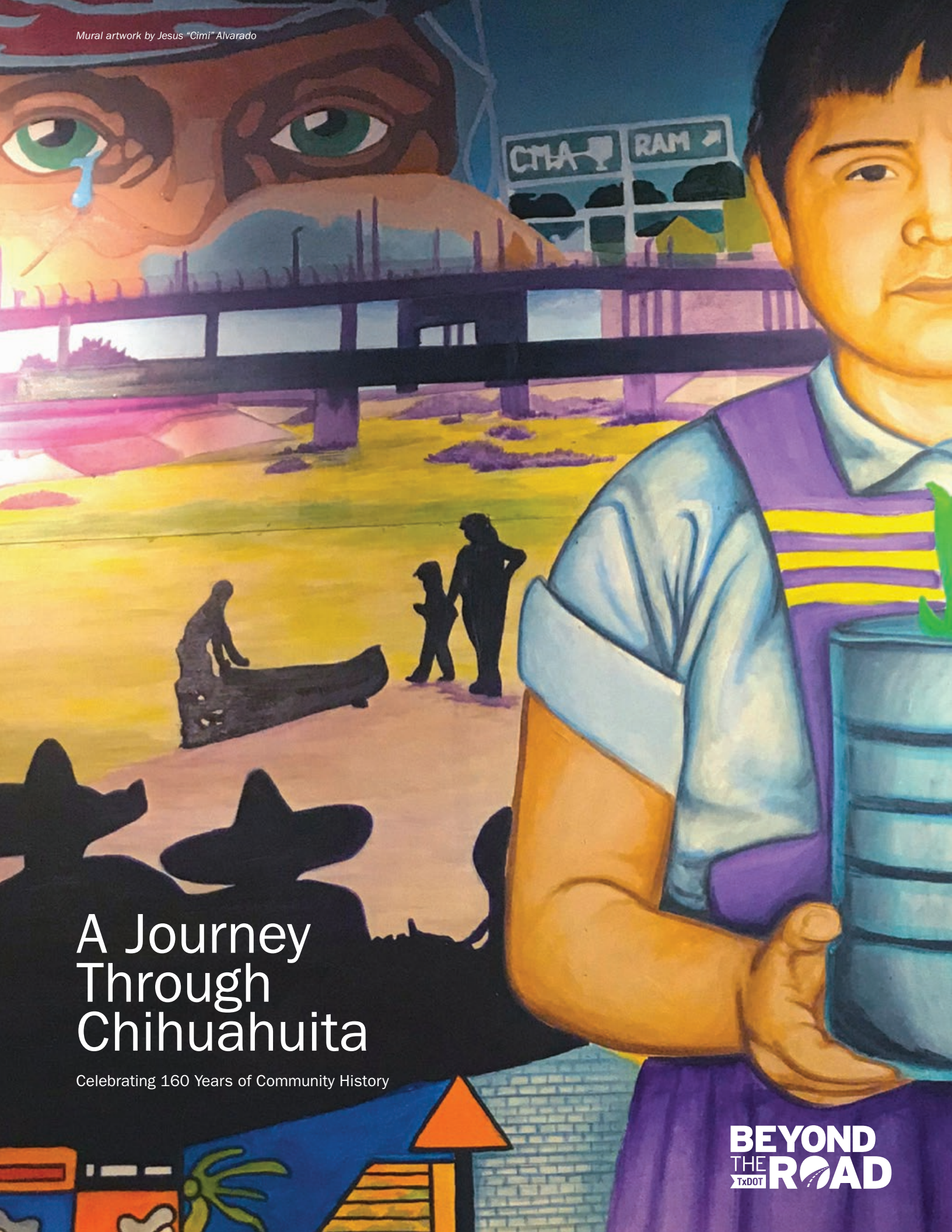


Mural artwork by Jesus "Cimi" Alvarado



A Journey Through Chihuahuita

Celebrating 160 Years of Community History

**BEYOND
THE ROAD**
TXDOT

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“We are comfortable, but we have to adapt to changes. We fight for our quality of life and try to change things, but if we can’t then we adapt. We are like chameleons. We stay for our family and friends.”

– Mannys Rodriguez, Chihuahuita resident

A Look Beyond The Road with TxDOT

September marks National Hispanic Heritage Month. It recognizes the achievements and contributions of Hispanic and Latin-Americans. This September 2018, we celebrate Chihuahuita as a cultural gateway between Mexico and the United States.

Today, residents of Chihuahuita are committed to their quality of life, which is deeply rooted in family, tradition and history. Historians in TxDOT's Environmental Affairs Division worked with the neighborhood to tell the story of Chihuahuita's endurance in the face of change around them. It is part of the agency's work to balance progress and preservation as it builds and enhances the state's roads.



FIGURE 1

FIGURE 2

The History of Chihuahuita

“People called Chihuahuita the ‘Ellis Island of the Border.’”

The small neighborhood of Chihuahuita is in South El Paso along the Rio Grande and is more than 150 years old. It has a long history dating back to the Mexican-American War in 1848 when El Paso became part of the United States. Before that, the area was part of a large ranch built on land once owned by the Spanish.

Today, just as it was back then, residents know each other by name. People are connected through cultural pride and commitment to help one another.



FIGURE 3

Leon Trousset was a French painter who lived and worked in the southwestern United States. He painted “View of El Paso” in 1885 (Figure 3). It shows the railroad bridge over the Rio Grande and El Paso in the background. A small adobe building and Ciudad Juarez, Mexico are in the foreground.

1848

After the end of the Mexican-American War, the Rio Grande River became the border between the United States and Mexico.

1881

The Santa Fe Railroad brought more farming and business to El Paso. People came from Mexico to El Paso for jobs.

1910

Groups of people came to Chihuahuita to escape the dangers of the Mexican Revolution.

Back then, Chihuahuita was known as “Ellis Island of the Border.” The Rio Grande was the only thing that divided the United States and Mexico. Today, it is still a gateway into the United States.

While many people came to El Paso to flee the strife of warfare during the Mexican-American War, others came make a better life. In the late 1800s, the Santa Fe Railroad brought economic opportunities and jobs to El Paso, so people settled in the booming town.

Chihuahuita still sits along the railroad tracks on the Rio Grande and is home to many generations of its original settlers. Most still speak Spanish and live a fulfilling life based in community and family.

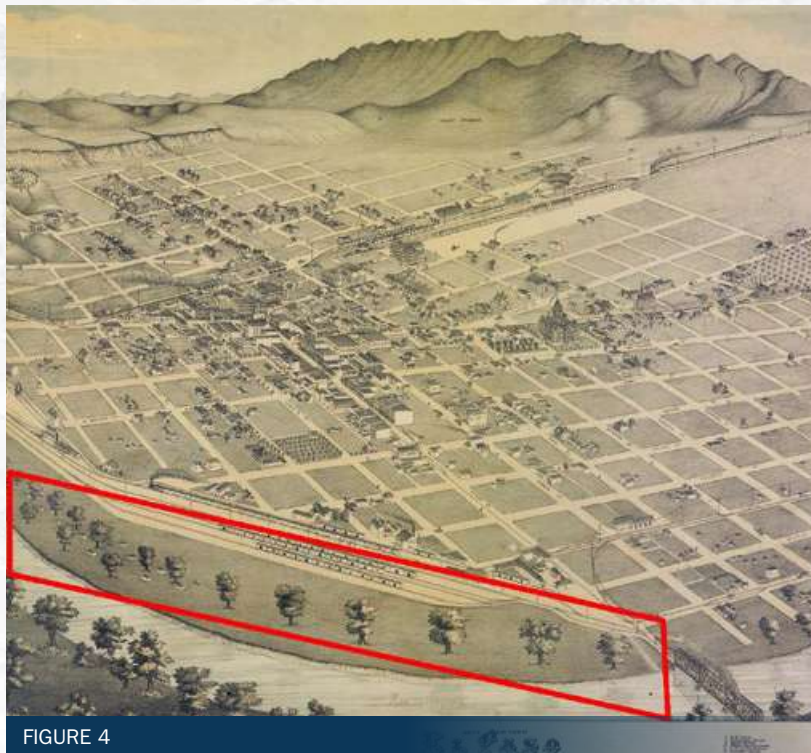


FIGURE 4

Augustus Koch drew the bird's-eye view (Figure 4) around the same time as Trousset's painting. Notice the layout of the streets and the Santa Fe railyard. Chihuahuita is the area outlined in red just southwest of the railroad tracks where the row of trees stand.

Former citizens of the Mexican state Chihuahua settled in the south of El Paso on the northern side of the Rio Grande. This is why the neighborhood is called “Chihuahuita,” or “little Chihuahua.”

The History of Chihuahuita

SNAPSHOTS IN TIME



FIGURE 5

People crossed the Rio Grande into El Paso riding on a hand-hauled ferry. It docked at South Santa Fe and Chihuahua streets. This photo from 1882 shows a temporary bridge built over the river at South Santa Fe Street.



FIGURE 6

The Mexican Revolution of 1910 caused a large wave of immigration from Mexico to the U.S. Since Chihuahuita was right across the border, it gained many of these immigrants. Crowds of people would stand along the Rio Grande River and watch the war.



FIGURE 7

In March 1918, The El Paso Herald reported, “Before being admitted to the [U.S.], these laborers are bathed, and their garments and baggage is sterilized by the United States ... at the Santa Fe [B]ridge.”



FIGURE 8

The Santa Fe Street Railway Company built a permanent bridge in 1892. Now it is called the Paso Del Norte Bridge or the Santa Fe Street Bridge.



FIGURE 9

This 2017 view of the border fence in Chihuahuita shows how the border has evolved over time.

History of Chihuahuita Homes

Brightly painted houses covered in stucco ... doors opening onto narrow streets ... these quaint features reflect the community's history and culture.

The architecture of the buildings is rooted in Mexico. Chihuahuita was one of the first places settled by Mexican immigrants when they crossed the border into El Paso, so the houses look and feel like the traditional homes found in Mexico at the time.

Today, some of those same houses still stand and reflect a community grounded in this identity. Many of these first homes were passed down from one generation to the next. This practice continues in Chihuahuita to this day. Many of the residents still live with or near family members.



FIGURE 10



FIGURE 11

“Our houses are not valued for sale but valued for our personal memories, and we cherish them because of that.”

– Mannys Rodriguez, Chihuahuita resident

In the Beginning



FIGURE 12

Chihuahuita was a neighborhood built on a type of mud and wood building called a *jacal*. Homes were easy and cheap to build and provided residents with the shelter they needed to survive (Figure 12).

However, as time went on Chihuahuita became a neighborhood made up of adobe, a type of sun brick traditional in the Mexican culture (Figure 13).



FIGURE 13

Landlords built brick tenements in the 1910s and 1920s on the edge of the community (Figure 14), but houses typically remained adobe.



FIGURE 14

“Change, like sunshine, can be a friend or a foe, a blessing or a curse, a dawn or a dusk. Chihuahuita shapes to and with change.”

– Judith Santiesteban,
Chihuahuita resident

Struggling Economy

As more people moved into the area, the neighborhood became very crowded. People worked hard to make a life there, but Chihuahuita was neglected by politicians. The poor conditions continued in Chihuahuita for many years.

More than 200 tenement buildings still stood in south El Paso by the 1970s. Conditions in the neighborhood remained unchanged since the early 1900s. Landlords did not take care of the aging buildings. Most of the apartments on the edge of the community still did not feature toilets or bathtubs.

The neighborhood did not have paved streets or street signs. Many houses lacked heat, running water, and electricity.

Chihuahuita's fast growing population brought unforeseen problems. As housing became more crowded, diseases spread quickly. While there were jobs, money was still hard to come by. Chihuahuita and El Paso suffered a period of discrimination.



FIGURE 15

Making a Change

The people of Chihuahuita got together to improve their community and formed the Chihuahuita Improvement Association. They built the Chihuahuita Park, a community center, and made Chihuahuita a historic district. The City paved roads and brought running water to houses and apartments in the neighborhood.



The History of Chihuahuita

SNAPSHOTS IN TIME



FIGURE 19



FIGURE 20

- In 1915, Mayor Tom Lea ordered immigrants to bathe in gasoline before crossing into El Paso. This was supposed to kill lice that carried a deadly sickness. A 17 year-old, Carmelita Torres, refused the treatment. She started a protest called the El Paso Bath Riots. Despite the protests, officials enforced the policy for many years.
- El Paso did not supply Chihuahuita with many city services because leaders did not consider it important. No hospital, garbage pickup, or sewage system served the community. In 1916, Mayor Tom Lea ordered almost 300 houses to be demolished in an attempt to improve the neighborhood.
- The El Paso Laundry and Cleaners Company hired many people in Chihuahuita. Workers started a strike in 1919 because they wanted equal pay to white workers. Unfortunately, many women lost their jobs during the strike because it was easy to hire white workers. The lower left image features the laundry company.



FIGURE 21

A RAGING TORRENT.
RIO GRANDE WATERS PLAYING HA-
VOC WITH PROPERTY.

- Many Chihuahuita houses were simple, with no running water and no access to the sewer system. Ironically, while the houses lacked water, the streets often had too much.
- Flooding was a major problem in the 19th and early 20th centuries. The Rio Grande flowed in different directions and often flooded Chihuahuita. Eventually, the city built a channel to control water pressure and prevent further flooding.
- The people of Chihuahuita are resilient. Floods plagued the neighborhood as recently as 2006. Residents worked with the city to install a water pump in 2011 solving the flooding issues for good.

La Vida de Chihuahuita

Work life in Chihuahuita changed through time, but family life was always important.

Early Years in Chihuahuita (1848–1900s)

- Residents worked on railroads, at farms, and at nearby businesses like El Paso Laundry. Many sold food, school supplies, and other hard-to-find goods from their homes. They called these little stores *tienditas*.

Prohibition Era (1920–1933)

- The U.S. government banned alcohol. Chihuahuita was close to the border, so it attracted “bootleggers.” Bootleggers brought alcohol from Mexico to sell illegally in America.

Bracero Work Program (1942)

- Millions of Americans fighting in World War II left few people back home to work. In 1942, the U.S. government created the Bracero Work Program. The program brought Mexican laborers to the U.S. to work on American farms during the war. The program ended in 1964.

Clothing Factories (1960s–1970s)

- Chihuahuita had large factories where people worked to make clothes. Farah was a large clothing factory near Chihuahuita at Cotton and 3rd streets. By 1971, Farah was the second largest employer in El Paso.

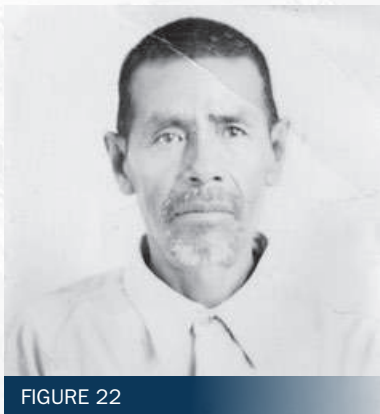


FIGURE 22



FIGURE 23

“People who have moved away come back on Sundays to attend Sacred Heart Catholic Church and see friends and family.”

– Mannys Rodriguez, Chihuahuita resident

Family and community are central to Chihuahuita's history.

Schools, churches, and community centers created a sense of pride among neighbors.

Kids played touch football, swam in the Franklin Canal, and formed baseball teams. Some children helped their parents at work, while others helped their parents by taking care of the siblings or other family members.

Many were, and still are, born and raised Catholics, so church is a large part of life in the community. Chihuahuita also made sure to have educational opportunities for its future generations.

Today, this close-knit community maintains the traditions that started with its ancestors.

FIGURE 25



FIGURE 26



FIGURE 27

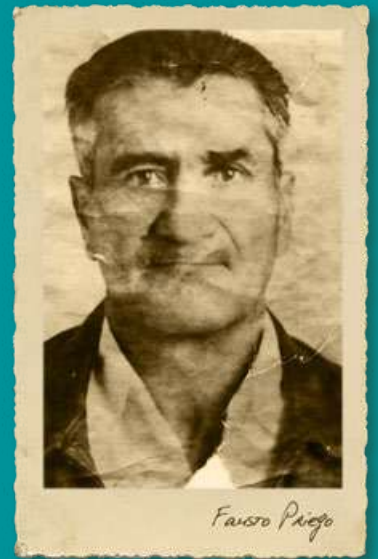


FIGURE 24

This is Fausto Priego. Some may know him as a bootlegger from Chihuahuita during prohibition. Priego worked to make a life in Chihuahuita, but he also enjoyed his life, fishing and hunting with friends and family (Fig. 26 and 27).

La Vida de Chihuahuita

SNAPSHOTS IN TIME



FIGURE 28

Chihuahuita boys formed a baseball team in the 1930s. The El Paso Laundry and Cleaners Company sponsored the team in this photo. Kids in the neighborhood also played games like hide and seek and “chin chi la gua,” a Mexican climbing game. Some of the boys became athletes at Bowie High School. Still others would go on to serve in the military.



FIGURE 29

The Sacred Heart Catholic Church on South Oregon Street has always been an important place. During the Great Depression, the church opened a soup kitchen. In the 1950s, Father Harold Rahm created Our Lady’s Youth Center. It offered programs for neighborhood kids.

“Chihuahuita is more than just a community. It’s where roots were made.”

– Julie Priego Zapata, Community member



FIGURE 30

Many children attended Aoy Elementary School near Chihuahuita. This school opened in 1899. The school, churches, and neighborhoods were separated between Mexicans and whites until the 1950s. Schools like Aoy, in the Mexican parts of town, were overcrowded and run down. The first Aoy Elementary opened in 1899 on the corner of 7th and Campbell streets. The City built a new Aoy School in 2010.



FIGURE 31

During the Great Depression (1929-1939), some people made money by opening small shops in their homes called tienditas. The shops were usually located on the front porch and run by the female of the house. Owners kept them open seven days a week to make ends meet. According to Mike Rodriguez, a resident of Chihuahuita, "If you lived through the Depression, you learned to survive." Later businesses included Villava's Grocery, owned by Elizabeth "Chavez" Perez. She opened the store in 1959 and it is still open today.

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Image Citations

- Figure 1: Jose Silva in front of his father's house, 1942. Courtesy of Mannys Rodriguez.
- Figure 2: Jose Silva served in WWII, 1945. Courtesy of Mannys Rodriguez
- Figure 3: "View of El Paso" by Leon Trouset, 1885. El Paso Museum of Art.
- Figure 4: Bird's-Eye View of El Paso by Augustus Koch, 1885. Amon Carter Museum.
- Figure 5: "Temporary bridge across Rio Grande," 1882. Courtesy of Fred Morales.
- Figure 6: Chihuahuita in 1911. Courtesy of El Paso Public Library.
- Figure 7: "Braceros being deloused," ca. 1955. Courtesy of U.S. Citizenship & Immigration Services History Office and Library.
- Figure 8: Paso Del Norte Bridge, 2017, Courtesy of TxDOT.
- Figure 9: Border fence in Chihuahuita, 2017, Courtesy of TxDOT.
- Figure 10: Adobe houses in Chihuahuita, 2017. Courtesy of TxDOT.
- Figure 11: Manuel Silva in front of Fausto Priego's home, 1939. Courtesy of Mannys Rodriguez
- Figure 12: Early *jacals*. Courtesy of El Paso Public Library.
- Figure 13: Montestruc house in Chihuahuita. Courtesy of Fred Morales.
- Figure 14: Brick tenements in south El Paso. Courtesy of El Paso Public Library.
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- Figure 19: El Paso Herald, May 29, 1916.
- Figure 20: El Paso Laundry, ca. 1915. Courtesy of El Paso Public Library.
- Figure 21: Pass City Steam Laundry, 1897. Courtesy of Fred Morales.
- Figure 22: Emelio Silva portrait. 1920. Courtesy of Mannys Rodriguez.
- Figure 23: Braceros in El Paso, 1950s. National Border Patrol Museum.
- Figure 24: Fausto Priego. Circa 1930. Courtesy of Fred Morales.
- Figure 25: Members of the Montestruc Wedding, 1942. Courtesy of Fred Morales.
- Figure 26: Fausto Priego fishing with friends. Courtesy of Mannys Rodriguez.
- Figure 27: Fausto Priego hunting with friends. Courtesy of Mannys Rodriguez.
- Figure 28: Chihuahuita Street Baseball Team, ca. 1930. Courtesy of Fred Morales.
- Figure 29: Northeast view of Sacred Heart Catholic Church on South Oregon Street. 2017. Courtesy of TxDOT.
- Figure 30: Aoy School, students, and staff, ca. 1900. Courtesy of El Paso Independent School District.
- Figure 31: Northwest view of Villava's Grocery. 2017. Courtesy of TxDOT.

Acknowledgements

Since 1917, TxDOT has built roads shaped around the state's scenic splendor and cultural heritage. Engineers eased travelers' journeys by building beautiful bridges, paving scenic roads and creating welcoming roadside parks. Today, the Environmental Affairs Division at TxDOT helps care for the state's natural and cultural resources in tandem with this vision. We would like to thank the following organizations for their collaboration on this project:

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