YEARBOOK

of the

ASSOCIATION OF
PACIFIC COAST GEOGRAPHERS

VOLUME 61, 1999

Edited by

Darrick Danta

Published by the Association
Northridge, California

Across the Street is Mexico: Invention and Persistence of the Border Town Curio Landscape

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Presidential address delivered to the Association of Pacific Coast Geographers, 61st Annual Meeting, Flagstaff, Arizona, October 16, 1998

"**It** WILL BE A LITTLE PLAZA but it will be totally themed so it looks like you walked into Mexico," says Gail Chase, general manager of Desert Sky Mall in west Phoenix. La Placita will mimic the ambiance of a Mexican border town. "The fun of it will be cramming a lot of shops into a small space," says Chase. "It will be fun to meander through the area and feel that you're in a Mexican marketplace" (*Arizona Republic*, July 16, 1998).

The notion of a themed marketplace has become something of a cliché in American retail and entertainment circles, if not in American landscape study (Relph 1987; Goss 1993). Even the kitschy Mexican border town hook is "old sombrero," or "b.D.," because similar contrived landscapes appeared in southern California "before Disneyland."

Arguably, the beginning of this particular form of Mexico-land promotion has its root in those north Mexican border towns that have so viled yet captivated North American tourist imaginations for more than a century (Arreola 1996). Contrived and pretentious as it may be, one can still be impressed with the staying power of this landscape; few modern commercial hypes have enjoyed such longevity (Figure 1). Persistence begs the question: "Why?" Historians (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) may have given birth to the notion of "invented tradition" as an academic concept, but we should not forget Woody Allen's admonition via his recent film *Deconstructing Harry*; "Tradition," he said, "is the illusion of permanence."

As geographers we have asked questions about the invention and resilience of regional landscape images. One thinks, for example, of Joseph Wood's (1991) interpretation about the shaped identity and persistence of the New England village as a popular icon and how it

Figure 1—The curio landscapes of Mexican border towns like Tijuana exhibit a form of commerce that is more than a century old. Photo by author, 1996.

is possible to transport such landscape to the Mendecino coast of California. Or Donald Meinig's (1979) symbolic communities including Main Street with its origins in the Middle West, and its reproductions across the Far West including Meinig's home region of the Palouse in eastern Washington. Others have stirred this pot from more postmodern positions; to wit, Kay Anderson's (1987) quite useful argument for understanding the construction of a racial category via Chinatown, and most recently, architectural historian Chris Wilson's (1997) brilliant deconstruction of *The Myth of Santa Fe: Creation of a Regional Tradition*, wherein Wilson shows quite convincingly the truth of John Caulfield's (1994) oft-repeated definition of postmodern—something that is a copy of a non-existent original.

My story is less well known, but the subject is equally romantic. And, I would maintain, it is also geographic because it concerns an image of a culture—Mexican; a process of exchange—tourism; and the invention of a place—the border town curio landscape.

Mexican Expo to Mexican Vogue

Mexico and Mexicans became especially curious to the world following the long sleep of Spanish colonial control that ended in 1821. In my doctoral dissertation, *Landscape Images of Eastern Mexico: A Historical Geography of Travel*, I explored the nature of geographical knowledge about Mexico as revealed in the popular travel account (Arreola 1982). To me, this was a kind of "geosophy," a word coined by John Kirtland Wright (1947) to describe geographical knowledge from any and all possible points of view. While travel narratives and their illustrations can be devices for uncovering image about place, the foreign travel account is, by definition, an assessment by an outsider and not, therefore, a self-conscious representation.

Perhaps the earliest means whereby Mexico promoted itself to the world as a "packaged landscape" came with the late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century world's fairs. In the nineteenth-century

fairs, Mexico shared Europe's fascination with the exotic and this fed a condition of "autoethnography." The 1895 cotton states international exposition in Atlanta, for example, exhibited the first "Mexican village" theme where many characteristic folk types of the country, including people from Tehuantepec, were on display in a form of human circus. The 1901 Buffalo Pan-American Exposition witnessed the so-called "Street of Mexico" exhibit, and the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair spotlighted "Aztecs and Their Industries," live artisans who worked brick, pottery and copper. Early twentieth-century fairs became "degenerated utopias" compared to the idealistic exhibits of the previous century, according to historian Mauricio Tenorio-Trillo (1996). Seen increasingly as vehicles for corporate advertising, mass consumption, and tourism, the fairs captured ideology materialized as myth.

But how did Mexican tourism become intimately welded to a mythic Mexico, a contrived, packaged ensemble of character types representing different regions and their artisan products? World's fairs provided the spark for this idea, but artisan products and Mexico needed legitimacy in North American minds before a tourist motivation would be created. After all, the fairs in Atlanta, Buffalo, and St. Louis allowed North Americans to visit Mexico without going there.

Tourism may have started as Paleolithic wandering, but surely it developed wings in the guise of travelers such as the Moslem Ibn Battuta, probably the most widely traveled human of the Middle Ages. Travel became organized through efforts such as the Crusades and the European as well as the Chinese discoveries of the world, emerged as a mark of status among privileged social classes whether the English grand tour or the German *wanderjar*, and eventually crystallizes as a nearly universal experience in the modern world. Leisure is said to be displacing work or at least the distinction between the two is becoming blurred. Lifestyle, a generic term for specific combinations of work and leisure, is encroaching upon occupation as the measure of social relationship, social action, and status, says Dean

MacCannell (1989) in his provocative book *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class.*

MacCannell states that popular tourism created "touristic shame," which is based not on being a tourist, but on not being tourist enough—in other words, failing to experience authenticity. This created a desire quite early among some tourists to stay clear of its opposite, "staged authenticity." At the turn of the past century, for example, tourists in Paris sought out and experienced the city's sewers, morgue, and slaughter houses, as if they were somehow more real than Eiffel's Tower.

It was especially during the early twentieth-century and particularly the 1920s when Mexico became discovered by an advanced guard of bohemian tourists. This coincided with and perhaps even sparked the so-called Mexican Renaissance (Delpar 1992).

The popularity of travel in Mexico was prompted in 1928 by the Mexican government's decision to do away with the need for a passport to visit the country; instead visitors were required only to secure a tourist visa. In 1930, Mexico's first national congress of tourism was convened, and in that same year the country created the national Commission of Tourism. These developments were the product of several political outcomes—the waning of the Mexican Revolution and strengthened diplomatic relations between Mexico and the United States. They were also a consequence of cultural issues, especially the discovery of our southern neighbor by artists and literati (Arreola 1995).

The writings of Anita Brenner, Frances Toor, and other veteran admirers of Mexican culture and the arts stimulated a Mexican vogue and contributed to an influx of cultural pilgrims during the 1920s.[1] Foreign visitors such as director Sergei Eisenstein, novelist John Dos Passos, artist Katherine Anne Porter, photographers Edward Weston and Tina Modotti, historian Lesley Bird Simpson, economist Stuart Chase, and many others commingled among and entertained the darlings of the Mexican art world including Rivera, Orozco, Siquieros,

Frida Kahlo, Jean Charlot, Carlos Mérida, and others. Foreign colonies of artists, writers, and assorted romantics and malcontents popped up in Mexican towns such as Cuernavaca, Taxco, and, quite naturally, the capital, Mexico City.

In 1934 Aldous Huxley wrote of Taxco as "...a sort of Mexican Saint-Paul largely inhabited by artists and by those camp-followers of the arts whose main contribution to the cause of Intellectual Beauty consists of being partially or completely drunk for several hours each day" (Ryan 1995, p. 144). One-time English diplomat, amateur folklorist, and musicologist Rodney Gallop visited Mexico in 1937 and captured the Taxco foreign art colony scene with this double-edged, yet compelling observation (Ryan 1995, p. 177): "...it remains uncertain whether they are painters who have come there to drink or drinkers who have gone there to paint."

Tequila, scotch, and gin notwithstanding, the impact of this cross-cultural imbibing yielded the first major exhibition of Mexican folk art in a museum or gallery setting in the United States, staged in Los Angeles in 1922. A second major exhibit followed in New York in 1928, and several others appeared across the country thereafter. U.S. ambassador to Mexico during this era, Dwight Morrow and his wife Elizabeth Cotter Morrow, promoted Mexican arts and crafts to every advantage. In 1930, with Rockefeller backing, a Mexican Arts Association was formed in New York, the purpose of which was said "to promote friendship between the people of Mexico and the United States of America by encouraging cultural relations and the interchange of fine and applied arts...[and] to encourage craftsmen of Mexico to maintain the best traditions of their arts and stimulate certain arts which are in danger of becoming lost..." (Delpar 1992, pp. 135–139). In 1933 Nelson Rockefeller made his first trip to Mexico, at which time he made the initial purchases of what would become a major collection of Mexican folk art.

The significance of this Mexican vogue, as art historian Helen Delpar has so appropriately termed the era, would be the creation in

the American popular mind of a persistent image, the idyllic folk world of Mexico (Figure 2). When artists and writers fled the United States for Mexico during this period, they were, in the main, seeking the primitive, the countryside, the romantic, and, as art critic James Oles has remarked, most dismissed images of modernity and urban life in Mexico as being of little aesthetic interest (Arreola 1995). When Europe reopened after 1945, and modern art became abstract impressionism, the door closed on the Mexican Renaissance. But another door was opening after the war, one that would promote Mexico as a tourist destination for a new consuming group, the North American middle class.

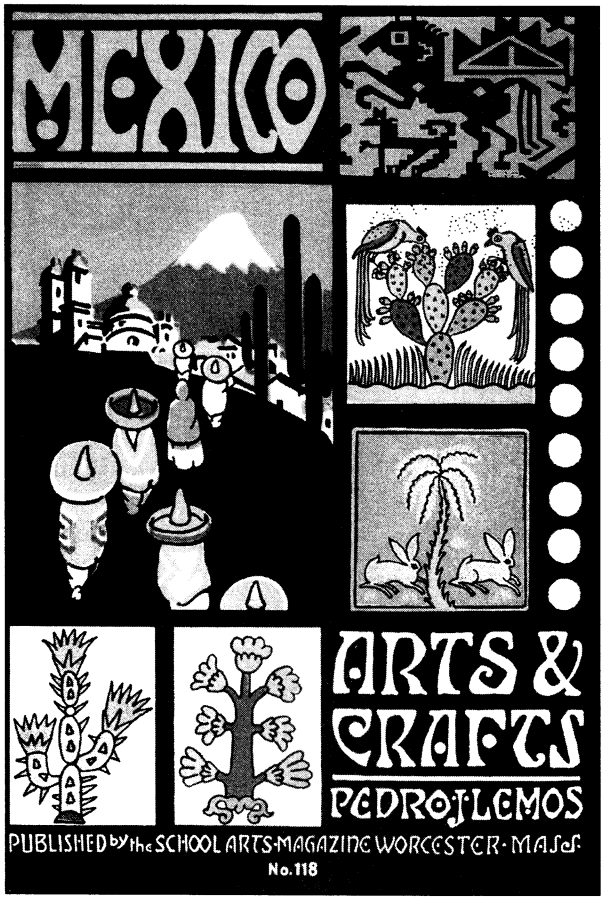

Figure 2—The idyllic folk world of Mexico captured the imagination of American artists and writers during the early decades of this century. Source: Lemos 1935, cover.

Romantic Mexico-land

The Mexican vogue gave legitimacy to Mexico as a travel destination. During the 1950s, tour agencies advised Cuernavaca for lunch, Taxco overnight, Acapulco and return. For many North American tourists, however, border towns were closer, if less exotic (Figure 3). Most lacked beaches and palms, but then border tourists were chiefly daytrippers so hotels were unnecessary. What excursionists wanted was a chance to frolic in a Mexico-land of their imaginations (Curtis and Arreola 1989)—a place that served up a romantic streetscape, complete with artisan shops, crafts, and the illusion of being in Cuernavaca, Taxco, and Acapulco.

Ciudad Juárez was likely the first tourist border town. The city was known for its mission, marketplace, and curio stores from late in the 1880s because the Southern Pacific railroad made El Paso a major stop between Chicago and California. Juárez was, therefore, the first real Mexico encountered by thousands of North American travelers along this southern corridor.[2]

During the 1920s, the El Paso chamber of commerce advanced a Juárez publicity campaign in popular publications, designed to reach millions of Americans. License and operating fees levied on American-owned and -operated drinking and gambling establishments by the Juárez municipal government yielded considerable revenues for beautification and public works projects. Juárez was proclaimed to have the air of an American city with paved streets, street lighting, ornamental plantings in public areas, and a sanitation department that maintained a clean downtown.

Regardless of the claim of first discovery, Juárez became eclipsed by Tijuana because the latter town emerged in the shadow of southern California. That regional stage proved more glamorous and became more recognized than west Texas-southern New Mexico, an almost classic illustration of one geographical situation superseding another. As Alan Weisman (1986, p. 167) observed, "Tijuana grew in spite of itself, trapped in geographic complicity with California."

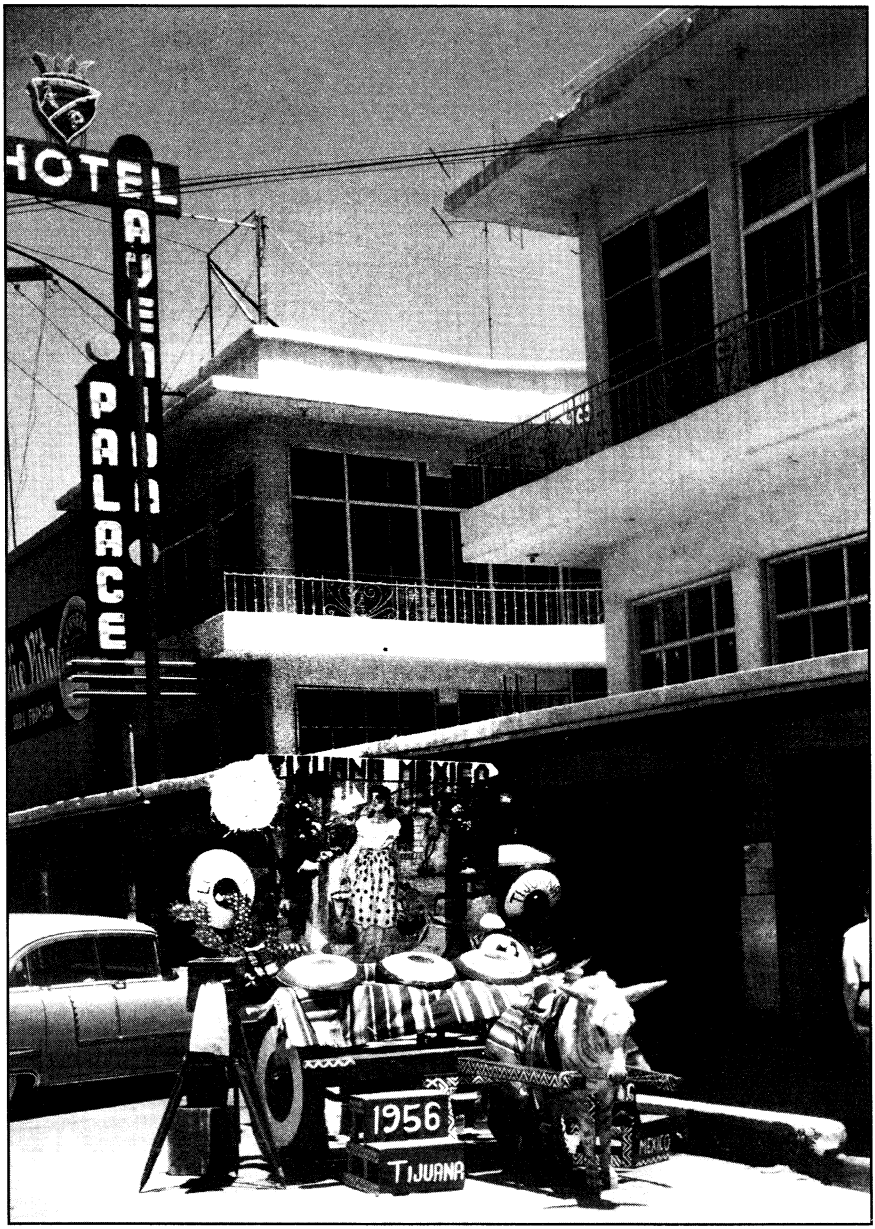

Figure 3—Border town tourist districts display a contrived streetscape and the illusion of a romantic Mexico. Source: Postcard from the author's private collection.

Rancho Tijuana first became a tourist site attracting Californians to its sulfur spring spa.[3] In 1889 when the town was platted, sightseers were drawn to the nascent border settlement, although TJ was then much in the wake of CJ, which was older, larger, and on the tourist railroad path. Tijuana had only two stores and most excursionists were limited to purchases of sombreros, serapes, and leather goods manufactured in the United States.

It took the San Diego-Panama Exposition at Balboa Park in 1915–1916 and the inventiveness of Antonio Elosúa's Feria Tipica to lure large numbers of tourists to the border. At the Tijuana fair, an unofficial complement to the exposition across the border, Californians were given access to gambling via cockfights, horse races, bullfights, and boxing, all of which were then illegal in the state. When Prohibition came in 1919, therefore, the tourist pump had already been primed for the roar of popularity it would produce during the 1920s. For most of Tijuana's golden era, it was American investors and promoters—so-called "border barons"—along with state and municipal officials in Mexico who profited from liquor production and consumption, the cabaret-casino take, and, most significantly perhaps, the sport of kings, thoroughbred horse racing. Tijuana was not a sideshow in this sport. In fact, it became the highlight of the North American winter racing season. Several innovations first appeared here, including the moveable starting gate, the photo finish, Sunday racing, the use of a public address to call races, and the first purse exceeding $100,000.

The enormous popularity of these attractions, however, meant that border towns became playgrounds for the rich, famous, and gambling crowd. Curio craft production, for example, was largely inconsequential during this era. In fact, it may have been the invention of Olvera Street, Los Angeles that proved the spark for a post-Depression craft economy and the romantic and contrived landscape that we have come to associate with the border.

Olvera Street was the brainchild of Christine Sterling, a preservationist and community activist who was unusual in at least two respects for someone of her era: first, she fell in love with Mexican-American culture, not a common following for someone of English ancestry; and second, she apparently found southern California fascinating, a peculiar quality for a native of the San Francisco Bay area (Robinson 1981; Acuña 1996). Perhaps her most colorful civic success was the Plaza Beautiful project, the announced purpose of which was to preserve the plaza as a monument to the founding of Los Angeles and to create an important Latin American trade and social center as well as tourist attraction. Converting the decayed Olvera Street, proximate to the plaza and original Mexican quarter of Los Angeles, into a Latin-American street and a picturesque Mexican market place was the first step in this undertaking (Griswold del Castillo 1979) (Figure 4). The story of Olvera Street is beyond my story, but its creation in 1929 may have been a catalyst to later bor-

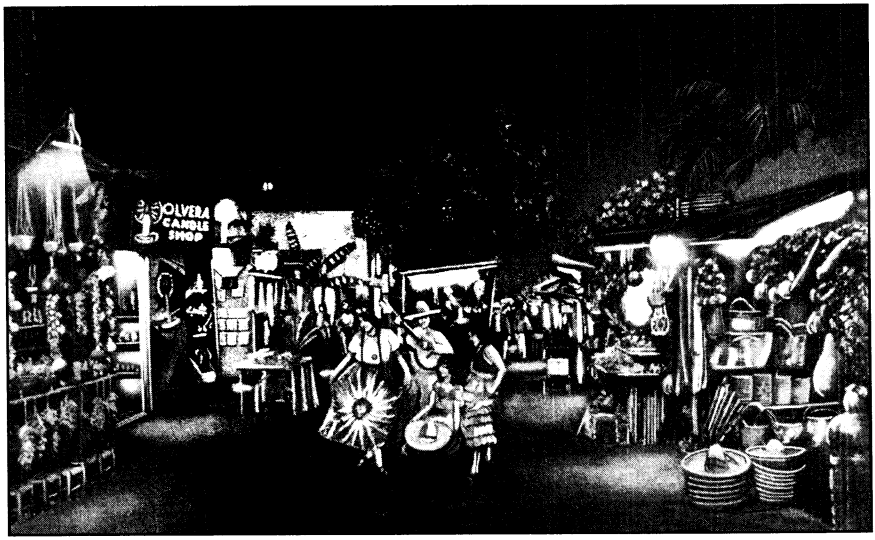

Figure 4—Olvera Street in Los Angeles may have been a model for Mexican border town curio landscapes that emerged after the Depression. Source: Postcard from the author's private collection.

der curio landscape formulas. With municipal authority and the support of Harry Chandler, publisher of the *Los Angeles Times*, as well as the business and political elite of the city's Mexican community, Sterling helped shape a block-long, romantic Mexico-land streetscape in the heart of Los Angeles—then, as now, one of the nation's most Mexican-American cities (Arreola 1997).

Today, Olvera Street is a string of shops lining a single street and stalls that occupy its center. Booths display all the accoutrements of the typical curio spaces now found in Mexican border towns. David Rieff (1991, pp. 71–72) writing in *Los Angeles: Capital of the Third World*, called Olvera Street the original theme park, "perhaps the first such confection in the world," predating Disneyland by 26 years. Sterling's Olvera Street was launched at the outset of the Depression, but it did gain notoriety and eventual tourist appeal in succeeding decades. It may also have been the model for Mexican efforts to revive tourism in the border towns after the repeal of Prohibition in 1933. That revival was especially based on the production of handicrafts, also known as Mexican curios.

Mexican Crafts to the Border

In the midst of the Great Depression, Mexico began to realize the commercial disadvantage accruing to the Mexican border towns. While Prohibition had brought attention and certain revenue from the tourism of the vices (alcohol and gambling), with the repeal of the Volstead Act, border towns lost their monopoly of the former, and in the wake of the central government reforms inaugurated under president Lázaro Cárdenas in 1934, they were denied the latter.

Because border towns were so far from the largest production centers of central Mexico, commercial product distribution had long been dependent on American retailers across the line. This condition meant, of course, that American border towns profited at the expense of Mexican towns that were unable to compete with the variety and volume of goods offered border consumers (Figure 5). Tax revenue

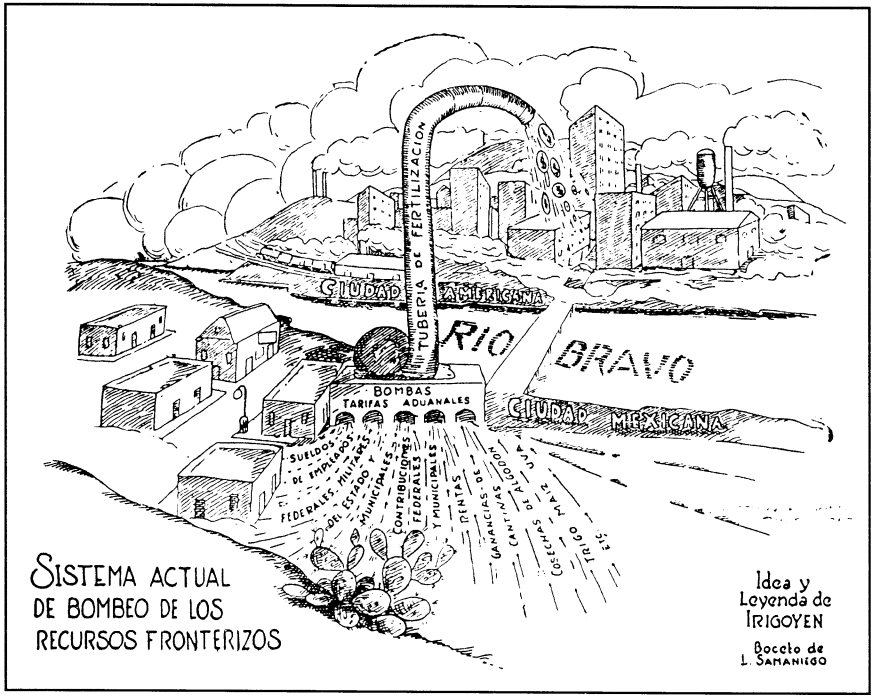

Figure 5—During the Depression Mexicans became alarmed at the flow of money to the American side of the border resulting from a dependence on American commerce. Source: Irigoyen 1935, facing p. 366.

as well as the multiplier effect of money spent in Mexico was siphoned away by American merchants.

Ulises Irigoyen (1935), writing on behalf of the Mexican Geographical and Statistical Society, identified this issue as "*el problema económico de las fronteras mexicanas*." The solution, wrote Irigoyen, was to protect the border towns by creating a free trade zone that would allow the duty-free importation of goods to a free perimeter surrounding border municipios. A prescribed free-trade zone had existed since 1858 for Tamaulipas state across from Texas and for all the border in 1885, but these were hotly contested concessions because they meant that the central government in Mexico City would be denied tariff revenue and the conditions created regional privi-

lege. In 1905 the free trade zone was abolished. With the deflated economy in border towns that followed the Depression, borderlanders and others in Mexico argued once again for a free-trade zone. Although the Mexican states on the Texas border were overlooked in this new appeal, so-called *perímetros libres*—strictly urban free-trade zones—were established for Tijuana and Ensenada in 1933, and this was then extended to Baja California and the Colorado River delta in Sonora in 1939. In the same year, small, duty-free enclaves were created for Nogales and Agua Prieta, Sonora on the Arizona border.

At the same time that some border towns developed import advantages from free-zone status, chambers of commerce in many Mexican border cities organized and promoted tourism through the expansion of the curio trade. Along Avenida Revolución in Tijuana, for example, wooden stalls were replaced in 1938 by substantial block-and-plaster buildings to house curios (Figure 6). After the war, Tijuana

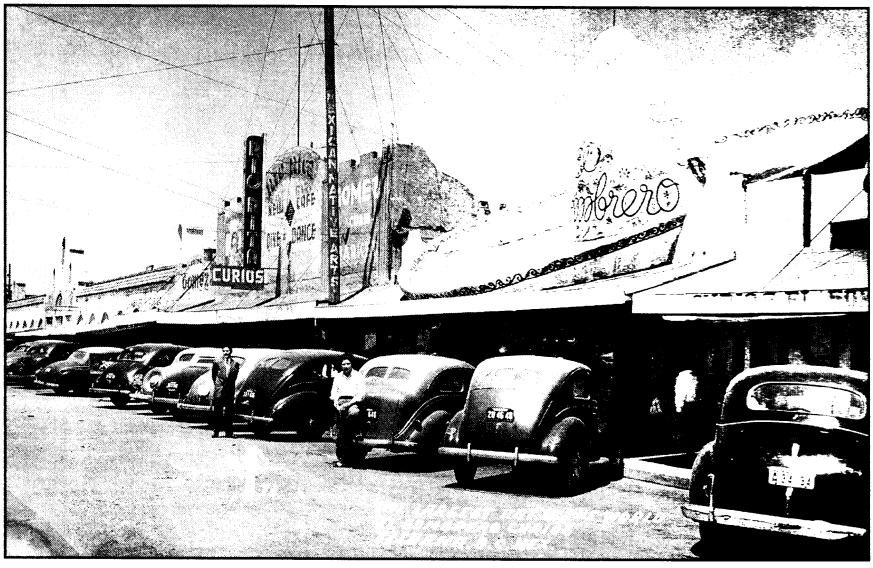

Figure 6—By the 1940s, Avenida Revolución in Tijuana was a popular curio streetscape and signature space of the border. Source: Postcard from the author's private collection.

began to spotlight family tourism where shoppers could purchase Mexican crafts, furniture, and clothing. Bars, while still present, declined relative to souvenir shops that sold arts and crafts (Price 1973, pp. 56–58; Proffitt 1994, p. 202).

In border towns such as Tijuana and Juárez, cottage manufacturing was the production base of this emerging tourist crafts economy (Figure 7). Small, household operations did not register with chambers of commerce, so records of product volume and vendors are rare, but it is likely that this activity gave impetus to what we now call the informal economy of these cities. Cottage crafts included paper and plastic flowers, velvet paintings, leather goods, and piñatas, while wrought-iron works, plaster statuary, and glassware were made in larger shops. In 1968 ethnographer John Price and his students counted 126 curio shops along Avenida Revolución where general Mexican crafts were vended, including serapes, huaraches, sombre-

Figure 7—Cottage manufacturing in Mexican border towns was the base for an emerging tourist crafts economy. Source: Postcard from the author's private collection.

ros, guitars, plaster statuary, paintings on velvet, plastic flowers, etc. In addition, 76 specialty shops that offered jewelry, liquor, leather goods, wrought-iron, and pottery were cataloged (Price 1973, p. 90).

Perhaps border tourism's greatest boost resulted from the creation of PRONAF, the National Frontier Program, in 1961. Antonio J. Bermúdez, a native of Ciudad Juárez and the former director of PRONAF, issued a privately published recounting of this initiative in 1968 under the title *Recovering Our Frontier Market: A Task in the Service of Mexico.* At the heart of the PRONAF experience, said Bermúdez (1968, pp. 26–28), was "the strengthening of our economy by a definite and clear-cut purpose of recovering the important and valuable markets of the border...[by selling] the mystique of preferring and consuming goods—made in Mexico." Three of the 10 stated aims of PRONAF were 1) "to transform the living conditions of the frontier residents by the creation of cultural and recreative attractions, with the idea of stimulating the tourist trade, especially visiting families, a thing which can be brought about only in an atmosphere of morality and order"; 2) "to bring to the frontier zones the whole range of the products of the craftsmanship of our country, excelling as it does in artistic merit"; and 3) "to transform the physical appearance of our frontier towns with a view to giving Mexico a good name since those towns are the points of entry into Mexico and in consequence determine the first impressions gained by our own people returning to their native land as well as by the foreign visitor."

Almost from its inception, the border survived by tourism. When Bermúdez was writing, an estimated 70 percent of Mexico's foreign tourist spending was carried out along the border and only 30 percent in the rest of the country (Bermúdez 1968). The creation of PRONAF and its directive to sell "made in Mexico" gave momentum to folk craft production, transforming it to a commercialized industry for segments of the economically marginalized rural population of the interior. Crafts developed as a major source of employment bolstered by the federal government (Kaplan 1992). The

relatively simple technology and low capitalization required for crafts was also seen as a means of stemming the flow of people from rural to urban areas during the 1960s.

Crafts and popular art works are called *artesanías* in Mexico. The production sites for this industry have historically been a cluster of chiefly southern states including Oaxaca, Guerrero, Michoacán, Puebla, México, and Chiapas (Figure 8). Specific towns and villages have long been identified with particular crafts: Olinalá, Guerrero for lacquerware; Pátzcuaro, Michoacán for decorative wood products and musical instruments; Oaxaca city for textiles, black pottery, and colorful animal figurines; city of Puebla for Talavera pottery and onyx materials; Taxco, Guerrero for silver; Saltillo, Coahuila for leather goods and cotton serapes; and San Pedro Tlaquepaque, Jalisco for a variety of pottery, wood furniture, and miscellaneous craft productions.

The advantage to craft production initiated by PRONAF has continued to expand into the present. In the late 1980s, the Mexican Banco de Comércio Exterior estimated that tourists spent 18 percent of their monies on crafts and popular art works. An estimated 8 percent of the population of Mexico, or 1 in 12 people, was dependent on the production and sale of folk arts and crafts (Kaplan 1992).

In the United States, popular arts and crafts of Mexico have become a recognized market for collectors (McMenamin 1996). There are today some 50 institutions and official agencies that promote popular art in Mexico, attesting to the role of *artesanías* as an economic force in the society, and to the market for national imagery and identity resulting from craft economies and tourism. Perhaps the most significant of these agencies is the Instituto Mexicano de Comércio Exterior (IMCE), created in 1970. This organization studies and creates policy, plans, and programs that target foreign commerce. In 1973, IMCE created the Commission of Craft Houses to coordinate all agencies working with folk art. Some 97 percent of Mexican folk

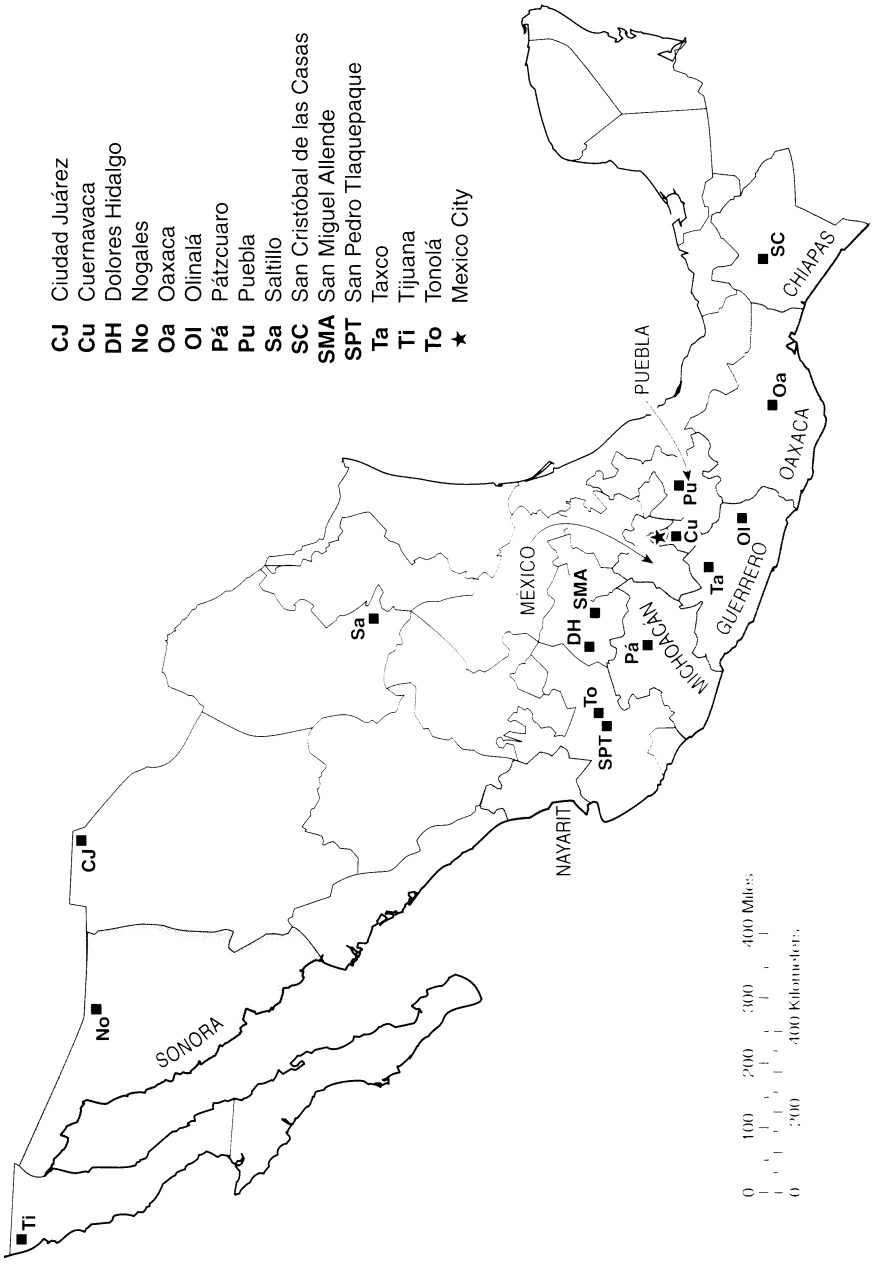

Figure 8—Selected artisan production locations in Mexico. Sources: Noble 1998; Kaplan 1992; Sayer 1990; Ross 1952; Brenner 1932.

art exports are destined for the United States, chiefly clothing, jewelry, musical instruments, glassware, and pottery (Kaplan 1992).

Thus, many of the same crafts produced for border tourism and destined for the curio shops of Tijuana, Nogales, Ciudad Juárez, and Nuevo Laredo are also exported directly to American markets. In a sense, this is analogous to the Mexican vogue of a generation earlier where American artists of the 1920s gave legitimacy to Mexico travel and its art for North American tourists. Now, we have Mexican border town tourist crafts giving legitimacy to the importation of the same products for the North American consuming public. No need to visit Mexico or the border, the products come to you and are available in all manner of retail vending found in toney Santa Fe arts shops, pseudo-Tlaquepaque retail spaces in Sedona, and faux border-town environments like El Mercado in San Antonio.

Clearly, North Americans want their Mexico crafts, and increasingly, we want them free of the Mexico experience. But how has all this process impacted the curio landscape of the Mexican border town? Consider Nogales, Sonora.

The Curio Landscapes of Nogales

The Sonoran Economic Development Corporation reported that some 560,000 tourists visited Sonora from Arizona in 1990, generating more than $36 million (U.S.), and that most—some 58 percent—of these visitors to Sonora entered via Nogales.[4] To most North American visitors to the border, Nogales, Sonora is a shopping destination, by interstate highway 3 hours from Phoenix and less than 1 hour from Tucson (Arreola and Madsen 1999). A recent guidebook called the town one of the cleanest and safest on the Mexican border (Cahill 1987).

In a story about "Nogales, the Picturesque" subtitled "A Peep through One of the Doorways to Mexico" written in 1914, it was said that the central point of interest for the tourist who visits the town is the public market (Scott 1914). There, under the direction of

Chinese merchants, one might purchase almost anything in the line of vegetables and provisions. Study of Sanborn Fire Insurance maps for Nogales, Sonora in 1890 and 1917 corroborate the absence of anything we today might consider a tourist function (Sanborn-Perris 1890; Sanborn 1917).

By the early 1920s, Nogales, like other border towns, was an attraction to Prohibition refugees who sought entertainment in Mexico's "wet palaces." Nevertheless, the town boasted of some 20 up-to-date cafes and restaurants, many with dance floors and orchestras during lunch and dinner hours (Nogales 1927). Nogales, it was said, affords unusually pleasant entertainment in a refined atmosphere, where wonderful meals are served and where one can order with legal disregard for the Volstead Act. Nogales was naughty but nice.

Nogales, Sonora's tourist reputation was jump started in 1927 when it became the northern Mexico terminal of the Southern Pacific railroad, linking San Francisco and Mexico City via Guadalajara where the Southern Pacific rails connected to the Mexican national lines (Terry 1935, fold out map facing p. 72). This meant West Coast travelers could transit directly to Nogales and central Mexico rather than routing through El Paso-Ciudad Juárez. In 1950, the Mexico West Coast highway was finally paved to facilitate produce distribution from Sinaloa via Nogales, and this extended to Mexico City in 1954 (Sokota 1990–91). Nogales thus became one of a select few border locales with paved highway access to the interior of Mexico. This situation of access combined with the border town's appeal during Prohibition meant Nogales would become one of the Mexican border's major transit points, in the same league with Juárez and Nuevo Laredo where rail and paved road gateways had existed since the 1930s (*Mexico en Cifras 1934*, p. 76). In 1950 as well the 10-story Marcos de Niza Hotel opened in Nogales, Sonora, celebrating the increase in tourist motor traffic through this port of entry. Traffic passing through Nogales, Sonora to Mexico's interior climbed from 38,000 persons in 1954 to 73,000 persons in 1959 (Stone 1963).

At ground level, Nogales' tourist landscape was also shifting. Since Prohibition, Calle Elías, immediately south and literally across the street from Morley Avenue and downtown Nogales, Arizona, had been the principal visitor district of the Mexican border town (Figure 9). Here were the city's premier restaurants and, of course, bars and night clubs such as La Caverna and the Green Club. With the repeal of Prohibition, Calle Elías became the border town's first tourist strip. Curio shops such as El Arte Mexicano, Antigua Casa Reyes, and Chozas Gift Shop, which boasted that it distributed William Spratling's silver jewelry from Taxco, were all located within 3 blocks of the Morley-Elías gate (Figure 10). A 1935 guidebook (Terry

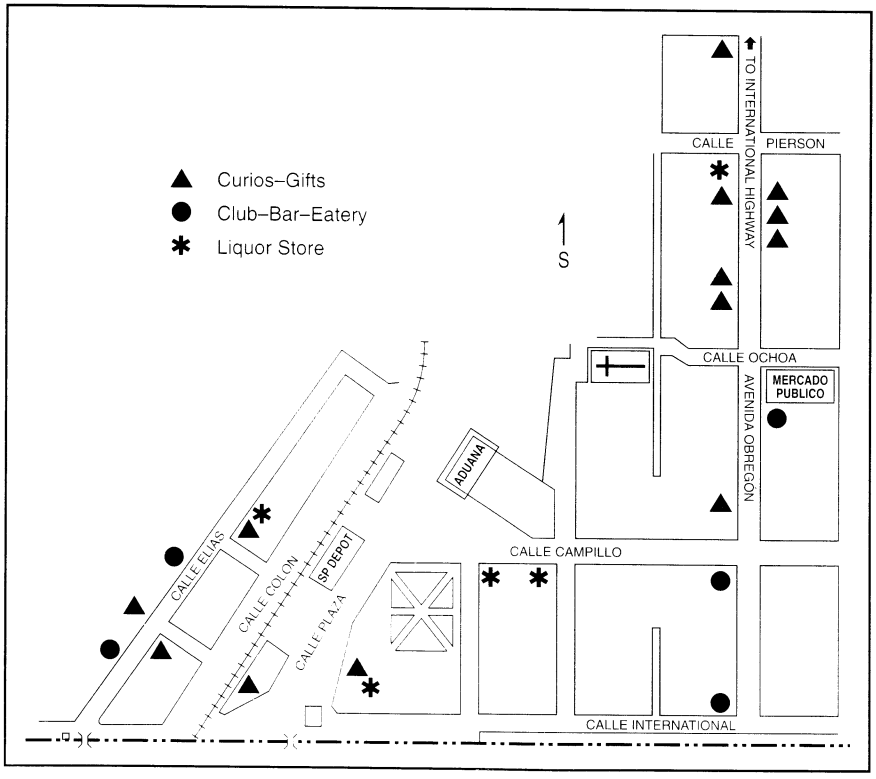

Figure 9—Tourist districts of Nogales, Sonora, circa 1950. Source: *City of Nogales, Old Mexico, Tourist Guide.*

Figure 10—Calle Elías, Nogales, Sonora's first tourist street. Source: Postcard from the author's private collection.

1935, p. 89) declared Nogales, Sonora "a uniquely attractive, hustling, progressive city...bi-lingual...friendly and extraordinarily pleasant...a model American city, and the ineradicable charm of a Spanish *ciudad*."

After the second world war and especially with the new emphasis on auto tourism, the curio district of Nogales shifted west to the Plaza Street gate, Calle Campillo, and eventually to Avenida Obregón (Figure 9). Curio stores, liquor outlets, and bars became the mainstay of this new landscape, but gift stores that offered perfumes and silver were also emerging (Figure 11). A total of 16 shops vending these goods became part of a new tourist landscape anchored by Obregón, which only a decade before had been a chiefly commercial street servicing nearby residential *colonias*.

When PRONAF was launched in 1961, its director Antonio J. Bermúdez persuaded then Mexican president Adolfo López Mateos to invest in the Sonoran border town. Bermúdez demonstrated that

Figure 11—Silver Alley (Calle Ochoa) was a popular side street along Avenida Obregón, Nogales, Sonora's second tourist street. Source: Postcard from the author's private collection.

Nogales residents assumed the second-highest per-capita purchasing of foreign goods among all Mexican border towns, behind only Tijuana but exceeding even Ciudad Juárez (Bermúdez 1968). Bermúdez envisioned a marked alteration of the tourist function of Nogales so that tourist revenue might flow south of the border to offset the hemorrhage of pesos north. If Nogales, Sonorans spent pesos in the shops of Nogales, Arizona, then reciprocity of tourist dollars collected along Obregón was retail parity.

By 1965, Nogales had received from the Mexican federal government some 60 million pesos, more than Tijuana, to carry out the necessary physical transformation that would make the border town worthy of tourist appeal (Bermúdez 1968). The Plaza Street entrance was radically recreated (Figure 12). The town's historic plaza—Trece de Julio—was built over; a gigantic double-winged auto canopy was positioned on the Mexican side of the main crossing; and new immigration, customs, and other public facilities were installed (Figure 13). Boulevards, especially Avenidas López Mateos, Sonora, and

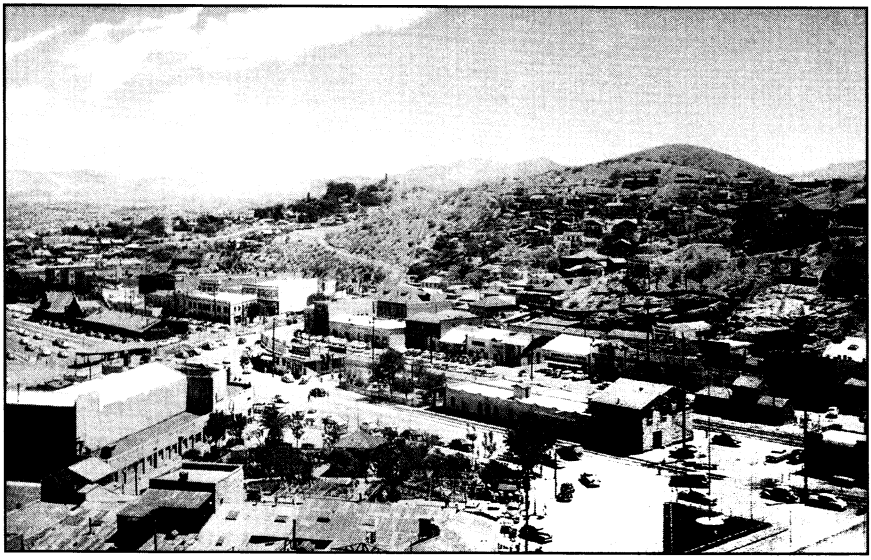

Figure 12—Nogales, Sonora's Plaza Street gate circa 1950s. Source: Postcard from the author's private collection.

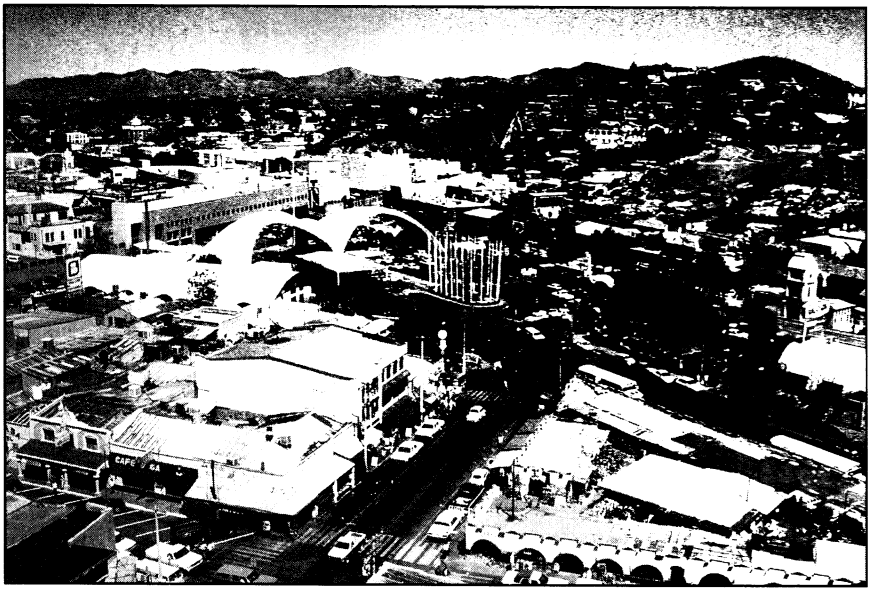

Figure 13—The Plaza Street gate was transformed by PRONAF redevelopment during the 1960s. Photo by author, 1998.

Ruiz Cortines, were constructed parallel to the railroad track to relieve auto congestion that had nearly crippled Obregón, then the city's chief arterial leading south of Nogales to the Mexican interior.

A 1967 tourist guide for Nogales, Sonora identified the heart of the border town tourist district as a roughly 20-block area extending east-west between Calle Elías and Avenida Obregón and north-south between International Street and Pierson Street (Harvill 1967). Today this remains the core of the Nogales tourist world. A 1998 survey counted nearly 400 businesses in the central business district of Nogales, Sonora, and some 78 establishments were stand-alone curio stores and gift shops (Arreola 1998). This total included nine curio store malls or shopping centers that alone contained 108 independent stalls with separate owner-operators. Furthermore, some 106 sidewalk curio vendors were counted in the tourist district, along with some 13 ambulatory curio vendors. This total did not include eateries, jewelry and drug stores, lodgings, etc. which can also appeal to tourists.

A tourist who first visited Nogales in 1947 commented a half-century later that prices had escalated in 50 years, but the ambiance was still the same: exotic, disreputable, foreign yet familiar (*Arizona Daily Star*, November 23, 1997). While Nogales, Sonora is accessible to Arizonans year round, it is especially active during the winter tourist season, October through May, when thousands of snowbirds seek temporary residence in southern Arizona. The Mexican state tourism office in Nogales, Sonora declares that 700,000 tourists visit the border town each year, generating a conservative spending estimate of $7 million (U.S.) (*Arizona Republic*, March 24, 1998). Nogales, Sonora is not only the major Mexican border town on the Arizona line, but it is one of the most successful tourist destinations on the entire Mexico-U.S. international boundary.

The Nogales curio landscape is a pedestrian path marked by arrows that lead one across the border, through a rotating metal-barred gate, past a loiter space filled with standing customs officials, squat-

ted begging street Marias, and assorted sidewalk vendors. Veering right along Calle Campillo, the first block in from the gate, one feels the first vocal blast of curio shop barkers in front of stores pressing you to come in and "take a look." Two blocks west you jog left and navigate along either side of a 3-block-long main street, the Revolución of Nogales, Avenida Obregón. Dipping in and out of curio stores along the sidewalk as well as in dense mini-malls and adjoining alleys, one discovers shops marked by signature cornucopic product displays of all things imaginable and some unimaginable.

This, then, is the curio landscape, exotic yet familiar, raucous but safe (Figure 14). This is the Mexico we have come to see, the Mexico-land of our imagination and the landscape that offers North Americans one of their most coveted and sacred rights—the freedom to shop. It is a landscape that has not only shaped our view of a people, it has created an object fixation as a substitute for cultural understanding.

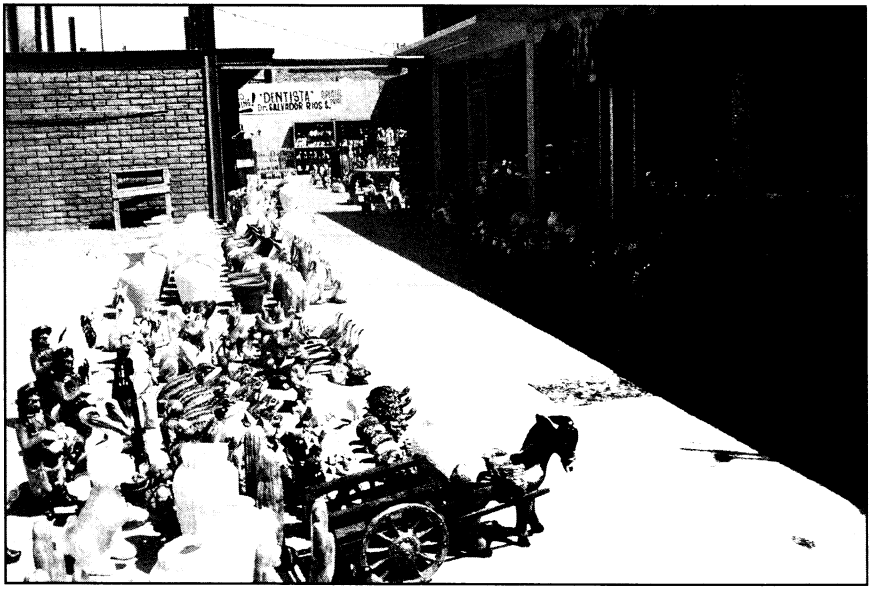

Figure 14—Curio landscape, San Luis Río Colorado, Sonora. Photo by author, 1992.

It is just across the street, visible through the tortilla curtain, far enough from home to be titillating, but not so far that we can't scurry back to the security of our pure-water-and-landscape tidiness. In 1875, Gilbert Haven, an American visitor to Mexico, wrote that "the nearest things are often the farthest off, the farthest off the nearest." This is true of places as well as of peoples. More than a century later, *New York Times* correspondent Alan Riding (1985) wrote about the Mexicans and called them our *Distant Neighbors*. And in some ways, perhaps many ways, so they remain.

The border-town curio landscape has been shaped in part by a Mexican desire to profit from a frontier predicament, as well from a *norteamericano* need to translate Mexico into a commodity that is acceptable to a market-driven, consumer-conscious culture. Yet, the curious caricature we have about Mexico and Mexicans may say more about our own perversions. One day we will have to awaken from this sleep, this illusion of a Mexico as nothing more than entertainment landscape. Should we persist in our fantasy view, we may come to find former president Porfirio Díaz's famous dictum, in reverse, written in some future American history book: Poor United States, so close to God and so far from Mexico.

Iconology of Landscape

My story has explored Mexico, its early twentieth-century allure from fairs to expatriate artists, and how these experiences have figured in the birth of a Mexican arts and crafts industry which, ultimately, helped shape a border-town curio landscape. My interest in this subject reveals my fascination with iconology. That term is, perhaps, less familiar to geographers than its sister iconography. The latter has been the focus of considerable affection by some nouveau geographers, and I must confess that I myself have been curious about its utility in my own studies.

In the early 1980s, I investigated the geography of Chicano murals, an outdoor art form that became a political instrument and

symbolic signature for an American urban ethnic population (Arreola 1984). What I was chiefly concerned with then was the iconography of the murals, their message and meaning as a kind of barrio language writ large on building surfaces by a subgroup without written history. While many Chicano historians over the past decade-and-a-half have filled in the blank pages of that unwritten past, I am comforted that my small contribution, undiscovered by art scholars, pointed out how reading the iconography of the murals as a text allowed one to see how a Chicano sense of place emerged out of the political shout of the art. Mural art evolved from ethnic-nationalist gesture to declaration about place and the familiar turf of the barrio. Chicano mural art thus became a barometer not only of changing political ideology, but also recognition about the landscape of home.

The curio landscape story, by comparison, is chiefly an iconology, an historical interpretation of images and their contextual significance. I have tried to show the process of how a Mexican curio landscape came to be. This, I believe, has value because we who explore the medium and ideology of landscapes need to understand how a landscape code emerges, and especially we need explanation of this process in a social and geographical context.

My interpretation does not, however, consider or evaluate with any precision the iconography of the Mexican curio landscape. That is a much more challenging exercise because it requires us to come to terms with the way places communicate as social constructs. Architect Robert Venturi (cited in Eco 1986, p. 40) once called Las Vegas a "message city, entirely made up of signs, not a city like others, which communicate in order to function, but rather a city that functions in order to communicate."

I see our urban landscapes becoming more like the message cities described by Venturi. To understand their deeper meaning we will need to become more sensitive to their iconography and their iconology. The border town curio landscape is part of a code Mexicans construct materially and we construct mentally in an effort to

accept Mexico in America. *Corona* beer, produced in Mexico City, recently surpassed *Heineken*, made in Amsterdam, as our leading imported beer. *Taco Bell* with all its tacky and pejorative innuendo is just the beginning. La Placita in west Phoenix may, in fact, be a sign of the future. A totally themed, totally messaged Mexican landscape, across the street and around the corner, is coming to a neighborhood near you, any day now.

Dedication

To the memory of James Jerome Parsons, past president of the Association of Pacific Coast Geographers.

Endnotes

[1]For Anita Brenner, see, for example, her more popular books such as *Idols Behind Altars* (1929), *Your Mexican Holiday* (1932) and two critical assessments of her writings and influence: Richard Woods, "Anita Brenner: Cultural Mediator of Mexico," *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture* 9 (1990): 209–222, and Susannah Joel Glusker, *Anita Brenner: A Mind of Her Own* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998).

[2]The single most comprehensive English-language historical account of Ciudad Juárez is Oscar J. Martínez, *Border Boom Town: Ciudad Juárez since 1848* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1978).

[3]Historical references in this section largely are taken from John A. Price, *Tijuana: Urbanization in a Border Culture* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1973) and T. D. Proffitt, III, *Tijuana: The History of a Mexican Metropolis* (San Diego: San Diego State University Press, 1994).

[4]Tourism figures are from *Investment Frontiers*, Newsletter of the Economic Development Corporation for the State of Sonora, Mexico, Vol. 3(2), 1991, p. 1, and *Strategic Economic Development Vision for the Arizona-Sonora Region: Tourism* (Phoenix: Comisión Sonora-Arizona and Arizona-Mexico Commission, 1993).

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