

Why did El Paso officials create “disinfecting” stations at the border in 1917?

PART 1: WARM UP

Instructions: Take a look at the image below. What do you think is going on here? Try your best, using clues in the photograph, to tell the story of the image. (Consider: What are the 5 W's of this image?)



PART 2: A PHOTO PUZZLE

Instructions: Please wait until we're all at this point!

At your tables is a folder with eight additional images, all taken at the same place as the photo you observed in the Warm Up. Take a look at the photos with your group. How do these images flesh out the story? What are you seeing? What clues are there as to what this is?

Below, record your findings: What's happening in each image? How is each photo building a bigger picture for you?

Photo #__:

So, now that you've looked at nine images, what do you think is the story here?

What questions are popping up for you? What are you curious about?

PART 3: FILLING IN THE GAPS

Instructions: Please wait until we're all at this point! Follow along as we build some historical context together, filling in the gaps from your photo puzzle in Part 2.

- These photos, taken in the early 1900s, are from one of the bridges over the **Rio Grande**, a river which divides the United States and its southern neighbor, **Mexico**.
- This bridge, the Santa Fe International Bridge, connects two “twin sister” cities: El Paso, Texas, on the **northern** [northern/southern] side of the border (**the United States**), and Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, on the **southern** [northern/southern] side of the border (**Mexico**).
- In the early 1900s, every day, hundreds of **Mexicans** would cross over from Juárez into the El Paso to work.

Thinking pause: Why do you think Mexicans would be coming across to work in the US? What kinds of jobs do you think they would be doing? What makes you say that?

Students' responses should include an explanation about power dynamics between the US and Mexico.

Why do you think Mexicans commuted across the bridge (working in El Paso but living in Juárez) instead of immigrating to El Paso? What makes you say that?

Students' responses should reflect an understanding of at least one of a number of factors: cost of living the US; institutional racism in the US (finding housing, for example); interpersonal racism in the US; desire to remain in one's own country/homeland/culture/community.

- In 1917, something changed: American officials at the border created “_____” stations on the bridge, requiring Mexicans who were coming into the United States to be “fumigated” before entering into American territory.

Predict: Why do you think American officials did this? What makes you say that?

This is the question students will be investigating for the day. They will revise this answer at the end of the lesson, with evidence.

What other information would you like to know in order to more confidently answer the question above?

PART 4: MAYOR LEA WEIGHS IN

Instructions: Below is a source that will tell us something about these “disinfecting” stations.

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

WESTERN UNION

TELEGRAM
NEWCOMB CARLTON, PRESIDENT

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

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

D. Leal

JUN 17 1906

What’s going on here? Let’s deconstruct it with our 5 W’s:

1. Who wrote this? Who is the audience? Why does the “who” matter?

Proficient student response: Tom Lea, Mayor of El Paso, Texas wrote this. He wrote it to the Surgeon General in Washington, DC. The mayor and the Surgeon General are both people in positions of power.

Note to teacher: Students may have difficulty locating that Lea was the mayor of El Paso. If they do not initially notice the location, use question five to build on question 1.

2. What is the author saying? (Remember to paraphrase to be sure you understand!)

Proficient student response: Mayor Lea is saying that Mexicans are unclean and many, many of them are coming to El Paso. He is saying that the Mexicans are going to bring disease to El Paso unless there is a quarantine to prevent it.

Note to teacher: If needed, help students with the words typhus/typhus epidemic and quarantine. These can be defined on the students’ worksheets if need be.

3. When was it written? Why does that matter?

Proficient student response: This was written June 17, 1916. This matters because there was a lot of immigration to the US during this time and people had racist ideas about immigrants.

Note to teacher: The telegram says June 17th, but it does not indicate the year. Include the year on your copies for students. Additionally, a student's knowledge of context in this question is dependent on how much teaching and learning has occurred in the course up to this point. An advanced answer to this question might name Nativism as an political ideology of the time.

4. Where was it written? Why does that matter?

Proficient student response: This was written in "El Paso, Tex," which I'm assuming is El Paso, Texas. This matters because Texas used to be part of Mexico, so there were a lot of Mexicans living there already. El Paso might be near Mexico.

Note to teacher: If this is being taught in a US history course after learning about the Civil War, students are likely to name that Texas was in the Confederacy. They may also name the rise of white supremacist terrorism in the South during the Reconstruction period. Use this to contextualize the source, but be sure to name that the key piece of context is borderlands history. An advanced student response would name the Mexican-American War and US acquisition of territory from Mexico.

5. In your estimation, why did they write this?

Proficient student response: It seems like they're writing this because they want a quarantine. I think this person may have some racist ideas about Mexicans.

6. Now, let's put it all together: So what? What seems to be going on here? What questions are raised for you by this source?

Proficient student response: It seems like there were a lot of Mexicans coming over to the US. The mayor makes it seem like they are dirty, but I am not sure if he's right. I know that White people said things like that about people who weren't White, so it's possible they were being racist, not accurate.
Note to teacher: The ideas here will depend on where this lesson falls in a course, in particular how much teaching and learning has been done around so-called "race science," eugenics, and the history of white supremacist falsehoods about people of color in the US and elsewhere.

Note to teacher: Depending on how you are organizing the sources, it is also possible to include this source on the chart on page 7.

PART 5: SOURCE INVESTIGATION, ANALYSIS, AND CORROBORATION

Instructions: As we just discussed, we need to **corroborate!** So, let's. Below are three additional sources. Actively read the sources with your partner and complete the analysis chart on the next page.

Note: These are labeled Sources 2, 3, and 4. Mayor Lea's telegram (the source we just analyzed) is Source 1.

Source 2

Dr. B. J. Lloyd, the public health service official stationed in El Paso, wrote the following to the US Surgeon General:

"Typhus fever is not now, and probably never will be, a serious menace to our civilian population in the United States. We probably have typhus fever in many of our large cities now. I am opposed to the idea [of quarantine camps] for the reason that the game is not worth the candle."

Source 3

In March 1916, the El Paso County Medical Society published a report in its monthly journal, *The Bulletin*, about the level of disease in El Paso, specifically the Chihuahuita neighborhood where many Mexicans/Mexican-Americans lived:

"Over 5,000 rooms in the worst part of Chihuahuita were visited by the medical inspectors of the Health Department during the last week of February. [...] They found two cases of typhus, one case of measles, one case of rheumatism, one case of tuberculosis and one case of chicken pox. That was all of the sickness discovered. This report, if exact, would indicate that Chihuahuita is not the festering plague spot that it is pictured to be."

Source 4

In 1908, the El Paso Printing Company published a book by eugenicist C.S. Babbitt. The book was called *The Remedy for the Decadence of the Latin Race*. He begins his book with a dedication to a man by the name of David Starr Jordan. Jordan, who supported eugenics, had written books of his own, one titled *Blood of the Nation: A Study of the Decay of the Races*, in which he advocated for the "purification" of "Anglo-Saxon blood." Here is an excerpt from C.S. Babbitt's book, published in El Paso:

"The Spaniards, and later the Mexicans, have, by disregarding the ancient laws and customs of eugenics, become degenerate. The Spaniards, mixed to an extent with the Moors and intermixed with the brown natives, Indians and negro slaves, exhibit an example of breeding downward on a gigantic scale. [...] The peon from Mexico is crossing the borders of fifteen hundred miles in length, and asserting his right through the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo to vote. [...] And so we see that America, the abiding place of the highest type of the Caucasian race, has become a vast cesspool and dumping ground for the most degraded classes of the whole earth."