



## The Chamizal Residents and the Chamizal Convention of 1963

In the early 1960s the Chamizal dispute, which involved both the Chamizal tract and Cordova Island, had reached nearly 100 years with no resolution. The Chamizal tract was originally a tract of land that belonged to Mexico and was owned by Pedro Garcia, a Mexican farmer. Garcia's property bordered the Rio Grande, which is the international border between Mexico and the United States. A huge flood in 1864 altered the course of the Rio Grande and thus altered Pedro Garcia's Chamizal tract—it went from being exclusively on the Mexican side to being exclusively on the U.S. side of the river. After several decades, the original international boundary was erased. This led to the prickly question of ownership: did the U.S. own the Chamizal tract or did Mexico? This question was a chronic thorn in the relationship between the two countries for decades.

Meanwhile, Cordova Island was essentially a Mexican enclave inside the U.S.—it was a Mexican piece of land surrounded on three sides by the United States. Cordova Island was covered in desert shrubs and did not have a definitive international border. As a result, the island was a “no man's land”; drug traffic, illegal immigration, booze, and blood were the signatures of the island. After many years, however, the Chamizal Convention (treaty) of 1963 finally ended the Chamizal tract conflict and significantly curbed the Cordova Island conflicts.

The Chamizal Convention of 1963 can best be explained by using the analogy of a sour lemon versus a glass of sweet lemonade. Indeed,

the Chamizal Convention had some sweet-tasting lemonade: it gave the Chamizal tract back to Mexico, cemented and straightened the Rio Grande through El Paso-Ciudad Juarez so that the river would never change course again, and readjusted the international boundary at Cordova Island. In doing all of this, the convention significantly improved the relationship between the U.S. and Mexico. However, the convention also forced approximately 5,600 U.S. residents to relocate off of the Chamizal tract. Moreover, the convention created a title dispute between the Mexican government and the Garcia family. This essay will focus on the lemon side—sour side—of the Chamizal Convention of 1963.

The Chamizal Convention officially gave the Chamizal tract back to Mexico, but what happened to the U.S. citizens that were living on the Chamizal tract at this time? In simple terms, these 5,600 residents were relocated and compensated by Uncle Sam (the U.S. Government). The Chamizal residents were assisted in their relocation efforts financially. For example, the federal government paid the residents for the work time that they lost due to moving. Moreover, for the residents that were still paying the mortgages on their house, the government took their mortgages and paid the rest. There was also a “Chamizal Neighborhood Center” set up during the relocation process that was run by city officials. This center was established so that the Chamizal residents could get information and ask questions about the relocation process. Finally, the Chamizal homeowners received compensation



Home on the Chamizal Tract, circa 1963.  
*Photo courtesy of William E. Wood*

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for their home and property. The federal government hired real estate appraisers to decide how much each home was worth (Nestor Valencia, Interview with Michelle Gomilla, Chamizal Oral History Project, UTEP, 1994).

Although the government did compensate the Chamizal residents for the time off of work that they needed to move and for the move itself, there were difficulties for all of the Chamizal residents. First, the residents had to pack up all of their belongings and leave the homes they had lived in for a long time. Second, the children had to switch schools, which meant having to adapt to a new environment and make new friends. Third, Chamizal residents that attended church on the Chamizal tract had to find a new church to attend. Fourth, the Chamizal residents and other El Pasoans who worked at the many industries that shut down had to find new jobs. Lastly, the Chamizal residents had to find new places to live. Many of the Chamizal residents moved into houses in other parts of El Paso while some left Texas altogether. Still many others moved in with family members or friends.

Now let's look at the title dispute between the Mexican government and the Garcia family. A Mexican farmer by the name of Pedro Garcia had title to the Chamizal tract starting

in the mid 19th century, before the Chamizal tract was on the U.S. side of the river. As noted earlier in this essay, the flood of 1864 altered the course of the Rio Grande and thus altered Pedro Garcia's Chamizal tract from being exclusively on the Mexican side to being exclusively on the U.S. side of the river. Garcia watched as U.S. citizens began settling on his property. Eventually he filed a complaint with the Mexican government, claiming that U.S. citizens were trespassing and moving onto his property. It took 99 years, from 1864 to 1963, for the Chamizal tract to finally go back to Mexico by way of the Chamizal Convention of 1963. It would be logical to assume that when the Chamizal tract went back to Mexico, it went back to Pedro N. Garcia, (descendant of Pedro Garcia, the original title holder) the person that held official title to the land. However, Victor M. Guzman, Garcia family member and Chamizal historian, notes that the Mexican government has been using the land for development, and the Garcia family has not been compensated to this day.

Indeed, history is rarely black and white; it's often a shade of grey. The fact that the Chamizal Convention of 1963 had both a lemonade side and lemon side to its story is a case in point. The 5,600 Chamizal residents and the Garcia family of Juarez were the ones that were forced to bite into the sour lemon.



Backyard of Chamizal Tract home. The homes on the Chamizal Tract were generally small and humble.  
*Photo courtesy of William E. Wood*