

Bagdad: Lost City of the Rio Grande

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A few years back, this part of the coast experienced a particularly high tide. The ensuing waves washed away several feet of sand revealing the clay sub-soil. A friend and I decided to do some exploring on the south side of the Rio Grande. Being unfamiliar with Mexico's laws, I decided against bringing my metal detector along.

We crossed the International Bridge at Matamoros and then drove 25 miles east on a narrow highway. After passing a military outpost near the coast we arrived at Playa de Bagdad beach. From here, we drove north along the shore, stopping periodically to explore the remains of several wrecks that lay partially exposed at the base of a line of dunes.

At one of these stops, I gathered several dozen brass nails and some lead sheathing from the hull of the bigger of the two wrecks. It was high noon when we reached the mouth of the river and we celebrated this leg of the trek with upraised cans of beer and cold bologna sandwiches. On a whim, we followed an old trail back along the river until we reached a sort of rough camp where a couple of fishermen were digging oysters in the muddy river bed.

After sharing a beer with the two, we continued a short distance before nature kind-a whispered in my ear. This of course was an irresistible call and we immediately stopped. It was while I stood, responding to nature's call, that I happened to notice the sun reflecting off something beside the trail. I examined the object and recognized it as the bottom of an old whiskey bottle. Looking more closely now, I could see the ground was strewn with broken bottles, old pottery, fine china and other unidentifiable shards of glass. Virtually every piece looked to be from around 1850-70. It took several moments before we realized we had stumbled upon an old settlement.

"The small Mexican town of Bagdad, located across the border at the mouth of the Rio Grande, would assume its place in history and sustain the Southern cause throughout the war. The Union did not desire a war with Mexico and was bound by treaties to allow shipping in and out of its southern neighbor's ports. The Europeans, anxious to protect their own interests, (the merchants were very persuasive in their economic arguments), sent modern warships to patrol the international waters of the Gulf. This was to ensure no foreign shipping would be molested while engaging in legitimate trade with Mexico. At any given time, there could be several dozen of these ships of war, lying at anchor just off the mouth of

the river. Not willing to antagonize the Europeans, the Union was forced to deal with the situation as best as they could.”

The town of Bagdad was wide open during the war years. In his book, “Backdoor at Bagdad, The Civil War on the Rio Grande,” author James A. Irby wrote: “Bagdad, until cotton times, had been a miserable collection of fishermen’s shanties. In a few months, all this changed. To this town, peddlers, gamblers, swindlers and smugglers-the backwash of the world-found their way in great numbers, augmented by the intermittent visits of soldiers from the French, Austrian, Belgian and Mexican Armies. So good was business that laborers made up to \$10.00 per day in specie, and the owners of skiffs and lighters (small craft carrying cargo through the treacherous surf to waiting ocean going vessels anchored offshore) could draw upwards of \$40.00 per day. Stagecoaches made ten trips a day to and from Matamoras. The little fishing village’s population soon grew to over 15,000 souls.”

An editorial in the Brownsville Ranchero, described Bagdad as a town in which “Fandangos were held every night and women as beautiful as houris exhibit their charms, without the least reserve!”

Lee’s surrender brought an end to the port’s usefulness. The next couple of years were quite chaotic. Bandits, deserters from both armies, and desperadoes roamed the area at will. Banks were not safe and most people hid their valuables close at hand. In the fall of 1867, a great storm sprang up, roaring in from the Gulf with little warning.

The surprised residents fled Bagdad with little but the clothes on their backs. Following age old traditions when threatened by man or nature, many of the people had hastily thrown their money and other valuables into their privies before evacuating the town. In the past, it had been a simple matter of digging a hole and recovering one’s property. A bit smelly perhaps, but a small price to pay for the safety of one’s treasure.

This was a bad storm and its effects were felt as far away as San Antonio, 300 miles to the north. Brownsville suffered heavy damage and Bagdad and the little town of Clarksville, directly across the river, were both totally wiped out. With no landmarks remaining it was impossible for the returning citizens to recover their valuables. If the old stories are true, an untold amount of gold and silver remains unclaimed to this day.

Should this year’s Hurricane Season produce a nice tropical storm, it could change the course of the river. It may be possible to hunt within the city limits of

this old port. Of course, you will want to be the first one there as I imagine all the local treasure hunters have already marked their calendars.

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