before the entire route was complete. This, in turn, led to frequent delays and obstructions along the route. However, with the completion of the highway in 1936, travel along the highway increased. One American travel writer described the easiness of travelling in Mexico because of the route. He stated:

Today's motorist is little likely to realize what driving down to Mexico City meant only a few years ago. The highway was officially opened in 1936, but for years before that, even before construction on a modern scale began in September 1925, hardy men were driving over what was little more than a mountain trail. Ten years later, cars were delayed for days by construction in the mountains or waiting for flood waters to subside...but let by gones be by gones. We merely wished to give you a passing hint of the romance and hardships of earlier days which make it possible to drive down to Mexico City today as easily as to California.<sup>53</sup>

For some American motorists, the reason for crossing the border was to experience the exotic. The Mexico City-Laredo Highway offered tourists to see many regions of Mexico, showcasing the differences between the tourist-generating and tourist-hosting countries. However, for some tourists and travelers, Mexico was not only an exotic and primitive land to gaze at, but was a country that could certainly be a friend to the United States. In a somewhat pan-Americanist voice, one travel writer stated, "Mexicans call it the Rio Bravo, 'Brave River of the North.' No longer is it the dividing line between us. Rather it unites us. It is a mere line of demarcation over which bridges are built, rails are laid...and automobiles driven."<sup>54</sup>

The Mexico City-Laredo Highway served many purposes for both governments which largely revolved around tourism. Certainly, the highway increased tourism, which was always a tool meant to be used two-fold; lay the foundation for economic growth and satisfy other

national interests such as closer economic cooperation with Mexico, expand overland transportation routes, and install closer connectivity with Mexico City. However, tourism can often times be altered in favor of the powerful, whose interests and long-term aims exert a hegemonic force over the destiny of tourist hosting-community.<sup>55</sup> This is especially so when the tourist-hosting country, like Mexico, is a poorer, less-developed country in comparison to the tourist-sending one.



**Figure 9.** The highway, a few miles outside of Mexico City, circa 1936. Source: Author's personal collection from *High Spots of Mexico-Laredo Highway* original postcard collection.

### *Conclusion*

The official opening of the Mexico City-Laredo Highway in 1936 was significant for a number of reasons. The highway functioned as a link between the previously strained relationships of the two countries and was promoted as a symbol of friendship between the U.S.

and Mexico. Despite some Americans' attempts to portray Mexico more positively, this sense of friendship was mostly felt between the two governments and had little effect on the American public as a whole. In the 1930s and 1940s, tensions between Whites and Latinos escalated in the U.S. with events such as the campaign to repatriate Mexicans and Mexican Americans living in the U.S., as well as the zoot suit riots that occurred throughout the country.<sup>56</sup> However, the improvement of bi-national relations was crucial for the development of Mexico's tourism industry and did help in bringing American motorists to travel the highway into Mexico.

The development of the Mexico City-Laredo Highway ushered in a new period in the evolution of Mexico's tourism industry and brought a huge increase in the number of tourist entries from the United States into Mexico. For example, the number of American motor tourists who entered Mexico between 1935 and 1937 increased by more than 50 percent, from 14,500 to about 29,000 people.<sup>57</sup> The combination of American media's and travel writers' promotion of travel to Mexico mirrored the friendship between two previously contentious neighbors and because of this improved relationship, Mexico capitalized. The construction of the Mexico City-Laredo Highway not only helped kick start Mexico's tourism industry, but was seen by the U.S. and Mexico as a mechanism to achieve improved international harmony and act as a force for peace. The idea promoted between the two governments was that the greater the contact between nations and cultures, the greater will be the level of international understanding. Some travel writers' descriptions of Mexico during the 1930s and 1940s reflected this pan-American sense of solidarity.

Some scholars state that travel between nations may also encourage economic interdependence.<sup>58</sup> However, the uneven flow of American tourists travelling into Mexico can also be seen as a force for constructing economic dependence. As Colin Michael Hall has points

out, “from the perspective of the tourism-generating country such dependence may be politically useful, as it may create conditions for influencing the foreign policy of the host country.”<sup>59</sup> Over time, the Mexico City-Laredo Highway did much to establish better relations between the governments of the U.S. and Mexico, but it also quickened the pace of globalization in the border region. First, the highway’s completion in 1936 allowed for an increased American presence in Mexico. Second, it led to a reliance on American tourists as a source of capital for the developing Mexican economy, which not all of Mexico’s leadership supported during the 1930s and 1940s. Most of all, the long-term impact of the highway was the ushering in of American economic domination of the borderlands and the possibility the route to Mexico City offered for greater trade with Mexico.

Despite the Mexico City-Laredo Highway’s promotion as a new destination for American adventure-seekers, some American media during the 1930s, like *Business Week*, declared it as “The New Trade Route to Mexico.” In addition, regardless of rising anti-American overtones in Mexico by the late 1930s<sup>60</sup>, many U.S. multinational corporations used the route to establish manufacturing bases and joint-venture operations along the border. Companies such as General Electric and General Motors quickly lead the way for the hundreds of *maquiladora* manufacturing facilities that would follow over the subsequent decades.<sup>61</sup> In a way, the investigation of tourism along the Mexico City-Laredo Highway allows the historian to see the process of globalization at work. Beginning in the late 1930s, the highway helped Mexico modernize its tourist industry, better linked the U.S. to Mexico City and Latin America, and allowed for a higher degree of cross-cultural contact between the two countries. However, the promotion of the highway as a symbol of friendship, and a force for peace, had hid the many political dimensions within which tourism often occurs, allowing for the U.S. to extend its

economic reach into Mexico and Latin America. In this sense, the Mexico City-Laredo Highway project adds to the suggestion that many bilateral tourism trade agreements involve the establishment of better transport in the host country. Furthermore, the idea that tourism along the Mexico City-Laredo Highway was a force for peace was a somewhat simplistic interpretation of the complexity of tourism and international politics along the U.S.-Mexico border. This simplification of the political interests of cross-border tourism helped serve the interests of both the U.S. and Mexico during the 1930s, but also helped provide a platform in which the effects of globalization could occur on the border.

The Mexico City-Laredo Highway would be the primary north-south route between Mexico City and the United States for decades after its construction. The annual increase of American tourists crossing the border into Mexico via the highway was an important aspect of U.S.-Mexico relations. The long-lasting impact of the highway helped establish the manufacturing centers known as *maquiladora* that are found along the length of the U.S.-Mexico border to this day.

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### **ENDNOTES**

<sup>1</sup> "Mexico Opens Highway," *New York Times*, May 13, 1931.

<sup>2</sup> "Pan-Am," *Laredo Times*, May 28, 1936.

<sup>3</sup> "Garner Helps to Dedicate Highway," *Laredo Times*, February 11, 1940.

<sup>4</sup> "Highway A Major Transportation Aid to Mexico," *Laredo Times*, June 30, 1936.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> "46 Tourists to Mexico Through," *Laredo Times*, June 30, 1935.

<sup>7</sup> Francisco E. Balderrama and Raymond Rodriguez, *Decade of Betrayal: Mexican Repatriation in the 1930s* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2006), 1.

<sup>8</sup> Dina Berger, "A Drink between Friends: Mexican and American Pleasure Seekers in 1940s Mexico City," in *Adventures into Mexico: American Tourism Beyond the Border*, ed. Nicholas Dagen Bloom (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006), 28.

<sup>9</sup> "Mexico to Return Railroad At Once," *New York Times*, September 26, 1932.

<sup>10</sup> "Mexico Will Offer Beauty and Romance to the Adventure-Seeking Motorist for this Summer," *The Sunday Avalanche Journal* (TX,) April 28, 1929.

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- <sup>11</sup> Dina Berger, *The Development of Mexico's Tourism Industry: Pyramids By Day, Martinis By Night* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 39-42.
- <sup>12</sup> John A. Adams Jr., *Conflict and Commerce on the Rio Grande: Laredo, 1755-1955* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2008), 168.
- <sup>13</sup> Benjamin Fulwider, "Driving the Nation: Road Transportation and the Postrevolutionary Mexican State, 1925-1960," (PhD diss., Georgetown University, 2009), 1.
- <sup>14</sup> "Two Laredos Are All Set," *San Antonio Express*, June 28, 1936.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>16</sup> Dennis Merrill, *Negotiating Paradise: U.S. Tourism and Empire in Twentieth-Century Latin America* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 70-71.
- <sup>17</sup> "Two Laredos Are All Set," *San Antonio Express*, June 28, 1936.
- <sup>18</sup> "Local News," *Laredo Times*, August 4, 1925.
- <sup>19</sup> "Two Laredos Are All Set," *San Antonio Express*, June 28, 1936.
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>21</sup> "Laredo the Gateway To Mexico," *Laredo Times*, September 8, 1925.
- <sup>22</sup> "Mexico to Seek Autoists," *Los Angeles Times*, January 10, 1926.
- <sup>23</sup> "Mexico Plans Road Construction," *New York Times*, February 11, 1927.
- <sup>24</sup> Everett Spring, "The Pan-American Highway: An Industrial Thread Which Will Join Two Continents," *The Rotarian*, January 1952, 21.
- <sup>25</sup> "Mexico Will Offer Beauty and Romance to the Adventure-Seeking Motorist for this Summer," *The Sunday Avalanche Journal*, April 28, 1929.
- <sup>26</sup> "Mexico Opens Highway," *New York Times*, May 13, 1931.
- <sup>27</sup> "C.C. Warns of New Highway Car Travel," *Laredo Times*, May 24, 1931.
- <sup>28</sup> "Mexico Gets Highway Aid," *Laredo Times*, June 11, 1931.
- <sup>29</sup> "Mexico Plans Strenuous Drive to Finish Highway," *Laredo Times*, December 14, 1931.
- <sup>30</sup> "Mexico City-Laredo Highway will be Speeded to Open It in 1933," *New York Times*, September 26, 1932.
- <sup>31</sup> "Efforts Concentrated on Road from Texas," *Los Angeles Times*, September 27, 1932.
- <sup>32</sup> "Pan-Am," *Laredo Times*, May 28, 1936.
- <sup>33</sup> Merrill, *Negotiating Paradise*, 69.
- <sup>34</sup> "Mexico Scales Mountains to Build U.S. Road," *Portsmouth Times*, June 19, 1936.
- <sup>35</sup> "Mexico Conquers Heights in Road Building," *Hattiesburg American*, June 25, 1936.
- <sup>36</sup> "Mexico To Seek Autoists," *Los Angeles Times*, January 10, 1926.
- <sup>37</sup> "Beautiful Marker to Cost 130,000 Pesos To Be Built By Mexico on Pan-American Highway at Once," *Laredo Times*, November 27, 1935.
- <sup>38</sup> Rachel St. John, "Selling the Border: Trading Land, Attracting Tourists, and Marketing American Consumption on the Baja California Border, 1900-1934," in *Land of Necessity: Consumer Culture in the United States-Mexico Borderlands*, ed. Alexis McCrossen (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2009), 113-114.
- <sup>39</sup> Berger, *The Development of Mexico's Tourism Industry*, 32.
- <sup>40</sup> "Two Laredos Are All Set," *San Antonio Express*, June 28, 1936.
- <sup>41</sup> "Garner Helps to Dedicate Highway," *Laredo Times*, February 11, 1940.
- <sup>42</sup> "New Laredo Road Opened," *Los Angeles Times*, July 2, 1936.
- <sup>43</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>44</sup> Berger, *The Development of Mexico's Tourism Industry*, 62.



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<sup>45</sup> “AAA Fosters Tourist Trade between U.S. and Mexico,” *Laredo Times*, February 11, 1940.

<sup>46</sup> As war loomed in Europe, many international destinations became off limits for American travelers who sought to partake in a tourist experience far from home. Mexico became increasingly attractive as a substitute tourist destination.

<sup>47</sup> Berger, *The Development of Mexico's Tourism Industry*, 46.

<sup>48</sup> “To Mexico By Motor,” *New York Times*, April 3, 1937. A detailed description of the article's impact can be found in Dina Berger's *The Development of Mexico's Tourism Industry*.

<sup>49</sup> “Mexico Is Land of Charm,” *Ukiah Republican*, September 1, 1937.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Edward Tomlinson, *The Other Americans: Our Neighbors to the South* (New York, NY: Scribners, 1943), 51.

<sup>52</sup> Cecil Carnes and Fred Carnes, *You Must Go To Mexico: Down the Pan American Highway with Cecil and Fred Carnes* (Chicago, IL: Ziff Davis Publishing Co., 1947), 46-47.

<sup>53</sup> Harry A. Franck, and Herbert C. Lanks, *The Pan American Highway: From the Rio Grande to the Canal Zone* (New York, NY: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1940), 14.

<sup>54</sup> Tomlinson, *The Other Americans*, 50.

<sup>55</sup> Stephen Wearing, Deborah Stevenson, and Tamara Young, *Tourist Cultures: Identity, Place and the Traveller* (London: SAGE Publications, 2010), 54-55.

<sup>56</sup> The Zoot Suit Riots, were a series of civil conflicts that occurred in June 1943, mostly in Los Angeles, between U.S. servicemen and Mexican American youths. Some Mexican American young men wore outfits called zoot suits as a sign of protest. The zoot suit outfit was a broad-shouldered drape jacket coupled with balloon-leg trousers, and often a wide, flamboyant hat. Mexican and Mexican American youths who wore these outfits were called zoot-suiters.

<sup>57</sup> Berger, *The Development of Mexico's Tourism Industry*, 45-46.

<sup>58</sup> S.G. Britton, “The Political Economy of Tourism in the Third World,” *Annals of Tourism Research* 9, No.3 (1982): 331-332.

<sup>59</sup> Colin Michael Hall, *Tourism and Politics: Policy, Power and Place* (New York, NY: John Wiley and Sons, 1994), 60.

<sup>60</sup> In order to counteract the failure of agrarian reform to raise profits of rural Mexicans, Mexico's President Lazaro Cardenas launched an investigation of several large U.S. companies operating in Mexico, especially oil companies, to criticize them for the low wages paid to laborers. After the companies, such as Standard Oil, refused to cooperate, Cardenas expropriated the companies' land and ultimately kicked the foreign companies out. However, President Roosevelt advocated the continuation of the Good Neighbor Policy. Stewart Brewer, *Borders and Bridges: A History of U.S.-Latin American Relations* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2006), 105-106.

<sup>61</sup> Adams Jr., *Conflict and Commerce on the Rio Grande*, 168-169.