

**Southwestern In Focus
CHAMBER OF COMMERCE
MANAGER BELIEVES IN CITY
AND ITS PEOPLE**

By Hayward Thompson
Written Especially for Sundial
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He is still called "Colonel Holmberg" at the chamber. The title is accorded out of respect and not because he runs the organization with an iron, militaristic hand.

He was still on active duty when the chamber offer came in November, 1964, and after 30 years with the military he was ready for something new. As he puts it, "One day I was too young to be a general and the next day I was too old, so I took the job."

Actually, his decision to accept the position and remain in El Paso wasn't made as easily or as lightly arrived at as that. Holmberg is a world traveler, having served in, or visited, almost 30 countries from Austria to Vietnam. "No matter where you go," he said, "the most important part of any area is its people. My wife and I discussed all aspects of the job offer and the city of El Paso before deciding. After everything was considered, what lit boiled down to was people. The caliber of people in El Paso made us stay," he said. "They are the most open and friendly of any that we have found anywhere."



DONALD W. HOLMBERG

NO REGRETS

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Holmberg knew nothing about chamber work but did express amazement about the state of financial and administrative chaos. Holmberg said, "The place was in administrative shambles when I came, and we actually had to borrow money to meet our monthly payrolls." "In a way, this was extremely advantageous to me as a novice in chamber work—I couldn't have made a mistake if I tried," he added.

It took a lot of time, patience, and hard work to get the chamber back on its feet, but Holmberg hired and trained a competent staff and by the close of 1966, the chamber had all of its bills paid and over \$35,000 in the bank.

The whole recovery operation was a start-from-scratch affair, but Holmberg's background, training, and experience made him the ideal man for the job. Virtually every position he held in the military, from his combat duties in two wars up to his last assignment as deputy commander and chief of staff at Ft. Bliss, were jobs that demanded experienced, responsible leadership abilities.

After World War II he was signed as president of the War Crimes Tribunal in Japan, where he was, in effect, the presiding judge. In the early fifties he served as executive to the deputy secretary of defense and then to the assistant secretary of defense for international security affairs. He was executive officer to the supreme allied commander of Europe and then commanded the 8th Division artillery in Germany.

His formal education stretches from Macalester College (he is a native of St. Paul) to the military's "executive training" schools, the Air University, the Command and General Staff College, the Armed Forces Staff College, and the Army War College.

The Chamber of Commerce is financially on firm ground today, and the operation, as a whole, is considered by some to be one of the most aggressive and efficiently run anywhere. Although Holmberg is no Norman Vincent Peale of the civic set, he is an advocate of the "power of positive thinking" and his attitude toward his adopted city is one of optimism, but it is optimism tempered with a heavy dose of reality.

An El Pasoan for not quite 10 years, he nevertheless knows more about this city than most life-long residents, but then that's his job.

"Frankly," he said, "this city has always been a little self-satisfied and content to sit back and let things move along in a more or less haphazard manner."

But that leave-it-be attitude is dying, according to Holmberg. "The turning point was about two years ago when the rising cost of living finally reached El Paso, and when it did, the impact caught this city off guard."

Holmberg said that more than ever before, El Paso is finding it hard and uncomfortable to live with complacency. He said that El Paso must create new jobs by attracting new industry and by expanding its present businesses; Income must rise to match the rising cost of living, and we can't use complacency to achieve it.

KNOWS CITY

The rampant, optimistic population growth predictions circulating around El Paso just prior to the last census never originated in Holmberg's office. He knew better. "The era of extremely rapid population growth is a thing of the past for El Paso," he said. "The City has settled down to a slow and steady pattern of growth, which in the long run, is a healthier situation for future planning and development."

Holmberg is a strong booster of the Twin Plant Concept, a program that he feels will provide much new industry for this area. "Let's be realistic," he said, "El Paso doesn't lend itself readily to industrial development. We lack natural resources, we are not a market ourselves, and we are a long way from other markets, but the Twin Plant program will attract industries that will

increase the economies on both sides of the border.”

Contrary to charges by organized labor that the Twin Plant program is stealing jobs from Americans and that manufacturers are exploiting “cheap” labor—the opposite is true. A well substantiated fact is that if the tariff regulations which permit the operation of Twin Plants were repealed, the U.S. would suffer an increase of 150 million to \$200 million annually in its balance of trade deficit.

About 120,000 jobs in foreign countries are created by this concept—very few of these jobs would be recreated in the U.S. The concept provides about 37,000 jobs in the U.S., the bulk of which would disappear if the tariff provisions were repealed.

The same principle applies to our local situation. It does not help us if a plant goes to Taiwan but if it goes to Juarez jobs are created both in El Paso and in Juarez, an increased demand for services of all kinds is developed, and we bring executive and managerial families to El Paso.

LOVES EL PASO

Holmberg loves El Paso and is deeply concerned and totally involved in the city and its future. His nature is progressive and demands that his involvement culminate in forward movement. But sometimes obstacles are encountered and something has to give. There was such a confrontation a couple of years ago, and it was serious enough that Holmberg considered quitting his job because of it. The confrontation was brought about by the new Civic and Convention Center, and the problem at that time was whether there was going to be a center or not. “Frankly, I would have quit had the Civic Center not gone across,” he said. “Had

it failed, it would have indicated to me that the city just didn’t want to go anywhere.”

Well, El Paso has its center on the way and fortunately for the chamber, it still has Holmberg. He considers the new complex to be a milestone for El Paso and artists’ drawings and architectural sketches of the center dominate the walls of his office in the Chamber’s temporary headquarters at 820 N. Mesa.

Once the center is completed, the chamber will have its offices in a building next to the exhibition hall. And it’s totally appropriate that the chamber be there because Holmberg feels that El Paso’s greatest potential lies in the area of conventions and tourism.

Since his enthusiasm for the new center is obvious, it follows that whenever he speaks of it he perks up and rattles off facts about the Center’s potential like a talking almanac. “Did you know,” he said, “that during the period Jan. 1 to Sept. 30 this year El Paso received \$3.9 million from conventions? Now that’s \$3.9 million new dollars,” he said, accenting the “new” with a slap on his desk. “They were dollars that were never here before and were brought in by convention delegates. In 1972, the first year that we use the new Center, we estimate that delegates will bring over 8.5 million new dollars to the city. That’s 8.5 million new dollars,” he repeated, “that were never here before.”

By their very nature, Chambers of Commerce form an activity hub for the economic areas they serve. The total scope of the El Paso Chamber activities is too varied to mention in detail, but committees like the agricultural, business development, business research, government relations, and international relations, to name just a few, and the various information pamphlets and other publications, all function under the direction

of Holmberg. The purpose of all the chamber's activities is to "advance the economy of the city, insure orderly growth, and provide service to visitors," according to Holmberg.

That may prove to be a little difficult, especially if, as the colonel says, "the greatest area for El Paso's growth lies in the area of conventions and tourism."

SELLS CITY

Among its other duties, the chamber is assigned the task of selling El Paso as a convention site, to the various interested organizations around the country. It's doing remarkably well considering the fact that the chamber's convention budget is, according to Holmberg, "pitiful."

Holmberg said that most other cities in El Paso's population class give their Chambers a tax-supported convention budget that generally hovers near \$200,000. "Our convention bureau operated on about \$00,000 a year," he said, "and every penny of that comes from local businessmen."

He not only feels that many chamber activities are under-budgeted but that the city could get much more for its dollar if chamber functions weren't duplicated by other organizations in the city. "There is a lot of fragmentation of effort in El Paso," he said. "If all business supported organizations were under one roof, with one central administrative and accounting system, there's no telling how much money we could save."

"I believe, and I preach this frequently—if a businessman is willing to, put up with a system where he fails to get full value for his dollar, that is entirely up to him. But any association executive who is willing to waste his contributor's dollars in overhead costs is not doing justice to his job."

It is to be expected, of course, that any position in an executive capacity isn't complete unless it has a wide variety of headaches and frustrations. Holmberg's job as executive director of the El Paso Chamber of Commerce has its share, and sometimes maybe a little more. But, Holmberg wouldn't have it any other way. He feels that El Paso's potential is great, and to him, helping the city reach that potential is an exiting and challenging job.

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(Please Turn to Page 4)

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