

CHANGE OVER TIME; EL PASO, TEXAS THROUGH THE WINDOW OF SANBORN  
MAPS AND CITY DIRECTORIES 1883-1920

*Companion Website:* <http://www.2cyberwhelm.org/temirose/papers/elpasso>

Introduction

In his lecture at UT, Austin, on November 6<sup>th</sup>, 2001, Dr. Don Carleton defined maps as "representations of the earth's curved surface as depicted on flat sheets of paper." Dr. Carleton went on to explain that maps are often used as primary sources in historical research. This paper will offer a brief analysis of some of the potentials of the Sanborn Maps and City Directories as primary historical resources.

*Sanborn Maps*

Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps were produced by the Sanborn Map Company in Pelham, New York from 1867 until the 1950's. "The maps were designed to assist fire insurance agents in determining the degree of hazard associated with a particular property and therefore show the size, shape, and construction of dwellings, commercial buildings, and factories as well as fire walls, locations of windows and doors, sprinkler systems, and types of roofs. The maps also indicate widths and names of streets, property boundaries, building use, and house and block numbers. They show the locations of water mains, giving their dimensions, and of fire alarm

boxes and hydrants. Sanborn maps are thus an unrivaled source of information about the structure and use of buildings in American cities." (Ristow, 1995)

Because Sanborn maps are so detailed, they can be used in conjunction with other sources (newspapers, correspondence, diaries, census data and city directories) to build a vivid picture of a place in time. However, as reported by Geostat, "Only built-up parts of towns were surveyed. Often, Sanborn surveyors ignored sections of town not of interest to fire insurers, namely poor or predominantly African-American residential areas. Therefore, Sanborn maps often do not record an entire city or town" (Geostat, 2000)

Sanborn maps use an "elaborate system of symbols" (Ibid) to designate a variety of physical characteristics of the buildings. The maps also contain notations as to what sort of activity occurred in the buildings. Clearly, some activities and occupations would incur a greater risk of fire damage than others and therefore would of necessity be included in a map whose purpose was insurance assessment.

### *City Directories*

In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, city directories were produced in many U.S. cities. These directories are in themselves valuable sources for historical research. City directories contain advertisements (some illustrated with drawings or photographs) for services and commodities available for sale. The directories contain information about the governmental structure of the city, the post offices, and railroad schedules. City directories list the people living

in the town alphabetically, similar to the convention in present day phone books, but, in addition, they provide street by street listings of occupants and their professions.

### *Sanborn Maps and City Directories*

Theoretically, it is possible to match the people listed in the city directories with the places described in the Sanborn maps. Beverly's (1997) study of El Paso's Chinatown is a good example of what can be done using this technique and combining it with census data and a solid background in the subject area of interest.

In my case, I am fascinated with the changing face of what Herbert (1990, p.81) calls the CBD. The Central Business District in the U.S. as Clay (1974) describes it, and as most of us can verify through our lived experience, changes rapidly due to its sensitivity to the competitive nature of commercial activity responding to economic forces at work in a society.

The original CBD of El Paso, Texas, was the environs of Pioneer Plaza. Here El Paso street meets the railroad tracks, not far from the Rio Grande and the Mexican border. After a brief discussion of methodology, I will discuss the changing face of Pioneer Plaza from 1883 through the 1920's. For additional information, for pdf versions of the maps referred to here, illustrations of El Paso and links to sites of interest regarding El Paso history, please see this paper's companion website: <http://www.2cyberwhelm.org/temirose/papers/elpasso/>

### *Problems and Limitations*

For this study I was able to use the Center for American History archives at UT, Austin. The Center does not have any city directories for El Paso before 1900. I am most interested in the period of transition between the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Since it would not be possible to use city directories for the early part of the transition, I felt that a comparison of occupations, trades and activities during the period could prove worthwhile.

Maps, of course, have inherent limitations as historical sources: they emphasize their particular perspective (perhaps sacrificing another equally valid perspective); they distort reality not only through scale and proportion but through neglect and deceit. In the case of the Sanborn maps, much of the information to do with the physical makeup of the buildings is probably accurate but after 1908, in the case of El Paso, the maps were reissued without a clear indication of date. I assume that, as the 20<sup>th</sup> century evolved its magnificent array of communication devices, much of the information to do with the Sanborn maps was provided through means other than the maps that came, more and more, to depict simply the physical composition, shape, square footage and location of the buildings.

## El Paso, Change over Time

### *Early History*

El Paso, Texas has been inhabited for at least 10,000 years. The first white explorers came to the area in 1581. The Spanish were the first to colonize the area but the Pueblo Indians

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remained the majority of the population for hundreds of years. In the late 1600's, settlers made their way to this part of Texas. Partly because the Rio Grande changed its location periodically, the border between Mexico and Texas was hotly disputed but finally resolved in 1850 with the end of open hostilities between the two governments. (Humanities Resource Center, 2001)

The Handbook of Texas Online states that "By the middle of the eighteenth century about 5,000 people lived in the El Paso area-Spaniards, mestizos and Indians-the largest complex of population on the Spanish northern frontier. A large dam and a series of acequias (irrigation ditches) made possible a flourishing agriculture." In 1849 The Forty-niners crossed through El Paso on their way to the California gold mines. In 1857 The first mail route was established through El Paso, but the stage coach operated only in the day time. In 1871 El Paso County was officially organized. In 1873 El Paso got its City Charter. (Timmons, 1997)

### *Pioneer Plaza*

According to the History of El Paso website, "Pioneer Plaza, in the heart of downtown, is the historical center of El Paso. This was the location of the Ponce Ranch, founded in 1827. The plaza evolved at the site of an irrigation canal that carried water to nearby vineyards and fields. During the town's turbulent frontier days, the "Newspaper Tree," an old cottonwood on the plaza, was used by locals to post notices. By 1881 with the arrival of the railroad, the collection of scattered adobes and ramshackle saloons became a boom town. In 1905, the little plaza officially

was named Pioneer Plaza in honor of El Paso's founders." (El Paso County Historical Society, 2001)

## El Paso, the City

### *Physical Structure and Location*

Herbert says that, cities are "products of the particular type of society in which they are placed." (1990, p.21) El Paso, as an ancient crossroad, has always been a cultural meeting place. Modern El Paso (that is El Paso from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards) has maintained its international character. The Sanborn maps and city directories of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries show that there have always been a variety of nationalities as well as a variety of religions represented in the community.

### *The Transition*

Don Martindale (1958) states in his prefatory remarks to Max Weber's classic, *The City*, "As the effects of the industrial revolution were felt, the growth in size of the cities of the western world was enormous...In America...by 1890 one third of the American population lived in towns of four thousand or more inhabitants. Between 1880 and 1890 the number of cities with from 12 to 20 thousand population had increased from 76 to 107; cities of from 20 to 40 thousand population had increased in number from 45 to 91; cities of from 45 to 75 thousand

population had increased from 23 to 39. (Martindale, 1958, p. 12) El Paso shared in this phenomenal growth, but on a smaller scale (See Figure 1).

Figure 1:Population Growth in El Paso

<u>Population</u>	<u>Year</u>
300	1881
3,000	1884
10,000	1890
18,627	1898
15,906	1899
20,523	1900
77,560	1925

*1881- 1925*

The introduction of electricity, cable cars, the telephone, telegraph, and the railroads into the urban environment in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, changed the nature and structure of the American city forever. As Grady Clay writes, "The contemporary urban complex has become the major power source, the originator of organization, the sender of messages, the manufacturer of influence. Its major exports are energy and control. It ships out regulations, orders, information, propaganda, and directives." (1974, p. 33) El Paso participated in this manufacture of influence.

### *Organization*

Even though El Paso was first settled by the Spanish, the city was organized according to the standard U.S. grid pattern as set out in the land ordinance of 1785. However, as is evident when examining the Sanborn maps, Pioneer Plaza exists in a jag, or, as Clay calls it, "a diagonal slash" (1974, p.43) in the grid. Clay believes that these places, where the grid lines meet at odd angles can become terrible bottlenecks, empty of productive activity and deathly to industry or

centers of incredible vitality and commercial activity. In the case of Pioneer Plaza in El Paso, we have a clear example of the latter.

### Pioneer Plaza: Change over Time

#### **1883**

See Appendix 1 or <http://www.2cyberwhelm.org/temirose/papers/elpaso/sanborn/1883.html> for the Sanborn Map of Pioneer Square 1883

There is no city directory at the Center for American History for 1883 but on the Sanborn map, on El Paso Street between San Francisco and San Antonio the following professions and trades were pursued

Barber	Jewelry
Drugs	Market
Grocers	Offices
Insurance office	Saloons

On El Paso Street between San Antonio and Overland:

Books	Hardware	Liquor	Offices
Cigarettes	Jewelry	Meat	Saloons
Grocery		Music	

#### **1885**

See Appendix 2 or <http://www.2cyberwhelm.org/temirose/papers/elpaso/sanborn/1885.html> for the Sanborn Map of Pioneer Square 1885

There is no city directory at the Center for American History for 1885 but on the Sanborn map, on El Paso Street between San Francisco and San Antonio we see the following:

Baker	Grocery	Meat	Photo Gallery
Clothing	Market	Millinery	Saloons
Drugs			

On El Paso Street between San Antonio and Overland:

Bank	Grocery	Lunch saloon	Restaurants
Books and drugs	Hardware	Offices	Saloons
Cigars	Jewelry	Produce	Variety and toys



**1888**

See Appendix 3 or <http://www.2cyberwhelm.org/temirose/papers/elpaso/sanborn/1888.html> for the Sanborn Map of Pioneer Square 1888

There is no city directory at the Center for American History for 1888 but on the Sanborn map, on El Paso Street between San Francisco and San Antonio we see the following:

China and Glassware	Grocery	Meat	Drugs	Saloons
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On El Paso Street between San Antonio and Overland:

Barber	Gem Theater (stage)	Jewelry	Restaurant
Cigars	Hardware	Loans	Saloons
Drugs	Ice cream and confectionery	Pacific Express	Watchmaker
First National Bank			

**1893**

See Appendix 4 or <http://www.2cyberwhelm.org/temirose/papers/elpaso/sanborn/1893.html> for the Sanborn Map of Pioneer Square 1893

There is no city directory at the Center for American History for 1893 but on the Sanborn map, on El Paso Street between San Francisco and San Antonio we see the following:

Cigars	Gentlemen's furnishings	Music	Saloons
Curios	Jewelry	Offices	Stationery
Drugs	Masonic Hall	Public Market	Wholesale Grocers

On El Paso Street between San Antonio and Overland:

Barber	Fruit	Liquor	Restaurants
Candies	Gambling	N.F. Express	Saloons
Clothing	Gem Theater	Pacific Express	Stationery
Clothing	I.O.O.F. Hall	Photography	

In **1898**, on the Index page of the Sanborn map for that year (see Appendix 5 or <http://www.2cyberwhelm.org/temirose/papers/elpaso/sanborn/1898.html>) we see Pioneer Plaza and its immediate vicinity outlined in dark ink with a caption saying, "Fire Limit." For this study there was not sufficient time but it would be interesting to check the El Paso Times for 1898 and 1897 to see if we could get the story of the fire that seems to have devastated this area. Just north

of the street that we have been investigating, there had been a large hotel that disappears at this time and is only rebuilt many years later. There is also during this time a radical change in the placement of the North Train Depot. The depot used to be on the south side of the tracks and after this period (because of the fire?) is moved to the north side of the tracks where it can be seen today and is, in fact, a tourist attraction. On other curious fact has to do with what seems to be a rather large building that at first is called the "Blumenthal Building" and is later called by several other names, in 1900 is called The Federal Building and houses most of the official offices for El Paso. This building is at the bend in the center of Pioneer Plaza.

## **1900**

*The Sanborn Map:* <http://www.2cyberwhelm.org/temirose/papers/elpaso/sanborn/1900.html>

The Editorial of the El Paso City Directory 1900 states:

"We look with wonder on the substantial improvement El Paso has made in the past 18 months. Her growth goes steadily and evenly on. The architect, builder, and mechanic have been working "overtime." Everything has proceeded quietly and orderly. A boom has not even been hinted. City clerk Catlin's books show \$913,077 in building permits from November 1, 1897 to July 15, 1899.

The numerous new cozy homes, palatial residences and commodious business buildings make it clearly apparent that you received quid pro quo for every dollar invested. In addition to this the county clerk's records show that real estate transfers to the extent of a round million dollars, making it manifest that conservative investors have an abiding faith in El Paso dirt.

Our census shows a population of 20,523, an increase of 1,896 since our previous canvass a year and a half ago. That this is no small matter, we will state that Galveston, during the same period, shows a decrease of 1,143. The comparison is made to emphasize the fact that El Paso is today the most progressive city in the state, and no town within Texas' borders has greater possibilities or a brighter future."

The above editorial indicates that the excitement and an awareness of the transition to industrialization and the 20th century was not absent at the time.

**1902**

*The Sanborn Map* <http://www.2cyberwhelm.org/temirose/papers/elpaso/sanborn/1902.html>

In the El Paso city directory of 1904, we read that, in the City Federal Building, between St. Louis and N. Oregon Streets, the following offices are represented:

- Collector of Customs and Custodian, Patrick Garrett
- Special Agent Treasury Department, Joseph Evans,
- Deputy U.S. Marshal, HR Hildebrand
- Postmaster, Theo Olhausen
- WD Howe, U.S. Commissioner

Circuit and District Courts	Board of Pensions
Customhouse Ore Samplers	US Dept of Agriculture
Clerks	US Immigration Bureau
Bond clerk	US Internal Revenue
Statistical clerk	US Weather Bureau
Inspectors	Post Office
Civil Service Examiners	International Boundary Commission

**On El Paso Street between San Francisco and San Antonio:**

Architects	Dressmakers	Jewelers	Shoes
Attorneys	Grocers	Real Estate	Stationery
Curios	Hotel Grand Central	Saloons	Tailors

**On El Paso Street between San Antonio and Overland:**

Attorneys	Clothing	Dry Goods	Real Estate
Baths	Confectioner	First National Bank	Saloon
Books	Dentists	Grills	Tailoring
Café saloon	Doctors	Hardware	Watchmaker
Chinese dining halls	Dressmakers	Liquors	Wells Fargo
Cigars	Drug store	Photographer	

**1905**

*The Sanborn Map* <http://www.2cyberwhelm.org/temirose/papers/el Paso/sanborn/1905.html>

In the El Paso city directory of 1906, we find no changes from 1904 as to the types of business taking place in the Federal Building.

On El Paso Street between San Francisco and San Antonio:

Architects	Clothing,	Meats	Sewing machines
Attorneys	Curios	Milling	Shoe shine
Barbers	Dentists	Mining	Shoes
Brokers	Drugs	Page press	Stationery
Cemetery Real Estate	Grocers	Pawn Brokers	Tailor
Chinese restaurants	Hotel Grand Central	Real Estate	Union Ticket Office
Cigars	Jewelers	Saloons	

El Paso Street between San Antonio and Overland: (Note: At this time there are many vacant spaces recorded in the directory at this location)

Artist	Café Saloon	First National Bank	Mercantile
Attorneys	Cleaners	Hatter	Optician
Barber	Clothing	Jewelry Manufacturer	Saloons
Books	Dentists	Liquor	Shoes

**1908**

*The Sanborn Map* <http://www.2cyberwhelm.org/temirose/papers/el Paso/sanborn/1908.html>

The editorial in the El Paso city directory of 1909 states, "To meet the ever increasing demands, especially of the vast mining interests around here, another great machine shop and foundry will be built in 1909. During the early months of 1909, too, will be completed a \$1,000,000 cement plant."

The Federal Building contained the following offices:

- US Referee in Bankruptcy
- US Army Recruiting station
- US Railway Mail Service
- El Paso Fire Department (Hose companies and fire station at E. Overland and Stanton)

On El Paso Street, between San Francisco and San Antonio:

Bijou Theater	Cigars	Hotel Grand Central	Saloons
Business Mens'	City National Bank	Labor	Shoes
Protective Association	Clothing	Mining	Stationery
Cemetery Real Estate	Grill	Real Estate	
	Grocery		

On El Paso Street between San Antonio and Overland:

Bars	National Hotel
Chinese Methodist Mission	Wells Fargo Building
Mercantile	Woman's Charity Organization

**1914**

The El Paso city directory of 1914 featured advertisements for automobiles and hay (for horses). The introductory material mentions that the First National Bank built a skyscraper and that El Paso was then "The best paved city in Texas." The El Paso Postmaster's salary, based on amount of business transacted, was third in the state at \$3500. El Paso tied with Galveston and Austin for third place. The Dallas Postmaster made the most - at \$6000 and the San Antonio Postmaster made second with a salary of #3800.

On El Paso Street, between San Francisco and San Antonio:

Audit company	El Paso Association of Credit Men
Bar	Grand Hotel
Café	Grill
City National Bank	Mining
Clearing house	Saloons
Drugs	Swastika Club (in basement)
Eating House	Unique Theater

On El Paso Street between San Antonio and Overland:

Billiards	Café and Bar	National Hotel	Shoes
Bowling and Athletic	Clothing	Pekin [sic] Café	Simona Hotel
Club	Hotel Paso Del Norte	Saloon	Taxicab and Auto
Building Trades Hall	Lyric Theater	Sewing Machines	Turkish and Vapor Baths

## 1920

In the El Paso City Directory of 1920, there are a many car advertisements; a listing regarding the El Paso Stock Exchange; and a plethora of advertisements for banks. In general, there are many more advertisements in this directory than for those of 1909 and 1914.

The Editorial states:

"'The Pass' topographically expresses its location at the point where the Great Divide has been eroded through by centuries of efforts on the part of the chocolate colored waters of the meandering Rio Grande.

The altitude of 3767 feet gives the necessary mountain air crispness, supercharged with ozone, replete with atmospheric electricity to make it invigorating. During the year, a mean average 8-inch rainfall, a 84% of 100% sunshiny days, an average 37% humidity and a 10-year summary of 38 cloudy days throughout the year, offers a combination exceedingly attractive to the climatic student, studying from the medical angle of what is worth while in chronic pulmonary cases, particularly the tubercular."

The Federal Building in 1920 contained the same offices as in 1914, with the addition of the following:

- Consulate at Juarez, Mexico
- Dept of Agriculture
- Federal Horticultural Board
- Navy Recruiting
- Reclamation Service
- Secret Service
- Social Hygiene Board

On El Paso Street, between San Francisco and San Antonio:

Auto Café	City National Bank	Security Loan and Jewelry
Club House Café	Photo Studio	Unique Theater
Grand Hotel	Hotel Paso Del Norte	

On El Paso Street between San Antonio and Overland:

Bijou Theater	Confectionery	Luncheonette	Shoes
City Loan and Jewelry	Grecian Theater	Photoshop	

## Analysis of Data

Pioneer Plaza is at the convergence of railroad lines and roads. My guess is that this plaza was used even in ancient times for meetings and gatherings. The newspaper tree is testament to

the fact that people had a tendency to make their way past this part of El Paso. Pioneer Plaza seems to have been the central microcosmic crossing place within a district of macrocosmically crossing transportation routes.

As the 19<sup>th</sup> century turned to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the first wave of white settlers, the traders, adventurers, missionaries and explorers were making way for the second set of white settlers, the businessmen, investors, families and educators. The military had often made its presence felt in El Paso but during this period the military takes on a greater and greater presence in the area until in 1941, Fort Bliss is credited with being the cause of the greatest influx of new immigrants to the area.

Pioneer Plaza seems to have always attracted businesses that support the traveler, the folks just passing through. There have always been hotels and restaurants in this area. There were always barbers and later dentists as well. The Chinese presence in El Paso is evident in this area. The Spanish and Pueblo population is not as well represented here during this period. I found it interesting that, in the late 1800's there were about half as many ice cream parlors as there were saloons. As time wore on, ice cream parlors made way for a wide variety of eateries and amusements.

Interestingly, there are always jewelers here. El Paso is nestled between several mountain ranges. This area is extremely rich in minerals and apparently has always done a fair business in gems and jewelry. Also, of note is the fact that there is a theater here even before there are

movies. The Gem Theater is a stage theater. Later there is a Penny Arcade and several movie theaters.

As we leave the study in the twenties, we can see that great optimism is building. The plethora of banks and investment options to our modern eyes bodes ill, for the crash of 1929 is just a few years ahead. One more detail is perhaps worth mentioning; In 1914 there appear to be two organizations on the street that are never there before or after. One is the El Paso Association of Credit Men, the other is the Swastika Club. Whether the appearance and the disappearance of these two organizations has any connection, one with another, would take a great deal of careful searching and require an honorable reporting.

There is a great deal more that could be said from the data gathered here but the intent is merely to show the efficacy of this methodology and not to prove any particular point. Again, in order to make a full length study with this material, it would be necessary to corroborate events imagined with newspaper accounts (both local and national) and with letters and government documents pertaining to the period.

### Conclusion

Even though we often think of the United States as a young nation, when we study a place like El Paso, we must acknowledge that we are dealing with an ancient city that has had only its most modern incarnations under U.S. purview. The U.S. Texas El Paso is a city that carries with it the character and tone of its many pasts. The native Pueblo past is alive in the



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agriculture and the mining. The military presence is no longer Spanish, neither is it Mexican, but the U.S. military carries a tradition set long ago in this area of an armed border along the Rio Grande.

The character of El Paso as a crossroads is probably thousands of years old. The snapshot of the city's turn of the century (from the 19<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup>) is just that -- a minute inkling of the many transitions that have occurred as myriads of settlers continue to experience and influence the character of the place.

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