The Chamizal "Tipping" Point?
El Paso's Garbage in 1901
By Sarah Hill

One of the lesser-known elements of the famous Chamizal dispute concerns the plans of the city of El Paso to get rid of its wastes in 1910. Because the plan provoked a series of diplomatic exchanges between the United States and the Mexican departments of state, most histories of the Chamizal settlement mention the dispute only in passing. However, none have done more than simply to note, as did Gladys Gregory, that this local issue with “diplomatic repercussions in the national capitals of Mexico and the United States” was one of a series of incidents in 1907-1910 that drove the two countries, finally, to arbitration over the nationality of the Chamizal tract. 1

Diplomatic correspondence concerning the waste plan comprises a portion of Appendix II of the Chamizal Arbitration. The politely worded exchanges between the Secretary of State Philander Knox and his assistants, and Mexico’s Ambassador to the United States, Francisco Leon de la Barra, provide only tantalizing suggestions of what was likely a very heated local dispute between the residents of El Paso and Juárez and the officials at the turn of the century. Indeed, the waste issue teemed, not only with the unsavory features of the city’s discards, but with politics, patronage, and controversial notions of hygiene and sanitation. Garbage and its disposal, in El Paso, as elsewhere in the United States in 1910, was hardly straightforward and hardly only about wastes, as we will learn shortly.

First, let us set the stage. Several decades prior to 1900, Louis Pasteur had made his discoveries which led to the germ theory of disease. 2 In fact, underway at that time was the shift from household-focused interventions, which sought to control vapor pathways inside the home, to the establishment of large public works infrastructure to guard against infection. 3 Still, at least in the United States, a good number of physicians and other health professionals regarded the germ theory with skepticism. Most notably, one of the most prominent 19th century sanitarians, Col. George Warring, whose peripatetic career took him around the world, wholly rejected Pasteur’s findings. 4 As it so happens, the city of El Paso had contracted Warring to design its sewer system, which Warring did in 1886, fully believing that pumping sewage into the river posed no danger for residents in Juárez or further downstream. 5

Apparently by 1907, however, Warring’s system proved unsatisfactory. In 1908, city leadership seized upon the then-fashionable idea of constructing a garbage “crematorium” which would be built on land leased in the Cotton Addition. This modern installation, budgeted with a bond issue of $100,000 in 1908 would facilitate “final disposition” of all manner of wastes, including garbage and sewage. Heralded in El Paso as vitally necessary to maintain the city’s image as a healthy setting, attractive to recuperating consumption sufferers, the announced facility propelled the mayor of Juárez to appeal to Mexico City to oppose the project.

Why? In his response to pressure from Washington to abandon the project, Mayor Pro Tem James T. Hewitt, argued that the crematorium would benefit the health of residents of both cities, by destroying the matter that would otherwise pour into the riverbed between the two cities. Indeed, it does not take much to imagine that the untreated sewage of residents in El Paso, festering in the often-dry riverbed, would prove offensive to residents in Juárez. So, why then would Juárez’s Mayor, Felix Barcenas, object to a facility that would spell the end of that persistently noxious condition?

While I can’t definitively answer that question, I want to begin with the suggestion, simply, that concern over rightful land ownership trumped concern over land use that would be a benefit to the public health of both cities. The acting Secretary of State, Hunter S. Wilson, assured his Mexican counterpart that the city of El Paso had “no ulterior motive and no other objective than to provide for the health, not only of the people of El Paso, but also of Juárez.” 6 Nonetheless, there are reasons why we should suspect their belief in miasmas and atmospheric conditions as the sources of disease. 2 In fact, underway at that time was the shift from household-focused interventions, which sought to control vapor pathways inside the home, to the establishment of large public works infrastructure to guard against infection. 3 Still, at least in the United States, a good number of physicians and other health professionals regarded the germ theory with skepticism. Most notably, one of the most prominent 19th century sanitarians, Col. George Warring, whose peripatetic career took him around the world, wholly rejected Pasteur’s findings. 4 As it so happens, the city of El Paso had contracted Warring to design its sewer system, which Warring did in 1886, fully believing that pumping sewage into the river posed no danger for residents in Juárez or further downstream. 5
that the promises of sanitation concealed other less noble goals: namely, political patronage and lucrative business opportunities.

What is garbage?

How did El Paso get rid of its garbage at the turn of the century? Answering that question requires some translation, because what contemporary Americans consider garbage, or more generally, wastes, is considerably different from what El Pasoans at the turn of the century considered garbage. The term "garbage" itself is not very helpful since then as now, it lacks precision. In addition, it seems that in 1910, it included substances that most contemporary Americans would not consider garbage. Indeed, the proposed incinerator, which was to burn both wastes and sewage, was called by the newspapers the "garbage crematorium." Nonetheless, we can make some educated guesses about what was and was not garbage in 1910. Our first point of departure entails the consideration that, first of all, El Pasoans produced little in the way of wastes, at least by today's standards, because quite simply they had very little to throw away. Historian Susan Strasser has shown that two features of pre-industrial America characterized wastes: one, Americans had so little access to useful consumer goods that they persistently reused everything, from cloth to metals to ceramics and glass. Thus, the kinds of items that routinely find their way into contemporary waste streams would never have been discarded one hundred years ago because they were practically irreplaceable. Second, Stasser observes that materials which no longer presented utility within households were purchased by armies of independent scavengers—rag buyers, tinkers, bottle collectors, and so forth. So things that are typically thrown away today would leave a household, in 1910, in the hands of ambulatory purchasers who in turn sold them to small industrial operations that could disaggregate these materials and turn them back into usable substances: rags became paper, cast-off metals went to foundries, old leather could be pulped and so on.

The City Scavenger and the Democratic Ring

By the turn of the century, the same forces that promoted new technologies such as "reduction"—the cooking of wastes to make grease—and cremation, also wrestled junk collection away from peddlers. When sanitarians began to promote the daily sweeping of streets in cities such as New York, Chicago, San Francisco, and Philadelphia, they also opened the door of scavenging to the politi-
First of all, it was unusual that the scavengers, at least by surname, were not ostensibly ethnic minorities. By comparison, throughout the United States, privy carting, scavenging, tinkering, rag picking, and junk collecting were enterprises almost exclusively controlled by either Jewish families, or southern European immigrants. Nevertheless, it's pretty clear that even though the monopoly was held by politically-connected white, Anglo El Pasoans, the actual dirty work of hauling, sorting, and disposal was done by Mexicans. Numerous references abound in the city papers, at the time, of the Mexicans who took care of the city's garbage. And despite how unsavory this work appears, it must have held some attraction because as Mario T. Garcia observed, the city garbage men became reliable supporters of the Democratic "Ring," and loyally supported the machine's candidates in election after election, until 1915, when a reform movement broke the Ring, and brought Tom Lea to office.

The proper place for Garbage is the Rio Grande

Where did the garbage go? It seems the city not only sought to protect the scavenger's monopoly, it also struggled to restrict dumping to authorized locales. In one city ordinance after another, beginning in 1882, the city established definitively that dumping should only occur in the Rio Grande. The first ordinance read, simply, "The Rio Grande is hereby designated as the place for all such [glass, broken ware, dirt, rubbish, old clothes, garbage, or filth] material." But, where, precisely, on the river, did the city have in mind? Apparently, that targeted spot moved downstream over time, with the city periodically reminding residents that such dumping should occur "outside the city limits." However, it is also clear that in the first decade of the 20th century the disputed tract of the Chamizal land took the lion's share of dumping. In early 1911 one reporter ventured to the dump to report on its workers to the El Paso Herald. And while we might suspect this reporter of some exaggeration, he paints an alarming image. According to the reporter's description, this site on the "Chamizal strip" brimmed with "huge pits, gradually filling with accumulations of rusty tins, and covered with smoldering piles of stable refuse exuding a vapory smoke." Several acres in size, the area "rises a few feet above the surrounding level." Little wonder, then, that Mayor Sweeney, in 1910, felt compelled to find a modern, industrial solution to the growing problem of wastes.
The incinerator Flames Out

By December, 1910, the future of the planned incinerator was in doubt, though Mayor Kelly refused to say publicly whether the Chamizal question had stalled construction. Shortly after the unsuccessful conclusion of the Chamizal arbitration, the El Paso Herald described the “ingenious design” of the planned facility which was now to be built near Washington Park and which would provide irrigation water for the park. But two years later, in May 1913, the city condemned the plant, noting that it was an expensive property that had never worked. And while the mayor hoped to find a better model and sent two city engineers around the country on a tour of cities with better facilities, the city never again dabbled in incineration. The move to Washington Park, however, was definitive; from then on the city buried its wastes in a broad area between the park and the river until, ironically, it traded that land to Mexico in 1967, in compensation for the disputed Chamizal tract. The story of this second dump, however, is another trash story.

SARAH HILL first visited El Paso in 1992 and returned to live here for four years from 1994 to 1998 while she conducted research for her dissertation in anthropology at Johns Hopkins University. She now lives in Kalamazoo, Michigan where she teaches anthropology and environmental studies at Western Michigan University. She is at work on two books, one about waste management on the United States-Mexico border, and the other about waste management on the United States-Canada border.

END NOTES

3. Tomes, 51.
11. El Paso City Council Meeting Minutes, March 21, 1890.