

In 1944, the US and Mexican governments ratified an International Boundary and Water Commission (IBWC) treaty regarding the distribution of the Colorado River and Rio Grande/Rio Bravo waters that form the international border. The first step was to be the construction of Falcón Dam near Roma, Texas.

“This reservoir will impound more than three million acre-feet of water—water which now at flood season rushes down the water to the gulf,” wrote photographer Laura Gilpin in her 1949 photo-book *The Rio Grande: River of Destiny*. “The retention of this great amount of water will insure all present irrigation needs and allow for the addition of new farm areas.”

Above the text, she showed the river floating sleepily past the Mexican town of Guerrero, already condemned to inundation. By 1954, the Presa Falcón was constructed, at the cost of two towns—Guerrero on the Mexico side, and Zapata in Texas—along with the lives of multiple workers. While the periodical *Ingenieria Hidraulica en México* described the inundated areas as “algunas rancherías de pequeña importancia.”

While rectification for flood prevention and new irrigation waters were the explicit aim of the IBWC’s dam-building, looking at the long history of the region—pre- and post-dam—in the archives reveals a divided story. While there is occasionally concern about flooding from the Mexican side of the river, there is far more concern about the over-appropriation of water on the United States side. In fact, it was those concerns that led to the creation of the dam in the first place.

In August 1932, the governor of Tamaulipas state, F. Castellanos Jr., wrote to the Secretary of Foreign Relations that the city of Matamoros was lacking water. The Secretary passed on the message to the Mexico Commissioner of the IBWC, Armando Santacruz Jr., who wrote to the commissioner of the United States side, L.M. Lawson. (Both men were based in El Paso, Texas.) A month later, Lawson replied that the shortage was due to drought, not overdrafting. Santacruz replied that the Americans had been taking water without regard to the degree of drought. Within three days, Lawson wrote back to defend himself and his country, blaming the river’s flood-drought cycle for the problems. “Una vez más, me permit manifestar que las dificultades que puedan experimentar en el Bajo Río Bravo, ambos países, provendrán por una parte, de las numerosas crecientes y la pérdida consiguiente de una cantidad valiosa de agua y, por otra, de las condiciones existentes durante las aguas bajas.”

Santacruz didn’t fall for it. He replied that because the river had been flowing at 25 percent of normal that August, in order to comply with the existing War Department order regarding the boundary the United States should have reduced their pumping accordingly, “y no extraer la cantidad ‘normal’ de agua y anular el escurrimiento en Matamoros.” Lawson replied, in a rather patronizing tone: “Me es grato...dar a usted gracias por sus ampliaciones a la discusión del asunto,” but continued on to write that while the matter required immediate consideration, it was a question for the countries’ respective national governments, not for their commission. Santacruz wrote back enumerating the ways in which the IBWC *could* control the situation.

In January 1933, Mexico Minister for Foreign Affairs J. M. Puig Casauranc got involved, writing a letter suggesting, “under instructions from my government, that the American and Mexican Sections of the International Boundary and Commission...undertake a joint investigation upon the present utilization...of the Rio Grande below Fort Quitman.” The urgency of the matter was justified efficiently with reference to “the present situation in the Lower Rio Grande Valley, where I understand Matamoros is suffering from a shortage of water.” By March, chief engineer of the Mexico branch of the commission Joaquin Bustamante had suggested two possible locations: the Salineño Basin and the “El Jardín” Basin.

Commissioner Lawson continued to emphasize the project as one of flood control. Yet the perspective from the Mexican evidence suggests that it was profligate American water use, not the inconvenience or even danger of flooding, that prompted the creation of the dam. Water shortage in Matamoros was repeated in 1938 and in 1951. On 24 February 1951, the Secretary of the Mexican branch of the IBWC Fernando Rivas S. wrote in a telegram from his office in Ciudad Juárez to the Mexico City office, “Gasto rio en Matamoros sigue en cero. Situacion grave,” while shortly thereafter David Herrera, commissioner of the Mexican branch of the IBWC, wrote to the Foreign Relations Secretary, “La situación que se ha venido presentando me hace que temer que la propiedad del agua Mexicana no sera respetada completamente cuando se presenten sequias en el Río Bravo.” The communication continued all year with such a tone: desperation on the Mexican side, defensiveness on the United States side. Commissioner Herrera went so far as to send the Mexican ambassador to the US in Washington identical telegrams noting the water level on April 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 27, and 28; May 12, June 25 and 27, July 28, August 1, 15, 21, and sporadically into the fall.

Even once the dam is built, the relationship remains largely the same, as though United States bureaucrats were instructed to gaslight their Mexican counterparts. The same responses to water shortage in Mexico show up again and again. Meanwhile, the IBWC’s booklet commemorating the dam’s dedication states that the pact over the dam “representa una de las demostraciones más elocuentes de la política de comprensión recíproca y de leal amistad que mantienen México y los Estados Unidos.”

This semester, I will continue to research the Presa Falcón as part of a History 285 seminar. I plan to conduct interviews with individuals from the border town of Salineño who remember the construction of the dam, in order to understand the ways that irrigation and flood control needs versus rhetoric were instrumental in the construction of the dam. I thank the Berkeley Center for Latin American Studies greatly for my Tinker Research Grant. The research I conducted with its support was crucial to my development as a scholar and would not have been possible without it.