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We are not Tijuana: The Valley Protests Washington's Crackdown on Gambling

Robin Robinson

In an effort to combat gambling, prostitution, and other illicit activities along the Rio Grande border during the Prohibition era, U.S. Treasury Department officials implemented a policy aimed at reducing the number of hours each day that international bridges spanning the Rio Grande would remain open. In response to the new restrictions, Brownsville politico Rentfro Creeger—representing the commercial interests of area businessmen—launched a vigorous campaign to get the new restrictions repealed.

During the 1920s period of national prohibition of alcohol in the United States, Mexican border towns became meccas for all forms of legal and illegal vice and tourism. One illicit attraction, gambling, particularly offended local officials and citizens on both sides of the Rio Grande who maintained that casinos threatened both the economic and moral health of their communities. Tijuana, once a sleepy insignificant village, modernized into a foreign tourist resort complete with saloons, casinos, brothels, and drug dens. American investors and purveyors of these establishments collaborated with Mexican politicians at local, state, and national levels who protected and participated in the vice and tourism industry. Tijuana quickly became the premier border vice center that attracted endless complaint from concerned California citizens demanding action from local and federal officials.

While not as vile as Tijuana, El Paso/Juárez also developed a large tourist industry that included vice. Seeking to attract a military base and other federal investments on the eve of the First World War, city leaders cleared El Paso of vice and organized gambling by relocating such activities to neighboring ciudad Juárez. While El Paso citizens benefited from and encouraged a “wholesome”

tourist industry, cross-border vice and gambling created a variety of social and economic problems and concerned El Paso residents petitioned Washington, D.C. for action to curtail gambling in this location.

Matamoros, Tamaulipas, on the other hand, stood in stark contrast to Tijuana and Juárez. No tourist industry existed before prohibition and none developed during the period. Matamoros and Brownsville, Texas historically participated in each other's holidays, special events, and bullfights that remained popular during the 1920s. Granted, these traditional attractions grew larger, more organized, and more commercial in response to the growing population of the Valley, but gambling and vice remained unremarkable. Federal officials in Washington received little complaint from the lower Rio Grande Valley and local U.S. customs agents and consuls reported a harmonious relationship between Brownsville and Matamoros.

In response to protests from other Rio Grande border regions, however, Washington imposed a system of regulations aimed at restricting border crossing times. Although not popular among those with interests in gambling, the new border crossing policies proved effective in reducing the financial success of gaming parlors and the establishment of new ones. Federal policy-makers often universally applied this strategy at all crossing points along the border throughout the 1920s. Matamoros, however, lacked the vice that plagued some locations, allowing the two Brownsville international bridges to routinely receive an exemption and return to normal operations. In 1931, however, Brownsville failed to receive the usual exception. Business and community leaders in Brownsville and the greater Rio Grande Valley, consequently, launched a heated campaign to persuade the Treasury Department that this portion of the US/Mexico border deserved special consideration as the Valley was far different than the notorious border towns of Tijuana and Juarez. The following account chronicles that often contentious debate.

Brownsville's Rentfro Creager led the effort to convince federal officials to exempt the Brownsville-Matamoros border area from restrictions. As custom collector in Brownsville during the Roosevelt and Taft administrations, Creager built a political group opposing the Democratic machine that controlled south Texas. In 1916, he ran unsuccessfully for governor of Texas as a Republican. He dominated the Texas delegation to the Republican National Committee, a position he held until his death in 1950. This, and being a close friend of President Warren G. Harding, allowed Creager to control virtually all patronage appointments in Texas, including the position held by the District Customs Collector overseeing Brownsville. As a Washington political insider, he held the powerful connections necessary to achieve immediate results. More importantly, as president of the Gateway Bridge Company, Creager held a considerable financial stake in the cross-border traffic and stood to lose toll money if the policy reducing the bridges' operating hours remained in effect.

On August 12, 1931, U.S. Assistant Secretary of Treasury Seymour Lowman announced the closing of the international bridges from Laredo to Brownsville from 9:00 p.m. to 8:00 a.m. rather than the customary twenty-four hour operation. The cause of the change, according to G. C. Richardson, manager of the Brownsville Chamber of Commerce, was due to the complaints of the good citizens of Hidalgo County about the “dens of vice” that thrived in the tourist-centered community of Rio Rico adjacent to Reynosa. Although Richardson admitted that closing the bridge might be appropriate in areas that relied on “tourists and the pleasure seeking public,” he argued federal officials were “infinitely wrong to place Matamoros and Brownsville in the same category.”¹

Unlike many other border communities, Matamoros and Brownsville were important commercial centers and the restricted hours, Richardson maintained, hindered legitimate tourist business, laborers and students crossing both ways, and the meetings of business organizations composed of members from both countries. Additionally, the hours prevented Americans from catching the train that embarked each morning from Matamoros to Mexico City and likewise complicated Brownsvillians use of Matamoros’ international airport. The two communities also shared doctors, clergy, and fire departments, all requiring quick—and at times--emergency access across the bridge at any hour.²

Rentfro Creager agreed heartily with Richardson’s defense of the strong Brownsville/Matamoros economic connection and knew exactly how to handle the matter. Confident that his Washington connections would come through for him, Creager wired Seymour Lowman requesting that customs officials reconsider their position and return Brownsville/Matamoros bridges to twenty-four hour operation. Lowman’s response was hardly encouraging. The bureaucrat replied that while he sympathized with concerns that the restricted hours “injured legitimate private interests,” he insisted that unrestricted passage also encouraged smuggling and illegal entry. Creager, being an experienced politician, offered a compromise, suggesting a 7 am to midnight operation.³

While he awaited a response from the Treasury Department, Creager turned to another political connection. The collector of customs at San Antonio (the district that included Brownsville) was Roy Campbell, an old Republican crony who owed his job to Creager’s control over Texas political patronage appointments. Creager wired Campbell, who happened to be in Washington at the time, with instructions to “protest actively” in person to Lowman on his behalf.⁴

Not one to leave any stone unturned, Creager next turned his attention to President Herbert Hoover by instigating an organized “wire protest” from leading Valley merchants, business organizations (including the Matamoros Chamber of Commerce), bankers, and citizens. All this--receiving notice of the hours change, telegrams to Lowman and Campbell, and organizing the wire protest--Creager achieved in a single day, testifying to his experience and ability in dealing with Washington.⁵

Lowman, meanwhile, launched a counter-offensive, telegraphing Creager the next day that he had received “many protests from judges, district attorneys, preachers and prominent citizens” requesting that bridges be closed at 7 pm “on account [of] demoralizing conditions at [the] border.” Additionally, earlier that month Roy Campbell supported an early closing policy to combat gambling at numerous locations in his district. Providing Lowman with additional ammunition, Campbell proffered that while gambling in Matamoros had been suspended, the earlier close time would discourage its reappearance. After an investigation, Lowman declared that his office would not consider Creigher’s 9 pm compromise.⁶

Campbell tried personally to explain himself to Creager and to the public in the *Brownsville Herald*. He admitted reporting complaints about gambling and that he had recommended a 7 pm closing time, but only at locations where gambling existed and he expressed astonishment to learn from the newspaper that all bridges fell under the 9pm mandate. While in Washington, Campbell maintained that he had told Lowman that the closing of the bridges where gambling did not exist worked a “hardship on residents of both sides of the River.” Lowman compromised only on the opening hour (moving it back from 8 am to 7 am), but remained committed to the 9 pm closing time along the entire border.. Campbell assured Creager that he would try again with Lowman.⁷

In a telephone call and subsequent letter to Lowman, Campbell laid out the facts for reconsideration. First, if combating gambling was the federal government’s goal, then a 7 pm close was necessary in order for the new restriction to be effective, not 9 pm. Second, open gambling existed only at Piedras Negras and Villa Acuna where local and federal Mexican officials were making honest attempts to curtail gaming activities. Third, most American citizens that had protested about border gambling expected a prompt return to a midnight closing hour once the gambling operations ceased. Campbell assured Lowman that his ten years experience as customs collector qualified him to know what was best for this part of the border and that appropriate “weight should be given my recommendations. Unfortunately, Campbell found customs officials--particularly Lowman--“intent on suppressing gambling on the border.”⁸

Lowman maintained his unyielding position. He believed local authorities had no real desire to curtail gambling as they were directly involved in the activity. The Mexican federal government, while willing to crack down on gambling establishments, lacked the means to do the job. Furthermore, the Mexican Undersecretary of Treasury had encouraged his American counterparts to use crossing hours as a tool to fight gambling. Finally, U.S. customs officials had received a torrent of letters from a variety of Americans residing along the border demanding that the government do something to address illicit gambling activities. Since the letter-writers lived in virtually all border locations, Lowman insisted, “We have to treat these towns all alike.” Complainants from Laredo,

for example, included the Mayor, Chief of Police, Justice of the Peace, Chief Deputy Sheriff, District Attorney, judges, numerous city officials, clergy, civil servants, and private citizens, all asking for a 7 pm closing time. A 7 am to 9 pm operating time, they argued, served all legitimate business interests and when the Mexicans had managed to shut down gambling at other times, the gambling



Caption: Rentfro Creager and Mrs. Creager at 1932 GOP Convention. Courtesy of the Hunter Room, Arnulfo Oliveira Library, University of Texas at Brownsville.

houses had returned as soon as the restricted hours ended. Lowman said that he was tired of “listening to many sweet words from our Mexican friends” and the current arrangement would stand.⁹

Campbell, admitting that he had just about exhausted his resources, made one last appeal to Lowman. He claimed that Texas cities suffered commercially because of the early closing time, and that tourist traffic simply moved to interior Mexican cities (such as Monterrey) where American tourists filled hotels and their dollars filled the pockets of Mexican merchants. The best way to address the gambling issue, he argued, was to adopt a flexible policy: to close the bridges early when the vice existed, and then reopen them as local conditions dictated. In a final emotional appeal, Campbell complained that local interests in his district were accusing him of being unresponsive to their requests to open the bridges to midnight and that his “political as well as personal prestige” had suffered as a result. Campbell insisted that the only way for him to regain his integrity was for Lowman to place the entire bridge closing matter under his direction. Not surprisingly, this argument failed to move Lowman, who curtly advised Campbell to “obey regulations and instructions of the Department in discharging your duties.”¹⁰

Realizing that matters were not proceeding as he had planned, Creager worked feverishly to increase pressure on Lowman by broadening his protest beyond Brownsville/Matamoros. Taking their cue from Creager, bankers, merchants, mayors, elected city leaders, international bridge companies, Mason lodges, chambers of commerce, and a host of others from Laredo to Corpus Christi and from San Antonio to Mexico wrote letters, signed petitions, and sent telegrams to the Texas governor, their senators in Washington, and even to President Hoover himself. In a lengthy telegram, Creager warned the U.S. Ambassador in Mexico City that continued bridge restrictions along the border could result in “unfavorable international relations,” labeling those complaining about gambling as “moral extremists.” Creager apparently held enough political clout to gain the attention of President Hoover with a two-page telegram detailing the injured economic situation along the border.¹¹

Lowman promptly responded to Creager’s letter writing campaign. Opening with a flattering comment about Creager’s diplomatic approach, Lowman sternly defended his position. For starters, District Customs Collector Campbell had requested an early border closing after a trial twenty-four hour operation encouraged gambling and prostitution in five border towns, including Matamoros. Campbell had also forwarded many of the complaints he had received from angry border citizens, including a petition and letter from the Mayor of Laredo requesting that the bridge be closed at 7 pm. Texas Senator John Connally provided the same, including resolutions adopted by the Commissioner’s Court of Hidalgo County urging an 8 pm bridge close time. The Laredo Chief of Police’s request for a 7 pm closing to combat crime and “gambling slot ma-

chines, saloons, and cabarets” in Nuevo Laredo ranked prominent among the “literally hundreds of telegrams and letters” directly received by federal officials “urging that the hours at the gate be shortened.”¹²

Avoiding sole reliance on secondhand accounts, Lowman also considered unbiased investigations and logistical issues in reaching his decision. A Public Health officer named Dr. King surveyed late night crossers and found them to be only “persons bent on pleasure or sport” and he recommended a 9 pm closing time. Dr. H. S. Cumming, Surgeon General in charge of Public Health Service along the Mexican Border, warned that he did not have the personnel to carryout twenty-four hour quarantines and immigration operations.¹³

Lowman made it clear that the adjustment to bridge operating hours was not a unilateral judgment. Officials of the Bureau of Customs, the State Department, and the President’s office all participated in reaching the decision, and the Under Secretary of the Treasury issued the explicit directions. Sensitive to Mexico’s concerns, Lowman gained the approval of Mexico’s Ambassador who agreed that only those with interests in gambling along the border would protest. Additionally, the Mexican Undersecretary of the Treasury even found a harsher 6pm closing time acceptable.¹⁴

Considering Creager’s request that Brownsville/Matamoros receive special consideration, Lowman pointed to Campbell’s belief that while gambling may not be operating at the present, once the bridges opened till midnight, it would immediately return, displeasing the businessmen on both sides of the border who wanted to see an end to gambling. Reports from other border locations, El Paso in particular, indicated that gambling represented a universal problem along the border, justifying a uniform policy regulating border-crossing hours.¹⁵

Making it clear that he knew of Campbell’s relationship with Creager and the influence that the latter exerted, Lowman concluded with a jab at the District Customs Collector. Insinuating that Campbell attempted to cause discontent with the new procedure, Lowman added, “Another thing that annoys me is that Collector Campbell is preventing Americans from crossing over to Mexico during closed hours, which is not the policy.” In reference to Campbell’s earlier appeal for confidence in his judgment, Lowman quipped, “His long experience in the Customs Service leads me to believe that he must have known that he was violating the policy of the Customs Bureau in taking any such action.”¹⁶

Lowman seems to have gained solid footing from which to defend his actions. John N. Garner, Republican Minority Leader of the House, replying to a petition from the Brownsville Chamber of Commerce quoted verbatim from Lowman. Stating that he had already communicated with the Treasury department numerous times about the issue, Garner conceded that the best that he could do was forward the Chamber’s telegrams to Lowman. Quoting Garner’s letter to the Chamber: “This is about [the] limit of my ability to serve since I cannot control [the] Treasury Department. I repeat, I cannot control the Trea-

sury Department.”¹⁷

Since Lowman remained unswayable, Creager reasoned that questioning his authority to regulate bridge operating hours might achieve results. An accomplished attorney, Creager investigated the customs laws. He found no explicit Treasury Department power to set international crossing hours, but a US code did provide the authority to regulate the “search of persons and baggage” of “all persons coming into the United States from foreign countries.” In other words, Americans could cross into Mexico at will, but unless a customs agent was on duty upon their return, they could not reenter the US, resulting in de facto authority to set the hours of operation. The general manager of Gateway Bridge, however, felt such a practice left the company open to “serious litigation.”¹⁸

Creager next attempted to exploit what Lowman had expressed in a previous letter that it was not his “affair to police Mexico.” In a four-page argument, Creager began by stating that for the past fifty years the Treasury Department “ignored the existence or non-existence of gambling . . . on the obvious theory that it was no part of its duty to police the Mexican side of the river, nor to act as custodian of the morals of American citizens.” Creager believed this to be the proper attitude and further stated that Americans abroad had the “perfect and legal” right to do what ever the laws and customs of that country permitted. Furthermore, any attempt to restrain this freedom was not only unauthorized by law, but a paternalistic effort to impose American views and morality on a sovereign country.¹⁹

Continuing this line of attack, Creager argued that if the Treasury Department actually sought to police the morality of Americans in Mexico, then such a policy should apply to other countries they visited. He pointed to the absurdity of attempting to restrict U.S. commerce with foreign countries until they abolished gambling: “Surely it is not part of the duty of our Treasury Department to reform foreign nations, and surely it is not part of its duty to reform and control the morals of American citizens at home or abroad.” Creager warned that Mexicans resented this paternalism and found such an attitude hypocritical, as they knew gambling operations existed in many parts of the US, particularly in the state of Nevada.²⁰

In the face of such arguments, Lowman remained steadfast. While protests from either side of the issue continued to flood his office, by September a standard reply became the norm:

Your telegram dealing with border conditions received and read with great interest. After careful consideration and much investigation, entry is prohibited from Mexico into the Unites States between the hours of 9:00 P.M. and 7:00 A.M. I am satisfied that these hours will furnish sufficient time for the transaction of legitimate business across the border. Anyone can go from the United States into Mexico, crossing the bridges at any time of the day or night so that

our Mexican friends are not interfered with as they can come to the United States during regular hours and go back home to Mexico whenever it pleases them to do so. This decision was made upon the request of the business interests of the border towns.²¹

The fact that gambling continued to exist in many locations or threatened to return under the restricted hours caused many to abandon their protests. Campbell found casinos flourishing in Laredo and reported to Lowman in September that he believed even a 7pm close would make no difference and that requests for extending the hours would end. The *Brownsville Herald* expressed the same sentiments when it reported one casino operating in Matamoros and "others coming." What protests the Treasury Department continued to receive lacked the length and emotion of earlier correspondence.²²

Creager continued to write Lowman long letters with new approaches--including letters from the Governor of Tamaulipas--and reasons for extending bridge hours. Lowman returned a cool response totaling two sentences: "Your telegram relative to bridge opening received. It is inexpedient to take any action on this matter at the present time." Lowman, however, promised to watch the situation and consider changing the hours at a later date.²³

As the holiday season approached, Valley businessmen that catered to tourists became increasingly concerned since reduced bridge crossing hours translated into meager profits. In late October, they touted the Mexican government's progress in curtailing border gambling in a renewed campaign to alter border-crossing hours. Border Chambers of Commerce employed and sent to Washington an attorney to meet with Lowman. Creager took advantage of the reinvigorated effort by also visiting the capital where he took "certain steps recommended by the Asst. Secretary of the Treasury in charge of such matters in Washington." Although the nature of these "certain steps" remain a mystery, they appear critical in the resolution of the controversy. On November 13, a confident Rentfro Creager reported to the Governor of Tamaulipas that he believed these "steps" would result in a midnight closing hour "within less than one month . . . possibly within two weeks." When this prediction came true, Creager wrote, "I think this ends this controversy as I don't believe Lowman will ever undertake to close them again."²⁴

A lot had happened in less than four short months. In mid-August 1931, the Treasury Department had announced a uniform border crossing policy that closed all bridges spanning the Rio Grande at 9 pm. The same day, led by Rentfro Creager, South Texas businessmen and related interests mounted a persuasive protest effort that reached high-ranking government officials and elected representatives in the state and in Washington, D.C.. Yet, Assistant Secretary of Treasury Seymour Lowman remained obstinate to change the policy, even refusing to allow the traditional extension of crossing hours for Mexican Independence on September 16. So the critical question one must ask is, what happened

that second week in November that allowed a return to normal practices?

From Matamoros to Tijuana, using border-crossing hours proved a popular tool to encourage action on the Mexican side of the line during the era of US prohibition. While Washington usually instigated changes universally at all crossing points, resident US State Department officials held much sway in receiving exemptions depending upon local conditions. Unlike most other border paired towns during prohibition, Brownsville/Matamoros offered little in the form of chronic gambling and held substantial and legitimate business ties, allowing this region to quickly return to normal operations, most often the very next day. The campaign mounted by local business interests to influence border-crossing policies was also a common response that occurred regularly along the border during prohibition. This explains how Rentfro Creager quickly mustered such a coordinated and broad response to Washington—he had played this game before with the same players. But unlike most border locations, Brownsville business interests enjoyed the support of an influential Washington insider named Rentfro Creager.

One obvious advantage was Creager's influence over Roy Campbell. When Creager contacted Campbell in Washington on August 12, the latter was busy the lobbying for an early close at Laredo. It is clear in communication between them that Campbell willingly reversed his position when Creager asked him to do so and Campbell promptly acted in Creager's behalf when dealing with Lowman. But, even with his considerable political influence and reach, Creager failed to sway Treasury Department officials such as Seymour Lowman—or did he?

This is the part of the story missing—the “certain steps recommended by the Asst. Secretary of the Treasury” that “ends this controversy as I [Creager] don't believe Lowman will ever undertake to close them again.” This certainly suggests that Creager's connections and skill finally won out in the end. In any case, as before, things returned to normal at the international bridge between Brownsville and Matamoros.

Notes

1 All citations refer to an uncataloged collection of papers belonging to Rentfro Creager held by the Arnulfo L. Oliveria Library's Hunter Room. Letter, G. C. Richardson to Rentfro Creager, August 12.

2 Ibid.; *Brownsville Herald*, 13 August 1931, p. 1. Hereafter *BH* and all articles are located on page 1 in the year 1931.

3 Telegram, Creager to Secretary of Treasury, Seymour Lowman, August 12.

4 Telegram Creager to District Customs Collector Roy Campbell, August 12.

5 Telegram Creager to Howard, August 12.

6 Telegram, Lowman to Creager, August 13.

7 Letter, Campbell to Creager, August 13; 7am change also reported in 14 August; Roy Campbell in *BH* 16 and 17 August.

8 Letter, Campbell to Lowman, August 14.

9 Letter, Lowman to Campbell, August 17; *BH* 26 August.

10 Letter, Campbell to Lowman, August 23; Telegram, Lowman to Campbell, August 25.

11 Telegram, Creager to J. Reuben Clark, Ambassador to Mexico, August 25; Telegram, Creager to President Hoover, August 20.

12 Letter, Lowman to Creager, August 26.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

17 Correspondence, John N. Garner to Richardson, Brownsville Chamber of Commerce, August 31.

18 Letter, Harbert Davenport, attorney, to Creager, August 28 referencing custom law of June 17, 1930, Sec. 1582, Title 19; Letter, R. D. Howard, General Manager, to Creager, August 31.

19 Letter, Creager to Lowman, August 31.

20 Ibid.

21 An example of this “form letter” found Lowman to San Benito Chamber of Commerce, September 3.

22 Gambling reopened in Laredo Chamber of Commerce to Richardson, August 31, “enthusiasm has died”; Report in letter, Campbell to Lowman, September 29; *BH* 6 September.

23 Letter Creager to Lowman, October 1; Letter Creager to Tamaulipas Governor Francisco Castellanos, October 3; Lowman to Creager October 1 and 5.

24 Attorney in letter, Eagle Pass Chamber of Commerce to Brownsville Chamber of Commerce, November 27 and December 4; Letter, Creager to Governor Castellanos, November 13 and November 28; *BH* October 5.

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