Rachel St. John

I think for many people who visit Border Field Park today or live in San Diego or Tijuana, this was certainly true for me growing up in Southern California, the divide between the United States and Mexico seems so stark it can be very hard to go back and forth, particularly from Mexico into the United States.

Anne Marie Tipton

This is the ancestral land of the First People, the Kumeyaay.

AMT
For thousands of years, fresh water flowed down from mountains to the east, carving out a course and, with its sediments, creating the Tijuana River Estuary when it mixed with the waters of the sea. All that time, plants and animals adapted to the evolving environment, with Kumeyaay using the estuary and its surrounding land for food-gathering and habitation. With the arrival of Spanish colonists and soldiers in May of 1769, all those patterns began to change and the natural landscape was subject to a different idea of ownership and land management. This shift was cemented when in 1821, the Tijuana Estuary became part of Alta California. In 1848, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo ended the U.S.-Mexican War – and ceded present-day California to the United States, eventually solidifying borders that changed people's ways of life.

You might have heard the war between the United States and Mexico referred to as the Mexican American War. We prefer to use the term U.S. -Mexican War because it acknowledges that Mexico is also a part of America, as well as the hard feelings that still exist to our neighbor to the south regarding that war.

In this episode of Divided Together, we'll hear from Rachel St. John, an historian who wrote a book about the early U.S.-Mexico border period from 1848 to the 1930s. How did a simple line on a map transform into the regulated divide we have today? In this episode historian Rachel St. John shares how an array of officials, land pirates, and law enforcement created the foundations for the modern border control we have today. I'm Anne Marie Tipton, the Education Coordinator for the Tijuana River National Estuarine Research Reserve, and I'll be your guide.

RSJ
My name is Rachel St. John and I'm associate professor of history at UC Davis.

AMT

Rachel also has another title that makes her an important and knowledgeable guest to have on the podcast.

RSJ

I'm the author of *Line in the Sand: A History of the Western U.S. Mexico Border*.

AMT

The history of the U.S.-Mexico border region is both rich and complex. The boundary itself has a history of its own.

RSJ

There was a team that was put together, a joint boundary commission consisting of both Mexican officials and U.S. officials. And both those teams had to travel from really far away from Mexico City and from Washington D.C., and they came together in San Diego and traveled down to where they thought the boundary line was. Although that in itself became a story because it turned out that it wasn't as easy as they thought to find where that initial point where the boundary line should begin. So that was a real challenge for them.

AMT

The job of the boundary commission was to come up with compromises and to interpret treaty language. So from the start, discretion was needed to figure out just where the border would be.

RSJ

The treaty is very specific about one marine league south of the port. What the treaty is less good about is where the port was, or where the bay was. And this is where that boundary commission really comes into play is that it's their job to come up with compromises and to interpret that treaty language. And so from the very beginning, officials on the ground are having to use some discretion to figure out where the border is going to be positioned on the ground.

AMT

In the early negotiations between the United States and Mexico in 1848, boundary commissioners were trying to decide if the Port of San Diego was going to be in California or

Baja California, based on old and faulty maps. The United States wanted one of the best ports on the West Coast, and to complicate matters, commissioners couldn't agree on the definition of the Port of San Diego.

RSJ

Now it's critical that the boundary that they agree on out in the field had to then go back and be approved by national government officials back in Washington DC and Mexico City. The problem didn't end up being the part of the border that's near San Diego actually.

And it just wasn't as easy as they thought it was going to be to figure out something that seems pretty straightforward in the treaty.

AMT

The players involved, however, were just as important as the idea of the boundary itself. There were two boundary commissioners, one from Mexico and one from the United States. One of them in particular was John Russell Bartlett, one of the main boundary commissioners on the border between El Paso and essentially the Colorado River.

RSJ

He was really just a political appointee who had very little knowledge of that region at all. He didn't have experience in surveying. He really, it seems he wanted to be an ambassador to Europe. He wasn't that interested in going out to the border and he didn't really have skills to carry out that work. There were other people on the border who had experience mostly in the army and doing surveying. And sometimes that meant that there was conflict between the members of the U.S. commission, particularly between Bartlett and some of the surveyors that he had to work with over time.

AMT

And even though it might be tempting to think that because the U.S. won the war they took more land, this was not the case. In fact, Mexico had a strong role and a lot of compromise was made.

RSJ

I think, you know, we'll want to step back a little bit to thinking about the treaty itself. So various officials within the United States have been trying to acquire California and other parts of Northern Mexico for decades by the time of the U.S.-Mexican War. And James Polk goes to war

with Mexico in order to acquire California--it's clearly a war of conquest to acquire this territory. So on that level, the Mexican government absolutely did not want to cede these vast stretches of territory.

Within the treaty negotiations themselves, which happened in Mexico among diplomats, it's actually almost surprising given the fact that the U.S. Army was overpowering Mexico and invading central Mexico, that the Mexican diplomats were able to push back and to prevent the United States from pushing even further into acquiring more Mexican territory. Polk, in particular, was interested in Baja California and parts of Sonora and Chihuahua. So I actually think sometimes those Mexican diplomats get not enough credit for how they were able to hold off some more avaricious U.S. land conquest. By the time you get to the surveys themselves, it's actually pretty impressive how much the Mexican and American officials were working together on the boundary line.

AMT

The International Joint Commission met on July 6, 1849. It stipulated that both demarcation parties should survey from the Pacific to the junction of the Colorado and Gila rivers. The commission decided that once both parties were satisfied with the accuracy of the surveys, “then the demarcation of these points shall take place by the placement of monuments.”

In other words, the boundary would go where both parties found agreement. The officials also came together to make decisions and compromises in the case of where to start the boundary line on the eastern side of the border in Texas.

RSJ

So where the initial point near Paso Del Norte or where El Paso and Ciudad Juarez are today, where that point should be, the Mexican and American commissions really had to work together to come to a conclusion about that. What they came up with was seen to have some advantages for the United States and some advantages for Mexico. So it was a real compromise in that sense.

Although some of the officials on the U.S. boundary commission were not happy about that decision. And as a result, they pushed back against the entire boundary survey process. And that's where we end up with the Gadsen Purchase or the Mesilla Treaty five years later that did allow the United States to acquire more territory

AMT

Still, the U.S. had to pay for it.

RSJ

It's really important to note that they were only able to do that by paying Mexico another 10 million dollars. So again, it's a place where you can see how although the United States was stronger than Mexico in these negotiations, the Mexican government didn't just roll over. They were able to push back and to continue to negotiate.

AMT

But not everything was that easy.

RSJ

The biggest controversy arose over where the border should start on the other end of the border from San Diego at Paso Del Norte. So you had the two commissioners come together to come up with a compromise. And it happened that they made that decision while the head surveyor for the U.S. was not there, a man named A.B. Gray. And A.B. Gray, when he did arrive, was really angry about what Bartlett had conceded to. John Russell Bartlett being the head commissioner.

AMT

Not only was there controversy among the commissioners but you can imagine the turmoil coming from the various native groups along the border over this boundary.

RSJ

As the boundary commission came through, they encountered different groups of native people who reminded them in many cases that this was native land, that the boundary commissioners needed to work with them. And there's a particular case that happened in what is now southern New Mexico, where John Russell Bartlett got into a conflict with a group of Apache leaders over questions of captives that the Apaches had taken in particular. And John Russell Bartlett tried to tell these Apache leaders that they had to give up these captives because the United States was coming in and that slavery would no longer be legal.

It's worth knowing that this is before the civil war, but that John Russell Bartlett is from Rhode Island. He's a northerner and was anti-slavery. And these Apache leaders pushed back and said, "No, this is our country and you need to recognize that you're coming into our space and you can't tell us what to do," and they have this whole back and forth. And at the very end of it, Bartlett in his journal acknowledges that he opened up the stores of the commission and gave goods to these Apache leaders, in effect basically buying the captives from the Apaches in order to appease them, which I think is an interesting moment of recognizing how tenuous U.S. power

was in this space and how powerful the native people who lived there and for whom it was their homeland continued to be at this time.

AMT

As explained in episode one of season one, of this podcast, Divided Together,the Kumeyaay Nation has been split by the border fence and still is to this day. There are Kumeyaay groups on both sides of the border that lack access to numerous sacred and ceremonial places and landscapes.

Many people might think that after the U.S.-Mexican War, United States citizens were happy with where the border was drawn, when in fact, there were several Americans who tried to take over parts of Mexico for themselves.

RSJ

One of the things that many people think about American history is they think about U.S. expansion, territorial expansion, almost like putting together a jigsaw puzzle where all the pieces were clearly laid out at the beginning and they just need to get slotted in. And so the United States acquired California because it wanted California and it didn't acquire Baja California because it must not have, or there was something natural about that. As a historian, I'm really interested in how in the 19th century, no one was really sure which parts of the continent would end up being part of the United States and which would remain part of Mexico. And so, a number of U.S. presidents are really interested in acquiring California. What most people don't know is lots of Americans not only wanted to acquire the entire Baja California peninsula, but assumed that it was going to be... So this language about “it's just natural, that this has to become part of the United States” gets repeated so many times. You almost feel like it drives them crazy just hanging off there attached to Mexico that they want it to be part of the United States.

AMT

From the mid-19th century and well into the 20th century, many officials in the U.S. continued their efforts to buy Baja California from Mexico. And then… there are the filibusters, and not the kind that delay legislative decisions.

RSJ

That comes from a word that meant freebooter, or pirate, basically. And the way I think of these filibusters is they're basically land pirates. They are people who came up with their own expeditions of armed men and they gathered money and they would go off into another country in many cases, but not always, Mexico, and try to foment rebellions that would lead to either the creation of an independent nation on Mexican territory or to cause that territory to be annexed to

the United States. Probably the most famous of the 1850s filibusters is a man named William Walker.

AMT

Nicknamed the Gray Eyed Man of Destiny, William Walker came from Tennessee during the gold rush.

RSJ

He became really interested in Baja California, and actually put together an expedition that sailed from San Francisco all the way down to the southern tip of Baja California to La Paz and temporarily claimed control of Baja California proclaiming it an independent Republic. He pretty quickly had to retreat back up towards the border and then was driven across the border into the United States again. And he was put on trial for violating neutrality laws by the United States. And he clearly had done that, but he ended up with a pretty sympathetic jury of Californians who thought maybe it was a good idea for Americans like Walker to try to conquer Baja California.

AMT

But the Gray Eyed Man of Destiny wasn't the only one with a keen eye for land.

RSJ

There's a man named Henry Crabb, who along with family members of his--he married into a Sonoran family, the Ainsa family--and Crabb and some of his relatives went down into Sonora and began talking about basically taking over Sonora and creating either an independent Republic or something that would be annexed to the United States. And the Mexican forces in Sonora, including some Tohono O'odham Indians rallied to defeat Crabb and his force, and actually killed Crabb and all but a few of his men in a major battle in northern Sonora and drove them out the state.

So this was a real ongoing tension in the 1850s, as again both on the official level of the U.S. government and with these sort of, like I said, independent land pirates, people tried to change the boundaries of the nations in the west.

AMT

For decades, tensions continued. Separately, in 1910, a Revolution began in Mexico.

RSJ

One of the things that's really interesting and complicated about the Mexican Revolution is it's a war that basically played out in a variety of stages in different ways, in different parts of Mexico over about 10 years, beginning in 1910, and continuing almost through the end of the decade. The way the war played out in Baja, California, particularly on the California- Baja California border, was mostly centered around a sort of more left-wing revolutionary group of people known as Magonistas. That part of the revolution blew up in a major battle in Tijuana in 1911. And this was really before the Mexican revolution had spread throughout Mexico in as a powerful way as it would over time. And as a result, many people in San Diego thought of it, again, sort of as a novelty.

So there was a battle that went on in Tijuana and as far as we could tell, a couple hundred people came down from San Diego, sort of clustered on the boundary line to see what was going on and to watch the battle almost as a spectacle.

AMT

There is a fascinating photo of this gathering to watch the battle in Rachel's book.

RSJ

And one of the things that's interesting is that happens in Tijuana, in that case in 1911, but it's something that happened in a number of border towns in early years. And then over the course of the revolution as conditions in Mexico got more dire as fighting became more extreme, particularly close to the border, more and more Americans came to think of the Mexican Revolution as an act of serious danger to them rather than being something that they didn't take that seriously in that first battle of Tijuana in particular.

AMT

As Rachel mentioned at the top of the episode, crossing the border these days is much more of a task than it used to be. Because of this, a distinct mindset sets in that Mexico and the United States are two vastly different places.

RSJ

When I look at the history of these places, that's something that really doesn't emerge until well into the 20th century. They were much more integrated, crossing the border back and forth was not nearly as difficult as it is now, even before 2001, right?

AMT

Flow across the border wasn't enforced until the 1920s.

RSJ

So the Border Patrol was not founded as a separate agency until 1924 and that was part of a major immigration reform act at the national level in 1924, which really stepped up enforcement on both the Canadian and Mexican borders, as well as at seaports of entry, but also began to turn its focus more to the Mexican border. And at that time, while there was still an emphasis on controlling Chinese immigration, there were also a growing number of laws that applied to Mexican people, people who were Mexican nationals that U.S. immigration officials were more concerned about collecting fees from and restricting their entries to legal channels.

AMT

Prior to the foundation of Border Patrol, particularly around the turn of the 20th century, very little patrolling was happening.

RSJ

San Diego was a very small city still in the early 20th century. San Ysidro barely anything. And Tijuana was also very small at the time. It really did start with customs officials though. So for a lot of people today, we associate patrolling the border with the Border Patrol and with immigration in particular, but the customs officers were really the people who were most responsible for patrolling the border. They mostly were stationed in those ports of entry where they would monitor people passing through towns or train traffic that was coming through. But by the late 19th century, there began to be a few mounted customs inspectors, who would mostly go out looking for cattle, to be totally honest, that's particularly on the Arizona -Sonora border, you have mounted customs inspectors. And then by the very end of the 19th century, but mostly into the 20th century, some of those customs inspectors also began to be charged with looking for Chinese immigrants who were prohibited from entering the United States under a series of Chinese exclusion acts that were passed beginning in 1882.

AMT

The work began with customs officers, who were the first group to be tasked by the U.S. government with enforcing those laws. By the early 20th century, officials were set up on the border to monitor immigration.

RSJ

Most of them, again worked in border towns out of an office, but you did have some mounted patrols going out to look for people, as well, or even going into Mexico. The big Northern Sonoran City of Cananea, for instance, was a place that some immigration officials would go to to sort of look for people who might be trying to get into the United States around those anti-Chinese laws.

AMT

After the U.S.-Mexican War, Mexico ceded 55 percent of its territory, including the present-day states California, Nevada, Utah, New Mexico, most of Arizona and Colorado, and parts of Oklahoma, Kansas, and Wyoming. As we heard, that was only after the two countries worked side by side for ten years, in terrible conditions, with politically appointed commissioners, many with little relevant experience or skills. Even after all their efforts, politicians in Washington, D.C. weren't happy with the boundary - so the U.S. paid $10 million for the Gadsden Purchase in what is now Arizona and New Mexico.

Rachel St. John shared stories with us of the brash and cocky filibusters or land pirates who thought that they could take over parts of northern Mexico for themselves. She pointed out that the Mexican Revolution in the 20th century was a dangerous time that included the Battle of Tijuana with U.S. tourists taking early selfies. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, thousands of people traveled to see the International Monument, south of what is now Border Field State Park. Rachel then detailed the early 20th century legal foundation to the modern border patrol apparatus, beginning with customs officials.

Rachel St. John's book *Line in the Sand* explores all of this early history of the western U.S.-Mexico border and draws you in with her engaging writing style that reveals the colorful characters that weave in and out of this era. I encourage you to dive into it yourself.

Thanks to Rachel St. John for her time and sharing this history. Thank you for listening to Divided Together, brought to you by Parks California and the generosity of an anonymous donor.

Adam Greenfield is the engineer and co-producer of this podcast. I'm Anne Marie Tipton, your guide and co-producer, and we'll see you soon.