

“The Hole in the Fence”

Scores of Americans found themselves suddenly stranded in Mexico last night when the famous “hole in the fence” at the border was closed yesterday afternoon without warning. . . Protest was made to customs and immigration officials on duty, but the officers said they could do nothing about it.

--San Diego Union, Dec. 20, 1930

It had been there for years: a narrow hole clipped from the barb wire fence separating San Ysidro and Tijuana. Since the late 1920s, thousands of American tourists returning from Mexico had squeezed through the opening at night, bypassing the big iron gates at the international border, which closed promptly at 6:00 p.m. daily.

The fence itself had by built by the Federal Bureau of Animal Industry. It was not an immigration fence; the U. S. government was unconcerned by illegal aliens at the international border. The wire fence was there to stop cattle. Mexican steers, it seemed, often wandered across the border, sometimes carrying ticks, which infected American cattle.

Most visitors to Tijuana paid little attention to the fence as they walked or drove across the border each day through Gate 1. San Diego motor coach operator Fred Sutherland did a booming business transporting people from the downtown San Diego. Others came on trains from the San Diego & Arizona Railway, which ran several times a day for round trip fares of \$1.

Prohibition had turned Tijuana into a mecca for thirsty Americans, eager to visit the cantinas on Avenida Revolución. Others were attracted to the Caliente Race Track, or the casino gambling at Agua Caliente, “the most elaborate pleasure resort in North America,” according to *Time* magazine.

But Tijuana was strictly a daytime adventure. San Diego area churches, PTA groups, women’s organizations, and many politicians wanted an early evening closure to protect public morals from the “injurious effects of wide-open towns.” After Gate 1 closed at 6:00, no one was allowed to enter the United States. Officially, that is.

Only a few paces east of the gate, a hole in the fence provided easy passage into the United States. Federal officials occasionally glanced at the “accidental” hole and sometimes questioned the evening entrants about their nationality or checked them for suspicious bulges in their clothing. For the most part, public use of the hole was a matter of course.

But on Friday night, December 19, 1930, scores of Americans were surprised to find the familiar gap in the “cattle fence” sealed up tight. A few scaled the fence and were grabbed for questioning by customs officials. Others retreated to Tijuana to look for hotel rooms. And some spent the night in the open, waiting for the Gate 1 to reopen at 6:00 a.m. The *San Diego Union* reported that many of the stranded were frantic women “thinly clad and unprepared for the cool night weather.”

The next day Dr. Jan Madsen, head of the local office of the Bureau of Animal Industry, revealed that the fence had been repaired at his direction to keep out stray Mexican livestock. “It is a government fence and it is my business to see that it is kept in repair at all places at all times.” Stranded Americans were not Madsen’s concern. It was “a matter for the customs department, not mine,” he added.

By the Saturday night, several new holes had appeared in the border fence. Enterprising Mexican boys armed with flashlights earned tips by showing Americans where to enter their native country. “Among those making use of the newly-discovered openings,” reported the *Union*, “were several fashionably-dressed men and women who were said to have passed the evening at Agua Caliente. In trying to squeeze through the small openings in the fence some of the plump women and fat men became entangled in the barbed wire, but quickly were extricated by friends or their guides.”

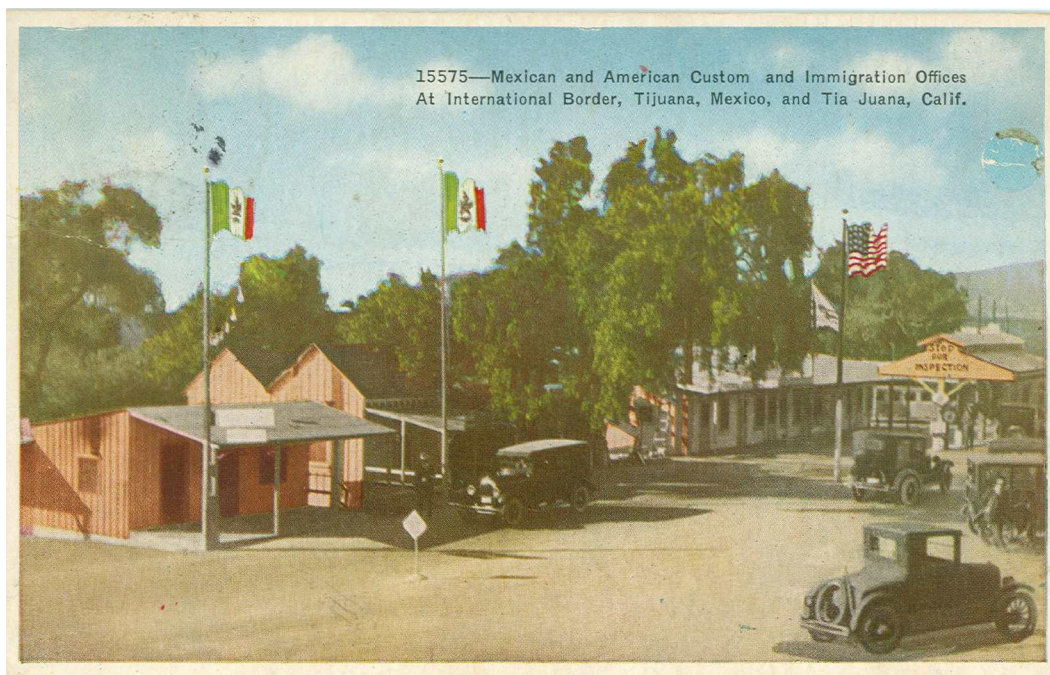
In March, agriculture officials installed a turnstile in the original hole, seven feet east of the main auto gate. Made of pipes painted yellow, the turnstile turned in only one direction--north, could not be locked and was meant to be used 24 hours a day. The new system was immediately tested by “scores of pleased United States residents who formerly wiggled carefully through the ‘hole’ in the barb-wire fence.”

But others protested. Congressman Philip Swing from the Imperial Valley howled that the turnstile “virtually nullified the 6 p.m. closing time,” which, he believed, had been rightly established to control Americans “being attracted to Tijuana gambling dens at night.”

The turnstile lasted only three weeks. “Mourners who had been in the habit of ‘making the hole at one’ (a.m.)” watched as the turnstile “was amputated at its base and new strands of wire were stretched across the gap, thereby closing the famous hole in the fence.”

In the next several months, while the Bureau of Animal Industry fought a losing battle against new holes in their fence, San Diegans began to agitate for a liberalized closing time at the border. Collector of Customs, William Ellison, pointed out that 1,423,751 people had crossed into Tijuana in the first three months of 1931. Clearly, the early closure was not adequate for the busiest port of entry on the U. S. border.

Extended hours finally arrived the following summer when border officials received orders from Washington, D.C. to open the gate until midnight. On Saturday night, July 9, 1932, officials counted approximately 4000 cars crossing the line to Mexico after 6 p.m. Tijuana resorts were packed as San Diegans—for the first time in years—“tasted and sipped of their new privilege--the right to cross the international border line” after dark, untroubled by the late night prospect of the infamous hole in the fence.



The San Diego-Tijuana border in 1930.

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