

Commercial Ports of the LRG Valley

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Part I: The Beginnings

The geology of the Valley is such that it was shortchanged when it came to having a natural, deep-water harbor. Neither Port Isabel nor the mouth of the Rio Grande afforded such an asset.

At the mercy of the one railroad company after 1904 and then two by 1928, Valley businesses early on began to seek alternatives to move commodities and other items produced in the region and even from northern Mexico. To add insult to injury, in 1906, the Gulf Coast Lines, later to become part of the Missouri Pacific Railroad, purchased the railway from Brownsville to Point Isabel. [On August 1, 1930 the name of the town was officially changed to Port Isabel.] Col. Uriah Lott, the man chiefly responsible for bringing the St. Louis, Brownsville, and Mexico Railway to the Valley, had been an intermediary in its purchase. It was consummated, according to him, "regardless of cost." In short, the railroad wanted a lock on transportation no matter where it would occur.

The use of Brazos Island as a transportation hub had begun in earnest in 1846 when General Zachary Taylor used it and the shallow pass for logistics of the Mexican War. Before the Civil War, shallow draft vessels could move into the Port of Brazos Santiago on the island's northwest side. It was recorded for the year ending June 30, 1858 that 132 ships had visited the port. By 1860, eleven men manned the custom service at Point Isabel.

An early survey of the pass and bay was made between January and March 1871, and seven years later Congress appropriated \$6,000 to remove a wrecked French vessel from the pass. Between 1878 and 1889 seven appropriations totaling \$253,500 were made for harbor improvements, but not all was spent.

Sometimes 30 to 40 shallow draft steamships entered the port in one month's time. The Morgan Line steamers made the Brazos Santiago port a regular port of call. More affluent visitors to the Valley favored ocean travel over the slow and rough stage coach line. Connecting transportation was facilitated when, in 1872, the first private railroad constructed in Texas was built from Point Isabel to Brownsville. It was of narrow gauge. Unfortunately for the area much changed after 1882 when Corpus Christi was connected to Laredo by a standard gauge railroad. Valley transportation then became relatively isolated.

Dr. S. K. Hallam had come to Brownsville in 1906. By the next year he had become a significant Valley land developer, especially near Donna and west of Brownsville. In the autumn of 1911 he helped to organize the Brownsville Waterways Association. Its goal was to provide the Valley the advantages of water transportation. This objective brought many of the area's leading citizens into the fold. On its board of directors was Louis Cobolini, William Kelly, S. L. Dworman, James b. Wells, R. B. Creager, W. N. Pearson, D. E. Hawkins, Jose Celaya, J. G. Fernandez, J. B. Scott, K. H. McDavitt, and Dr. Hallam. That they had a singularity of purpose was amazing, since some were political enemies. Dr. Hallam became the association's president, Benjamin

Kowalski 1st vice president, and C. P. Barreta 2nd vice president. Two committees were established, one was concerned with Brazos Santiago deep water; the second the Brownsville ship channel. The fact was that Major G. P. Howell, District Engineer at Galveston, had in a November 17, 1910 very analytical and exhaustive report, concurred with the New Orleans engineer in advising against spending money at Brazos Santiago at this time.

By the end of October 1911 funds had been collected to use for publicity and lobbying efforts. Commodore Cobolini became the only paid association officer. He commenced full-time to accumulate the necessary data from government and other sources. He was successful in getting Congressman John N. Garner to secure a Congressional appropriation for the survey of the harbor. This survey was completed in 1912.

Cobolini was native of Trieste, Italy and from a distinguished military family. He had fought as a youth with Garibaldi during the campaigns to unify Italy. In 1865, at age 20, he arrived in Galveston where he became a fish and fruit peddler. He later secured a fishing schooner that plied the Gulf Coast. Cobolini was involved in organizing the dock workers' union in Galveston, involved in state labor affairs, and in the 1880s helped in the development of Port Lavaca and Port Aransas. He was a proponent of a deep water port for Galveston and worked to bring it to fruition. These experiences were invaluable when working toward the same for Point Isabel.

His knowledge was made useful when he moved to Brownsville in 1907 and established a fleet of fishing boats at Point Isabel. It was he who traveled several times to Washington to consult about the harbor survey.

When the engineering report was released, it stated that a 30 foot channel through the pass and to and including the turning basin at Point Isabel could be secured for \$4, 200,000 and a 40 foot one for \$6 million. General Marshall, chief of the staff, and other engineering board members visited the Valley and were given the grand tour. One very important aspect of his visit was that the Rio Grande River, once declared a navigable stream, was reassessed when it was apparent that the waters of the river were more needed for irrigation than navigation.

Marshall, however, could not recommend the channel project because 1. there was no railroad adequate to carry the stone for construction of the jetties and 2. the Valley was not sufficiently developed at the time to warrant the port. Marshall suggested that a navigation district be organized and authorized to issue bonds. He concluded that if such were established and able to raise \$2 million, he would approve the project. With the citizens "bond shy" at this time, the project died.

A 1916 visit to Washington by Cobolini in another effort to secure the jetties and a 30 foot channel for \$4million met upon deaf ears. This was after members of the Board of Engineers had visited the area, and Lt. Col. C. S. Riche, district engineer at Galveston, had recommended a 25 foot project through the bar, a 1000 by 2000 foot turning basin behind the north end of Brazos Island, and suitable jetties. When in January 1917 similar plans were set out, Cobolini dropped his activism as he believed the proposal was impractical.

It had been in 1912 that B. G. Stegman began to actively espouse the idea of a ship channel to Brownsville. It was on a route close to what became the present Brownsville ship channel. His idea went nowhere.

Meanwhile another important development was occurring. D. A. O'Brien had caught the ear of A. Albert Browne by suggesting that Browne purchase the Rio Grande Railroad as a potential valuable asset when and if a turning basin was dredged at Point Isabel near the end of the railroad pier. Browne did so with his nephew, James A. Browne, as a partner. They paid \$25,000 and assumed a 1st mortgage of \$65,000. Later they sold it to Dave O'Brien, who for eight years worked for a deep water port and finally rebuilt the road to standard gauge as required by the federal government. O'Brien was to sell the property on February 15, 1925 to W. E. Eldridge of Sugar Land, TX.

In 1916, O'Brien, along with A. Albert Browne, Cobolini, Frank Rabb, and E. S. Brodix visited Washington and asked the Army to consider another port project survey. The Army approved one and conducted it in the summer of 1917. In May 1918 engineers from New Orleans came to Brownsville to ascertain if Valley interests would furnish sufficient funds to dredge a channel 16 feet deep, 100 feet wide at the bottom from the pass to the end of the railroad pier and rebuild the railroad to standard gauge. In return the federals would dredge a channel through the bar 18 feet deep and 400 feet across the bottom, and keep it open for five years. O'Brien would need to sell \$191,000 in bonds to pay for the standard gauge conversion.

On July 11, 1918 a Valley-wide conference was held at Point Isabel After an all-day session the prominent representatives wired Senators Culbertson and Sheppard and Congressman Garner that the Valley would meet Government requirements.

Fixed on the basis of \$125,000 for the Channel Fund, quotas were set for each Valley community. Brownsville topped the list at \$46,875 and La Feria and Lyford/Sebastian were at the bottom at \$937.50 each. Brownsville took on the task of selling the investment to other Valley communities. C. L. Jessup's talk to a overflow Mercedes gathering was reprinted and 30,000 copies distributed throughout the Valley.

On 7/10/19 the campaign wired the engineers that the fund had been reached.. In fact, some money had been returned as an economic depression was to ensue. In early 1922 unpaid bond subscriptions to the railroad renovation totaled \$35,000 and the Channel Fund was still \$15,000 short. In March a \$50,000 S.O.S.—Save Our Seaport—campaign was instituted. After some fitful months, the books were finally balanced. On 11/22/22 Mr. O'Brien himself took the funds to the district engineer in Galveston.

Part II: Slow and Unsteady Progress

The wheels of progress moved slowly. It wasn't until August 1923 that the *Dredge Velasco* was reported to be anchored between Brazos and Padre Islands. Another dredge was said to arrive in about six weeks to excavate the outer channel through the bar. Both projects were scheduled for a five weeks completion time. Sixteen months later on December 23 the project still had not been completed. On that date all work had stopped due to lack of funds. An additional \$23,000 would

be needed to complete the inner channel. In fact the dredge for the outer channel had not gone outside the bar until more than a year after the arrival of the first dredge. When it did, problems cut its operations short. Early in January 1925 both dredges sailed for home.

Cost estimates had been incorrect. The \$125,000 Channel fund was based on the removal of 720,000 cubic yards at 15 cents per cubic yard—a total cost of \$108,000. for the 16 foot deep, 100 foot wide channel The contract let however designated a 17' channel hence adding 125,000 cubic yards costing \$18,750 more. Even this did not take into account an additional 45,000 cubic yards of shoaled material that had built up after the last survey.

As slow as the government was, it was committed, since the Valley had acted in good faith.. The engineers now decided to construct jetties from the tips of both islands extending into the Gulf to where the depth was 16 feet. The estimated cost of this new project was \$158,056. Work was first to begin on the transfer wharfs on July 22, 1926 and by June 29, 1927 the two dikes were completed. The actual cost had risen to \$206,341. The *Dredge Absecon* began operations on 4/23/27, but nature again interceded. The work was suspended when the inner channel silted to the point that the dredge couldn't proceed to the railroad pier to take on oil and water.

In March 1927 the Commissioners Court of Cameron County employed Commodore Cobolini "to again take the leadership in a fight for a Valley harbor." In early 1928 Cobolini led Army engineers through the pass during very inclement weather. He contracted a severe cold then pneumonia and died February 27, 1928 at age 84. The *Brownsville Herald* wrote "...he, who had outridden many a storm on life's tempestuous sea, cast his anchor in the haven of eternal rest."

By June 30, 1928 the results were no where near what was initially expected. Since late 1924 the engineers had spent \$215,000 resulting in the inner channel having a depth of six and a half feet and a width of merely 50 feet. The channel over the bar was 12 feet deep and 75 feet wide.

As C. L. Jessup was to write, "History seems to prove that once the government started on a project of merit, regardless of delay and disappointment the work will some day be pushed to completion." Back to the drawing boards!

On May 5, 1928 the Chief of Engineers had already recommended modification of the existing project. He now recommended a channel through the bar 300 feet wide and jetty construction at an estimated cost of \$1.6 million. During the next three years only survey work was conducted.. Congress on July 3, 1930 adopted a new project calling for a channel 25' deep and 300' wide. From the pass to Long Island would be a channel 21.5' deep and 1,200' wide at its bottom. Two other channels would extend from this one, one towards Port Isabel and the other 1000' towards Brownsville. Originally the depth of the channel to Port Isabel was set at 16', but at the end of January 1930 the engineers changed it to 25' and 100' wide. Cost estimates were put at \$2,358,000 with a \$60,000 annual maintenance cost.

When the Arroyo Colorado Navigation District was formed August 1, 1927 it was obvious that Valley-wide cooperation was a thing of the past. Harlingen was striking out on it own. Likely San Benito, Port Isabel and Brownsville would also continue to go it alone. Even this proved not to be the case. An election was called for on 12/22/28. The Brownsville Navigation District

(BND) and \$2 million of bonds were voted. On 5/29/30 \$1.5 million more of bonds were approved. None of these bonds were sold. Earlier on 12/29/28 the San Benito-Port Isabel Navigation District had been formed. It was able to sell \$500,000 worth of bonds and organize on 1/2/29.

The government refused to loan Brownsville on its bonds, but, after the Labor Day Hurricane of 1933, the federal Public Works Administration, with its more liberal attitude, made such a loan possible. The PWA made a loan of \$2, 472,000 to the Brownsville Navigation District.

In December 1933 the twin jetty project was started. It was completed at the cost of \$2.6 million in March 1935. What made its design different from its predecessors was that it was modeled for spacing and orientation at the U. S. Waterway Experiment Station at Vicksburg, Mississippi. It was, however, the first problem to be investigated, hence it didn't have the benefit of past experience.

As finalized the jetties ended up 1,200 feet apart and extending approximately one mile, with 4,000 feet into the Gulf itself. The foundations were built of limestone riprap rock varying in size from 15 to 200 lbs. Its core section was of limestone 15 lbs. to two tons. All was then covered with granite blocks weighing from 6 to 10 tons. What a far cry this was in dimension, size and strength from the puny attempts that had come before.

The rocks were placed by gantry cranes operated from timber trestles into the Gulf. The supply of rock was moved via a car ferry on standard gauge railroad tracks leading onto the trestles. All told about 420,000 tons of rock were placed over a 16 month period. The jetties were completed almost six months ahead of contracted time.

Upon completion of the jetties, the BND rushed the rights of way matters. Where need condemnation suits were filed and engineering plans rushed to completion and approval.

Bids had also been opened for extending the water pipe line from the city to the planned turning basin. Despite tight funding the PWA would not forego elimination of any facilities at the basin. Finally it increased the grant by \$222,000, making the total \$2,694,000. Then the dredging and infrastructure contracts were signed.

The giant dredges *Orleans* and *Texas* cut their way from deep water seventeen miles to the Brownsville turning basin. It was the Standard Dredging Co. with offices in Galveston, New Orleans, and New York that had done much of the work. The port would be officially dedicated May 10, 1936.

The channel was 32' deep and 200' wide while the turning basin was 36' deep and 1000' wide. In the 1970s the south side of the basin was expanded to 3,500' wide and 1,900' long. By 1980 Port Brownsville had 48 piers, wharves, and docks. Four miles east of the basin is a special harbor dedicated to use by the shrimping fleet.

Shipping firms along with their agents were soon to appear. The Newton Line advertised that it ran ships between New York and Brownsville via Houston. Among its vessels were the S.S.

Texas Ranger, *S.S. Texas Tender*, and the *S.S. Texas Banker*. Philen, Miller & Co. were agents for Moore & McCormack with its Mooremack Gulf Lines Inc. subsidiary, Continental Steamship Co., Petroleum Navigation Co., and the U.S. Tankship Corp. Lallier and Co. was another shipping agent operating out of Brownsville.

When in 1949 the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway was completed to the Brownsville Ship Channel this added considerably to its traffic. The port deals primarily in bulk cargo such as ore, fuel oil, and grain. It is also home to marine drilling rig construction and ship dismantling.

With the channel to Port Isabel first to be in place, it got the initial jump on Port Brownsville. Its port director, Herbert S. Crawford, was ecstatic about its first eight months of operation since its July 1935 start. One strange export was Italy's purchase of Valley oil to supply her warplanes operating in Ethiopia and her warships in the Mediterranean. Crude exports totaled 199,685 barrels. Through March 31 1936 the port had handled 4,884,164 pounds of canned goods, primarily grapefruit juice and grapefruit. Coastwise shipping saw 26,718 lbs. of hides, 548,542 bushels of corn, 10,958 bushels of grain sorghum, 1,170 bushels of maize, 330,550 lbs. of cabbage, 1,318,325 lbs. of broomcorn, 5,798 barrels crude oil, 302,946 lbs. of vegetables, 712,160 lbs. of general merchandise, 103,851 lbs. of print paper, and 312,194 barrels of gasoline refined at a Port Isabel plant.

The imports including tubular steel, steel plates, lumber, lubricants, boxboard, roofing paper, and rice totaled an even larger tonnage. In all 484 vessels had registered at the port in the eight month period.

When Port Brownsville with its superior infrastructure and protected harbor came on line it would soon outstrip its neighbor. Port Isabel in later years was able to attract a shrimping fleet of its own, sports fishing boats, and for a time a sizeable gambling ship.

The preceding history of decades-long efforts to create the Port Isabel and Brownsville ports points out many things including lack of scientific knowledge when it came to channel and jetty construction, and wasteful and inept government management combined with special interest lobbying and pork barrel spending. If they took decades to bring to fruition it should be no wonder that the creation of the Port of Harlingen did likewise.

Harlingen's founder, Lon C. Hill, early on had a vision for connecting the town to the ocean via the Arroyo Colorado. Other Harlingenites also took up the flag. On 10/15/15 Mr. and Mrs. Lindsay Waters and Mr. and Mrs. A.H. Weller. Represented Harlingen as delegates to the Intracoastal Canal meeting in Houston. The idea of making a cut through Padre Island and dredging the Arroyo Colorado near the town was offered. On

6/6/16 it was reported that the Federal Government has turned down any funding to dredge the Arroyo Colorado in order to create an inland harbor.

While matters then languished for a decade, the impending start on ports for Port Isabel and Brownsville spurred positive action in Harlingen. On 12/6/27, \$500,000 of the new Arroyo Colorado Navigation District bonds are offered. They attracted a premium price, according to

J.B. Chambers, chairman of the newly created district. [A second bond issue for \$625,000 will be approved in 1946, making the total indebtedness \$1,125,000. By 1958 when Clifford Purdy is chairman of the board, the total has been reduced to \$404,000. The original area tax was 60¢ per \$100 valuation but drops to 30¢ by 1959.]

The following year the 9/4/28 newspaper reports that there is considerable public support and agitation to dredge at least a 9" deep channel at the mouth of the Arroyo Colorado and make a cut through a South Padre Island in order to move to making Harlingen a deep water port. In an editorial, 9/25/28, the *Harlingen Star* lists objectives for Harlingen. Among them is "Dredging Arroyo Colorado canal channel in six months." On this date J.B. Chambers, chairman of the Arroyo Navigation District, makes formal application for a cut in South Padre Island to facilitate movement into the Arroyo Colorado waterway to be. The idea is endorsed by former Corps of Engineer chief Gen. Lansing, but nothing comes of this Nine months later Chambers and the old board are re-elected by a 3 to 1 margin after opponents question the investment of funds. Not everyone had been aboard such a plan. J.A. Seagrove in a letter to the editor (11/22/28} details the high costs of Arroyo Colorado, Laguna Madre, and South Padre Island dredging to effect the Arroyo Colorado Navigation District's plan to access Harlingen.

General Lytle Brown, chief of engineers, informed the U.S. Rivers and Harbors Commission in early February 1930 that no permit would be issued for any island cut until a study was made of current and tidal flows and their possible effects on the Brasos Santiago Pass.

Almost a decade later, on 3/6/38, it is reported that a dredge in the Arroyo Colorado is progressing toward what will be the Port of Harlingen. Lack of funds apparently brings an end to this work, but a First Day Cover *Arroyo Colorado Barge Canal from Harlingen, Texas to Deep Water Ports* is issued for the first mail posted by boat June 29, 1938. It also states "Harlingen is the Distribution Center for the rich Rio Grande Valey production area of World's Finest Grapefruit." Likely this commemorative cachet was issued for a mail movement to Port Isabel by a shallow draft boat. True freight traffic would still be far in the future.

Real movement comes on 2/8/46 when the U.S. House of Representatives approves funding for Intracoastal Waterway construction work. This is after Rep. Milton H. West of Brownsville assures all on 1/11 that the extension of the coastal canal to Harlingen is in the bag, that work on two storage dams is to start, and that a drainage system for the Valley will be built.

The signiifcant date becomes 6/15/51. This is when the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway from Corpus Christi to Brownsville is completed and when the dredge *J.J. Mansfield* excavates the last land blocking the channel and the opening to Port Harlingen. The E. and M. Bohuskey Construction Company of Harlingen is awarded a \$102,000 contract to erect a 650' dry wharf, a 100' bulk wharf, storage facilities, and internal roads for the port. These will near completion seven months later.

Port Harlingen facilities are completed and dedicated on 2/27/52. Its initial cargo shipment arrives at one of seven docks when the very first commercial barge arrives. The port has a 500 by 400 foot turning basin dredged to a depth of 12 feet and tied to a 125' wide channel down the Arroyo Colorado for 26 miles to the Intracoastal Waterway.

A \$150,000 project of the Harlingen Municipal Water Board is underway to install a 12 inch water main to Port Harlingen.

In the summer of 1953 the \$500,000 lift bridge over the Arroyo Colorado opens. It connects the west side of FM 106 to Rio Hondo and allows for tall waterway traffic to reach Port Harlingen. It is the only such engineered bridge of its type in Texas.

In 1955, 121 barges with 159,299 long tons of freight utilize Port Harlingen.

On 2/13/81 Harlingen native David Bodenhamer is named Port of Harlingen Director. He is a graduate of Pan American University with a B.A. in administration and has been assistant manager at Ferguson Motors.

In 1987 the Port of Harlingen Authority employs W. G. "Butch" Palmer, Jr. as port director. It is one of 14 waterways in the Texas Ports Association.

It is in April 1991 that a localized, once in 500 year, freak storm dumps upward of 20" in a ten hour period. Runoff flood waters in the Arroyo Colorado almost exceed its high banks. The deep, swiftly-moving, waters destroy half of the dry cargo dock at the Port of Harlingen. Three years later some of the \$1.6 million accrued navigation district tax money is used to effect rebuilding.

One of the major exports of the port is brown sugar refined by the Rio Grande Valley Sugar Growers, Inc. at Santa Rosa. To facilitate sugar handling on 5/12/09 the Port of Harlingen dedicates the 60,000 sq. ft. Sam Sparks Warehouse capable of storing 36,000 tons of raw sugar. This all-weather facility will expedite shipments of sugar by intracoastal barges to the white refinery south of New Orleans. Six locked barges are propelled by one tugboat pusher.

All the ports of the Valley have become established assets. While they have experienced a long and a difficult birth they are now thriving in their middle and old ages.