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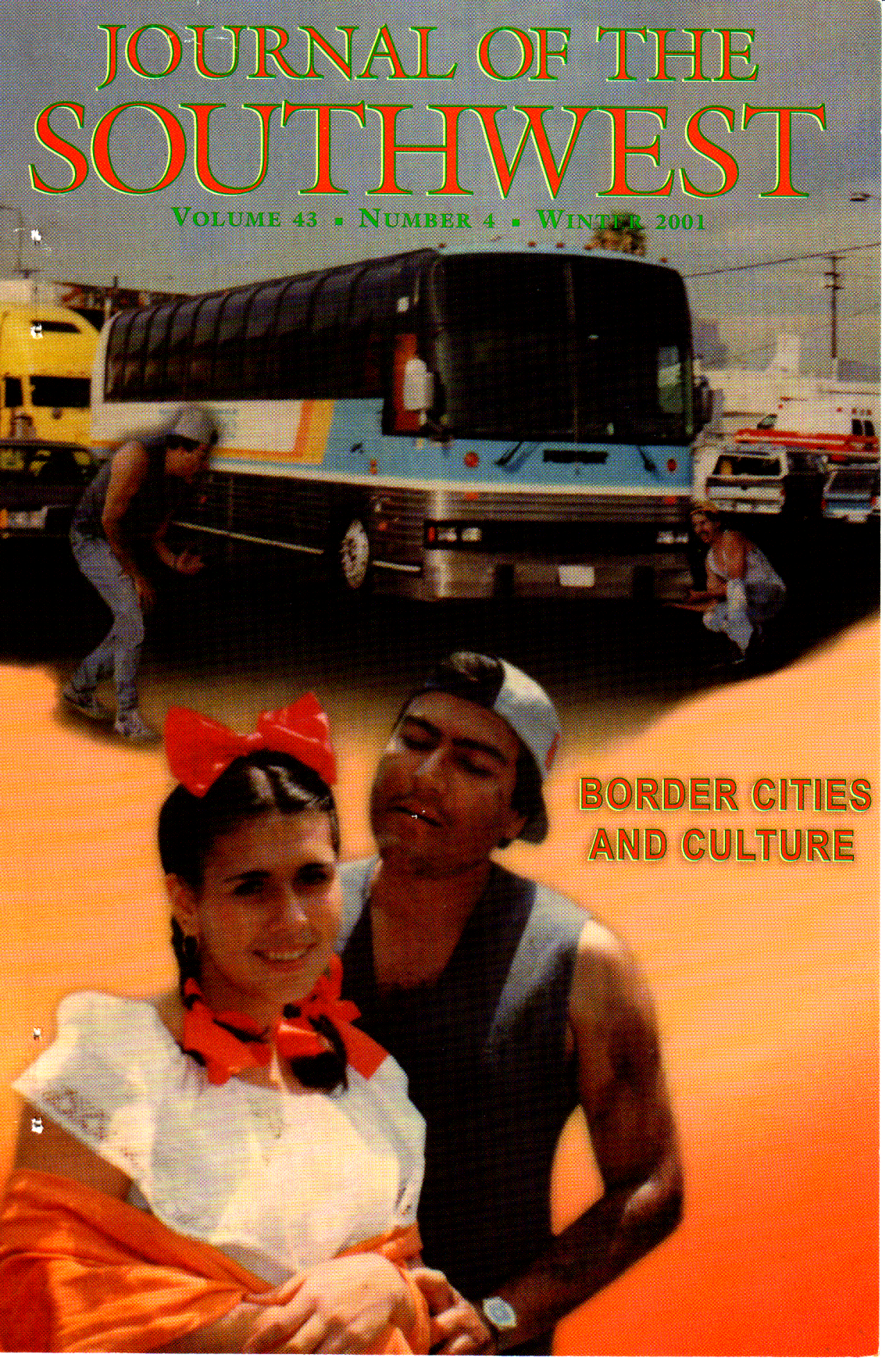

BORDER CITIES AND CULTURE

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La Cerca y Las Garitas de Ambos Nogales: A Postcard Landscape Exploration

DANIEL D. ARREOLA

Charting the cultural geography of Mexican border cities is an ongoing project. Early writings laid a foundation for understanding spatial patterns and place characteristics of these cities (Herzog 1990; Arreola and Curtis 1993; Méndez Sáinz 1993). Further topical explorations have expanded this vision (Curtis 1993, 1995; Arreola 1996, 1999; Herzog 1999). Missing from the literature, however, is any effort to assess landscape change through time at a single border locale. This essay explores that possibility through the use of postcard imagery, a special source of visual evidence.

Unlike conventional photographic imagery about place that one might excavate from an archive, postcards, as mass commercial products, combine accessibility with visual repetition. Whereas archival photography can reveal an image of a city that is like a window to a particular time and place, repeat inspection of the same view at another time is not typically possible (Hales 1984). A diachronic, or time-series, record is therefore difficult to reconstruct from archival imagery. This problem is remedied somewhat by the strategy and application of repeat photography and by the transcription and comparison of archival photographs for selected cities (Foote 1985). In the case of Mexican border cities, however, no single historical repository of photo images has been assembled, although a portfolio of 1964 Tijuana has recently been published (Ganster 2000). No known repeat photography project is in progress.

In contrast to archival photographs, postcard views of a townscape allow images to be evaluated serially because postcard photographers typically were attracted to similar view sites, which were documented repeatedly. Over several decades, postcard views of the same landscape can be used to create a diagnostic visual interpretation of place.

The history of postcards is more recent than that of photography (Newhall 1982), and picture postcards as view cards first evolved in

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Europe during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Although many countries restricted early postcard circulation to domestic mail, Germany, Switzerland, and Austria encouraged international postcard circulation with *Gruss aus*, or "greetings from," cards. These postcards depicted local views and scenes in art nouveau style on the borders of the front, or message, side of the cards; the back was by law reserved for the mailing address only (Staff 1966). After 1902 in Europe and 1907 in the United States, divided-back postcards appeared, allowing for a message and the mailing address on the back of the card while the front was entirely devoted to a view.

During the early postcard era in the United States, two Chicago-based companies came to dominate commercial production, Detroit Publishing Company and Curt Teich. Detroit Publishing is known to have printed postcards from seventeen thousand different images between 1895 and 1935 (Stechschulte 1994). By the 1910s, Curt Teich was selling some 150 million postcards annually, mostly view cards of scenes in the United States. During the 1930s and 1940s, Curt Teich was the most prolific publisher of linen postcards, so-called because the front view simulates a linen texture (Miller and Miller 1976). In Mexico, early postcard printers included the Sonora News Service, founded and operated by American photographer C. B. Waite (Montellano 1994). Perhaps the largest single Mexican producer of postcards from the 1930s to the 1950s was México Fotográfico, a Mexico City company whose real photo cards recorded scenes in many border towns as well as across the country.

While corporate postcard publishers dominated national production, independent photographic postcard producers operated in towns and cities across the country and in Mexico (Fernández Tejedo 1994). Eastman Kodak Company, for example, marketed postcard-size photographic paper that could be used to print directly from a negative, and this innovation was quickly copied by other companies, enabling amateur photographers and independent printers to begin producing postcards (Morgan and Brown 1981). Brownsville, Texas, photographer Robert Runyon (1909–1968) is an example of an independent borderlands postcard entrepreneur (Samponaro and Vanderwood 1992). A local professional photographer, Runyon produced his own postcards and also contracted companies to convert his photos to postcards. He then made arrangements with local drug and cigar stores and other small retailers to sell his cards. In addition, regional distributors such as

Gulf Coast News and Hotel Company, which had curio stores in San Antonio and Houston, bought several thousand of Runyon's postcards, which included landmark scenes from Matamoros, Mexico, across from Brownsville, especially his always-popular bullfight views. Runyon and his brother-in-law, José Medrano Longoria, opened a curio store on the plaza in Matamoros in 1925, and this, too, became a strategic outlet for his postcards until they sold the business in 1939.

Postcards provided popular imagery about places before personal cameras and television became widely available. Ironically, postcard photographers sought the unique in the landscapes they documented, but typically they tended to capture the ordinary (Jakle 1982). Representations of the ordinary or vernacular landscape gives postcard imagery great utility in historical geographic research. Their repetitive renderings of local scenes makes them an excellent source of historic views about a place, especially if that place was popularly photographed over time and if the postcard images are compared serially by a researcher.

Mexican border-town landscapes have appeared in postcard images since the 1890s, yet there is great variability in the coverage of particular towns. If my private collection is any indication, almost half of all border-town postcards are scenes of Ciudad Juárez and Tijuana, the two largest and most famous border cities. Other popular border towns that have moderate postcard coverage include regional tourist destinations such as Nuevo Laredo, Matamoros, and Reynosa on the Texas border, and Mexicali on the California boundary, but the number of cards representative of these places is decidedly inferior to those picturing Ciudad Juárez and Tijuana. Small towns such as Tecate, Naco, and Ojinaga are poorly represented in postcards.[1]

Ambos Nogales

Nogales, Sonora, is across the border from Nogales, Arizona, and together the towns are known as Ambos Nogales. My postcard collection of Nogales, Sonora, includes 290 individual images. This makes the town the third most popularly rendered border location in postcards after Ciudad Juárez and Tijuana. This is curious given the apparent relationship between the size of a town and its tourist potential (and, therefore, potential postcard popularity). Based on its size Nogales should not be such a popularly depicted border town. Before 1980,

Nogales, Sonora, had fewer than 70,000 people and thus was considered a medium-sized border town (Arreola and Curtis 1993, table 2.2). Nogales, nevertheless, has long competed as a tourist destination because of its historic advantage on the Arizona boundary, its hinterland access to nearby Tucson and Phoenix, its tradition of promotional effort, and media exposure (Arreola and Madsen 1998; see figure 1). No less important has been the town's status as a curio mecca (Arreola 1999).

Nogales, Sonora, and Nogales, Arizona, were first settled in 1880. By 1882, a railroad linking Guaymas, Sonora, on the Gulf of California with Benson, Arizona, across the international boundary created Ambos Nogales. The earliest town plat suggests the peculiar asymmetrical morphology of the towns, which straddle the railroad corridor as well as the boundary (see figure 2). The irregular blocks to the east represent the nucleus of pre-railroad settlement in the narrow pass, whereas the blocks to the west show a rigid perpendicular alignment to the border. The boundary follows International Street (Calle Camou), yet Nogales, Arizona, hugs tight to the line east of the railroad—lending the city its early nickname of Line City—while Mexican Nogales is set back from the boundary. To the west, blocks on either side of the border are equally set back.

Table 1 categorizes postcards of Nogales by the dominant location depicted in the view. The premier tourist street of the city, Avenida Obregón, is the second most popular depiction, and Calle Campillo, a secondary tourist street that leads to Obregón, has fifteen images. Calle Elías, ranking just above Calle Campillo, was the border town's first tourist street until the 1940s. The celebrated bar and eatery La Caverna was situated on Calle Elías, and combined these two locations rival gate crossings as the most popular Nogales postcard view. There are an unusually high number of panoramas, accounted for by the fact that Nogales is spread out along a narrow pass creating spectacular vistas. Since the 1940s, when the population began to swell through inmigration (Arreola and Curtis 1993, fig. 2.3), housing has pushed up and over these steep hills. Public buildings and monuments combine for a significant postcard category in part because Nogales has been from its founding a railroad gateway and official customshouse (*aduana*) location. The old aduana built in 1894 and razed in 1963 was a neoclassical architectural landmark of the border and the spotlight of many postcard views.

Table 1. Nogales Postcards by View Depicted

View	Number of Images
Gate crossings	38
Avenida Obregón	29
Panoramas	27
Public buildings and monuments	25
Fence line	24
Miscellaneous	21
La Caverna	20
Plazas	20
Calle Elías	20
Calle Campillo	15
Bullfights	12
Residential areas	11
Total	**262**

Source: Author's postcard archive.

Garitas, or gate crossings, are, however, the most popular postcard views; combined with views of the famous border fence, they total almost one-quarter of all Nogales postcard depictions (see table 1). In the discussion that follows, I use only these postcard image categories to narrate landscape change along the boundary. The fence line, the Morley-Elías gate, and the main gate are the principal view sites assessed. Twenty-two postcards are arranged topically and mostly chronologically, and a separate caption interprets each postcard image or set of images. Information other than landscape description presented in the figure captions is drawn from standard histories and writings about the towns (Rochlin and Rochlin 1976; Ready 1980; Flores García 1987; Sokota 1990–91; Tinker Salas 1997) and from Sanborn fire insurance maps for 1890, 1893, and 1917.

The first fence dividing a Mexican from an American border town was erected at Nogales. Gate crossings evolved as official ports of entry along a declared buffer zone between the Sonora and Arizona towns. These landscapes became photographed as postcard views when Ambos Nogales began being promoted as a tourist destination. The fence line and gate crossings were fixed features of border-town identity by the early twentieth century.

For almost a century, postcards have faithfully recorded changes in landscape features along the boundary separating Ambos Nogales. Table 2 illustrates the frequency of borderline views by era. The fence-line view of the two towns looking west from Chureas Hill is perhaps the dominant postcard fix for Ambos Nogales, a landscape consistently rendered by postcard photographers of each generation. The Morley-Elías gate crossing was a popular depiction early in the century, especially during Prohibition (1919–1933), when Americans could easily cross the street to bars along Calle Elías. This gate survived as a postcard image until 1960, but from the 1940s on, this landscape lost photographic allure as tourists and curio seekers increasingly opted for the main gate crossing and its proximity to Calle Campillo and Avenida Obregón, the premier tourist districts in the postwar period. This is demonstrated quite dramatically by the large number of postcard views of the main gate crossing during the 1950–1969 era, as well by the substantial number of depictions of this landscape during the 1930s and 1940s.

Table 2. Frequency of Nogales Border Postcard Views by Era

View	1910–1929	1930–1949	1950–1969	1970–1995
Fence line	10	6	6	2
Morley-Elías Gate	3	3	2	0
Main gate	2	7	11	8
Other gates	2	0	0	0

Source: Author's postcard archive

Table 2 also suggests that postcards no longer dominate as a visual medium for recording Ambos Nogales. Only two images of the fence line and eight of the main gate are available for the quarter century from 1970 to 1995. This is remarkable because Nogales, Sonora, is today a more popular tourist destination than perhaps it has ever been, attracting some 700,000 visitors each year (*Arizona Daily Star* 1997; *Arizona Republic* 1998). Tourists, however, have changed their visiting habits, making chiefly day-tripping excursions rather than overnight visits. The combination of shorter, more frequent visits with a general decline in traditional forms of correspondence like postcards means that postcard views have less credibility for travelers than they did in the past. Besides, many of the excursionists to Ambos Nogales today bring

their own cameras and snap away at a myriad of views to capture their own images.

Still, picture postcards remain an important form of visual evidence for understanding and reconstructing place. These images are especially valuable for our appreciation of the towns of the Mexican-American border because other photographic sources are generally lacking or inaccessible to the researcher. A postcard archive of Mexican border cities can prove a useful lens through which one might view these evolving communities. ✣

Note

1. My postcard archive consists of some 2,200 individual postcards of Mexican border towns. Approximately 600 postcards are of Ciudad Juárez and 400 are of Tijuana. There are about 160 postcards of Nuevo Laredo, 152 of Matamoros, 140 of Mexicali, and 120 of Reynosa. Other towns such as Agua Prieta, Ciudad Acuña, and Piedras Negras account for between 65 and 95 postcards. The archive contains less than 20 postcards for the following Mexican border towns: Tecate, San Luis Río Colorado, Sonoita, Naco, Palomas, Ojinaga, Miguel Alemán, and Camargo.

photos

Figure 1. Between 1927 and 1929, Nogales was advertised regularly in U. S. national magazines as a tourist destination. Note the reluctance to use the word Mexican, which is substituted for by the ethnic referent Spanish. (Collier's, The National Weekly, *January 28, 1928, p. 42.)*

Figure 2. Railroad engineers Bonillas and Herbert drafted this plat of Ambos Nogales in 1884. The railroad ran between the older, pre-railroad settlement aligned diagonal to the boundary at the bottom of the map and the grid of blocks arranged perpendicular to the border west of the tracks. The first railroad depot actually straddled the border. (After reproduction in Silvia Raquel Flores García, Nogales: un siglo en la historia, 1987, p. 32.)

NOGALES

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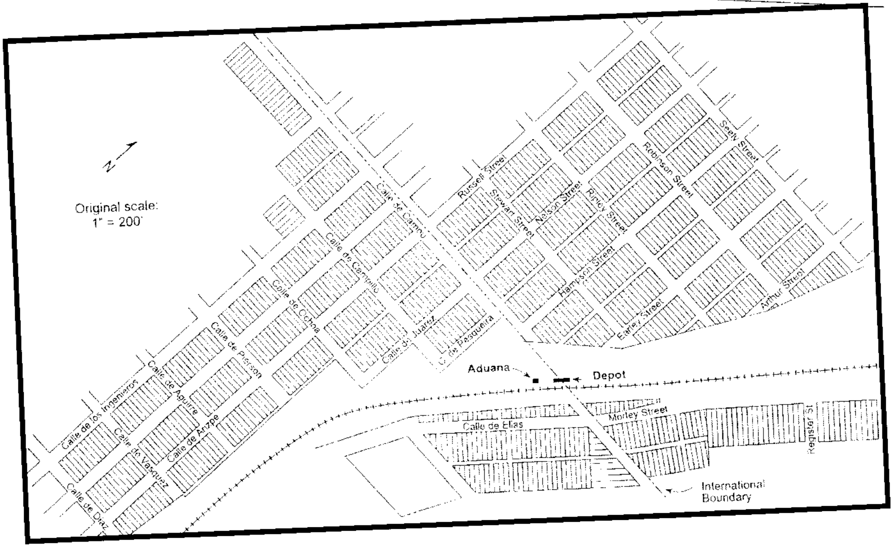

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