

Only traces of 'Hole in Wall' on border are the memories

All traces of a nationally famous El Paso-Juarez landmark are gone but its memory lingers.

It was the "Hole in the Wall," a large frame structure on the El Paso-Juarez border where people could buy a drink by stepping over the international line. It was torn down on Jan. 1, 1931.

The "Hole in the Wall" could be reached by going south on Eucalyptus Street where it intersected with what is now Paisano Drive. (The Mexican side at that time was on Cordova Island in the Chamizal.)

RAY DWIGANS, who retired as U.S. Collector of Customs in 1974, recalls the place. "I was in it," he said.

"I was going to the College of Mines and working for the Police detective bureau at night. It was about 1929 or 1930. People at the 'Hole' were being robbed by a bunch of hoodlums. I was sent over to see if we could break them up. You got to the building by a ramp over a 3 foot deep channel which had no water in it. When I was in there, a fellow asked me if I'd like to have a certain coat one of the guests was wearing. He indicated the one and asked if I'd pay \$5 for it. I said, 'Yes.'"

Dwigans got the coat and the man who stole it was arrested by police who were waiting outside. The coat was returned to its owner.

"THEY GOT Oklahoma Blackie there," Dwigans recalled. "He was a bank robber. It was a wild place, but it wasn't the original. There was a 'Hole in the Wall' in Fabens earlier, and I was there once. You had only to walk across a drainage



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ditch. It had an orchestra and dance floor and it was a wild place, too."

While the "Hole" in El Paso gained fame as a place in the nation where drinks could be purchased easily (it was during Prohibition), it also garnered the intense dislike of ministers and Juarez merchants who claimed it was taking business away from them.

An El Paso Post story of Jan. 1, 1931, said workmen used a crowbar to upturn a huge wooden bar "nearly half a block in length where hundreds of celebrators reeled to a honky tonk orchestra before two federal governments combined to block the operation.

"BROKEN BOTTLES lay about the floor . . . board racks, holding slot machines met an infamous end in a common woodpile. The spacious dance floor was ripped from warped joists . . . 'Too much politics,' said a workman. 'There is \$15,000 tied up in this place and the wreckage will not bring \$1,000.'"

The Chamizal area came into being when the Rio Grande shifted its bed numerous times from the 1850s and both sides claimed it. ("Chamizal" means a place where the chamiza, a semidesert evergreen shrub, grew freely.)

Dwigans said he was told Cordova island evolved after a 1898 flood, when the Rio Grande backed up and flooded both sides of the river. "The mayors of Juarez

and El Paso got together and sent mules and workmen to carve a short cut through a horseshoe bend so the water could run straight," he said.

LEON METZ, author and historian, said he'd heard stories of the "Hole in the Wall" from the late banker, Chris P. Fox.

"The 1898 flood brought water up into the courthouse," he said. "The flood was in the midst of a raging dust storm. People were in boats, some sought refuge in trains and in the Army quarters at Hart's Mill."

He said officials got together with Mexico to dig a trench, which cost \$10,000, across the neck of the horseshoe, allowing the water to run straight but the island (Cordova) belonging to Mexico protruded into the U.S. Cordova Island was a 380-acre tract of Mexican territory, roughly a triangle, that thrust north of the river.

A HERALD-POST story of May 13, 1940, relates the Mexican government was then fencing the boot shaped patch of land that extended into the United States but belonged to Mexico.

"The meandering Rio Grande, shifting its course southward years ago, left the Island jutting into the United States and it is separated from South El Paso only by a dry wash," the story related.

"The story of Cordova Island for three decades has been a tale of the federal government's fight to stamp out liquor, narcotics and alien smuggling." (Prohibition was enacted in 1918 and repealed in 1933.)

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