

Fall 2008

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Recommended Citation

Robinson, R. (2008). Why Brownsville Failed to Become "The Next Coral Gables." *Journal of South Texas*, 21(2), 188–211.

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Why Brownsville Failed to Become ‘The Next Coral Gables’

Rob Robinson

During the early 1920s, Brownsville and the greater Lower Rio Grande Valley region had an opportunity to expand their economic base from one focused solely on agriculture to one that embraced both agriculture and tourism. Despite the efforts of non-Texas boosters and businessmen, most South Texas residents remained unenthusiastic about the prospect of becoming the next Coral Gables.

In the early twentieth century, a maturing America with disposable income, cars, and a strong rail network allowed previously remote exotic places like Florida and southern California to blossom into winter resort and tourist destinations. The factors that enabled successful development in these locations resulted from strategically planned and well-financed campaigns to attract visitors, local resident support, and first-class attractions and accommodations. In the 1920s, the Lower Rio Grande Valley sat ready to become the next Coral Gables or Palm Beach.

While Valley land developers, residents, politicians, and businessmen viewed agriculture as the sole catalyst for growth and prosperity in the early 1920s, Americans escaping the severe winters of the East and Midwest found other potential for the area. Outside investors and “snowbirds” who stumbled into the Valley often re-

turned and brought others with them by spreading word of what they found. The number of visitors relocating to the South and their economic impact did not go unnoticed. By mid decade, most Valley interests recognized the need to attract and provide for these guests. Competition between Valley communities and sporadic local interest in tourism, however, prevented the Valley from providing the essential facilities and attractions necessary for the region to reach its full potential as a winter tourist destination.

The Lower Rio Grande Valley found itself in a land boom during the first two decades of the twentieth century. The Brownsville Chamber of Commerce definitively proclaimed “the popularity and increased land value in the Valley [were due] entirely to agricultural resources.” The title “Valley” is even a label applied by marketers to make the area sound more attractive to Midwestern farmers. Consequently, Brownsville took every opportunity to “sell” its agriculturally productive advantages to potential investors. Along with famers and produce dealers, Brownsville leaders courted realtors, land developers, bankers, and railroad interests. Newspapermen received special attention because they returned home to report about the “amazingly fertile fields, warm winter climate, and stunning growth occurring in the Valley.” These groups selected the Lower Rio Grande Valley as a side trip destination from conventions held in larger cities--such as Houston, San Antonio, or Corpus Christi—and took special trains southward for one or two day visits.¹



Figure 1: Brownsville Chamber of Commerce

Regardless of what group came to town—whether sponsored by city leaders or private land developers—they received a standardized program that held to a consistent format. Visitors first attended meetings where speakers and promoters hawked the Valley's agriculture assets, climate, and growing economy. Valley boosters also provided "elaborate entertainment" such as "an opportunity to visit the fine orchards, fertile fields, [and] big irrigation systems." Most tours ended in Matamoros with a banquet of traditional Mexican foods or an exotic game dinner where visitors heard a similar promotional pitch from Mexican officials, including the secretary of the Mexican Department of Agriculture. If the attendees remained in the Valley overnight, they might receive an additional tour touting Mexico's economic potential.²

Brownsville residents took notice of "tourists" visiting the Valley, but they failed to embrace their economic potential. While outsiders encouraged the development of a tourist industry in the Valley, land and agriculture remained the local focus. When Brownsville finally put together a four-page promotional folder in 1926, it emphasized agriculture rather than recreation and targeted distribution at agriculture related conventions. That same year, the Women's Publicity Committee saw the Women's International Fair in Chicago as an opportune time to tell the world about the Valley. They expected over 200,000 people from forty nations to see their display, but their "large exhibit of prize-winning products" lacked any mention of tourism.³

The effort at home was no better. The keynote speaker at a gathering of Brownsville merchants in 1924 stated, "Every lawyer, doctor and merchant should take more interest in farming--our principal resource." Brownsville did not offer tourist entertainment--it offered information that attracted investment, population, and industry related to agriculture. Even events in Mexico promoted business, not fun. More often than not, the dinner in Matamoros concluded the agenda, and visitors immediately left Mexico for home or other parts of the Valley.⁴

Even outsiders that had once promoted tourism or came to the Valley as tourists changed their tune once they became residents. Former

snowbirds quickly forgot what first attracted them to the region and joined long-time residents in their conviction for agriculture development. When retired investment banker George White of Davenport, Iowa, returned in 1927 to buy land, his tone had changed from his radio interview the previous year where he had encouraged the promotion and development of tourism. As a local landowner and farmer, he now backed additional infrastructure to support citrus production rather than tourism.⁵

Outsiders recognized what citizens failed to see or refused to embrace—that the Valley offered economic potential other than agriculture. Resort developers, snowbirds, and the railroad encouraged the Valley to wake up and invest in its potential as the next Coral Gables. A national developer of theaters from Oklahoma found California and Florida at a standstill and declared the Valley the next big region for development, including tourism. “You don’t realize what you do have,” one observer told readers of the *Brownsville Herald*. “Much money in the north is looking to come south,” he continued, and “if it comes sooner or later is up to them [the citizens of Brownsville] to determine.”⁶

A Brownsville man recently returned from a December business trip reported an exodus of tourists from northern states en route to California and Florida. Thousands of these people, the businessman declared, would come to the Valley if only they knew of it. The businessman promised that with just a small investment of a few thousand dollars in a general descriptive booklet, the city would “derive a hundred dollars for every dollar spent when the tourists come south next winter.” By mid-decade, however, no such tourist literature existed.⁷

Since Valley residents refused to promote and develop tourism, outsiders did. The forced awakening of the Valley occurred in the mid-twenties with a rush to the Gulf Coast. To the north, money from Tampa, Florida was developing Mustang Beach across from Corpus Christi. Desired attractions included a large hotel, an

eighteen-hole golf course, paved streets, a sea wall, and possibly an American Automobile Association Speedway. Developers announced in March 1926 the coming of Hollywood, the “play town on the gulf,” located on the Laguna Madre just north of Point Isabel. This “long-wanted play town and playground” promised visitors the amenities of a fishing pier, inner boat harbor, an observation tower, and a variety of water sports. “The rush for the gulf coast is here,” read the announcement for “summer and winter homes by the sea.” The Rio Grande Railway promptly extended track to the proposed site.⁸

Point Isabel became the next rush to the gulf, with 650 acres modeled after resort developments in Florida. Construction of a harbor and jetty and increased rail service initiated the project. Padre Island also loomed attractive for development. Unlike Valley civic organizations, developers knew the value of advertising. Before construction began, the Padre Island project allocated \$25,000 for publicity in the state of Texas alone. The Beaches Hotel resort opened to huge crowds in 1927 with bathing, boating, and dancing.⁹

With Florida’s example in mind, resort developers did not limit their ambitions to the Gulf coast. Developers purchased the 900-acre town site of Olmito, northwest of Brownsville, to create a “township that will resemble Coral Gables of Florida more than any other project in the state of Texas.” Features included paved roads, waterworks, exquisite landscaping, tennis courts, bridle paths, a lake large enough for speedboat competition, and a modern hotel with a swimming pool. In order to make everything uniform and new, all existing structures would be demolished and rebuilt, including the train station. The developer expected to sell 1,000 lots on opening day. Like in Florida, prospective land purchasers camped on the most desirable lots and scuffles broke out over disputed claims.¹⁰

While Coastal development provided the elements for a profitable tourist industry, Valley residents failed to capitalize. Outsiders continued to question why Brownsville made no serious effort at

promotion. Judge Hugh L. Small of Fort Worth, bemoaned, “We have had a hard time telling the world about this region, because we have nothing but some chamber of commerce literature to aid us in our arguments.” To remedy the problem, Small suggested an aggressive advertising campaign in major magazines, while the Brownsville Chamber of Commerce called for a national marketing blitz and establishing an advertising fund, but little action materialized.¹¹

Despite the lack of effort, another group of outsiders, snowbirds, kept “coming to the Valley in flocks, like ducks migrating south when the north gets unpleasantly cold.” A report in May showed a 250-percent increase of automobile traffic in 1927 over 1924. Edinburg reported that the number of tourist cars passing their booster club increased by 50 percent in a matter of just two weeks in June 1927. A man from Nebraska moved to Brownsville and built four-room apartments with the most modern amenities for seasonal tourists. A reporter for the *Brownsville Herald* stood on the highway between San Benito and Harlingen for one hour on a Friday in December and reported 195 cars sped by, 37 (19 percent) from out of state and even more from upstate Texas. Visiting autos displayed tags from Minnesota, Illinois, North Dakota, Pennsylvania, Mississippi, Arkansas, Ohio, Indiana, Florida, and California.¹²

The rest of the area did not sit idly by and allow Brownsville to dominate as the “capital” of the Valley. Harlingen sought a city tax that provided \$10,000 annually for the Chamber of Commerce to put toward tourist and recreation industry development. San Benito donated forty acres of city land for a country club and golf course. Other cities solicited the building of resort hotels to rival Brownsville’s El Jardin.¹³

The year 1929 proved an even bigger year for visitors to South Texas. A record-setting number of “home seekers” arrived on the Missouri Pacific and Southern Pacific railways in early February. On Monday and Tuesday of the first week, the total exceeded 1,500. A

Missouri Pacific special train brought 900 on Monday, according to the general agent at Harlingen, and another special train brought over 600 the following day. Southern Pacific railway also operated two special trains. Its agent general reported 415 visitors for the same two days. These passengers detrained at Brownsville, Edinburg, Mission, Harlingen, Progresso, and McAllen. Hundreds more were expected through the week on regular service. The next week bettered the new record. Monday and Tuesday's passenger total came to 2,250, with 2,450 for the week. The railroads predicted a third week better than the first. L. H. Moore, division passenger agent of Missouri Pacific, credited such numbers to extensive advertising by the railroads and land companies. The publicity campaign by the Missouri Pacific proved so successful that it attracted a group of its own ticket agents desiring to see for themselves what they were selling to their customers.¹⁴

Outsiders continued to encourage the Valley to advertise nationally. The publicity counsel for the Port Isabel Company told the Brownsville Kiwanis club that the Valley was superior to California in its potential for tourist development, but that state's intensive national advertising put it ahead. A Valley businessman returned from the East with tales of people there asking him why the Valley did not advertise. They heard rumors about the beaches, golf, fishing, hunting, climate, and other advantages, but the lack of promotion allowed Florida to attract all the business.¹⁵

When the Greater Valley Chamber of Commerce in 1925 expressed interest in a national advertising campaign, the Missouri Pacific railroad took command. At a meeting of company executives and managers, the railroad not only chose to distribute the literature, they offered the services of the editor of their travel magazine to supervise the effort.¹⁶

Veterans at promoting their routes, the railroads realized that a successful publicity campaign required more than just getting the word out. Valley residents needed to become more knowledgeable

of what their region offered so that they could be better salesmen when visitors arrived. Missouri Pacific hired J. C. Carter, a well known Texas newspaperman and writer, to assist in conducting the local campaign of enlightenment. The railroads, more than local leaders, knew how much tourism contributed to the growth in California and Florida and encouraged the Valley to place as much emphasis on tourist development as agriculture development¹⁷.

Yet even the Missouri Pacific's influence could not move Brownsville businessmen to embrace tourism fully. What finally materialized, a four-page promotional folder, the "first of its kind," continued to promote agriculture and received distribution to agriculture related interests. A major national ad campaign, however, remained elusive as business leaders continued to resist aggressively promoting tourism.¹⁸

The Brownsville Chamber of Commerce again failed to raise a meager \$15,000 publicity fund in February 1926. A capitalist from Chicago found this a puny effort, urging local promoters to start thinking big--"in the millions" big. A developer from the Midwest said that people in his part of the country had never heard of the Valley. Acknowledging the impressive agriculture activity in the region, he encouraged Brownsville to promote its tourist aspects with an "interesting and splendidly illustrated booklet."¹⁹



Figure 2: Interior of Brownsville Chamber of Commerce

Despite local indifference, the railroads continued to advance Valley tourism. When the general manager and other officials of the Missouri Pacific lines visited to investigate growth in Brownsville in 1927, they left promising to promote the Valley to tourists riding their line. Southern Pacific sent a promotional leaflet to 58,000 of its stockholders and distributed illustrated folders along its routes. The railroads offered special spring rates from points along their lines running from Shreveport, Dallas, Fort Worth, and Houston and allowed stopovers for passengers on their way to California.²⁰

The railroad could not do all of the work. Attracting and providing for visitors called for community collaboration and resident support. With each town too small to dominate the Valley or adequately provide for tourists, area wide cooperation was required. Cooperation, however, did not come easily in the Lower Rio Grande Valley. Before the 1920s, Valley communities competed for irrigation projects and railroads. Railroads led to the establishment of new towns, all seeking their part of the growth and prosperity pie. Rail service ranked so crucial to success that the developing town of La Feria, when denied a train station, literally stole Bixby's depot building and placed it on their own site.

City pairings combined business organizations, promotional efforts, and local celebrations in an effort to advance their communities at the expense of other locations. Smaller farm towns, for example, might incorporate with a resort town and combine assets to enhance their growth and economic choices. One or two towns might join with a local land developer in promoting their part of the region to "settlers" in the Midwest, hoping to draw purchasers away from neighbors. This naturally hindered Valley unity and boosterism. By the end of the 1920s, Harlingen, as well as Brownsville, claimed the title of "Capital of the Lower Rio Grande Valley."²¹

Word of mouth, land developers, and the railroad may have brought visitors to the Valley, but the Valley failed to keep them. The average tourist spent \$15 a day and stayed only three days be-

fore moving on to places like Florida or Los Angeles, “where special provisions have been made for their entertainment.” Thus, Brownsville lost substantial tourist money to other places. Palm Beach and West Palm Beach, Florida netted a reported \$17 million from tourists in 1928.²²

Lack of publicity and information left the national public with misconceptions about the Valley. Brownsville still had a reputation as a frontier cowboy town. A London newspaperman passing through the Valley expected to find a Wild West scene, with people in the street toting six-guns and sporting wide sombreros. Mexico remained an enigma to most Americans and tourists felt “suspicious” of Matamoros taxi drivers.²³

The Chamber of Commerce discussed plans to make Brownsville more attractive to tourists. Suggestions included enlarging the tourist room at the Chamber of Commerce building, employing a full-time hostess to aid tourists, and organizing tourist clubs. Everyone agreed that the city needed golf courses, tennis courts, horseshoe pits, and other “amusement devices and games.” Other suggested improvements included a daily sightseeing bus and a hard surface road to Boca Chica, the most popular beach.²⁴

With individual communities unable to muster the necessary support to advertise properly, local booster launched a renewed Valley-wide effort. After much debate, the Valley Chamber of Commerce finally decided on a thirteen-week national radio advertising campaign. McAllen tried it in 1928 with great success, estimating a gain of \$210,000 from tourists. \$75,000 would buy thirteen thirty-minute spots on a popular Cincinnati station that would result in “hundreds of thousands” of additional tourists. This, one backer said, was the secret to California and Florida’s success.²⁵

Everyone agreed that the radio campaign was a good idea, and all assented to contribute toward the \$75,000. A skeptic in the crowd reminded the group that organizers had arranged such plans before, but when it came to collecting on the pledged funds, few came

through. The answer was a county tax. This called back to a persistent 1920 problem. Citizens needed convincing to become boosters. The Valley knew how to sell land, but it lacked the desire to host or entertain tourists. Part of the promotional effort required eliminating “knockers.” Only then would the people accept a county tax.²⁶

Knockers (or those opposed to Valley boosterism) were everywhere. It was difficult enough to rally a single community around financing ventures to attract tourists, let alone the whole valley. Brownsville city leaders encountered stiff opposition from residents when it decided to build a much-needed hotel in 1924 with contributions from the public. The *Brownsville Herald* and a committee of prominent citizens chaired by Mayor A. B. Cole found it difficult convincing residents that their financial support amounted to an investment in the future of their community. Public meetings, knocking on doors, and publishing in the newspaper a “black list” of leading citizens that refused to “do their patriotic duty” failed to meet the initial goal of raising \$75,000 seed money to start the project. If a single community could not support something that most everyone agreed was needed, what chance did a Valley-wide effort stand for success?²⁷

In ten years, things had not changed much when it came to the promotion of tourism. Repeatedly, outside promoters continued to tout the Valley’s climate and other characteristics believed to make it superior to California and Florida, but those places remained more attractive to tourists. Unlike the Valley’s competitors, the region lacked a “spirit of boosting.” The many cities of the region continued to act independently, and a national ad campaign, just as in 1920, remained only a discussion.²⁸

Even if an ad campaign materialized, the Valley lacked the basic offerings of Florida or California. Before providing entertainment for visitors, they must have a place to stay. With boosters claiming that 5,000–6,000 “home seekers” per month were looking to buy farms in the 1920s, the limited Valley sleeping accommoda-

tions proved woefully inadequate. The short supply of hotel rooms prompted the land companies to construct big clubhouses that included bedrooms and apartments. Although the available number of rooms doubled in the previous year, the Valley needed at least an additional 1,300 rooms just to meet 1921 demand. Developers and recruiters placed ads in the newspaper for rooms and houses to rent for buyers who arrived daily, and for the many new residents needing places to stay while homes underwent construction.²⁹

While city leaders recognized Brownsville's facilities as "seriously inadequate" for home seekers, outside capitalists found the Valley ripe for resort development. Viewing resort hotels as the key, International Amusement of Little Rock Company proposed a 300-room vacation spot as the first step in transforming Brownsville and the Valley into a "playground which will rival Florida and California." No hotel southwest of Houston, they argued, would contest this creation in appointments. With the hotel in Brownsville on the banks of the Rio Grande, just across the river developers envisioned "one of the finest casinos in Mexico" as the cornerstone of the playground. In Matamoros, visitors would enjoy banquet halls, dance halls, and a roof garden with an exquisite bar.³⁰

Company president L. H. Edwards proclaimed this venture to be the first step in making the lower Rio Grande Valley "one of the three great playgrounds of America. Its development so far has been mostly along industrial lines. But in the future more and more money will be spent in developing it along recreational lines." Like many big development schemes in the Valley, this one never got past the grand bravado.³¹

Outsiders continued to tell Valley residents what they seemed unwilling to grasp. The *Brownsville Herald* quoted bankers, the local radio station broadcast the rosy evaluations of investors, and speakers before civic organizations encouraged Brownsville and the Valley to wake up and take advantage of the region's climate and other resources. "Thousands of tourists will flock to this city next

winter if assured hotel accommodations,” proclaimed L. J. Anderson of Oklahoma. “It was hotels that made California and Florida successful,” the developer reminded, and “if available, thousands of tourists that are now going to California and Florida would come to Valley.”³²

A “land man” from Chicago urged Valley businessmen to take the region’s tourist potential seriously. The developer told the newspaper, “What the Valley bankers and businessmen ought to do is to make up a pool of half a million dollars, build a few million dollars worth of roads. Put in few dozen golf courses and make this the playground of the world.” Another developer advised that after building hotels and a paved road to the beach, a “wet, foreign city” just across the border represented an equally popular draw for tourists.³³

Austin North, president of Glacier to Gulf Motorway and North Real Estate Investment Company, expressed the same sentiments while touring the country inspecting various tourist resort sites. North encouraged local citizens not to wait for outside capital, but to build a tourist hotel themselves and keep the profits at home. In addition to the hotel, North saw promise in a tourist loop to Point Isabel and Boca Chica on the Gulf Coast. Add the attraction of Mexico and the Valley above, and Brownsville could “become the center of a spoke wheel of tourist attractions.”³⁴

During the first half of the decade, many pundits expressed their vision for Valley tourism, and hotel men--some promising great enterprises--toured the region checking on conditions. By 1924, however, the only increase of hotel rooms occurred when the unimpressive Travelers Hotel opened a new addition of thirty-five rooms. The town also lacked large meeting halls. When 300 insurance men took a side-trip to the Valley from their convention in San Antonio, the bullfight arena in Matamoros provided the only place large enough for banquet space.³⁵

Brownsville lacked the capacity to accommodate 600 guests ex-

pected for the Southwest Shippers Advisory Board meeting in March 1926. The Chamber of Commerce placed a plea in the newspaper, asking citizens to open their homes to the visitors. With hotels in Brownsville and Harlingen filled, the Hotel Paloma, located between Harlingen and McAllen in the small town of Weslaco, capitalized by advertising in the *Brownsville Herald*, “We are never full.”³⁶

Brownsville expected nearly 3,000 visitors when the State Volunteer Firemen’s Association arrived in 1926. Realizing that this number would “tax the Valley to capacity,” organizers asked every town to provide as many hotel rooms and private homes as possible to care for the conventioners. Only Matamoros possessed a place large enough to host a barbecue for a crowd this large.³⁷

As an alternative to arranging private rooms, some conventioners slept on the Pullman sleeper rail cars that brought them to the Valley. On more than one occasion, the railroad brought a set of Pullmans into town to provide sleeping quarters for big events. A day trip of Houston businessmen required rescheduling because a convention in town overtaxed Brownsville’s ability to accommodate both at once.³⁸

San Antonio and Corpus Christi provided hotels for these tourists, while smaller towns along this route furnished tourist camps. For a minimum investment in gas, water, and stoves, “hundreds of these summer nomads” planned their trips around available municipal campsites. The cities of Fort Worth, Corsicana, Abilene, Amarillo, Waco, Wichita Falls, Ranger, and Paris offered these facilities. Brownsville sat too far off the westward route, lacked any historic attractions, and failed to provide these popular tourist camps that encouraged auto travelers to venture further south.³⁹

The Brownsville Board of City Development took seriously Austin North’s encouragement of building a hotel. A city constructing its own hotel was not unusual. Corpus Christi’s effort reaped great rewards for that city’s tourism, and other Valley cities considered doing the same thing. Less ambitious than the Little Rock capital-

ists, the city of Brownsville decided in May 1924 to develop its own tourist hotel of 150 to 250 rooms and formed a committee. The Tourist Hotel Committee went to work seeking capital to build the tourist hotel that outsiders had failed to deliver. At a public meeting, organizers agreed to seek subscriptions totaling \$75,000 for use as a bonus to induce construction. The committee reminded residents to consider this fund an investment, not a donation. A list of prominent citizens supporting the project circulated around town, encouraging others to get on board and to lend their assistance.⁴⁰

The *Brownsville Herald*, a strong backer of the project, posted a notice titled "Some Reasons Why Brownsville Must Have a Tourist Hotel." California, Florida, and Colorado owed most of their success to the hundreds of tourist hotels in those states, the notice read. Last winter, the railroads classed Brownsville as a winter resort on par with Galveston and San Antonio. This would bring many tourists to town and accommodations must be available. Brownsville needed the hotel if it expected to become the gateway to Mexico and Monterrey. Business in general would derive great benefit from the tourist trade. The newspaper's final argument stated the obvious: Without proper hotel facilities, Brownsville could never become a big convention city.⁴¹

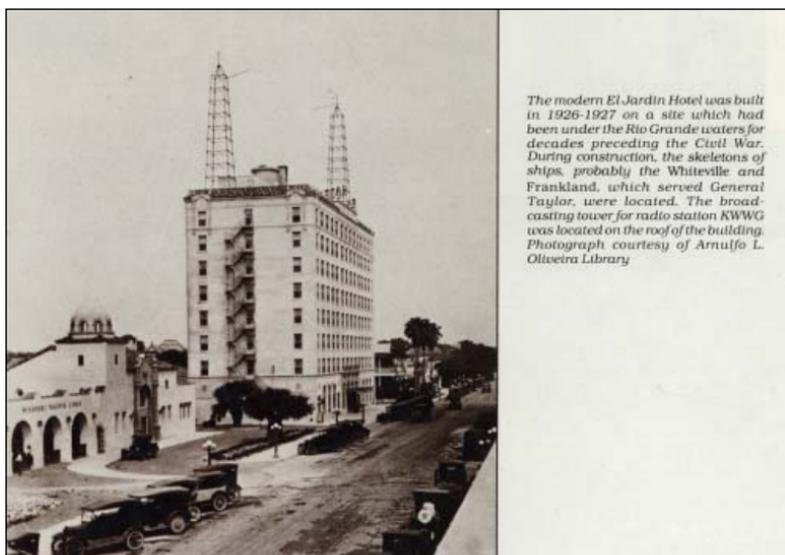
Response from the community, however, proved less than overwhelming. City leaders and the *Brownsville Herald* continued attempts to spur participation by holding public meetings, knocking on doors, and publishing articles. Even as the newspaper announced that the goal seemed assured, subscriptions fell short as the deadline drew near. The committee extended the deadline and pressured those on the "black list" to do their patriotic duty. Winter Texan landowners also received encouragement to contribute. The newspaper reported a good response to the plea, but at closing time, the goal remained unrealized. Some of Brownsville's leading citizens remained missing from the "honor roll," and a final threat of ostracism hung over their heads if they did not come through.⁴²

Although short of expectations, the promoters tagged the total of \$65,000 “successful.” The following day, they revised the figure to \$62,700, and the committee delayed releasing the list of contributors so that those who “refused to aid in the city’s development” might have the opportunity to spare themselves embarrassment by a last minute donation. Late-arriving funds brought the final total to \$64,000, and negotiations opened with parties interested in taking on the project. Brownsville expected to have a \$300,000 hotel by year’s end, 1924.⁴³

The city of Brownsville, like previous developers with big plans, discovered that building a hotel did not occur easily. A contract with James-Dickinson Farm Mortgage Company for a 150-room hotel at \$300,000–\$400,000 (fewer rooms for more money than originally sought), remained unsigned until March 1925. With no building site selected, the architect toured hotels in Florida to find the perfect design. After agreement on the style, plans required another three to four months to complete.⁴⁴

With contract in hand and a commitment to complete the hotel by June 1926, the committee called for payment of subscriptions. Gulf Coast Railroads owned the site selected, the same location eyed by International Amusement in 1920. Recognizing the potential of the venture, Gulf Coast promised to build a passenger station costing \$75,000 to go with the hotel. Before the ceremonial ground breaking shovel had lifted a particle of dirt, the estimated price of the project had escalated to the maximum allowed cost of \$400,000, and the station increased to \$100,000. An artist’s rendering of the resort resembled one in Palm Beach, Florida, and the name of the hotel, El Jardin, first appeared.⁴⁵

Delays continued. The start date of construction remained undetermined in July 1925. It seems that many parties held interests in Gulf Coast’s deed, including Mexican National Lines and Missouri Pacific. Builders called this hitch only a formality, completed plans and specifications, and opened bids for construction in August. Sep-



The modern El Jardin Hotel was built in 1926-1927 on a site which had been under the Rio Grande waters for decades preceding the Civil War. During construction, the skeletons of ships, probably the Whitesville and Frankland, which served General Taylor, were located. The broadcasting tower for radio station KWVG was located on the roof of the building. Photograph courtesy of Arnulfo L. Oliveira Library

Figure 3: Motel El Jardin

tember arrived without a formalized deed.⁴⁶

The 1926 snowbird season came early. So many winter visitors arrived that Brownsville would have lacked enough rooms even if the El Jardin had been completed. Before the ground was even broken, developers announced a plan to add 150 rooms when the original building was completed, making it one of the largest hotels in the state. As soon as El Jardin opened in 1926, construction started on a two-story parking garage and a garden with a dance floor, giving Brownsville the tourist resort and convention center desperately sought since 1920.⁴⁷

The beautiful El Jardin, unfortunately, failed to eliminate Brownsville's hotel space woes. As in the past, un-accommodated visitors sought rooms in Matamoros and neighboring Valley towns. Even senior railway officials found themselves without rooms in January 1926 and stayed in McAllen. A two-day meeting of the American Railway Express Company cancelled its gathering due to lack of space. Even the governor of Oklahoma crossed over to Matamoros for lodging while on a hunting trip.⁴⁸

Snowbirds arrived earlier every year. Many families who had previously spent winters in Florida now came to the Valley. Hotel managers no longer experienced the usual dead season that lasted through Christmas. In 1927, with the new El Jardin and other hotels in Brownsville offering completed new additions, Brownsville could accommodate 1,500 people maximum, 1,000 comfortably. The number of rooms remained the same for the rest of the decade, and hotels stayed crowded year round.⁴⁹

While not solving the lack of lodging in Brownsville, El Jardin provided the first-class facility needed to court true conventions. City leaders continued, however, to seek the type of organizations that contributed to the Valley's growth based on agriculture rather than those that spent the tourist dollar. A delegation of Valley shippers and Chamber of Commerce men went to New Orleans for the gathering of the 1926 Western Fruit and Vegetable Jobbers of the United States to get the next annual convention for Brownsville. Attended by agricultural shippers from across the country, this convention would be one of the most important that could be brought to Brownsville and the Valley. The delegation quickly realized that Brownsville lacked the ability to accommodate the over 1,000 attendees. Even without a convention in town, visitors to Brownsville were seeking rooms in Matamoros.⁵⁰

Despite the hotel space added to the Valley by 1929, a major convention brought more guests than any single Valley town could accommodate. This occurred for the celebration March 9–10 for the opening of the Brownsville airport. Other cities were no better off than Brownsville. When San Benito hosted 600 medical doctors, many had to seek rooms in Harlingen and Brownsville. Cries went out again for private accommodations when just a few months later, 1,200 doctors came to Brownsville for the State Medical Convention.⁵¹

In the end, Brownsville failed to reach its potential as a tourist destination. When railroads connected the Valley to the rest of the

country in the 1910s, farming and ranching solidified their position as the region's economic base. The subsequent increase in land values and arrival of farmers from soil-depleted regions of the country looking for land only enhanced this development. While it became obvious to some that the Valley held potential for tourism, those who controlled politics and the economy stuck to tradition and dismissed calls for greater economic diversification. Thus, it was easy for outsiders to call on the Valley to invest in a tourist/recreation industry, but actually doing something about it proved exceedingly difficult. Unlike El Paso, a border city that quickly recognized the value of tourism and enthusiastically provided the needed services and improvements, Brownsville did not even possess basic accommodations. The lack of hotel space prevented any chance of a tourist or convention industry developing. Where El Paso and other Texas cities sought tourists with well-organized promotional campaigns, Brownsville never got a concerted effort off the ground. When the Valley experienced a "rush to the coast" in the latter half of the decade, mostly outside developers provided the capital, improvements, attractions, and promotion, while Brownsville settled for the wake from these efforts rather than joining the rush as a partner. Brownsville and the Valley may have had the potential in the 1920s, but it failed to become the next Coral Gables.

Notes

1 *Brownsville Herald* 24 February 1920, p. 6 hereafter *BH*; 14 June 1927, p. 5; 12 June 1927, p. 2; 20 February 1927, p. 1; 11 August 1929, p. 4.

2 Promotions by land developers and the extent to which they determined how the Valley developed in Niles Hansen, *The Border Economy: Regional Development on the Southwest*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 50-52; Port Isabel Sales Company in *BH* 8 February 1928. p. 3; 9 January 1922, p. 2; 9 July 1924, p. 1; 16 April 1924, p. 1; 18 April 1925, p. 1; 6 February 1929, p. 1; 17 June 1928, p. 2; 14 February 1928, p. 2; 17 June 1928, p. 2; 17 January 1929, p. 2; 6 February 1929, p. 1.

3 *BH* 9 February 1926, p. 5; 4 April 1926, p. 1.

4 *BH* 9 July 1924, p. 1; Even sixty years later, Brownsville remained preoccupied with agriculture as its primary economy with Matamoros the more industrialized of the two cities in Michael V. Miller, *Economic Growth and Change along the U.S.-Mexican Border*, Bureau of Business Research, University of Texas at Austin 1982, 7-9.

5 *BH* 7 January 1927, p. 5.

6 *BH*, 7 January 1926, p. 1.

7 *BH* 27 December 1922, p. 1.

8 Ad in *BH* 14 March 1926, p. 7; Rio Grande Railway in 24 March 1926, p. 2.

9 Point Isabel in *BH* 4 April 1926, p. 1; Padre Island in 20 April 1926, p. 1; Beaches Hotel ad in 17 April 1927, p. 4.

10 *BH* 11 April 1926, p. 1; "Scuffles" in Milo Kearney and Anthony Knopp, *Boom and Bust: The Historical Cycles of Matamoros and Brownsville*, (Austin: Eakin Press, 1991), 224.

11 Outsiders' views in *BH* 7 February 1928, p. 3 and "What the Val-

ley needs above all other things is better roads and a national advertising campaign” in 7 January 1927, p. 5; Judge Hugh L. Small in 7 February 1928, p. 3; Investment banker George White, Davenport, Iowa in 7 January 1927, p. 5; Ads in 18 April 1926, p. 7 and 19 April 1926, p. 2; 6 January 1927, p. 7.

12 Automobile traffic in *BH* 3 June 1927, p. 1; Edinburg in 20 June 1927, p. 8; Apartment construction in 26 June 1927, p. 3; 15 December 1929, p. 14.

13 Harlingen in *BH* 8 January 1928, p. 2; San Benito in 26 June 1927, p. 3; Other cities building hotels include Harlingen in 4 February 1925, p. 1; 11 July 1915, p. 1; 10 March 1926, p. 5; 2 March 1927, p. 2; 10 April 1927, p. 1; Weslaco in 5 March 1926, p. 1; 12 March 1926, p. 3; 26 January 1926, p. 7; 15 February 1928, p. 2; Mission in 9 January 1927, p. 6; Mercedes in 29 March 1927, p. 1; La Feria in 10 April 1927, p. 1; Point Isabel in 8 May 1928, p. 1.

14 General description in Kearney and Knopp, *Boom and Bust*, 224; Specific numbers and examples in *BH* 5 February 1929, p. 2; 11 February 1929, p. 1; 26 February 1929, p. 3; Ticket agents visit in 9 August 1929, p. 2.

15 Kiwanis club in *BH* 30 August 1929, p. 5; 11 September 1929, p. 5.

16 *BH* 20 May 1925, p. 2.

17 *BH* 20 May 1925, p. 2.

18 Promotional distribution to shippers, manufacturers, growers, and other businessmen attending the Southwest Shippers Advisory Board meeting *BH* 9 February 1926, p. 5.

19 Publicity fund in *BH* 24 February 1926, p. 1; 4 March 1926, p. 1; Davenport, Iowa developer in 7 March 1926, p. 7.

20 Missouri Pacific in *BH* 6 February 1927, p. 12; Southern Pacific in 8 January 1928, p. 7; 15 March 1928, p. 3 and 2 July 1929, p. 2.

21 Milo Kearney, "The Shifting Relationship between Harlingen and San Benito in the First Three Decades of the Twentieth Century," *Studies in Matamoros and Cameron County History*, (The University of Texas at Brownsville and Texas Southmost College, 1997), 38-40; 44-45; 54-55; 57; The resort town of Rio Hondo merged with the farm communities of Combes and Primera in 1926 and 1927, 57; 38-40, 52-54; "Capital of the Lower Rio Grande Valley," 59; Bixby and La Feria in J. L. Allhands, *Railroads to the Rio*, (Salado, Texas: The Anson Jones Press, 1960), 138; *BH* 7 March 1926, p. 136.

22 *BH* 15 April 1929, p. 3.

23 London reporter in *BH* 8 June 1928; Matamoros taxis in 18 August 1929, p. 1.

24 *BH* 15 April 1929, p. 3; 23 August 1919, p. 1; 2 October 1929, p. 1; 13 October 1929, p. 1 Sec 2.

25 *BH* 23 August 1919, p. 1.

26 *BH* 23 August 1919, p. 1; 11 September 1929, p. 5.

27 Hotel committee in *BH* 21 May 1925, p. 1 and 22 May 1924, p. 1; Promotional efforts in 5 June 1925, p. 1 and 9 June 1924, p. 1 and 10 June 1924, p. 1 and 12 June 1924, p. 1; "Black list" of citizens in 4 June 1924, p. 1 and "Honor roll" list in 11 June 1924, p. 1; Subscription total in 29 May 1924, p. 1.

28 *BH* 22 August 1929, p. 1; 30 August 1929, p. 5; For a good discussion about competition between Valley communities and a lack of "boosterism," see an essay by Kearney, "The Shifting Relationship," 37-76.

29 *BH* 3 September 1920, p. 2; Quote in 24 February 1920, p. 6; Land company clubhouses in Kearney and Knopp, *Boom and Bust*, 223-24.

30 "Seriously inadequate" in *BH* 5 April 1924, p. 1; International Amusements in 9 January 1924, p. 2.

31 *BH* 10 January 1924, p. 1.

32 *BH* 17 February 1924, p. 1.

33 *BH* 4 March 1926, p. 1; 7 March 1926, p. 7

34 *BH* 7 April 1924, p. 1.

35 Travelers Hotel in *BH* 19 September 1924, p. 1; 25 August 1924, p. 1; 16 September 1925, p. 1; A national hotel builder came to the Valley to check on opportunity in 6 November 1924, p. 1; Builder and capitalist from San Antonio, Percy Tyrrell, looks into building a hotel in 9 March 1925, p. 1; 10 March 1925, p. 1; Things look promising to Tyrrell now, unlike two years ago when he first visited in 11 March 1925, p. 2.

36 Asking for homes in *BH* 16 February 1926, p. 2; 7 March 1926, p. 1; 3 March 1929, p. 2.

37 *BH* 4 March 1926, p. 1.

38 The train depot was often the first structure built for the establishment of a town, and it was common for railroads to provide a string of cars that served as construction and promotional offices and sleeping quarters in Allhands, *Railroads to the Rio*, 138; 7 March 1926, p. 1.

39 *BH* 5 July 1921, p. 6.

40 *BH* 21 May 1925, p. 1; Corpus Christi in 5 June 1924, p. 1; Hotel committee in 21 May 1925, p. 1; 22 May 1924, p. 1; Subscription total in 29 May 1924, p. 1; List of citizens in 4 June 1924, p. 1.

41 *BH* 5 June 1925, p. 1.

42 *BH* 9 June 1924, p. 1; 10 June 1924, p. 1; "Honor roll" in *BH* 11 June 1924, p. 1; 12 June 1924, p. 1.

43 \$65,000 in *BH* 15 June 1924, p. 1; 16 June 1924, p. 1; 20 June 1924, p. 1; 23 June 1924, p. 1; 13 July 1924, p. 1.

44 *BH* 11 March 1925, p. 1.

45 Calling of subscriptions in *BH* 7 April 1925, p. 1; Passenger station in 10 May 1925, p. 1; 19 June 1925, p. 1; 22 June 1925, p. 1; 4 July

1925, p. 1.

46 BH 26 July 1925, p. 1; 28 July 1925, p. 1; 14 September 1925, p. 1; During and just after World War I many rail lines merged, changed hands, and failed all together in the Valley. This is the reason for the unclear land title as described in Ira G. Clark, *Then Came the Railroads: The Century from Steam to Diesel in the Southwest*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1958), 281-84.

47 BH 10 January 1926, p. 3; 11 February 1926, p. 1; Parking garage and garden in 10 March 1926, p. 5; 13 January 1927, p. 2.

48 BH 22 January 1926, p.

49 BH 10 January 1926, p. 3; 31 May 1927, p. 3.

50 BH 6 January 1926, p. 3.

51 Opening of airport in BH 3 March 1929, p. 2; San Benito in 19 May 1929, p. 3; State Medical Convention in 8 May 1929, p. 9; 18 May 1929, p. 1; 19 May 1929, p. 1 Sec 2.

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