



## The Rio Grande Floods: the Beginning of the Chamizal Dispute

Many visitors to Chamizal National Memorial ask, “Where’s the river?” Indeed, the Rio Grande is not very grand as it runs through El Paso-Ciudad Juarez. It carries very little water and lies in a cemented riverbed. However, the meager Rio Grande was not always so meager. From the 1850s to the 1890s, the Rio Grande flooded almost every spring. Particularly large floods occurred in 1864 and again in 1897. This essay will discuss how these floods and the river in general initiated the Chamizal dispute and Cordova Island problems.

In 1827, Jose Ponce de Leon received a land grant from the Mexican government. His land was in El Paso del Norte, on the south side of the Rio Grande. Leon’s land became known as el Chamizal (the Chamizal tract), named after the Chamisa, or four-wing salt bush. After the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo of 1848 established the Rio Grande as the international border between Mexico and Texas, the community of El Paso Del Norte was divided. North of the Rio Grande, in the U.S., a town became known as El Paso. South of the river, a Mexican town became known as Ciudad Juarez. Problems soon arose for el Chamizal due to the Rio Grande.

El Paso-Ciudad Juarez is located where the Rio Grande changes direction from heading south to southeast. Due to this mighty turn, in the second half of the 19th century, the river constantly chewed away at its southern bank. As a result, el Chamizal “switched” sides. Year after year, the Chamizal tract became less on the Ciudad Juarez side of the river and more on the El Paso side. In 1864, a particularly large spring flood

exacerbated this process.

In 1866, Pedro Ignacio Garcia, Leon’s grandson, inherited the el Chamizal. By 1895, Garcia’s property was completely on the El Paso side, the U.S. side, of the river. Garcia did not dare “to occupy my aforesaid land, fearful, as I was. . . that some personal injury might befall me from. . . a few North Americans, who supposing this land to belong to the United States of North America, pretended to come into possession of the same” [Pedro Ignacio Garcia quote in Robert M. Utley, *Changing Course* (Tucson, Arizona: Southwest Parks and Monuments Association, 1996), 98-99]. The U.S. believed the Chamizal tract to be U.S. property, since the Rio Grande was the international border.

Garcia told the Mexican government about the Chamizal dispute in 1895. The Mexican government then brought the Chamizal dispute to the attention of the International Boundary Commission (IBC), a government agency made up of both Mexican and U.S. officials. Thus, the seeds of the Chamizal dispute were planted.

It must be noted that throughout the 19th century, the Rio Grande flooded almost every spring. The Rio Grande begins 14,000 feet up in the San Juan Mountains of Colorado. Every spring, due to mountain snowmelt, the Rio Grande flows much higher than the rest of the year. In the 19th century there were no dams to control the water of the Rio Grande. As a result, nature was allowed to take its course. The spring runoff of the Rio Grande would barrel south through New Mexico, as the state generally loses elevation from north to south. But



The Rio Grande, International Border between the United States and Mexico.  
*Wikipedia Photo*

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*Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, the Rio Grande shifted course. This created a nightmare for Pedro Ignacio Garcia and his land, el Chamizal.*

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when the swift waters reached the flatlands around El Paso-Ciudad Juarez, the water would stagnate and overflow its banks.

During the years 1895 and 1896, uncharacteristically, the San Juan Mountains experienced minimal precipitation. This resulted in the Rio Grande flowing minimally. But in the winter of 1896-'97, Colorado received heavy snows which led to a major flood in El Paso-Ciudad Juarez that spring. The aftermath of this flood had enormous impact on Cordova Island.

Since Chamizal National Memorial commemorates the Chamizal Convention of 1963, many of us assume that the Memorial sits on the actual Chamizal tract, Pedro Garcia's property. Actually, the Chamizal tract is a couple of miles west of the park. Chamizal National Memorial is in fact entirely within a piece of land known as Cordova Island. To make matters more confusing, Cordova Island is not an island, it's a peninsula. Up until 1899, Cordova Island was a Mexican peninsula surrounded on three sides by the curving Rio Grande.

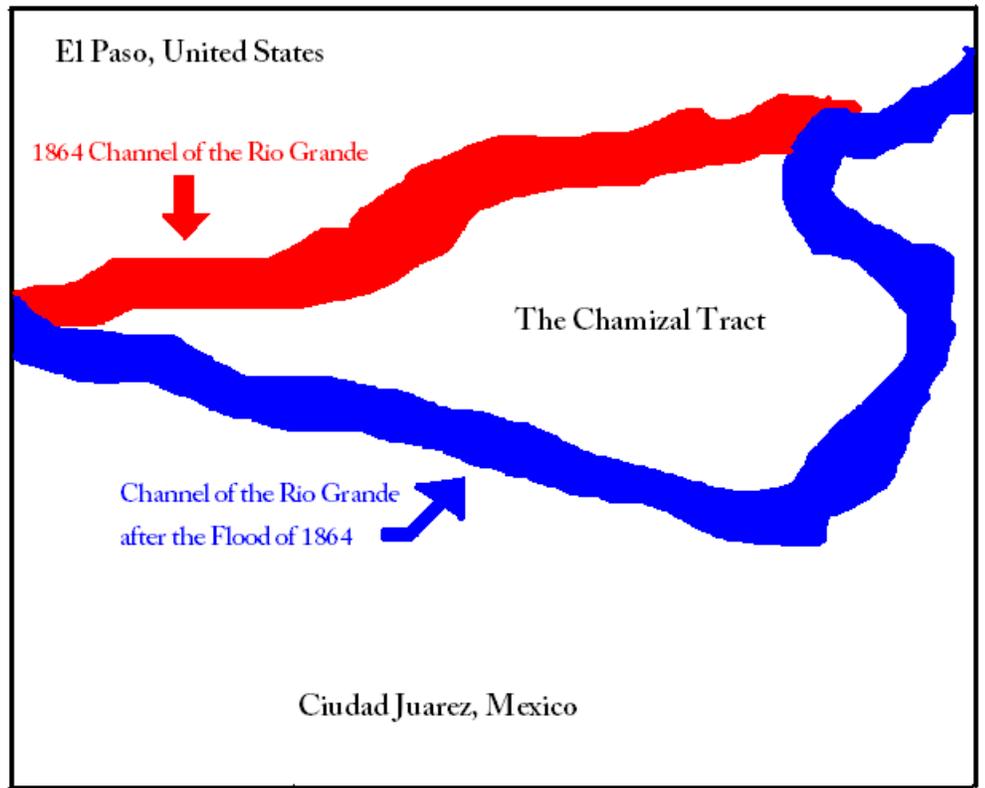
After the Rio Grande flood of 1897,

however, the IBC studied Cordova Island and realized that future flooding could be avoided. If an artificial cut was constructed through the neck of the Island, then the Rio Grande would be forced to barrel straight through the area rather than arc around it and flood. And so the artificial cut was constructed in 1899 and the two countries split the cost. After completion, Cordova Island became a peninsula of Mexico surrounded on three sides not by the Rio Grande but by the United States. The IBC constructed cement boundary markers at the now dry, original Rio Grande river bed. These boundary markers can be seen at Chamizal National Memorial today.

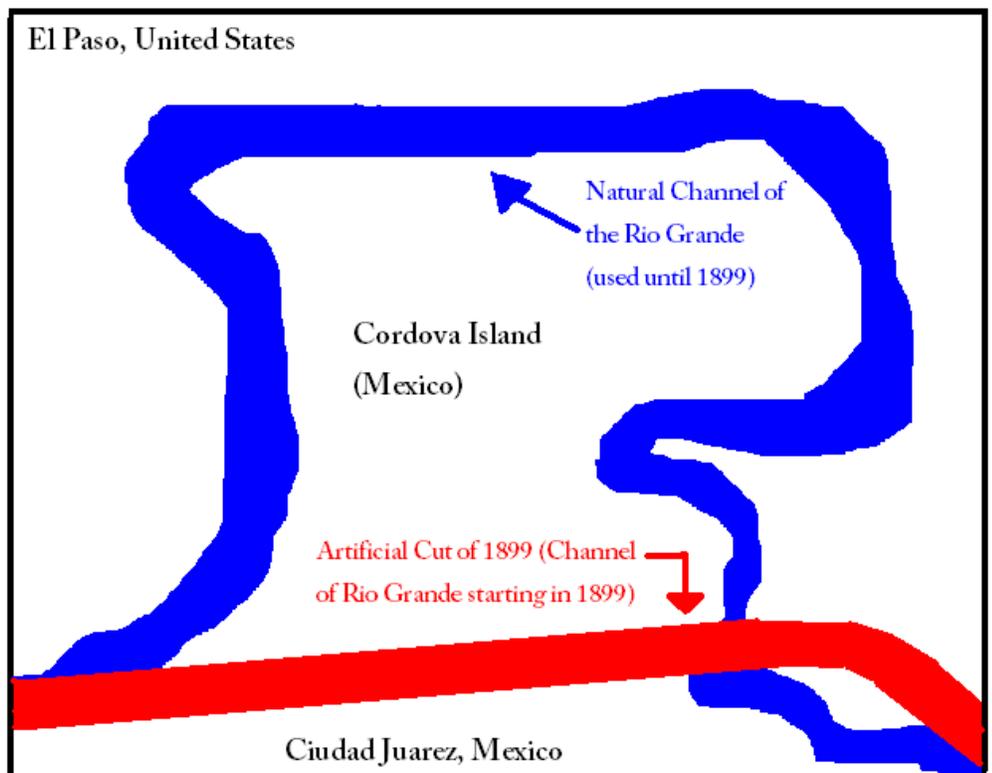
In the early 20th century, the Chamizal dispute plagued El Paso-Ciudad Juarez. Cordova Island would become a problem a few years later when immigration to the U.S. was restricted and when El Pasoans and other U.S. residents began calling for booze and drugs. These two land problems would turn out to be marathons, lasting for decades. The pistol that started these two marathons was the currently subtle, once brutal, Rio Grande.



Bridge to the Chamizal Tract, circa 1903  
*NPS Photo*



In 1864, the Chamizal Tract went from being on the Mexican side of the river to being on the United States side. So which country owned the Chamizal Tract?



With the completion of the artificial cut in 1899, Cordova Island became a Mexican enclave surrounded on 3 sides by the United States... Now there was no definitive international border. What kind of problems did this cause?