



In Search of El dorado

A daily journal of my travels and adventures in my.....Search for Eldorado

Hello to Family & Friends

Thursday, February 11th 2021 Day 25



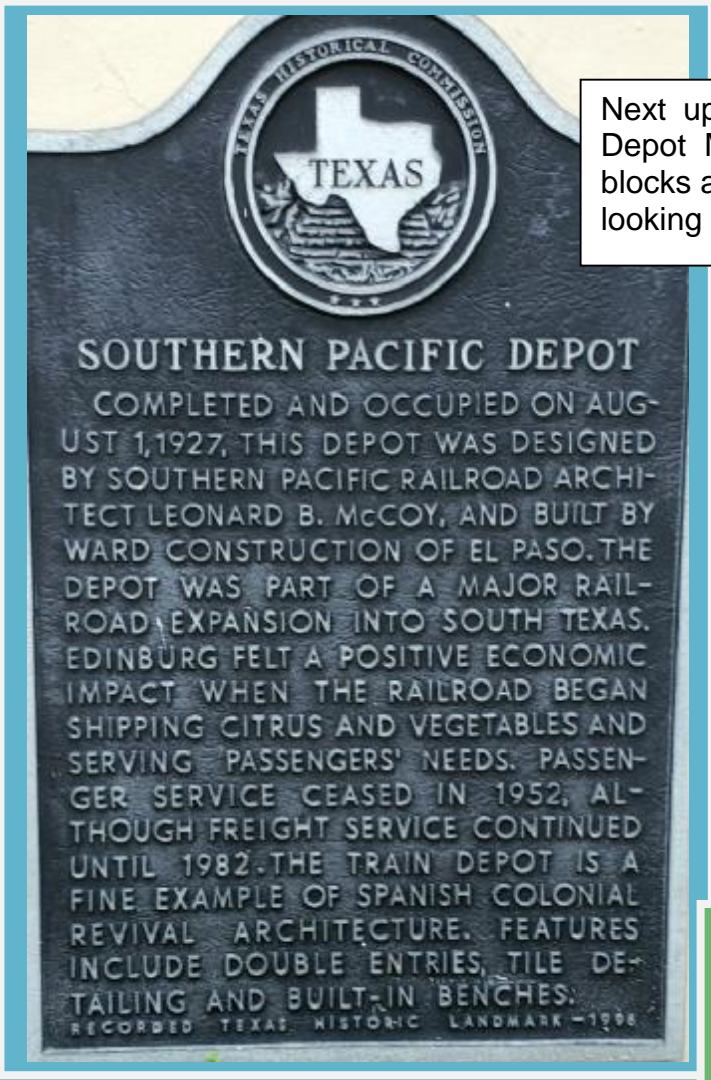
The planetarium is on the grounds of the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley. Every parking lot I passed said 'parking with valid permit only', even the visitor's lot. Since they were 90% empty I don't think it mattered.

I navigated my way around campus to the planetarium, which the website states is open from 8-5, only to find it closed due to Covid. I called the number on the site to ask for sure because it did say something about making a reservation. "No" she says, "it's closed until further notice." Then why does the website say it's open? "Oh, does it? I'm sorry, I'll have to change that." It's only been eleven months since Covid closed everything down, and they never realized the website was not updated? And this is supposed to be an institute of higher learning? I know, I'm being very cynical. (like, why didn't I call first?)

It was a very 'gray day' when I awoke this morning. It was about 62 degrees when I went to bed last night and only in the low 50's when I opened the shades. The temp slowly went down throughout the day with a brisk north wind and misty rain. Quite the change from the 88 degrees on Tuesday. I know, you guys have it quite a bit colder back home, but that's one of the reasons I'm down here instead of up there. A good day to spend at the planetarium.



Next up is the Chamber of Commerce and the Railroad Depot Museum. I just drove over since it was only two blocks away. Closed due to Covid. Too bad, it's a really nice looking depot.



Next stop is the Museum of South Texas History, or MOSTHistory. Nice, partial acronym there. I was actually having thoughts of going to see a movie if this turned into strike three. But I had to buy a ticket online so I think it's good to go.



Very nice lobby! So far, so good.

This museum covers the history of the entire Rio Grande Valley, touching briefly on several topics we've already covered. It starts with how the land was formed and its earliest denizens.



The River Frontier

“Since I offered to narrate the story,
I shall start at the beginning...”

Pedro de Castañeda de Nájera, Spanish explorer, 1596

Journey back with us...

Beyond the Great River sprawls a vast, forbidding land – once ocean floor, now arid rock and soil, bounded by mountains, hills, and surf.

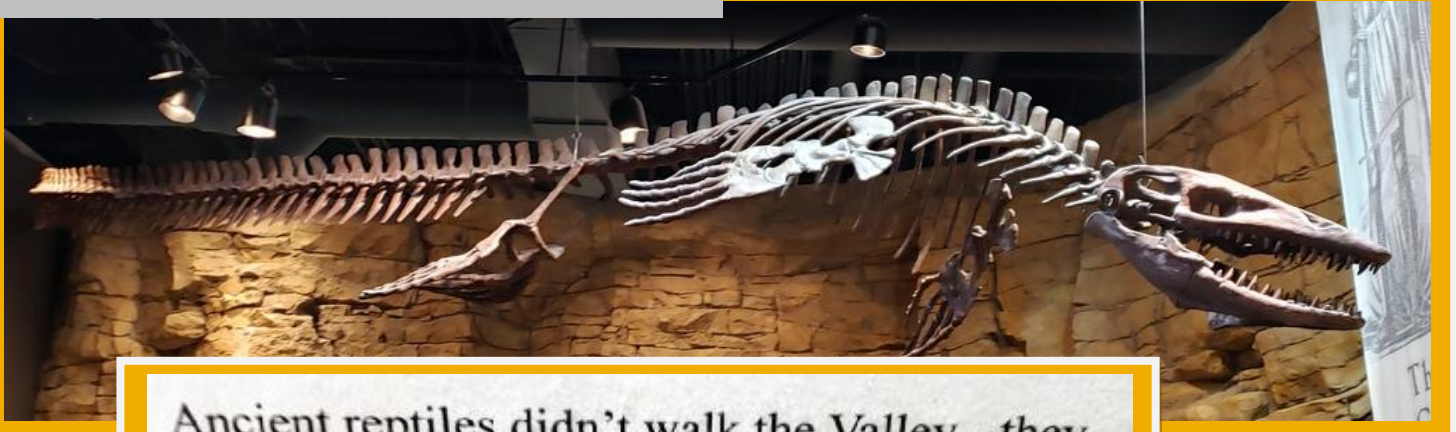
In the beginning there is no land, only rolling sea. North America emerges; ancient Texas forms. Seas advance and recede. Plants and animals spread. Dinosaurs stalk the land, and monsters swim in coastal waters. Later, mammals inherit a changing landscape. Gulf waters recede, ocean floor becomes coastal plain. A young Rio Grande winds seaward; floods deposit silt, creating a fertile delta – the Rio Grande Valley. In time, its earliest human dwellers appear.

Origins

For millennia, Indian people live here. Then Spaniards come, to explore and colonize the land, their northern line at the Great River.

Spanish rule yields to Mexican. Soon, a war will decide the region's destiny.

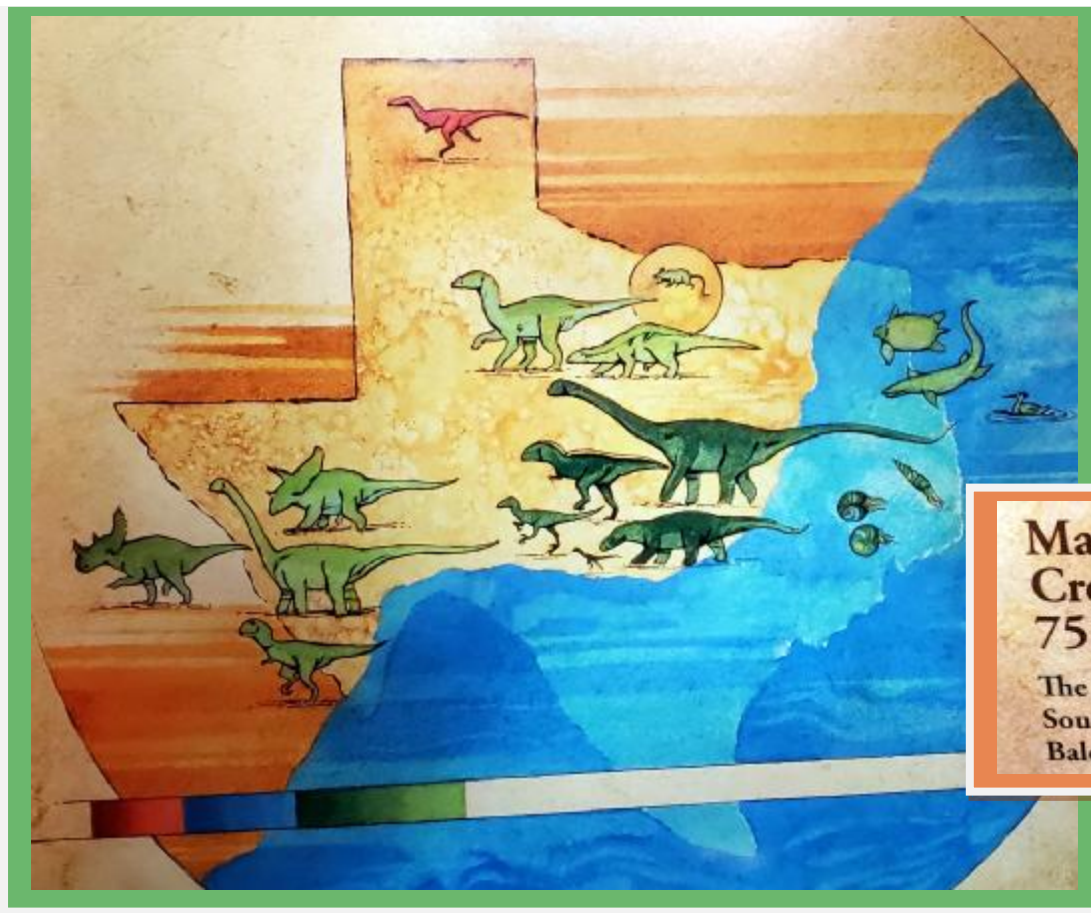
Mosasaur Skeleton Replica



Ancient reptiles didn't walk the Valley - they swam. Above you is Plateocarpus, a mosasaur. These predators terrorized the sea covering most of South Texas and Tamaulipas, some 80 million years ago

Where are the actual bones? Look down. Cretaceous rock containing them lies five miles or more below the Valley's surface.

Mosasaurus were marine reptiles, not dinosaurs. They went extinct at the end of the Cretaceous, but may have modern descendants - the monitor lizards and possibly snakes.



Map of Texas in the Cretaceous era, about 75 million years ago

The ancient Gulf of Mexico covered South Texas and extended to the Balcones Escarpment

SABER-TOOTH CAT SKULL

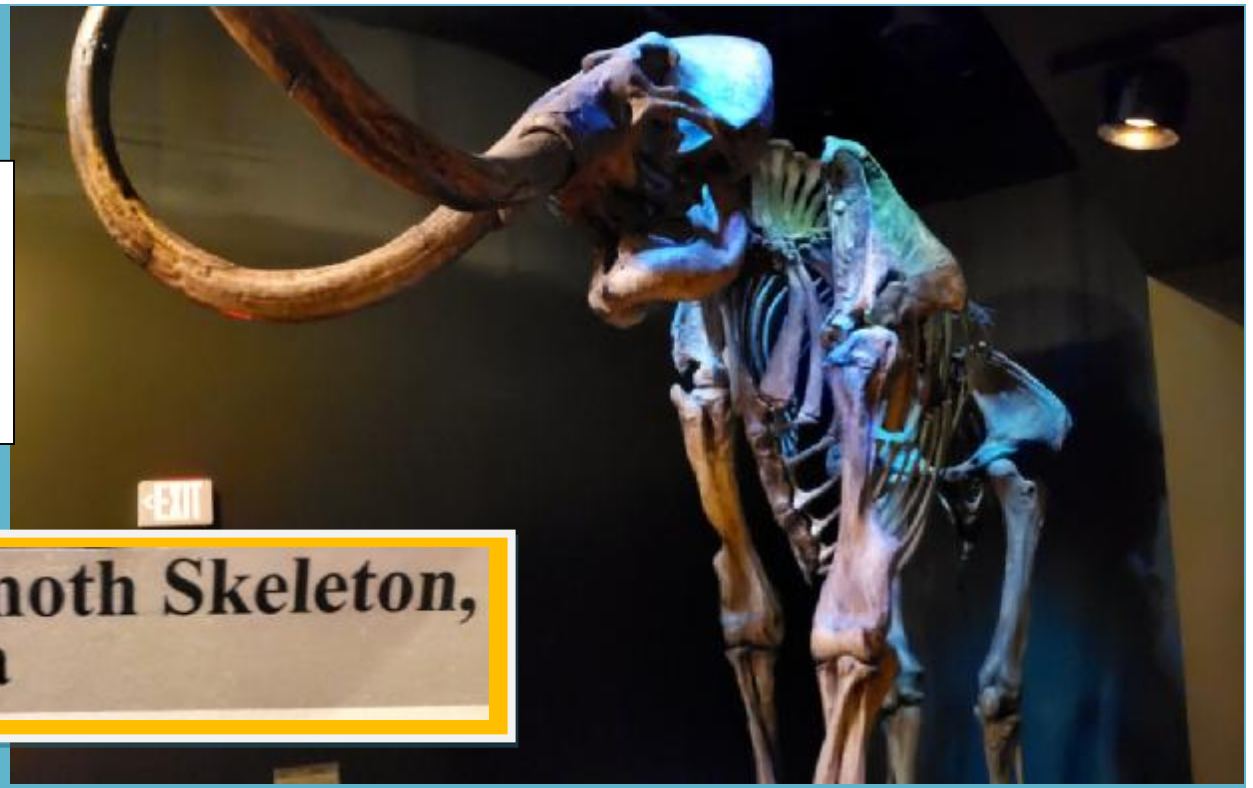
(Replica, life size)



Columbian mammoths reached 13 or more feet in height, and weighed around 10 tons. Adults ate an estimated 500 pounds of vegetation daily. Ancient South Texans may have hunted these animals. The original of this skeleton was recovered from the Aucilla River in Florida. It is on display in the Florida Museum of Natural History in Gainesville.

They had three-quarters of this behemoth tucked back in an alcove, making it very difficult to get a good photo.

Mammoth Skeleton, replica



I know I've said this before, but we 'civilized immigrants' were really quite savage.

Ancient Peoples

Some 12,000 years ago, people first enter this region. Mostly hunters, they leave few traces. In time, others inherit the land. From stones, animals, and plants come their implements, clothing, and food. For millennia, they raise families, engage in trade, make war, and celebrate life. Then Europeans arrive. Within three centuries the native people and their ancient culture all but vanish.

Bringing the Horses

"Horses are the most necessary things in the new country, and they frighten the [Indians] most..."

Pedro de Castañeda de Nájera,
Spanish explorer, 1596





Horses are vital in New Spain. From Spain and the Caribbean islands, they arrive by ship. On larger vessels, horses have below-deck stalls. In fair weather, standing helps keep leg muscles sound. Heavy slings let them sway above rolling decks, in rough seas. Not all survive: calms trap ships for days, depleting feed and water. Starved



horses, cast overboard, give equatorial waters a grim nickname: "Horse Latitudes". But many endure, and will help build the Spanish ranching heritage of South Texas.

Texas' War of Independence

San Jacinto: On April 21, Houston's outnumbered troops attack Santa Anna's encamped army and destroy it in 18 vengeful minutes. Captured, Santa Anna agrees to Texan independence. Mexican armies withdraw across the Rio Grande. Santa Anna later returns to Mexico. He will be heard from again.



They had several very well done, full sized displays such as the Mexican Hacienda below and the steamboat at the dock on the next page.





The Mexican War

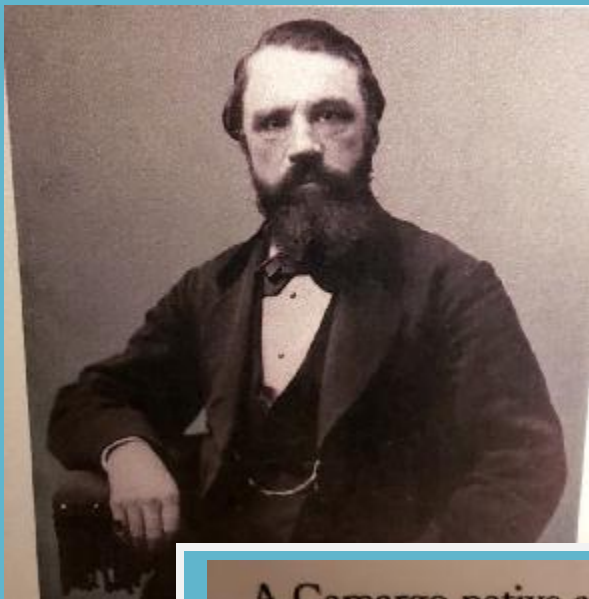
“A...war against [the U.S.]...would imply immense sacrifices...Are such sacrifices possible for the Mexican Republic...?”

José Joaquín de Herrera, Mexican President, 1845

Cannon fire thunders at Palo Alto. Within 18 months, U.S. forces defeat Mexico. Northern Mexico is ceded to the United States. Most Americans forget the conflict. Mexicans remember it, bitterly, as the war of yanqui aggression. It makes the Rio Grande an international boundary, dividing families the Great River once bound together. And it opens a new era in border commerce: the steamboat age.

Juan Nepomuceno Cortina

Finally, here's some info on "The Robin Hood of the Rio Grande". Not nearly as complete a history as the website link I had the other day if you want something more in-depth.

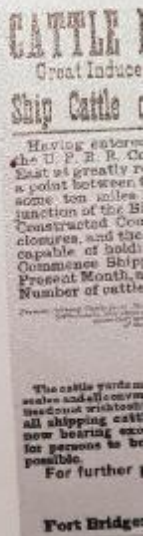


"Mexicans!...Many of you have been robbed of your property, incarcerated, chased, murdered, and hunted like wild beasts, because your labor was fruitful and because your industry excited [the Anglos']... wild avarice..."

Juan N. Cortina, Mexican leader, Cameron County, 1859

A Camargo native and Mexican War veteran, Juan Nepomuceno Cortina sees Valley Tejanos treated unfairly. With a growing hatred for the *gringos*. Cortina and his followers – *cortinistas* – raid Brownsville in September, 1859. For over a year, they attack Anglo ranches in the Valley, becoming folk heroes to many poorer *Tejanos*. For over a year, U.S. troops and Texas Rangers duel with "Cheno" Cortina. Pursued into Mexico, Cortina leaves the border region. He will return.

South Texas' early cattle trade is limited. Hides and tallow, exported by sea, have more value than beef; coastal "packeries" process thousands of animals a year. During the Civil War, untended "beeves" multiply; but their post-war value is low. Then, rising demands back East open new beef markets. Trail drives head for railroad shipping points. Cattle values soar; herds get bigger, requiring more management and capital. By 1880, ranching in South Texas is a major industry.



Rise of the Cattle Industry

"A five-dollar steer in Reconstruction-ridden Texas was a twenty-to-forty-dollar steer in Chicago, if you could get him there."



Tom Lea, Texas author, 1957

Cattle Wars

"...many ranches have been plundered and burned, and the people murdered or driven away;..."

Capt. Leander H. McNelly, Texas Ranger, 1875



With prices rising, gangs of cattle thieves run South Texas herds into Mexico. Violence escalates.

Many vaqueros and rancheros are driven out or killed. Anglos and Tejanos form vigilante groups that often kill guilty and innocent alike, sparking reprisals. Captain L. H. McNelly and a special Texas Ranger force disband vigilantes, then sweep through South Texas and the Valley, killing many known and suspected rustlers. Mexican authorities, meanwhile, place Juan Cortina under house arrest: he is said to be behind many raids. Cattle rustling declines; by 1880 the worst is over.

Texas Rangers will remain for years, their often-brutal methods frequently directed against Mexicans and Tejanos. Ill feelings among victimized Tejanos toward Anglos in general and Rangers in particular will linger for generations.

CANAL BUILDING

Men, mules, and muscle build the early canals. Survey crews map routes through mesquite and cactus. Axe-wielding brush crews hack out rights-of-way. With mule-drawn plows and earth scrapers, construction crews break the soil and build canal embankments. The first canals are open-top, partly above ground; later, many are put underground to cut evaporation loss. With the “earth movers” come other crews, installing gates and valves. Meanwhile, still others build the pumping stations. Before long, steam engines turn, pumps spin, and water flows!



This is the pump room I toured yesterday

CONTROLLING THE FLOW

To control and direct water flow, canal builders install valves or “gates.” Along the early main canals are wooden “check gates,” used to regulate the volume of water. Smaller metal gates direct water into side channels. From these laterals, the water flows through ditches into fields and groves.

But open canals lose water through leakage and evaporation. Many are later concrete-lined and buried, their paths marked by concrete pipes sticking up across the landscape. Bigger pipes contain gates. Smaller pipes vent air to help keep water flowing.

Rails West

By 1910, farmlands near the main rail line are mostly taken. A new railroad – the San Benito and Rio Grande Valley – begins serving more distant farms and towns: Progreso, Rio Hondo, San Perlita, and others. From its network of tracks comes a nickname – the Spider Web.

Hustler, 1911. Cortesía de lo McAllen, MOSTH

The Great War:

The Telegram

“...we propose an alliance with Mexico, on the following basis: joint pursuit of war, joint conclusion of peace....Mexico to reconquer its former territories in Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona.”

The Zimmermann telegram, January 1917

Late 1916: In Europe the entrenched armies are deadlocked. The Allies hope for US involvement; the Central Powers fear it. But Uncle Sam stays out of “the Great War.” Concerns closer to home, including a Mexico in turmoil and US troops on the border, outweigh those in Europe. Nevertheless, rising American sentiments favor the Allies. US intervention may come soon. So Germany makes a fateful move.

January 1917: British intelligence intercepts a coded German transmission, proposing to Mexican President Carranza an alliance against the US. Carranza considers the offer, but postpones a decision. In March, Pershing’s expedition leaves Mexico. With a key incentive for war thus removed, Carranza declines the German proposal.

Meanwhile, disclosed to Washington and published nationwide, the Zimmermann Telegram stirs national outrage. Coupled with the Germans’ resuming unrestricted submarine warfare, the telegram prompts the US to join the Allies in April 1917. The deadlock breaks, and Germany surrenders in November 1918.

This is the first I ever heard that Mexico joined the Allies during WWII

Prohibition

January 16, 1920: The 18th Amendment becomes law, prohibiting the sale and consumption of alcoholic beverages in the US. Most Americans support Prohibition at first, but later ignore it. Liquor smuggling thrives, with a main corridor through South Texas. Mule trains cross the Rio Grande, laden with fiery Mexican tequila; fast cars take the liquor to San Antonio and beyond. Brush-country battles occur between *tequileros* and lawmen. Meanwhile, *yanquis* flock to bars across the river at Rio Rico, Matamoros, and elsewhere. When Prohibition is repealed in 1933, smugglers turn to other contraband, including narcotics.

Texas Ranger with liquor smugglers, Browns

Citrus Fruits and Packing Sheds

The 1920s: Citrus becomes a major Valley industry. Grapefruit is foremost. Groves of white and pink Florida varieties cover thousands of acres. 1925: a red-pulp fruit appears. The "Ruby Red" becomes the Valley's best-known product. Nationwide demands for citrus rise; Valley production of grapefruit, oranges, and limes increases. Growers organize exchanges to improve control of harvesting, shipping, and marketing. Packing sheds line railroad sidings in many Valley cities. Within the sheds, men and women, including many *tejanos*, sort and pack citrus and other produce, then load it into refrigerated railroad cars bound for northern markets.



My mom would always buy the "Ruby Red" grapefruit. And whenever I buy grapefruit, which is seldom, I too pick "Ruby Red".

Crate label, Gold
Texas, circa 1930
Memorial Archiv

Etiqueta de guac
Valley Fruit Co.,
Texas, circa 1930

Valley Life in the 1920s

“...the landmen had said they would see sunshine every day, [but] the new settlers...saw the sun hardly at all in [the winter of] 1924. Icicles formed and clothes froze on the lines....”

Dorothy Lee Pope, *Rainbow Era on the Rio Grande*, page 131

HORSELESS CARRIAGE

Truly, the automobile is a revolutionary invention: a personal, self-propelled vehicle that gives unprecedented mobility to the average person. From a spindly “horseless carriage” it becomes, by 1910, a modern machine. The Magic Valley feels its growing impact. New cars arrive by train – Fords, REOs, Chevrolets, and other makes. Farmers, ranchers, and town folk buy ever-more autos and trucks. Blacksmith shops become garages. Stores sprout curbside gas pumps. Street paving begins. Service stations and tourist courts appear. By the 1920s, South Texas, like the nation, becomes a culture on wheels.



Man on motorcycle, Edinburg, Texas circa 1917.

Summer, 1942: German submarines prowl the western Gulf of Mexico, from Veracruz to Texas. Their objective: to disrupt the flow of vital oil from Mexican to American ports. Mexico is still neutral, but her oil helps to fuel the Allied war effort, prompting German attacks. Off Tamaulipas and South Texas, Mexican tankers and freighters are sunk, and Mexico declares war on the Axis. US and Mexican forces hunt the enemy from the air and the sea. Armed beach patrols keep watch, lest Nazi saboteurs come ashore. By October the *unterseeboote* or “U-boats” are gone from local waters. A wary surveillance continues, however, in case the enemy returns.

U Boats Offshore



The 1910 Hidalgo County Jail

Jail construction began in 1909 after the county seat was moved from the town of Hidalgo to a more central location. It was completed late in 1910, along with the new courthouse. The jail office, kitchen, and jailer's quarters may have occupied the ground floor. Upstairs was the cell block, the "death row" cells, and the hanging room.

Replaced by a larger jail in 1921, this building served as a community meeting house, then the Edinburg City Hall and Fire Station. Later the Police Department was added. Vacated by 1964, the one-time jail re-opened in 1970 as the Hidalgo County Historical Museum, now the Museum of South Texas History.

**THIS ROOM WAS THE JAIL ENTRY.
PERSONS ON BUSINESS AND THOSE
UNDER ARREST CAME AND WENT
THROUGH THIS ROOM.**

**The jail had double front doors to allow
the passage of a coffin.**

Above it on the second floor is the hanging room. Look up to see the trap door of the gallows. When hanged, the condemned prisoner dropped into this space until the noose ended his fall just above the floor.



**IN PRISON JARGON THE SPACE
BELOW THE GALLOW WAS
THE "DROP ROOM."**

Court-appointed witnesses were required for an execution. The one time this gallows was used in 1913, there were 17 witnesses, including two doctors, either in the hanging room or drop room.

DEATH WATCH CELL

A condemned prisoner would spend his last night in this cell, next to the hanging room.

Outside the cell a guard was posted all night to prevent suicide attempts. The vigil gave rise to the term "death watch" in the mid-17th century.

The jury found Ortiz guilty of rape and first-degree murder, both capital crimes in Texas. He was sentenced to death by hanging. Ortiz's attorney filed bills of exception, but the verdict stood. After an appeal to the State Court of Criminal Appeals failed, the judge set Ortiz's execution date.

HANGING ROOM

WHO WAS THE HANGMAN?

As sheriff, A.Y. Baker was responsible for pulling the lever but decided to delegate the responsibility to someone else. One account states that Nathaniel "Polo" Jackson, an African American from Hidalgo, put the noose around Ortiz's neck. He did not collect his \$50 payment for months, saying that he was glad to help avenge the terrible crimes. Ironically, fifteen years later he was the victim when fatally shot while fishing in the Rio Grande.

I don't know, the sheriff sounds like a little bit of a coward here, hiring someone else to do the deed. What do you think?



No, this is not the actual rope they hung Ortiz with. It's just an example of a hangman's noose



The original steel trap door is still set into the floor. When it opened, the condemned man plunged into the drop room below.

Are there ghosts? When this building was a fire station, volunteer firemen slept in the old death-row cell rooms, including the gallows room. Years later a former fireman visiting the museum spoke of hearing thumps on the stairs or clanking chains in the dead of night. In the mid 1990s, a museum staff officer talked of being conscious of “something” in the jail section. Given a choice, she preferred not to go in there — especially after dark.

Ooooooooooooo, scary. There was a photo on the wall of a field trip and a bunch of 5th graders gathered around the steel railing, gazing at the hanging noose. I wonder what they were thinking.

The way today started out I thought this might be the shortest newsletter ever written. But I think it turned out well.

Without bright sunshine, and not much driving, my power is starting to run short. So I took the side roads back to the vicinity of Sam's Club in McAllen where I spent last night, hoping to charge up the portable battery I use for the laptop. It just wasn't enough and I had to fire up the generator for an hour plus to charge things back up.

The temp dropped into the 40's while I was in the museum and is supposed to reach the lower 40's overnight. Running the generator will take some LP, so I need to conserve a little to use the heater tonight. I even switched back to long pants today.

Just checking the forecast. I thought it was supposed to be warm down here. What is this, 1924 all over again? Saturday, Sunday and Monday nights are supposed to be in the 30's with highs in the 40's.

I feel sorry for all that produce sitting out there in the fields.

Not sure what to do tomorrow. There are a couple items in Mission to check out, then I start heading north for a little bit before going west again to Laredo.

I think tomorrow's newsletter has a possibility of being relatively short.

Until next time.....