

Celebrating 60 Years

PASSWORD



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Fear and Terror on the Border: Why the Ku Klux Klan Was Not Able to Maintain Its Presence in El Paso, Texas, 1921-1924

By Patrick Driscoll

The city of El Paso, Texas is an ethnically diverse community in which Mexican Americans constitute approximately 80 percent of the total population. Incidents of racial or ethnic tension and violence are low, with the city exhibiting many signs of cultural integration with their border neighbor Ciudad Juárez, Mexico. Yet during the period from 1921 to 1923, the Ku Klux Klan, a white supremacist and anti-Catholic organization, dominated the local school board and made a serious effort at controlling the city and county governments.

Several key factors allowed this to occur, including an influx of settlers from other parts of the United States around the turn of the twentieth century, fear of violence from the Mexican Revolution spilling across the border, rising crime because of Prohibition, and corruption in local government. However, almost as swiftly as it rose, support for the Klan dwindled, and Klan-backed candidates failed to win office after 1922. Within a few years, the Frontier Klan 100 of El Paso was no longer operational, and the Klan left El Paso for good.

In order to explain how an organization with a notorious reputation for racial discrimination and violence could gain popular support in El Paso, this essay will provide a background to the tumultuous conditions of early twentieth century El Paso which allowed the seemingly impossible to occur. In addition, it will describe the rise of the Klan in El Paso politics in the early 1920s, as well as its subsequent loss of power. The essay will then discuss the Klan's unsuccessful attempts to reestablish its political influence and the efforts of Mayor Richard Dudley and other citizens to prevent this Klan resurgence. Finally, it will examine how various social and cultural factors in 1920s El Paso conflicted with the spirit of Klan ideology, eventually causing most El Pasoans to oppose the Klan's strict discriminatory views and practices.

The main sources used for my research are numerous primary sources found in El Paso newspapers, school board records from that era, and Klan publications. In addition, valuable information from the often overlooked personal collections of prominent El Paso citizens such as Mayor Dudley and Superintendent of Schools Allen H. Hughey provide further insight into how influential local residents viewed Klan actions during this period.

One previously untapped perspective used for this paper are articles and opinions from Mexican and Mexican American publications, especially the Spanish-language Protestant newspaper *Atalaya Bautista*, about Klan activities in the borderlands and the interior of Mexico.

A Short History of Race Relations in El Paso

From the time El Paso became a part of the United States after the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo to the turn of the twentieth century, histories generally characterize the city as having relatively "peaceful relations" between white "Anglo" Americans and the original Mexican inhabitants compared to other parts of Texas. El Paso is unique compared to most major cities in the U.S. in that it has usually had a Hispanic majority population. A border city, El Paso has retained an influx of fresh immigrants from Mexico on a regular basis. With few white Americans in the area until the turn of the twentieth century, business trade between Mexico and the U.S. created a kind of cultural and economic interdependence for residents on both sides of the border where the white minority accommodated Mexican culture.¹

Since they were few in numbers, white Americans who first arrived in the county had to rely out of necessity on the native Mexican population for labor, services and trade. Such interaction limited the racist policies that were more prevalent in other parts of the country, especially those not located on the border with Mexico.² Even when white Americans did not make up a sizeable population in El Paso, there were incidents of racism and ethnic tensions resulting from prejudicial law enforcement practices and legal proceedings favoring Anglo Americans, such as in the El Paso Salt War of 1877 and the El Paso Race Riots of 1916.³ According to U.S. census data from 1920, people of Mexican descent remained the majority population with 39,571 residents in a city of 77,560, even as the white population had grown steadily over the last three decades.⁴

Race relations took a sudden dive in the early part of the twentieth century due to many key events. Railroads and industrialization had brought into the area more Americans from the South (including East Texas) who were not used to local Mexican customs and brought segregationist views from their original homes.⁵ These white settlers saw the Mexican population as a foreign element, and since they had not interacted with them before, fear and discrimination grew. Aside from the influx of white immigration from the southern part of the country, Mexico itself was in the middle of a revolutionary period where El Paso, Ciudad Juárez, and the state of Chihuahua played starring roles, with many Mexican refugees settling into the city.⁶ This combination of racism from whites and refugee Mexicans proved volatile.

At the start of the Mexican Revolution, Francisco Madero used Ciudad

Juárez across the border from El Paso as his temporary headquarters, while legendary figures like Pancho Villa were constantly in the area.⁷ Being in close proximity to such an important event in Mexico, El Paso experienced episodes of spillover violence from raids, riots, and stray bullets flying across the border. Conditions were dangerous enough that U.S. soldiers physically located in El Paso from June 15 to June 16, 1919 were awarded Mexican Service Medals due to hostile fire received during the third battle of Juárez.⁸ Xenophobia increased across the nation against Mexico when many Americans believed on the basis of the Zimmerman Telegram that Germany had offered military aid and the return of lost territory to Mexico in an attempt to antagonize relations between the U.S. and Mexico during the First World War.⁹ Although Mexico never entered into any formal agreements with Germany, the offer established distrust of Mexico in the American population.

The Klan developed a violent reputation in the southeastern part of country from its racial focus in targeting black populations, but in the Southwest the different population demographic usually refocused Klan activities to center on protecting American values from socialist intrusion, competing vices, and Prohibition activities.

Immediately after the U.S. participated in the First World War, Americans generally became more isolationist, and the movement of minorities to cities searching for work caused racial rifts with returning white veterans.¹⁰ In El Paso, the United States Public Health Service exacerbated racial tensions with policies requiring Mexicans to undergo a demeaning disinfection process to enter the U.S., thereby portraying Mexicans as a disease-carrying foreigners.¹¹ Soon after, Prohibition also came into effect with the passing of the Eighteenth Amendment, making alcohol manufacture, sale, and distribution a lucrative criminal enterprise. Ciudad Juárez became known during this period for vice, with El Paso social elites frequenting the town, but growing religious movements discouraged visits. Within this environment, the marginalized Mexican population of El Paso had little ability to stop Klan political growth in El Paso.¹²

A Brief History of the Ku Klux Klan

Confederate veterans originally started the Ku Klux Klan as a fraternal order of former Confederate soldiers in Tennessee immediately after the

Civil War.¹³ Confronted with the enfranchisement of African Americans and Republican reconstruction efforts in the South, many groups in the Klan started terrorizing African Americans and northern Republicans settling in the South to keep them from shifting the social order that had been in place before the war.¹⁴ In response to growing Klan violence, the Civil Rights Act of 1871 suspended the writ of habeas corpus in the South and allowed the government to use federal troops to combat Klan insurgent activity.¹⁵ In time, the federal government's anti-Klan actions effectively caused the Klan to disband by 1871.¹⁶ The Klan, however, would return forty years later.

In 1915, the film "Birth of a Nation" was released theatrically in the U.S. depicting the process of reunification after the Civil War, but it was also filled with sympathetic portrayals of the Klan defending southern society from black domination during Reconstruction.¹⁷ Inspired by the film, preacher William Simmons revived the Klan in Georgia to "defend the liberty" of white Americans from what he saw as growing foreign influences due to recent immigration.¹⁸ By the early 1920's the Klan was able to exert its influence throughout the U.S. by portraying itself as a champion of law, order, and the "American way." Citizens concerned about Prohibition crime, supposed black militancy from African American war veterans, renewed immigration from Europe, and Mexican Revolution violence spilling across the border, joined the new Klan in great numbers.¹⁹ By 1924, Klan membership was estimated to be between three to five million nationwide, with over 100,000 members in Texas.²⁰ The Klan also expanded to areas in which it traditionally did not have a presence during the Reconstruction era and where there were few African Americans, especially the Midwest; in fact, Indiana had the highest Klan membership numbers of any state with around 250,000 members.²¹ The Klan developed a violent reputation in the southeastern part of the country from its racial focus in targeting black populations, but in the Southwest the different population demographic usually refocused Klan activities to center on protecting American values from socialist intrusion, competing vices, and Prohibition activities.²²

The Klan Victory in El Paso

Sometime in 1921, C.M. Kellogg set up Frontier Klan 100 in El Paso.²³ By the next year Klan membership was estimated to be at least 2,700.²⁴ Klan membership activities were kept secret, and Klan activities in public were first met with opposition by local authorities including the mayor, police chief, and sheriff.²⁵ When the Klan received opposition from the city council for wanting to parade in the streets of El Paso in their hoods and robes, *El Paso Times* editor James Black implied the parade would have met with violent resistance if it had occurred.²⁶

The Klan became the talk of the town when the *El Paso Herald* approvingly printed its agenda as the group to clean up El Paso's prostitution, bootlegging, and corruption.²⁷ (The *El Paso Times* proved to be more critical of the Klan during their time in El Paso, with the *El Paso Herald* initially publishing more articles sympathetic to the Klan.) Primary Klan efforts in El Paso were to present itself with a favorable image that emphasized charity donations, including credit for saving the Orphanage School of El Paso that had been set up by the Salvation Army.²⁸ Klan activists apparently conducted no violent activities in El Paso, but there were the occasional anonymous notes with veiled threats sent to recent immigrants residing in the city.²⁹ The lack of documented violence in El Paso gave the local Klan a more "respectable image" separate from the violent reputation that Klan groups in other parts of Texas carried.³⁰

One target for Klan action was the influence of Roman Catholicism in El Paso. The Klan made its first real effort for power in 1922 by secretly running three members—Samuel Isaacks, Charles Ward, and Hal Gambrell—for the El Paso school board on a reform ticket calling for more school funding.³¹ Later it was discovered that board member James Brady had been a Klan member but left when he understood more about the organization.³² Some Protestant clergy made accusations that Catholic members of the school board were attempting to violate the separation of church and state by pushing for public funds for projects in Catholic institutions.³³ By April 1922, Issaks, Ward, and Gambrell were elected, with Ward being chosen as president of the board and Gambrell as the secretary.³⁴

The Klan-dominated school board soon removed several Catholic teachers and principals from their positions in the school district.³⁵ They even removed veteran Principal Maria Gallagher, who had run Alamo School for over twenty years, even though Superintendent Hughey recommended her retention due to the respect she commanded from faculty and students.³⁶ Issaks, Gambrell, and Ward all voted for her removal. When former students and parents of students attending Alamo School started an effort to reinstate Principal Gallagher, their demands were rejected, as the Klan-dominated school board began acting bolder in asserting its agenda.³⁷

The Klan's goals for El Paso included instilling a more patriotic image for the city. The board renamed El Paso High School to Sam Houston High School and gave new school projects patriotic Texan names, which Bowie and Austin High Schools retain.³⁸ The school board also began formally accepting donations from the Klan.³⁹

Most people in El Paso were either unaware that the Klan had infiltrated the school board or did not seem to be alarmed by it. Although Superintendent Hughey never explicitly expressed his opinions on the Klan—insight into his thoughts from letters dated in the 1920s show that he did not express any explicit anti-Catholic views and wrote sympathetically

FREE! The Truth Is Free to All—The Klan Has Nothing to Sell—Read and Pass to Another, Please!

FRONTIER KLANSMAN

Vol. 1.

EL PASO, TEXAS, FRIDAY, JUNE 8, 1923.

No. 98.

THE PRICE OF LIBERTY

One of the noblest emotions that has ever stirred the soul of the human race is love of liberty. Not the selfish and selfish desire to do as one pleases; to ruin at large, to add power and enjoy. But the pure and unselfish desire to grow and develop in God's sunlight unimpeded and without molesting others; with the desire and power to aid and assist others to become better men and women that the world may become a better and safer place in which to live.

God made man in his own image and placed him upon the earth. God gave man dominion over the earth and for his guidance and protection wrote laws and statutes on tablets of stone.

Through all ages the nations which have obeyed these laws have waxed strong and prospered and when they ceased to obey them they perished.

National wickedness has always been followed by national calamities. This is one of the most important truths that all history teaches. So universal has been the operation of this great law that it is safe to make predictions as to the time for future judgments. These calamities have sometimes come in the form of destructive wars—sometimes in the

REMEMBER

- MYRTLE GAMBLER.
- DOUG BRIGGS.
- BURGLAR.
- PIMP.
- WIFE BEATER.
- DOPE PEDDLER.
- CRIMINAL POLITICIAN.
- TRAITOR.

IS AGAINST THE KLAN AND HOLLER TOLERANCE.

Some are open in their fight against our public schools—the enemy of ignorance and Romanism. The priests are coming out bolder from time to time reminding their followers that Catholics owe allegiance first to the Pope and second to their country. Many of them are open in their complaint against paying taxes to support our public schools. Our churches are looked upon by them as mere institutions. Our marriages are illegal and our children are illegitimate. Catholics object to paying taxes upon the property of the hierarchy, regardless of what the property is used for. In nearly every city in the U. S. they own large hospitals which are being run for profit, upon which they have been paying no taxes. Our government has lost hundreds of millions of dollars in this way.

The Romanists have established national headquarters at Washington, where an immense lobby is maintained. They are getting control of our press—and are endeavoring to influence legislation and public opinion.

All over the United States the Catholic party is in politics. They are doing up the law with unscrupulous politicians to accomplish their ends, and when the bargain is made they stick either a president or vice-

punishment of the Pope for the sin (1) of whipping God, the forefathers believed that all men are created equal and that God does not forgive sin. They founded our republic upon God's laws and upon the principle of right, justice and equality. They derive from their creation the right to the pursuit of happiness; that equality in the right to that pursuit is the fundamental rule of divine justice in its application to mankind.

Figure 1. Front Page of the Frontier Klansman, June 8, 1923. Courtesy of the El Paso Public Library.

about some Catholic employees like Maria Gallagher—he appears to have continued his work without issue during the Klan era in El Paso.

Klan support was not limited to white Americans from the South or the school board. The Klan also gained admiration and support from many El Paso Protestant leaders and some Protestant Mexicans in the area. One pastor from Third Methodist Church even referred to Jesus Christ as the first Klansman.⁴⁰ An evangelical Spanish language newspaper published in El Paso, the *Atalaya Bautista*, frequently published articles on the virtues of the Klan in combating Roman Catholic conspiracies, the social ills of alcohol, and the Klan's efforts in enforcing Prohibition.⁴¹ In one edition, *Atalaya Bautista* proudly proclaimed the Klan as its friend.⁴²

The Klan was not above targeting prominent citizens they viewed as their enemies. In one instance, the Klan newsletter of El Paso, *Frontier Klansman*, accused a Catholic priest of kidnapping a Mexican girl from her husband for getting married outside the church.⁴³ In the story, the Klansman reported that a Mexican couple eloped in a civil court in El Paso before marrying in the Catholic Church. The priest was described as threatening to remove the girl from her husband as they were living in sin unless she agreed to marry in the church and paid a fee for the service. The husband then ended up in court with the priest for the return of his wife. The priest was represented by prominent attorney William Fryer, who the *Frontier Klansman* accused of putting religious belief over the law of the

land by advocating the girl be returned to the care of her mother instead of her legal husband. William Fryer was a highly respected lawyer in El Paso who was heavily involved with the Knights of Columbus, which instantly made him a Klan enemy.⁴⁴ The Klan vilified Fryer by accusing him of using undue influence with the judge to coerce the girl back to her mother's care, with the situation only being resolved when a group of "heroic" Klansman showed up to the court and physically prevented a second kidnapping. The Klan may not have realized it at the time, but Fryer was already working on a plan to take down the Klan in El Paso.

The Decline of the Klan in El Paso

In the summer of 1922, the Klan was at the pinnacle of its power and decided to take over the city. Klan leaders planned to run several candidates for city government, including mayor.⁴⁵ However, the longer the Klan was in El Paso the more obvious it was that Klan objectives clashed with local interests. The Klan endorsed a suggestion from visiting preacher Reverend Bob Jones to close the international bridge early to limit drinking and other illegal activities by Americans in Ciudad Juárez.⁴⁶ The suggestion was soon rejected, as many local business merchants in the El Paso Chamber of Commerce supported keeping the bridge open at its current time.⁴⁷ The reasoning behind keeping the bridge open was due to a threat from the Ciudad Juárez Chamber of Commerce to set up a free trade zone, as well as limiting goods coming in from El Paso, if the bridge was closed early.⁴⁸ The Klan failed to understand that trade was more important than combating vice to many El Pasoans who had their livelihood tied to the border economy. The Klan would also have to soon deal with fallout from William Fryer attacking their organization using the court system.

Fryer was a former El Paso county attorney, a First World War veteran, and prominent member of the local chapter of the Knights of Columbus.⁴⁹ When the Klan began running candidates for office, Fryer devised a plan to reveal the membership list of the Klan through a series of legal actions. Fryer's first action against the Klan was to publicly accuse the National Business Men's Association (NBMA) of being a business front for the Klan in El Paso.⁵⁰ The *El Paso Times* investigated the story, and while it found no criminal or secret activity, it found the NBMA to have had no known prior history before the Klan's arrival.⁵¹ Mr. Fryer was not alone in his efforts to reveal Klan membership, as the *El Paso Times* also followed Klan activities and started compiling lists of members through surveillance during a time when police with Klan membership were suspected of harassing reporters.⁵² When the city civil service commission suspected that several policemen were Klan members, all city firemen and police officers were forced to sign an affidavit stating they were not members of the Klan or

face dismissal.⁵³ Justice of the Peace Wright also subpoenaed the names of the NBMA, which revealed most of the named members of Frontier Klan 100 to local officials.⁵⁴ Many prominent members were embarrassed that their names were revealed and withdrew their support.⁵⁵ These exposures undermined Klan support.

Neither the city nor county governments made the acquired Klan membership lists available to the public, in order to keep the support of prominent community members with Klan ties in future business ventures and community plans. Fryer held no such sentiment and continued his efforts to expose and punish the Klan for its attempts to take over local government in El Paso. Fryer's next action was to file a petition that four names of candidates on the ballot had to be removed from the upcoming county elections.⁵⁶ The reason Fryer gave the 65th Judicial Court for the injunction was that Klan members had forsworn allegiance to the constitution and laws of the U.S. by swearing allegiance to the secret society of the Ku Klux Klan, in violation of oaths for holding U.S. office. The result was that the individuals named were subpoenaed in court and asked about their Klan affiliations.⁵⁷ The court opinion was that Klan membership did not prevent someone from taking oaths of office and Fryer dropped the request for injunction.⁵⁸ Even though the injunction was not granted, Fryer had shown the public which El Pasoans running for office were Klansmen.

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By election time, candidates were ready to battle for the coveted mayor position. The Klan chose attorney Preston Gardner as their candidate.⁵⁹ Incumbent mayor and Klan opponent Charles Davis chose not to run for reelection.⁶⁰ As a result, anti-Klan support then went to former Texas State Senator Richard Dudley, who had lived in El Paso and Chihuahua for a number of years and was a well-known contractor who built Scenic Drive.⁶¹

Dudley was a moderate candidate who emphasized enforcing American allegiance in schools and keeping illegals from voting, but his years of experience working in Mexico made him sensitive on how to handle affairs and not offend Mexican sensibilities for business ventures. One example of his knowledge of Mexican effects on conditions in El Paso was during

1917, when the Carranza government requested that Mexican troops in Sonora be allowed to travel through Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas in order to invade Ciudad Juárez.⁶² The governors of New Mexico and Arizona approved, as initially did Texas Governor William Hobby. Dudley was convinced that such action would have a negative effect on border relations in El Paso, due to the large support for revolutionary factions in Ciudad Juárez and El Paso. He was then able to convince Governor Hobby to withdraw permission for Carranza's forces to cross through El Paso, as such an action would likely be viewed as another imperial invasion by Mexicans.⁶³ Dudley had also gained the support of both the *El Paso Times* and the *El Paso Herald*.⁶⁴

Unlike the previous school board election, it was now public knowledge which candidates were members of the Klan. Klan backlash from some of their activities certainly played a part in influencing the voting preferences for many El Pasoans. Due to the firing of many popular employees of the El Paso School District and the Klan's support for the early closing of the international bridge, El Paso voters were less supportive of Klan candidates. When the election results came in, the Klan lost the mayoral race and almost all other races for city government.⁶⁵ Soon after, Isaaks, Gambrell, and Ward completed their terms, removing all known Klan members from the school board.⁶⁶

Swan Song of the El Paso Klan

Though the Klan was defeated in the elections, it still attempted to regain influence in El Paso during 1924. There was appreciation from El Paso citizens for the large construction projects the Klan-dominated school board had completed in order to expand and improve the school district. The Klan continued to express support for the school system and nonprofit assistance organizations. Klan member Samuel Isaacks still attempted to influence El Paso politics as a member of the school board. In one such meeting with the mayor and city council concerning the budget for the school system, he advocated continued support of El Paso's public junior college, which was supposedly met with support from citizens in attendance. The *Frontier Klansman* of course blamed the Catholic Diocese in El Paso for threatening the budget for the junior college by stating that the Diocese expressed fears that it would interfere with growing the student body at the newly built Loretto Academy.⁶⁷

Despite the stigma surrounding the image of the Klan, it still had supporters in El Paso even after the school board and other city government officials were exposed as members. Several voters that were on mailing lists from Mayor Dudley's campaign headquarters sent back the letters with responses of why they would not support him in the future, despite previous support. Many said they supported Klan actions even

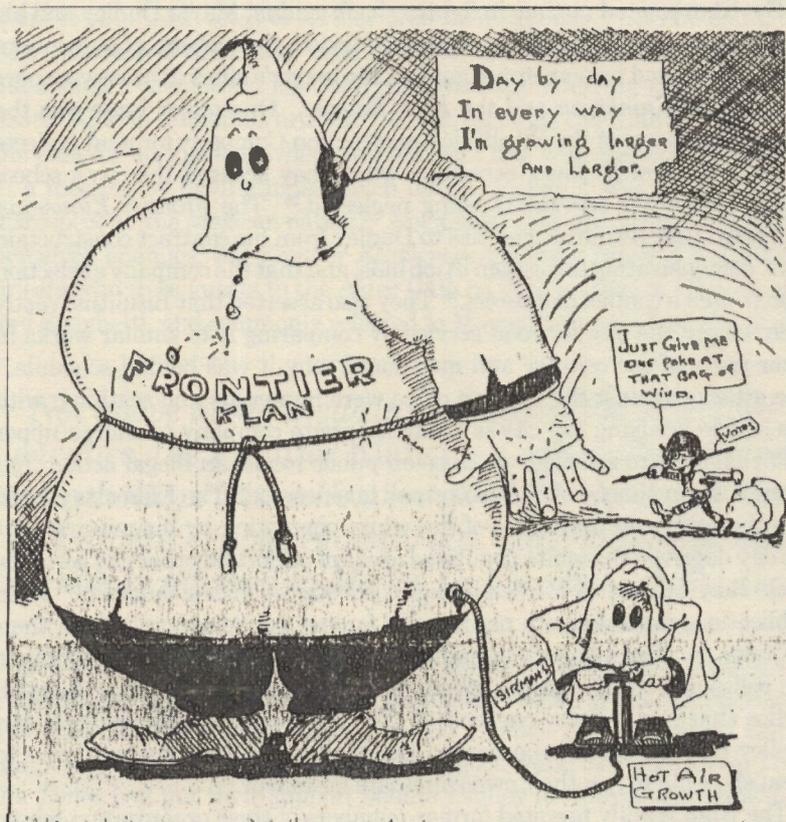


Figure 2. Political Cartoon on the El Paso Klan, Greater El Paso, February 19, 1923. Courtesy of UTEP Special Collections.

if they were not members, and actions by Dudley during and after the campaign against the Klan made them withdraw further support for him.⁶⁸ Included were typical rhetoric that the mayor was corrupt and under the heel of Rome, with signatures that were typically anonymous like "KKK Sympathizer."⁶⁹ One returned letter called Klan members all honorable men and stated that Mayor "Prince" Dudley was more interested in serving his own needs.⁷⁰ One from a "Lady Voter" wrote that any consideration to supporting Mayor Dudley was dissipated by his stance on the Klan.⁷¹ A letter from an Eli Jacobs stated that he voted for Dudley but would have changed his mind after learning more about him, and ended it by venting that Dudley "just won't stay put."⁷² Many prominent businesses like Ideal Pharmacy had no issue advertising in KKK newspapers well into 1924.⁷³ Manhattan Dry Goods Store in the Five Points area had no qualms about their support for the Klan, signing quotes in advertisements stylistically as Doc KirKpatrick.⁷⁴

The Klan wasted no time in fighting back against Mayor Dudley and his anti-Klan stance. The Klan repeatedly levied accusations of corruption, witch-hunts, and incompetence against the mayor's office in its newspapers the *Frontier Klansman* and the *Klan Courier*. One major issue was the mayor office's use of the Bitulithic Construction Company for road projects in rural parts of El Paso, especially when they accused the city's school budget and other services of being neglected.⁷⁵ The *Frontier Klansman* suggested that Bitulithic had ties to Dudley from his contract construction days, demonstrating favoritism in job bids, and that the company's selection represented a conflict of interest.⁷⁶ They also asserted that Bitulithic vastly overcharged the city for road service by comparing it to similar works in other parts of the country and questioned why it was behind schedule.⁷⁷ The attacks against the mayor's office were numerous and scathing, with one article accusing the city of using a private company to charge upper valley farmers to sell their produce on public roads, an illegal action that cut into the livelihood of El Paso's small businesses.⁷⁸ The Klan also played into the fears and prejudices of the white population by insinuating that the city deprived the white populated areas of parks and other city services, while they catered to Mexican neighborhoods for voting support.⁷⁹ Klan publications criticized city practices of forcing public servants from their positions for Klan sympathies and accused Mayor Dudley of threatening to use police and troops against dissidents, which they described as thuggish tactics that had legality concerns.⁸⁰ The Klan even boldly claimed that Dudley had previously approached the Klan for political support prior to them choosing to run their own candidate for mayor.⁸¹

The Klan readily targeted former members of their organization whom they felt had bowed to public pressure by resigning from the group and criticized those organizations in El Paso that they viewed as extensions of the mayor's office. Klan newspapers accused former Mayor Tom Lea and other prominent citizens such as Chris Leavell of resigning their Klan membership for political reasons, making them untrustworthy people.⁸² Individuals who were once part of the Klan but resigned typically stated that their early Klan affiliation was due to ignorance on the true nature of the Klan, with many stating they promptly quit once they realized what the Klan was truly about.⁸³ When the *El Paso Herald* got a new chief, Captain H. D. Slater, he took an anti-Klan stance. Frontier Klan 100 ironically accused him of being an outsider imported in to El Paso to sway readers of the newspaper against the Klan.⁸⁴

The Klan seemed obsessed in particular with discrediting the Aztec Club in El Paso, made up of prominent citizens in the area including Mayor Dudley, William Fryer, and Tom Lea.⁸⁵ Typical with all their enemies in El Paso, Frontier Klan 100 charged the Aztec Club of conspiring with the mayor's office to discredit the Klan in El Paso. It also accused the club of pandering to "ignorant" and "unintelligent" Mexicans, purposely misleading

them to gain their votes to further their own agendas.⁸⁶ At one point, the Klan celebrated what they believed to be the decline of the Aztec Club, publishing a memoriam for them and colorfully referring to them as the Asstik Klub in numerous articles.⁸⁷ In an odd twist, the Klan also attacked the club for an incident where the Mexican flag was improperly handled at a meeting by having nails driven into it, stating it was a clear case of disrespect for the Mexican nation.⁸⁸ Not above using insulting monikers for perceived enemies, the *Frontier Klansman* colorfully referred to Catholic priests who were guests to the Aztec Club as Fathers Frijole, Sauerkraut, and Spaghetti, and commonly referred to Mayor Dudley as Dick the Dud.⁸⁹

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In a final effort to regain wide spread support, Frontier Klan 100 made attempts to reconcile its image with groups that it had previously criticized. The *Klan Courier* praised changes to the *El Paso Times* staff and stated that it was now a proper newspaper doing good work, less than a year after the *Times* had put their support behind Dudley for Mayor and published less than flattering articles about the Klan.⁹⁰ The Klan also publicized the fact that a judge in El Paso found that Klan membership did not prevent a person from serving on a jury for criminal cases, despite needing to be under oath.⁹¹ This was especially significant after previous attempts by Fryer and others to assert that Klan members swore an oath to a power they considered higher than the U.S. Government and should be prevented from seeking office. Strangely, they supported Dudley's decision to select J. Reeder for Chief of Police, instead of attacking the mayor's every decision that had been standard for them.⁹² The Klan also commended the election of certain candidates in Ciudad Juárez as respectable Mexicans that will serve the Mexican people well.⁹³ The Klan tried to defend its stated anti-Jewish stance by clarifying that it was not racial, as Jews were God's chosen people, conceding that Jews had many commendable qualities.⁹⁴ The Klan argued that Jews in America were under the influence of the Catholic Church, finding it ironic after centuries of highlighted Catholic atrocities against Jews.⁹⁵ Jews were also accused of exploiting black people for their own agenda.⁹⁶ Local Klan leaders also publicly emphasized their previous charity work, the expansion of the school facilities in the city, as well as record of upholding moral decency in El Paso.

Mayor Dudley seemed to make tracking and thwarting Frontier Klan 100 a personal hobby. Dudley's collected copies of the *Frontier Klansman* and other newspapers, many times with his own personal notes. Perhaps Dudley saw the Klan as a group that still had influence, and was fearful of their hurting his efforts as mayor during his first year in office. As mentioned earlier, firefighters and police that were known to be members of the Klan had to resign their membership or face termination.⁹⁷ Lying about Klan affiliation could also lead to dismissal for an El Paso government employee.⁹⁸ Government servants such as Justice of the Peace Arthur M. Horn not only resigned their membership in the Klan, but also pledged to combat Klan influence in the city. This resulted in the Klan justifiably accusing many in the city's employment of resigning membership just to keep their jobs.⁹⁹ Hal Kelly, an editor of the *El Paso Times*, had no issue taking the *Frontier Klansman* to court for libel whenever they ran baseless stories targeting the *El Paso Times*.¹⁰⁰ Under constant attack by the press and the local government, the Klan found it difficult to break their previous stigma as a secret society that placed their own organization above their allegiance to the American nation.

Mexican and Mexican American Confrontations with the Klan

During the early 1920s, Mexican government officials and educated Mexicans had only a very limited awareness of the Ku Klux Klan. Knowledge of the Klan was mostly based on a few newspaper stories about Klan activities in parts of the United States or stories about abuses against African Americans and Mexicans in Texas. This limited coverage in part may have been due to the tumultuous conditions that existed in Mexico at the time. Because power was still being consolidated after the recent end of fighting in the Mexican Revolution, Mexican elites had little time to analyze a foreign terror group in another country.

In 1923, however, Mexicans unexpectedly learned about the Ku Klux Klan during a shocking incident in Mexico City. In a bold if not bizarre move, several members of the Ku Klux Klan went to Mexico City to kidnap Jose Campos, the editor of *Excelsior*, the nation's leading newspaper.¹⁰¹ The Klan members accused the newspaper of running negative stories on the Klan.¹⁰² Klansmen temporarily seized Campos for about eight hours before police fatally shot the group's leader, arrested the other Americans, and freed the kidnapped editor.¹⁰³ At one point, Gonzalo Espinoza, the editor in chief at *Excelsior*, was charged with escalating the incident with the Klan, but charges were later dropped against him by the District Judge who claimed his and other employee actions were justifiable against the intruders.¹⁰⁴ There does not seem to be any further incidents in Mexico where the Klan so boldly or foolishly tried to exert their influence outside

their own country. Mexican accounts of the kidnapping were highly critical of the Klan and warned the group that Mexico was not the United States.¹⁰⁶ Although the incident is apparently the only Klan episode to occur in Mexico, its novelty lies not only in the fact that it happened, but that it occurred in that nation's capital and not on the country's periphery, which was more accessible to the American-based Klan.

Mexican American newspapers had much a more intimate exposure to the Klan than their Mexican national equivalents. Spanish language

Under constant attack by the press and the local government, the Klan found it difficult to break their previous stigma as a secret society that placed their own organization above their allegiance to the American nation.

newspapers throughout Texas and the Southwest tended to report on Klan terror tactics and targeting of blacks, Jews, and Mexicans in the area.¹⁰⁶ One newspaper, *La Patria*, was published in both Ciudad Juárez and El Paso for Spanish-speaking readers. Unlike published accounts in the *El Paso Times* and *Herald-Post*, early articles in Spanish language newspapers had less of a neutral tone concerning the Klan, warning readers that they had a justifiable reason to be afraid of the Klan, due to its notoriety for violence through the South.¹⁰⁷ *La Patria* also published stories of Klan threats, raids, and violence that seem to be mostly absent from the *El Paso Times* and *Herald-Post* around the same period.¹⁰⁸ One serious story in *La Republica* reported that members of the Klan had routinely attacked citizens with weapons, driving around neighborhoods in automobiles with impunity in other parts of Texas.¹⁰⁹

The Spanish language newspapers had no qualms labeling the Klan as a criminal and bigoted organization and used every opportunity to criticize its actions, as well as defend Mexicans. Several articles reported that Mexican threats to reestablish the Free Trade Zone on the border were due to Klan backing for a bridge curfew that would have hurt the Ciudad Juárez economy and called for the public in El Paso not to support the curfew, as the resulting zone would harm the El Paso economy.¹¹⁰ One article criticized the Klan for taking down Mexican flags at Liberty Hall during one of their meetings, since the hall was also being used for a celebration with representatives from both governments. The Klan of course was defensive and stated that the flags were handled with respect and that as an American organization it was not out of line for them to

want only American flags present at their meeting.¹¹¹ The newspapers also showed the probable religious preferences of their readership by accusing the majority of Protestant ministers in El Paso of sympathizing with the Klan.¹¹² In another, they discussed rumors that the Klan planned an attack on Sacred Heart Catholic Church, and in response over a thousand Mexican Americans, a hundred policemen, and a thousand soldiers from Fort Bliss offered to defend it if the Klan made good on their promise.¹¹³ The Klan made the Mexican American Press an enemy very quickly, with the notable exception of the evangelical Protestant publication *Atalaya Bautista*, and they probably did not know or care that their opinions were at the detriment of retaining support in El Paso.

Factors that Led to the Klan Not Retaining Support in El Paso

Religion proved to be one of the more controversial factors for the Klan in El Paso. The Klan nationally was extremely anti-Catholic, with the viewpoint that Roman Catholicism was an autocratic empire ruled by the Pope that prevented Catholics from exercising unbiased democratic values.¹¹⁴ Catholicism had also been associated with immigrants from autocratic states in Europe during the late nineteenth century, who had been a frequent target for Klan activities.¹¹⁵ El Paso with its majority Mexican population logically had a majority Catholic population. As demonstrated by their actions on the school board, the Klan did much to alienate and cause fear in the devout Catholics of the city and county. Part of the way the Klan built a base of support was supporting Protestant preachers that had traditionally attacked the Catholic Church in El Paso. While such stories built support among hardcore fundamentalists, they were more likely to isolate the rest of the city. What the Klan may not have realized was Catholic El Pasoans were receiving lectures on the dangers of the Klan from priests fed up by attacks on their organization.¹¹⁶ Once prominent Catholics like William Fryer became the target of Klan smear campaigns, they made it their top priority to remove the Klan from El Paso.

One unique fixture of border communities is that they tend to use multiple languages, with English and Spanish being used on both sides of the Texas border. The makeup of Klan members based on ideology were white native-born Protestant males who typically only spoke English unless they had lived extensively in foreign countries or studied a foreign language at universities. With the majority of members being monolingual, their inability to understand Spanish was a major obstacle to interacting with the population in El Paso. Negative opinion pieces and reports on Klan activities in El Paso published in Spanish language newspapers like *La Patria* likely helped turn most Mexican Americans against the Klan, with most Klan supporters being probably oblivious or indifferent to Mexican

Vindicate the good name of your city.
Obtain clean, efficient officials.
Tread out the fires of discord and hate.
Enlist for a United El Paso.
Further the cause of clean government.
Obliterate factional strife.
Redeem the future of your city.
Don't be misled by false issues.
Unite the fragments of old time spirit.
Deliver this city from the menace of secret rule.
Line up for the square deal to all.
Encourage local patriotism.
Your confidence will not be misplaced.



For Mayor

Figure 3. Political Advertisement for Mayor Candidate Richard M. Dudley, Greater El Paso, February 19, 1923. Courtesy of UTEP Special Collections.

American views. Although some Spanish language newspapers such as *Atalaya Bautista* spoke highly of the Klan, others like *El Azote* printed a more critical view.¹¹⁷ By being an English only organization in El Paso, the Klan missed a significant demographic to persuade and build support for its powerbase.

Perhaps the most recognizable issue with a Klan takeover succeeding in El Paso was the ethnic makeup of the city. To members of the Klan the racial issue of Mexicans was tricky, as the Klan preached against miscegenation and in favor of white "Anglo" superiority over other races and ethnic groups.¹¹⁸ But for census data and for purposes of citizenship, the federal government traditionally categorized Hispanics as "white," granting Mexicans and Mexican-Americans advantages that other minorities lacked.¹¹⁹ In El Paso, where the white Anglo population was the minority and the white Hispanic population the majority, a Klan

organized with the purpose of targeting Mexicans would seemingly have been doomed from the start. Nonetheless, the Klan still published opinions that Mexicans were a foreign and criminal element, even if it did not make it a primary issue.¹²⁰

In El Paso, the Klan avoided making race and ethnicity a central issue, which was typical of Klan groups throughout the Southwest.¹²¹ This likely had to do with the fact that other Klan targets, such as African Americans and Jews, were not as numerous as they were in the Deep South, so the Klan shifted their focus to combating social ills. Mexicans in El Paso also experienced occasional friction with Jewish and Chinese merchants operating in the city. Issues with these groups in El Paso usually had to do with competition for work and perception that these groups dominated certain trades unfairly. One example from newspaper clippings Mayor Dudley saved in his personal collection involved the issue of Jewish merchants operating in downtown.¹²² According to the clippings, the Jewish merchants had developed a reputation with the downtown locals of selling overpriced goods and cheating buyers out of money. One policeman that was reported to have been a former Klan member was described as having good character, but he was accused by one of the merchants for slapping him and calling him a Jew. Many in the community came to the officers' defense, and the merchants were portrayed as responsible for the incident in the articles. Unfortunately, the clippings kept by Dudley demonstrated that there did appear to be some anti-Semitic bias held by the community in El Paso. Fortunately for Jews in El Paso, the Klan did not appear to exploit this bias to their full advantage.¹²³

The African American community in El Paso, which numbered around 2,000 people, did not appear to have suffered any violent episodes with the Klan during its heyday. Even though African Americans were not the victims of violence in El Paso like in areas of the Deep South, harsh punishment was legally given for blacks who appeared to make sexual advances towards white women in the city.¹²⁴ Relations with Mexicans had also been strained during this time as black soldiers assigned in the 10th Cavalry Regiment fought Mexican Revolutionaries and participated in the hunt for Pancho Villa.¹²⁵ In El Paso, where the public did not tolerate violent Klan activity and the African Americans generally had good relations with the rest of the community, it did not appear there was much for the Klan to exploit.

The small Chinese community of El Paso also had issues with locals due to recent events in the Mexican Revolution. Chinese had been immigrating to Mexico to eventually immigrate into the U.S., but sometimes they were targeted for violence. In Torreon, for example, three hundred Chinese were killed, allegedly because of their business practices that included exploiting cheap labor and sending their earnings out of Mexico.¹²⁶ Although the Chinese Exclusion Act prevented new Chinese from entering the U.S.,

many came over to El Paso with the Punitive Expedition, because as General Pershing stated they would have been victims of attack for having assisted the U.S. Army in Chihuahua.¹²⁷ With their small presence in El Paso, there did not seem to be any signs that the Klan or most El Pasoans felt that the Chinese were a problem for the community.

The Ku Klux Klan was a racist organization during the 1920's, but many of the views held by Klan members were also shared by people opposed to

Even though African Americans were not the victims of violence in El Paso like in areas of the Deep South, harsh punishment was legally given for blacks who appeared to make sexual advances towards white women in the city.

the Klan. Respectable citizens and Klan opponents like Richard Dudley also held similar racist views against some minorities that were common for the era. Dudley titled a letter to a colleague of his in the Texas Senate as "Jap Law," trying to convince the colleague that he should support upcoming anti-Asian legislation in 1921.¹²⁸ Dudley stated that Asians like the Japanese were unwilling to adapt to American culture and had dubious business practices. Shockingly, he also wrote that they were worse than blacks were because they were craftier and lamented that African Americans had caused so much turmoil and death in the U.S. due to the Civil War. Respectable men like Mayor Dudley were clearly capable of holding prejudicial views common in their era, so racism alone cannot explain why the Klan did not succeed in El Paso. The serious ethnic issue would have been how the Klan would have dealt with the "racially inferior" Mexican State across the border that was strong enough to affect the local economy. The biggest fear from local business owners in El Paso was the retaliatory reestablishment of the free trade zone along the border that would have had disastrous results for local El Paso businesses unable to compete with the lower Ciudad Juárez market prices.¹²⁹ A Klan unsupportive or hostile to Mexicans could not survive for long in El Paso.

Conclusion

The Ku Klux Klan and El Paso did not prove to be ideal matches for each other. Although regional circumstances—Prohibition, crime, and political turmoil—had allowed the Klan to gain a following here, it proved temporary, and the Klan was soon a distant and odd memory for the city. The transnational relationship of the borderland, where the languages,

cultures, and economies of two different countries blended together made it hard for the nationalistic Ku Klux Klan to reconcile the cooperative nature of the region with their exclusivist nature. It does not seem there would have been a plausible scenario where the Klan would have carried on past the decade in El Paso. Although a casual visit to El Paso would not reveal that the city was once under the influence of the Klan, evidence of its presence remains. Local schools like Austin High School, Bowie High School, and Crockett Elementary School carry the names that Klan members controlling the school board gave them over ninety years ago.¹³⁰ If there is one lesson that the history of the Klan in El Paso could teach us, it is that even seemingly unlikely events can occur, and that common sense and tolerance will hopefully prevail over bigotry.

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Death on the Calle del Diablo: The Killing of “El Pablote” and the Birth of the Narcocorrido

By Bob Chessey

Hours before dawn on Saturday, October 11, 1930, Pablo “*El Pablote*” González, the narcotic kingpin of Ciudad Juárez (Chihuahua, Mexico) was killed in an early morning whorehouse gunfight. His death certificate listed his age as 45. The death of *Pablote* (“Big Pablo”) set in motion a series of events that ignited the wrath of his widow and his narcotic-peddling ring, spawning the first documented *narcocorrido* (drug ballad) and the morphing of “*El Pablote*” into folklore as a mythical outlaw and gunman.

Pablote and his wife Ignacia “*La Nacha*” Jasso de González had been dealing narcotics in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua since the mid-1920s. Contrary to popular belief, the pair did not lead an autonomous organization. They worked for Enrique Fernández, acknowledged leader of the Juárez underworld, during the mid-1920s and early 1930s.¹

Pablote met his death at the *La Popular* Cabaret on *Calle Ugarte*, known colloquially as *Calle del Diablo* (“Devil’s Street”), a rough section of Ciudad Juárez known for its gambling joints, prostitution, cheap saloons and narcotics.

Calle Ugarte was not the location of the more famous Prohibition-era Juárez bars, cafes, casinos and cabarets, such as The Mint (co-owned by Harry Mitchell and *Pablote*’s boss Enrique Fernández), Café Central, the Juárez Casino (located in the Hotel Río Bravo), Big Kids, and O’Brien’s. Those establishments were to the east of the main downtown intersection of *Avenida Juárez* and *Comercio* (presently 16th de Septiembre). *Calle Ugarte* lies immediately west of the intersection, branching away from *Comercio* at an odd angle. Off and on *Calle Ugarte* belonged to Ciudad Juárez’s zone of tolerance, or red light district.

The events directly leading to *Pablote*’s death at *La Popular* began approximately ten months earlier, in front of a different venue along the same infamous street.

Teódulo Álvarez

In the early morning hours of Friday, January 31, 1930, 21 year-old Special Policeman Teódulo Álvarez stood at the front door of the *Norteña* Restaurant on *Calle Ugarte*. Many Juárez bars, restaurants and cabarets employed a “Special Policeman” to function as security and maintain order

in their businesses. The Special Police fulfilled a role similar to modern-day security guards and many were allowed to carry weapons.

At approximately 2:00 a. m. *Pablote* and five companions, Manuel Hernández, Armando Sánchez, José C. Montalvo, R. Velarde and Lt. Raul Lozoya (of the Mexican Army) arrived by automobile in front of the restaurant. Manuel Hernandez was a known thief.² Armando Sanchez was a convicted narcotic smuggler who seven years earlier had been arrested entering El Paso at the Santa Fe Street Bridge (while searching his car U. S. Customs officials discovered four boxes of morphine under the front seat, resulting in Sanchez serving two and a half years in Leavenworth penitentiary).³

Pablote and his friends were noticeably drunk and loud, and when they exited the car, they swarmed toward the entrance of the *Norteña* Restaurant. Special Policeman Alvarez stopped the group at the door, warning the men to quiet down. This directive agitated the drunken *Pablote*, who began bullying the Special Policeman.

"I don't want to fight with you," Álvarez told *Pablote*.⁴ *Pablote* responded by slapping the Special Policeman twice. "I'm going to call the patrol wagon," Álvarez then informed *Pablote*.⁵ Enraged, *Pablote* yanked a pistol from his pocket and fired twice at Álvarez's abdomen. The first bullet went right through the policeman, ricocheting high on a wall, while the second one lodged in his abdomen, causing him to collapse. As he fell, he managed to draw his pistol from his holster, but before he could shoot, Manuel Hernandez kicked Álvarez in the ribs.

Juárez Police Patrolman Julian Bencomo, who heard the shots, was the first policeman on the scene, disarming and arresting *Pablote*. Juárez police were then able to round up the rest of *Pablote*'s companions by Friday morning, except for Lt. Lozoya. Lt. Lozoya was captured later in the day by Lt. Ramon Z. Silva and handed over to the Juárez Police by Juárez Garrison Commander Gen. Francisco del Arco (who was locally famous for having defended Ciudad Juárez against Francisco "Pancho" Villa's siege in 1919).⁶

Meanwhile, Álvarez was rushed to Liberty Hospital in Ciudad Juárez. As he lay on his death bed, Álvarez testified in a whisper to State District Attorney Juan B. Rosales regarding the course of events. He died at 9 a.m., too weak even to sign his deathbed testimony.⁷ After an autopsy confirmed the cause of death, State D. A. Rosales pressed charges against *Pablote*. A hearing before Judge Gabino González of the Penal Court was then scheduled.⁸

Juárez Police Commissioner Jose Motta labeled the killing a "brutal murder" and revealed there were more than a dozen indictments against *Pablote* in the Juárez court system for selling and smuggling narcotics. Motta also noted that *Pablote* had been incarcerated at least 100 times in the previous four years.⁹



Figure 1. Calle del Diablo in Juárez, Mexico. Photo courtesy of the author.

At his hearing the following Monday, February 3rd, *Pablote* stood before Judge Gabino González claiming Álvarez attacked him first and that he had knocked Álvarez's gun away, shooting the Special Policeman in an act of self-defense.¹⁰

Two months later, Wednesday, April 9, 1930, *Pablote* was found guilty of second degree murder. Judge Gabino González announced that *Pablote* would be sentenced within the next 40 days. During the 40-day time period the law allowed *Pablote* an opportunity to present any new evidence that might affect his verdict.¹¹

Pablote was held in the Juárez jail without bond until Tuesday, April 30, 1930. He appealed to the State of Chihuahua Supreme Court for release, which found in his favor, leading to his posting a 5,000 pesos bond and his release.¹² Then, in the early hours of October 11, 1930 *El Pablote's* legal concerns became moot.

The Death of El Pablote

At approximately 2:45 a.m. on October 11, *Pablote* and an unidentified man (probably his friend Agustín González) entered 339 *Calle Ugarte*, the *La Popular* Cabaret and brothel.¹³ Antonio Martino, the *La Popular* owner, later reported that *Pablote*, who was probably drunk, immediately began provoking the Cabaret's Special Policeman, 33 year old Feliciano Robles, a Mexican national and veteran of the U. S. Army.¹⁴ Due to Teódulo

Álvarez's high profile murder on the same street nine months previous, and the notoriety of *Pablote* in the Juárez underworld (especially in the concentrated vice of the *Calle del Diablo*), Robles must have been fully aware of the danger he was in.

Pablote confronted Robles with the threat that he breakfasted early on "owls," street slang for officers working nights.¹⁵

Robles replied, "Don't say that to me."

"You _____, I'm going to kill you," *Pablote* promised.

Then the gunfire commenced.

Pablote initiated the shooting, firing two rounds at Robles while simultaneously seeking refuge behind a column in the middle of the bar. Robles drew his weapon and fired, spending every round in his pistol.

Antonio Martino and his bartender, Luis Ortega, both dropped behind the bar seeking protection from the flying lead. Girls sleeping upstairs rushed down in their nightclothes. Then suddenly the gunfire stopped. *Pablote* lay dead behind the base of the pillar, slain by two of Robles's bullets.¹⁶

Juárez police, fearing retaliation from the Juárez underworld, placed Robles under arrest on a technical charge, largely for his own protection. Witnesses confirmed he shot in self-defense and only after *Pablote* had fired twice at Robles.¹⁷ The expectation was that Robles would be released by Tuesday, October 14.

At the time of his death, *Pablote's* widow—Ignacia "*La Nacha*" Jasso de González—was locked in the Juárez jail on charges of drug dealing. *La Nacha* was granted permission to be present at her husband's burial on Monday, October 13; in fact, she received a police escort from her jail cell to her husband's funeral. *La Nacha* produced quite a drama at her late husband's funeral. An El Paso newspaper reporting on *El Pablote's* funeral captured the scene:¹⁸

Eyes blazing, black scarf fluttering in the wind, '*La Nacha*' whose baptismal name is Ignacia Jasso, flung her arms wide over the grave as they lowered the coffin containing what was her husband. "I promise you darling, I promise you dear, I'll kill the one who killed you," she cried. She looked definitely at the policeman who had been her guard from the Juarez jail, where she is held on drug selling charges after being refused bond.¹⁹

La Nacha was not the only member of the Juárez underworld demanding the death of Feliciano Robles. By Wednesday October 15 members of *Pablote's* drug gang announced a \$5000 (\$68,949 in 2013 dollars) bounty for the killing of Feliciano Robles.²⁰

At the same time, citizens of Ciudad Juárez raised a paltry \$52 (\$717 in 2013) for Robles' defense fund.²¹

On Tuesday, October 14, Gen. Matias Ramos, commander of the Fifth Military Zone Chihuahua, along with Col. Maureilo Rodriguez of the Juárez garrison, pledged assistance to Robles. That same evening, the night before Robles' release from jail, a soldier from the Juárez garrison was ordered to guard Robles' home.

On Wednesday, October 15, Feliciano Robles gained release from Judge Luis G. Guzman of the Juárez penal court on a 1000 pesos bond. An El Paso newspaper reported Robles "was spirited away from the police station. Police professed ignorance of his whereabouts but it was known that Robles has a bodyguard to protect him."²²

Within a day or two following his release, Robles crossed the international border into El Paso and received permission from Police Chief L. T. Robey to carry a weapon in El Paso. The guard from the military garrison was still posted at his Juárez home for protection.²³ As well as having slain *Pablote*, Robles' status as a U. S. Military veteran may have given him an advantage when requesting a gun permit from the El Paso police chief.

The public outcry from the regional border communities to *Pablote's* death was a stark contrast to that of the Juárez underworld. *El Continental*, a Spanish language newspaper based in El Paso, Texas serving residents of both El Paso and Ciudad Juárez, summarized many of those feelings in an editorial written two days after *Pablote's* death. "*El Pablote's* death surprised no one. What really surprised many was that such a dangerous criminal had been allowed his freedom and the opportunity of packing a gun. *El Pablote* died as he had lived. When he killed Teodulo Alvarez, a policeman, some months ago he boasted that he breakfasted early on 'owls.' He made the same boast to Feliciano Robles before he died. May there be no successor to *El Pablote*."²⁴

Interestingly, the contemporary reporting about Álvarez's murder made no mention of him having "owls" for breakfast. If *El Continental's* editorial is correct, and if Feliciano Robles was aware that *Pablote* had issued the same threat earlier to Álvarez, it is quite likely that he was prepared to draw his pistol and shoot before *Pablote* made his play.

"El Pablote": The First Narcocorrido

Dr. Juan Carlos Ramírez-Pimienta at San Diego State University, Imperial Valley, has extensively studied *Narcocorridos*, or "drug ballads," a subgenre of the Mexican *corrido*. In 2011, he published *Cantar a los Narcos: Voces y versos del narcocorrido*, in which he claims that "*El Pablote*" is the first known *narcocorrido*. According to Ramírez-Pimienta, the first recording of "*El Pablote*," which recounts his death at the hands of Feliciano Robles, was released in 1931, a year after his death.

The first known popular retelling of his fatal gunfight, however, appeared less than two weeks after his death, presaging the later ballad. On Tuesday,

October 21, 1930 the *El Paso Evening Post* reported that a broadside, "The Shooting of El Pablote" (the newspaper presumably translated the Spanish title for its readers), was being sold on the streets of Ciudad Juárez. No author was cited. "The poetry is a highly eulogistic account of how Pablo 'El Pablote' Gonzalez, Juarez dope ring leader, was shot to death at the Popular cabaret in Juarez," the newspaper reported.²⁵ Unfortunately no complete copy of the 1930 street-peddled poem of *Pablote's* death is known to exist. All that has survived is the newspaper's translation of the first verse from Spanish into English:²⁶

El Pablote was feared
On all the frontier
And who'd prophesy
That in this way he'd die?

The *El Paso Evening Post* claimed that the "The Shooting of *El Pablote*" was based on a poem published in Canada, "The Shooting of Dan McGrew," by Robert Service in 1907. However, a note of caution is in order. Service's poem tells the tale of a Yukon prospector's death, shot by a mysterious piano playing stranger; the tragedy appears to revolve around McGrew jumping the claim to the stranger's true love. This does not resemble the circumstances that led to *Pablote's* demise. Also, though the first verse of both poems is four lines, "The Shooting of Dan McGrew" employs a much grander scope for describing the setting:

A bunch of the boys were whooping it up in the Malamute saloon;
The kid that handles the music-box was hitting a jag-time tune;
Back of the bar, in a solo game, sat Dangerous Dan McGrew,
And watching his luck was his light-o'-love, the lady that's known
as Lou.

The *El Paso Evening Post's* comparison of the poem "The Shooting of *El Pablote*" to "The Killing of Dan McGrew" was more likely the result of the fact that Robert Service's poem was the nearest contemporary cultural reference for the paper's Anglo readership.

Interestingly, the translated verse of the broadside sold in Ciudad Juárez is very similar in structure and content to the second verse of "*El Pablote*" that Norberto González y José Rosales recorded on September 8, 1931 in El Paso, Texas.

*"El Pablote era temido
En todita la frontera.
Y quién lo habría de decir
Que de ese modo muriera."*

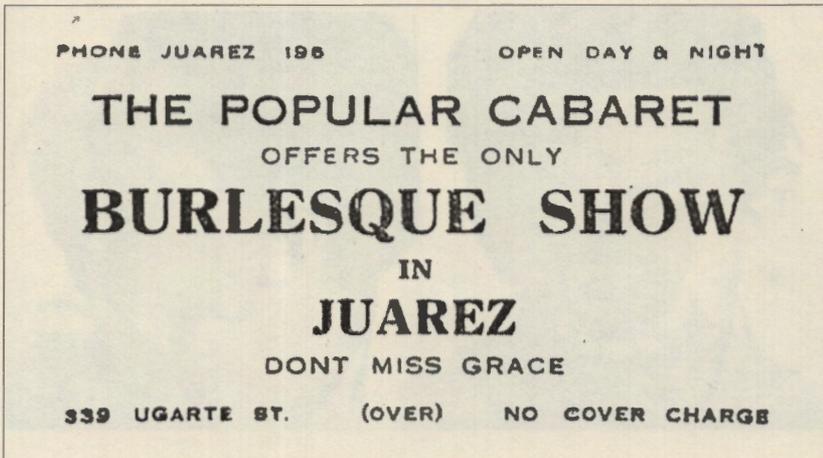


Figure 2. Business Card for La Popular. Pablote was killed in La Popular on October 11, 1930. Photo courtesy of the author.

It is unknown if the original intention of the broadside was to be a stand-alone poem that was later put to music, or if the verse was part of the first draft of the 1931 *corrido* that was later recorded and released as a record. The 1931 version of “*El Pablote*” also includes the following verse:²⁷

*A las 3 de la mañana
en el cabaret estaban.
El Veracruz y el Pablote
A un policía maltrataban.
(At three in the morning
In the cabaret were
El Vera Cruz and El Pablote
Abusing a police officer.)*

This version, written and recorded less than one year from the date of *Pablote*’s death, identifies the man accompanying *Pablote* into *La Popular* bar the night he met his demise as “*Vera Cruz*,” the nickname of his friend Agustin González.²⁸ On the basis of this, Ramírez-Pimienta concluded that Agustin “*Vera Cruz*” González most likely accompanied *Pablote* on that fateful night.²⁹

El Pablote’s Legend

Time has enhanced the legend of *El Pablote* at the expense of history. This is especially true in regard to the number of killings attributed to him post mortem, which makes him out to be more of a killer than he actually was. There are egregious and undocumented claims to the number of men



Figure 3. Mug Shot of Manuel Hernandez. Hernandez was an associate of Pablote. Photo courtesy of the author.

he murdered or was responsible for having killed. Below are the two most common claims to *Pablote's* legacy as a gunman.

In 1980, the historian C. L. Sonnichsen published the second part of his El Paso history, *Pass of the North*, in which he claims that *El Pablote* González was “responsible for 113 assassinations in the rocky hills south of Ciudad Juárez, until a police officer killed him in *La Popular* restaurant on October 30, 1931.”³⁰ More recently, the *Universidad Autónoma de Ciudad Juárez* (UACJ) in Ciudad Juárez posted an often-sourced article by Adriana Linares entitled *La Leyendra Negra* (“The Black Legend”) which claimed:

*La preeminencia de los asiáticos en la distribución y venta de drogas finalizó cuando, a mediados de los años veinte, fueron asesinados 11 inmigrantes chinos dedicados a dicho comercio ilícito. El responsable de las muertes fue un individuo apodado “El Veracruz”, al parecer integrante del grupo de “La Nacha” y su esposo “El Pablote.”*³¹ (“The preeminence of Asians in the distribution and sale of drugs ended when, in the mid-1920, 11 Chinese immigrants who were said to sell the contraband were killed. The one responsible for the deaths was an individual called ‘El Veracruz,’ a member of ‘La Nacha’ and her husband ‘El Pablote’s’ gang.”)³²

Sonnichsen’s knowledge of *Pablote* is highly questionable. For instance, his assertion of the date of the killing (October 30, 1931) is off by one year and nineteen days. He further asserts that *Pablote* was responsible for “113 assassinations in the rocky hills south of Juárez,” but provides no source to back him up. Similarly, Linares’ assertion that Ignacia “*La Nacha*” Jasso

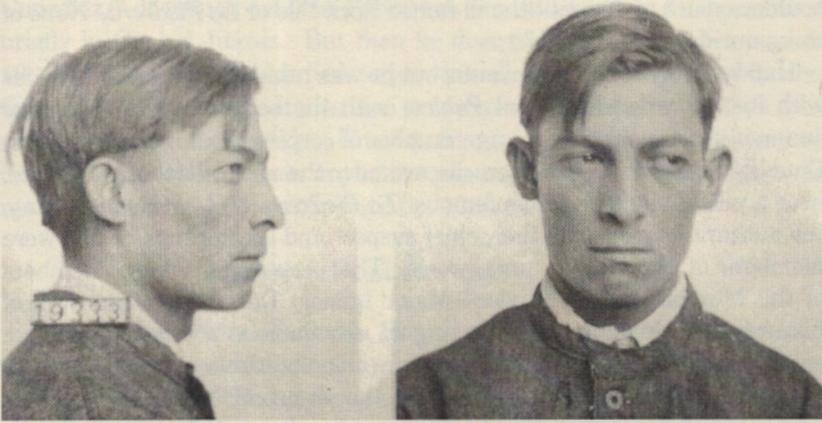


Figure 4. Mug Shot of Armando Sanchez. Sanchez was an associate of Pablote. Photo courtesy of National Archives at Kansas City, Record Group 129.

de González and Pablo “*El Pablote*” González participated in the murder of 11 Chinese immigrants is wholly unattributed.

Furthermore, contemporary newspaper accounts contradict the assertions of Sonnichsen and Linares. At the time of *Pablote*’s death, articles covering his sordid legacy identify a litany of criminal behavior, but none mention mass murder. The *El Paso Evening Post* wrote: “(Pablote) had become wealthy through his dope traffic, according to Rafael Vargas, federal district attorney. El Paso police said he was a notorious ‘fence’ for articles stolen in this city, and was sought for investigation on automobile theft charges.”³³ The *El Paso Times* noted: “The slain man long has been a terror in Juárez, where his name has been linked with virtually every vice ring. Among the charges made against “*El Pablote*’ one will find dope, white slavery, counterfeiting, smuggling, and virtually every other known illicit business.”³⁴ These sources provide no triple digit body counts or double digit body counts of trafficking competitors. The reporting at the time documents a body count of a single digit: Teódulo Álvarez.

The origin of the 113 deaths “in the rocky hills south of Juárez” likely began with an *El Paso Herald-Post* reporter, Marshall Hail. In January of 1947 Hail wrote: “In the 1920’s, when *El Pablote* (Big Pablo) Gonzales (sic) ruled the Juárez underworld, gangsters were being ‘taken for a ride.’ Admirers of *El Pablote* claim he was ahead of Al Capone of Chicago in this respect.”

Later in the same article Hail made another claim: “In the early days of *La Nacha*’s reign, a wave of gangland murders rocked the city [Ciudad Juárez]. Victim after victim was found, riddled with bullets, near a pile of

boulders south of Juárez—the ill-famed Rock Pile or *La Piedrera*. None of these murders was solved.”³⁵

Hail was relying on real events, but he was taking tremendous liberties with history when he linked *Pablote* with the body count. During the summer and fall of 1928, a large number of corpses of known criminals in Ciudad Juárez and El Paso were discovered in the sand hills south of Juárez, near a pile of boulders, the infamous “*La Piedrera*.”³⁶ After investigating, the authorities identified their chief suspect and accomplices. None were members of the Juárez underworld. The perpetrators were members of the Mexican Secret Service—Major Ignacio Dosamantes and two of his underlings—who were engaging in extrajudicial action to eliminate criminals. Dosamantes’ two agents were jailed but later released. A quote from an El Paso newspaper sums up the situation: “After Dosamantes began his clean-up movement in the border city well known gangsters were ‘taken for rides.’ Their bodies were found later in desert hills near Juárez.”³⁷ The investigation appeared to end when Major Dosamantes was murdered in El Paso that same fall.³⁸

Then, in late July of 1930 additional bodies were found in the outskirts of Ciudad Juárez, but these were not discovered in the “*La Piedrera*” area. On Monday, July 21, the unidentified body of a man was found in the sandhills west of Juárez (the “*La Piedrera*” sandhills are located south of Juárez). Another two bodies, “riddled with steel-jacketed bullets,” were discovered in a third area one-half mile from the international border. These were the remains of Bernardino Porras and Alejandro Sanchez, liquor smugglers, who had been missing for three weeks. Theories at the time focused on a liquor high-jacking or a battle with U. S. Mounted Customs officers. No connection with “*El Pablote*” was ever put forth by Juárez authorities or newspaper reports.

In fact, no contemporary sources linked *Pablote* with any of these sandhill murders, not during the coverage of Teódulo Álvarez’s killing, not during *Pablote*’s trial, and not in the immediate aftermath of *Pablote*’s demise. The Juárez police were fully aware that *Pablote* was capable of a “brutal murder” (to quote Police Commissioner Jose Motta regarding Teódulo Álvarez’s killing); that he had dozens of indictments for selling and smuggling narcotics; and that he had been incarcerated at least 100 times in the previous four years.³⁹ But none of them linked him in any way with the *La Piedrera* killings. Indeed, *Pablote* would more likely have been a victim than the perpetrator of the murders.

One curious detail related to *Pablote* does surface in the *La Piedrera* saga. On August 27, 1928, the local newspapers carried a story about a notorious car thief who had plagued El Paso law enforcement for years, Policarpio Rodriguez. The articles report Rodriguez’s disappearance, noting his family’s fear that he had been “‘taken for a ride’ to ‘*La Piedrera*.’” The articles also reports a second man believed missing, Agustin “*Vera Cruz*”

González.⁴⁰ It turned out that Rodriguez was still alive, as he reappeared briefly in Ciudad Juárez. But then he disappeared again on September 19, and this time his bloodied corpse was discovered at *La Piedrera* on October 1, covered with stones, one arm extending from a makeshift rock covered grave.⁴¹ As for "*Vera Cruz*" (a friend and associate of *Pablote*) no further mention is made in any of the papers, dead or alive. His name is not mentioned again in public until the 1931 corrido "*El Pablote*."

Post Script

Ignacia "*La Nacha*" Jasso de González widow of Pablo "*El Pablote*" González, continued trafficking and maintained her grip as the dominant source of opiates in Ciudad Juárez for decades to come, even eluding U.S. attempts for extradition in the early days of WWII. *La Nacha* never remarried. She "retired" in the early 1970s after a storied 50-year career as a trafficker and died of natural causes in the early 1980s.

Feliciano Robles, the man who successfully stood up to *El Pablote*, does not seem to have remained a folk hero for very long. In January 1934, a small article appeared in a Juárez newspaper publicly calling for Robles, apparently still a Special Policeman, to be disarmed: "We have begged the Commander of Police, that the gentlemen Feliciano Robles, who killed 'the Pablote' and Manuel Perea, an individual of not very recommendable antecedents, be disarmed. It seems that they have been extended to them both, appointments as auxiliary police and these must be withdrawn. We do not do more than to say what society demands to our authorities."⁴² There was no mention of what had become of the \$5000 bounty that had been placed on Robles' head by *La Nacha* and *Pablote's* gang.

The struggle to survive amid the double onslaught of the Great Depression and repeal of the U.S. of the Volstead Act legalizing alcohol led to the demise of *La Popular*. Initially the business moved to the main street of *Avenida Juárez*, but then closed its doors permanently October 10, 1933. At that date, owner Antonio Martino, who had ducked behind the bar when *Pablote* opened fire on Feliciano Robles, was in the Juárez jail on an immigration charge (he was an Italian citizen). His wife Grace, who supervised "the girls," made it clear that she wanted to get out of the prostitution business. "I want to go to New Mexico and sell home made pies. I'm a good cook, and I want to get out of this life."⁴³ The closing of *La Popular's Calle del Diablo* location also meant the loss of a local attraction: "Madame Grace's girls long took pride in pointing out to tourists the bullet holes that entered the café woodwork in this (*El Pablote* vs. Robles) historic duel."⁴⁴

The *narcocorrido* "*El Pablote*," can still be heard by strolling street musicians in the market and bars of Ciudad Juárez.

Endnotes

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Hall of Honor Nominations

The El Paso County Historical Society accepts nominations from the general public as well as from Society members for the Hall of Honor. A minimum of one living and one deceased persons will be remembered and honored at the Society's annual banquet in November. Nominations may be made for one or both categories. Nominees must be (1) outstanding men or women of character, vision, courage and creative spirit who have lived in what is presently El Paso County, (2) who have consistently done the unusual which deserves to be written or recorded, or who have created that which deserves to be read, heard, or seen, and who have made El Paso County better for their having lived in it; and (3) who have influenced over a period of years the course of history of El Paso, or by their singular achievements have brought honor and recognition to the El Paso community, and (4) who have directed us toward worthy goals and merit being remembered by all El Pasoans as an exemplary guide to our future.

All nominations must be accompanied by a biographical resume that include pertinent information about the nominee and the reasons for nominating him or her. Please include the nominee's address and phone number if living, date of death if deceased, date and place of birth, years of residence in El Paso County, profession, and name and address of nearest known relative(s). The person making the nomination must give his or her name and phone number and mail all information to Chairman, Hall of Honor Selection Committee, El Paso County Historical Society, P.O. Box 28, El Paso, Texas, 79940 by July 20 of each year.

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Address (including zip code) _____

Birthplace _____ Years Residence in El Paso _____

Profession _____

Nearest Relative _____ Address _____

DECEASED NOMINEE:

Name _____

Address (including zip code) _____

Birthplace _____ Years Residence in El Paso _____

Profession _____

Nearest Relative _____ Address _____

NOMINATOR:

Name _____

Phone No. _____ Date _____

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2. Historical accuracy is crucial; therefore, great care must be taken in preparing the article.
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General meetings (open to the public) are held in February, May, August and October.

Election of officers and directors is held at the October meeting. Exact dates, times, places and other pertinent information concerning all activities are announced in our electronic newsletter, *El Conquistador*, which is published approximately fourteen days prior to each general meeting.

OTHER ACTIVITIES

- Hall of Honor Banquet
- Frank W. Gorman and Arthur K. Gorman Memorial Historical Essay Contest

*For an up-to-date calendar,
please visit our website
ElPasoHistory.com or on Facebook,
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El Paso County Historical Society

ORGANIZED MARCH 18, 1954

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The purpose of the society shall be to study the history of the city and county of El Paso and of the surrounding territory; to conduct and foster research in the history of the area; to acquire and preserve documents, papers and other objects of historical interest and value pertaining to this area; to make such material available for the information of the community; to publish and encourage the publication of historical writing pertaining to this area; to develop public consciousness of the rich heritage of our historical background; and to engage in such activities which contribute to the restoration and maintenance of the Richard F. Burges House, home of the Society.

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