

# THE BATH RIOTS

By RENÉ KLADZYK

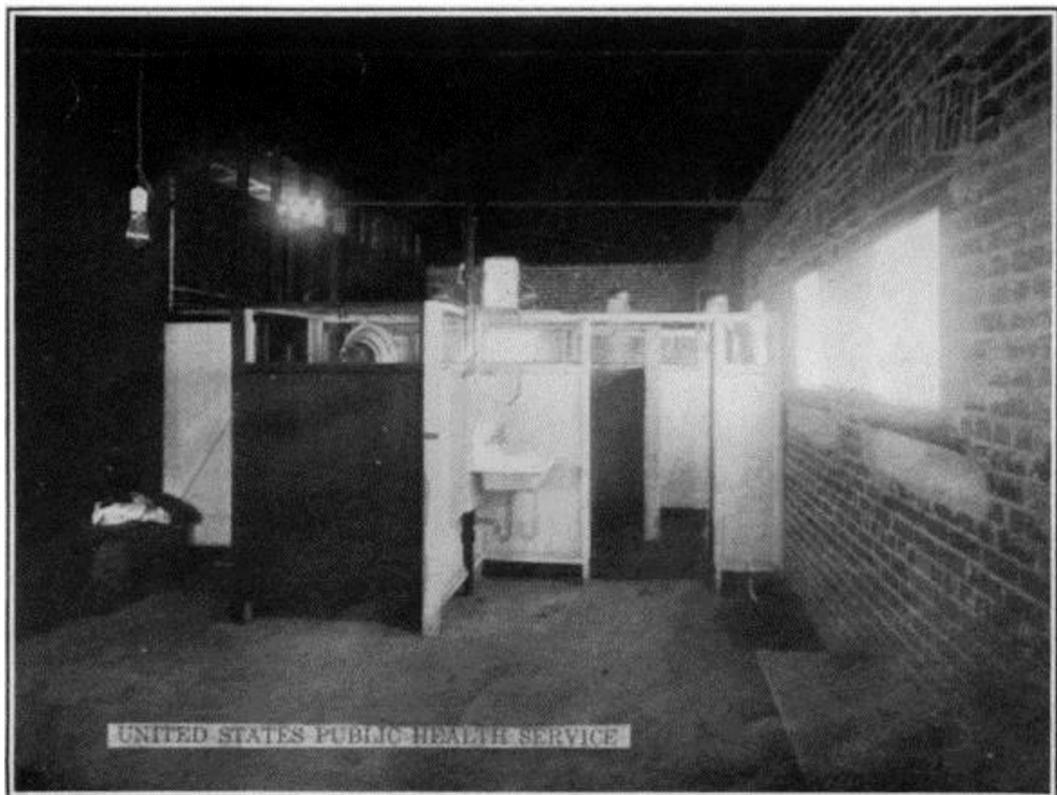
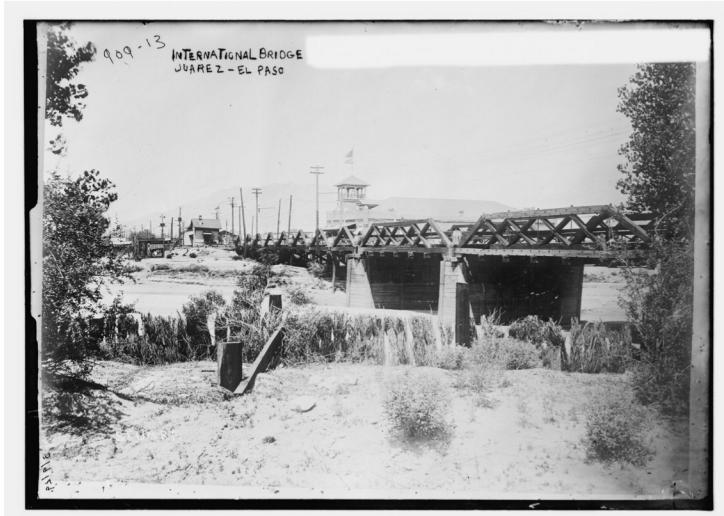


FIG. 4.—BATHS ON WOMEN'S SIDE OF PLANT, LOOKING FROM UNDRESSING ROOM.

At 7:30 a.m. on January 28, 1917, Carmelita Torres sat aboard a streetcar crossing the Santa Fe Bridge from downtown Juárez to downtown El Paso. It's a short trip, the two cities hug each other—they used to be one city before the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo split them apart back in 1848. So for Carmelita Torres, a commute across the international border would usually take five or 10 minutes, depending on that day's rush of domestic workers and factory laborers headed into El Paso. On a typical morning, Torres would walk to downtown Juárez from her home. She'd present her pass and hop on the cross-border trolley. She'd get off in El Paso and squeeze through vendors, walking to the house she cleaned. If she had time to spare, she might stop by the pond in San Jacinto Plaza to see how the alligators who lived there were faring in the weather (Don Porfirio the alligator had died just a couple years earlier from the winter cold). On a typical morning, Torres and all the other border crossers would have enjoyed relative freedom and ease as they moved from Mexico into the United States.



*One of the international bridges between Juárez and El Paso, early 20th century.  
(Library of Congress, Prints  
and Photographs Division)*

On January 28, 1917, things went very differently for Torres. She sat aboard the trolley as it passed over the Rio Grande, but it jolted to a stop before entering El Paso. U.S. immigration officials then ordered everyone on the streetcar to submit to bathing and disinfection, part of a new quarantine policy implemented at the border. If she had acquiesced, she would have been stripped naked, all of her possessions and clothing taken away from her as her body was inspected by uniformed border officials (who may or may not have mocked her in a language she could only partly understand). She would have been drenched in chemicals with a strong odor carried by liquid that may have been uncomfortably cold or painfully hot. She would have been surrounded by all the other commuters with whom she had formerly kept a polite distance aboard the trolley. She would have stood naked alongside them, waiting for this indignity to be over and for her chemical-soaked clothing to be given back to her.



*Steam dryer for sterilizing clothing  
at the Santa Fe Bridge, 1917.  
(U.S. Public Health Service,  
National Archives)*



through friends in Juárez). She emboldened the other women to join her in resisting, and they all got off the trolley and began walking back across the bridge, blocking traffic, and encouraging others to join in their revolt.

Torres and her fellow protesters laid down across the streetcar tracks to stop traffic. They stopped automobiles and pedestrians. They kicked the American conductors out of the trolleys and wrangled the motor controllers from their hands. Described as “Amazons” and a “swarm of angry bees” by El Paso newspapers, the women in these riots went from a group of 30 on that first streetcar to hundreds by late morning. The rioting was finally quelled by border officials, but resumed the following morning. Eight women were arrested and spent the night in jail. Another group of women went to the office of Melchor Herrera, the mayor of Juárez, to demand that he do something to stop these humiliating measures. The local Mexican government did try to offset the burden of bathing at the border with their own disinfection certification process (which was rejected by U.S. authorities) and attempted to convince El Paso public health officials to end the quarantine, but to little effect. Despite protesters’ efforts, this practice of forcible bathing along the border continued for over 40 years.



# El Paso Morning Times

Monday, January 29, 1917

## ORDER TO BATHE STARTS NEAR RIOT AMONG JUAREZ WOMEN

### Auburn-Haired Amazon at Santa Fe Street Bridge Leads Feminine Outbreak

Juarez women, incensed at the American quarantine regulations, led a riot yesterday morning at the Santa Fe bridge. From the time the street cars began to run until the middle of the afternoon thousands of Mexicans thronged the Juarez side of the river and pushed out to the tollgate on the bridge. Women ringleaders of the mob hurled stones at American civilians, both on the bridge and on the streets of Juarez. ...

When women were ordered to get off the street cars and submit to being bathed and disinfected before passing to the American side the rioting started. Reports were circulated that the women were being insulted in the bathhouse and photographed while nude. The greater part of them refused to go to the bath and became indignant when they were ordered off the street cars, after

having paid their fares, and could not have their nickels refunded.

When refused permission to enter El Paso without complying with the regulations the women collected in an angry crowd at the center of the bridge. By 8 o'clock the throng, consisting in large part of servant girls employed in El Paso, had grown until it packed the bridge half way across. Led by Carmelita Torres, an auburn-haired young woman of 17, they kept up a continuous volley of language aimed at the immigration and health officers, civilians, sentries, and any other visible American. ...

The controllers of the street cars were carried away by the women, and used for weapons or thrown into the river. Carranza cavalrymen were unable during the morning to make any headway against the crowd, although they drew their sabers threateningly. Women laughingly caught their bridles and turned the horses aside, holding the soldiers' sabers and whips.

*Excerpt from an article in The El Paso Times  
that ran the morning after the bath riots.*

Day Message	
Day Letter	Blue
Night Message	White
Night Letter	N L

If none of these three symbols appears after the check (number of words) this is a day message. Otherwise its character is indicated by the symbol appearing after the check.

# WESTERN UNION



# TELEGRAM

NEWCOMB CARLTON, PRESIDENT

CLASS OF SERVICE	SYMBOL
Day Message	
Day Letter	Blue
Night Message	White
Night Letter	N L

If none of these three symbols appears after the check (number of words) this is a day message. Otherwise its character is indicated by the symbol appearing after the check.

RECEIVED AT WYATT BUILDING, COR. 14TH AND F STS., WASHINGTON, D. C. ALWAYS OPEN

NA 12 CH RV 60 1 EX

EL PASO TEX 523 P JUNE 17TH

HON RUPERT BLUE

*D. Lea*JUL 17 1916  
D. LEA

SURGEON GENERAL WASHINGTON DC

HUNDREDS DIRTY LOUSEY DESTITUTE MEXICANS ARRIVING AT EL PASO DAILY/  
 WILL UNDOUBTEDLY ... BRING AND SPREAD TYPHUS UNLESS A QUARANTINE IS  
 PLACED AT ONCE/ THE CITY OF ELPASO BACKED BY ITS  
 MEDICAL BOARD AND STATE FEDERAL AND MILITIA OFFICIALS HERE FEEL  
 THAT THE GOVERNMENT SHOULD PUT ON A QUARANTINE/ PLEASE INVESTIGATE  
 AND ADVISE ME THIS IS NECESSARY TO AVOID TYPHUS EPIDEMIC.

TOM LEA

MAYOR 803 P

This telegram was sent on June 17, 1916 to Washington, DC by Tom Lea, El Paso's germophobic, eugenicist mayor. It prompted the horrific U.S.-Mexico border quarantine policy, triggered the Bath Riots, and later inspired Nazi concentration camp death chamber design. A largely forgotten chapter of U.S.-Mexico border history, the events and ideology connected to Tom Lea's fear-mongering message continue to reverberate throughout U.S.-Mexico border policy today.

At the beginning of the 20th century, eugenic ideas were percolating throughout the U.S. government. Deeply invested in ideas of white supremacy, eugenicists believed that it was a moral imperative to uphold the "genetic superiority" of the population. (Affluent white male) politicians authorized extreme measures, such as forced sterilization of populations deemed "inferior" (poor women of color). Eugenics also permeated immigration policies at this time, with medicalized procedures at Ellis Island and other ports of entry targeting specific groups based on their perceived cultural, moral, and intellectual genetic worth for the "breeding stock" of America. Mere weeks after the Bath Riots, the U.S. government passed the hugely restrictive Immigration Act of 1917, a sweeping law built on a foundation of racism, nativism, and cultural anxiety. Immigration inspections included evaluation of mental acuity, with numerous grounds for exclusion, including feeble-mindedness, illiteracy, constitutional inferiority, prostitution, imbecility, alcoholism, homosexuality, and more. Migrants from Asia were barred altogether.



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*Crowds of Americans and Mexicans on the banks of the Rio Grande in El Paso and Juárez during the Mexican Revolution.*  
*(The University of North Texas Library, El Paso Public Library)*

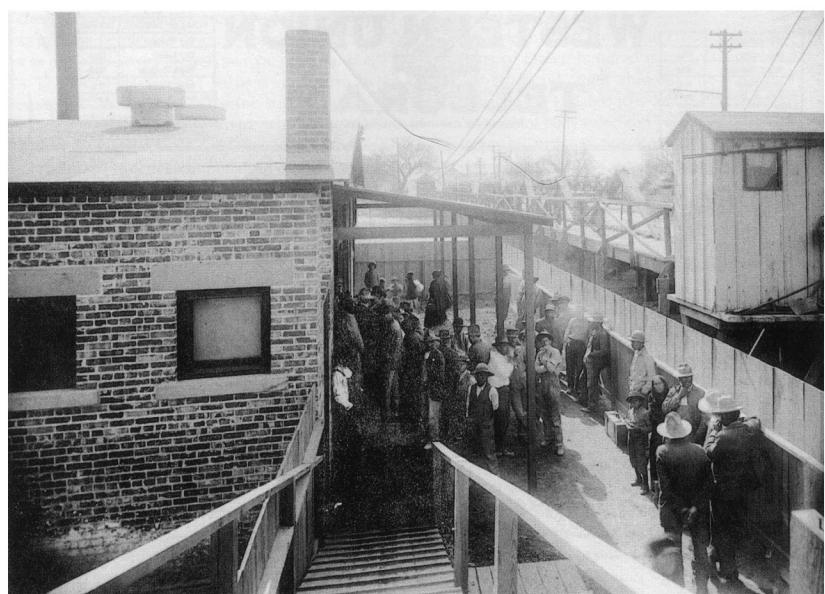
But the Immigration Act of 1917 conflicted with the interests of business owners in the growing industries of the American Southwest, which relied on seasonal and daily workers crossing over from Mexico, as was the case with the domestic workers and laborers in El Paso's smelter. This dependence on Mexican labor deepened when, in 1917, the U.S. entered World War I. At the same time, the Mexican Revolution, which lasted the entire decade, was raging. There was much fighting along the border, and U.S. troops were garrisoned there. Pancho Villa staged three major battles in Juárez. (During the first Battle of Juárez, which lasted for a month in the spring of 1911, El Pasoans would gather along the Rio Grande or on rooftops to watch the fighting across the border, buying and selling field glasses and snacks, and cheering the insurrectos.) The revolution also led to a massive influx of Mexican refugees, and attendant American fears of "the other." Tensions were high in El Paso; just a year before the Bath Riots, in January of 1916, a race riot erupted after Villista troops killed 18 U.S. citizens, with white El Pasoans calling for vengeance against Mexicans in the city.

It was against this background of upheaval and anxiety that the Mexican border quarantine policy was implemented. Typhus, a deadly disease that can be spread by fleas, served as the excuse for a broad-scale medicalization of immigration at the Mexican border. Although typhus is one of the oldest diseases among humans, the discovery of its cause in 1916 coincided with a typhus panic that swept the United States. Fear of outbreak caused by "dirty" Mexican immigrants spread despite there having only been one typhus death in El Paso at the time of quarantine implementation. Federal officials acknowledged typhus was more pretext than public health threat: U.S. Public Health Service (USPHS) surgeon B.J. Lloyd, who was dispatched to the border in 1916, informed the

Surgeon General that “typhus fever is not now and probably never will be, a serious menace to our civilian population in the United States.” Still, he recommended erecting delousing plants along the border, and subjecting all Mexicans crossing the border to forcible inspection and disinfection.

Claude C. Pierce, a senior surgeon at USPHS, was sent from Washington to design and oversee a methodology for quashing this supposed typhus epidemic. Pierce’s solution was to forcibly bathe all Mexican border-crossers and their belongings in noxious chemicals such as kerosene, gasoline, and cyanide. Mexican entrants into the U.S. would be stripped naked and examined by border officials, with particular attention paid to their “hairy parts.” If lice were found, men’s heads were shaved and their hair burned; women’s heads were drenched in kerosene and vinegar. After inspection, the border crosser was sprayed in a soap mixture containing kerosene oil (and after 1942, the pesticide powder DDT). The belongings of border-crossers were thoroughly fumigated in gas—first cyanide, and in later years Zyklon B, a cyanide-based pesticide widely used by Nazis to kill Jewish people at death camps. The clothing and belongings of migrants were steam treated in cyanogen gas for 25–35 minutes, so for that length of time, plus the amount of time it took for loading and unloading, the border-crossers would remain naked, waiting for their things. It bears mentioning that in January, the morning temperature in El Paso is often in the 30s. It’s unknown what the heating conditions were in these facilities.

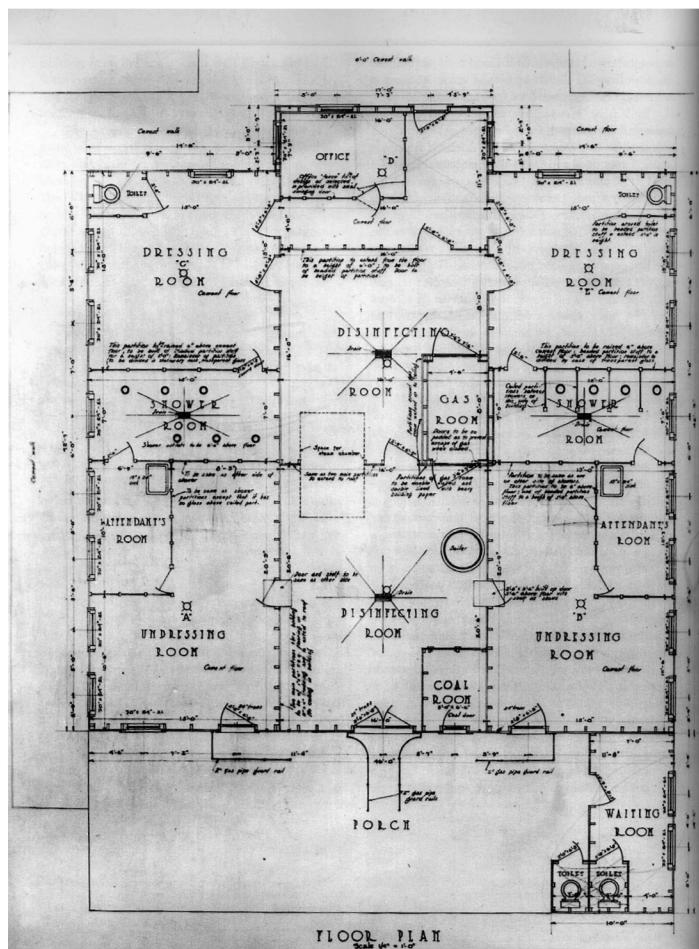
This quarantine policy was implemented in January of 1917 in El Paso, and soon thereafter throughout cities along the Mexican border. A personal account of delousement from border-crosser Raul Delgado details: “An immigration agent with a fumigation pump would spray our whole body with insecticide, especially our rear and our *partes nobles*. Some of us ran away from the spray and began to cough. Some even vomited from the stench of those chemical pesticides. … The agent would laugh at the grimacing faces we would make. He had a gas mask on, but we didn’t.” Another crosser subjected to this treatment, Jose Cruz Burciaga, describes: “They would spray some white stuff on you. It was white, and it would run down your body. How horrible … that was an extreme measure, the substance was very strong.”



*Mexicans waiting to be deloused at the Santa Fe Bridge quarantine plant, 1917.  
(USPHS, National Archives)*

Newspaper articles of the time tell a vastly different story, revealing patronizing and racist attitudes among white El Pasoans toward Mexican border-crossers. From January 29, 1917 in the *El Paso Morning Times*: “In spite of protests made by so many, there were enough Mexicans who submitted to the orders of the immigrations officers to keep the bathhouse and disinfection equipment busy. Each individual who crossed the bridge was questioned and inspected, and the greater part of them ordered to the cleansing house. They came out with clothes wrinkled from the steam sterilizer, hair wet and faces shining, generally laughing and in good humor. The immigration men predict that as soon as the Mexicans become familiar with the bathing process they will not only submit to it, but welcome it. ... Many laughable incidents were reported by the health officers, quoting their conversations with Mexicans ordered to the baths. One argued eloquently that he had bathed well in July.”

The 1917 Bath Riots were in large part motivated by memories of the 1916 El Paso “Jail Holocaust,” an event in which at least 25 prisoners at the El Paso City Jail were accidentally burned to death after being bathed in kerosene. El Paso newspapers depicted these fears of the risks of forcible bathing among protesters as silly and anti-American, with text like “Women Start Wild Stories,” and “Misunderstand the Regulations.”



Dr. Pierce went so far as to deny that gasoline baths were taking place. He did so during an emergency meeting of the El Paso Chamber of Commerce, held on the afternoon of January 30th. El Paso business owners were concerned by the number of domestic and smelter factory workers who had stopped showing up for work, opting to stay in Juárez to avoid the baths. Pierce claimed that they were “merely soap and hot water baths” and that the clothing was simply disinfected in a “steam room.” But his directives for bathing at these facilities specifically detailed the use of kerosene for washing hair and indicated that kerosene oil was used in the spray soap, a similar technique for bathing as that used in the gasoline bath deaths of the El Paso Jail Holocaust. The steam room he referred to at this meeting was also described as a “cyanide gas room” in the manual he later wrote about the facilities.



*Mexican woman entering the United States. United States immigration station, El Paso, Texas. Photograph by Dorothea Lange, 1938. (Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.) Opposite: Blueprints for the El Paso disinfection plant, 1916. (USPHS, National Archives)*

In the first four months that this policy was in effect, 871,639 people were inspected along the Mexican border. On average, Texas border officials inspected 5,660 people per day. In 1918, riots nearly broke out again, with a large crowd gathering at the bridge until the Mayor of Juárez closed the Mexican port of entry. Over time, the policy was relaxed for more affluent or well-dressed Mexicans, but it had a broader effect of deeply embedding a prejudicial association between Mexicans and uncleanliness, which remains to this day. In 1942, the kerosene and vinegar showers for border-crossers were replaced with DDT powder dusting, a practice that was later discovered to have detrimental health consequences including cancer, infertility, miscarriage, as well as nervous system and liver damage. This practice continued into the 1950s, with some migrants stating that they had received these delousing baths as late as 1963. It was still in place during the era of the Bracero Program, a U.S. labor recruitment policy that brought over four million Mexican laborers into the United States during and after World War II. The lack of available information regarding both the end date of this quarantine policy and the extent of its application after early years of implementation points to the perceived disposability of the population who were most affected. There have been no major studies of the long-term health impacts caused by routine exposure among Mexican border crossers to chemicals used in United States' forced bathing program.

The legacy of U.S.-Mexico border policy was acutely potent in Nazi Germany. Adolf Hitler praised the 1924 U.S. Immigration Act in *Mein Kampf*, noting: “There is currently one state in which one can observe at least weak beginnings of a better conception. This is of course not [Germany], but the American Union. . . . The American Union categorically refuses the immigration of physically unhealthy elements, and simply excludes the immigration of certain races.” A 1938 issue of the German scientific journal *Anzeiger für Schädlingskunde* included images of El Paso delousement facilities alongside information about the use of Zyklon B. The author of this article, Dr. Gerhard Peters, went on to supply Zyklon B to Nazi death camps, where it was determined that if, instead of spraying Zyklon B on the belongings of people, it was instead applied directly to the skin, Zyklon B was an effective method for mass murder. Peters was later tried and convicted at Nuremberg. In 1955, he was retried and found not guilty.

### Suggested Reading:

David Dorado Romo, *Ringside Seat to a Revolution: An Underground Cultural History of El Paso and Juarez, 1893-1923* (El Paso: Cinco Puntos Press, 2005).

Alexandra Minna Stern, *Eugenic Nation: Faults and Frontiers of Better Breeding in Modern America*, 2d. ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015).

Alexandra Minna Stern, “Buildings, Boundaries, and Blood: Medicalization and Nation-Building on the U.S.-Mexico Border, 1910-1930,” *The Hispanic American Historical Review*, Vol. 79, No. 1 (Feb., 1999), pp. 41-81; Duke University Press.

