

II.5. LAREDO

Laredo Largely Latin

“Laredo, symbolic of the Aztec, and overflowing with richest promise of all that is desirable—we are fain to linger long in thy midst. Laredo, on the banks of the murky and fearsome Rio Grande—so we go down to the middle of the bridge and view the “marker” that means that it is the boundary line between the States and Mexico—the line that divides the Stars and Stripes from the soil over which floats the red-green-white on which is emblazoned the snake, the eagle and the cactus. Probably we will cross over to Nueva Laredo; but, so far as Mexican ways go, it is utterly useless to take a step further; for when you have seen Laredo you have seen Mexico, combined with all the pep and vim and go of the American. Semi-tropical as it is, you find oranges, grape fruit, and all that you could ask for, even to natural gas and oil; and this coupled with the fact that street cars and electric lights have been added, makes the fact very apparent that one of the long stops will be at Laredo.”

G. A. MacNaughton, *The Meridian Road in Texas*, 1916

Laredo is particularly important to the Meridian Highway because it marks the southern terminus of the highway in Texas as well as the point of entry on the route from Mexico. As such, it was critical to the promotion of the highway as an international thoroughfare and was featured prominently in early marketing literature. As originally conceived and promoted, the Meridian Highway entered Laredo from the north where it extended through several small communities such as Cactus, Webb, and Cotulla. The highway encouraged travelers to continue into Mexico by way of the International Foot Bridge, which crossed the Rio Grande from Convent Avenue. Following the establishment of the Texas Highway Department in 1917, the Meridian Highway was designated as SH 2 within the newly organized state highway system. In 1926, the route was integrated into the federal highway system and included another highway overlay designation as US 81. Within the private sector, proponents of the Meridian Highway also associated it with the Pan-American Highway, which initially extended to Mexico City but later stretched as far south as Argentina, making it one of the longest highways in the world. Within this highway, Laredo was a key location and was known as a “gateway between Texas and Mexico.”²⁸⁰

Well before named highways, such as the Meridian Highway, made their mark on the city, Laredo was an important transportation corridor between the United States and Mexico. Tomás Sánchez de la Barrera y Garza founded Laredo in 1775 to discourage French settlement into Spanish territories.²⁸¹ After a period of political unrest, Laredo officially became part of Texas and the United States in 1846; two years later the city became the seat of Webb County. The Rio Grande was established as the international boundary between the United States and Mexico,

and effectively separated a portion of the city from the U.S. side; the separated portion became Nuevo Laredo.

Although established in the mid-eighteenth century with the Rio Grande making the city a major trade and commercial center, Laredo's modern era did not begin until 1881, when the Texas Mexican Railroad laid tracks from Corpus Christi, and the I&GN Railroad extended service from San Antonio. The following year, the Rio Grande and Pecos Railway was constructed north of Laredo along the river. These rail lines made Laredo the only Texas border town to have a permanent rail connection along the lower Rio Grande until the St. Louis, Brownsville and Mexico Railway reached Brownsville in 1904. Of the railroads that extended to Laredo, the I&GN Railroad played an important role in the establishment of the earliest automobile route, especially for the Meridian Highway. It provided the most direct route between San Antonio and Laredo, and as roads evolved in the early 1900s, the path of the Meridian Highway closely followed an existing railroad (in this case, the I&GN), which typified trends elsewhere on the Meridian and other auto trails of the era.

The Bexar County Highway League published one of the earliest travel guides that described the Meridian Road through Laredo (see *Figure 138*, to follow). The guide listed Jarvis Plaza (incorrectly spelled as "Parvis" Plaza) and the Customs House on Matamoros Street as the starting point and directed motorists to turn right (north) onto Santa Maria Avenue. The guidebook identified this route as the Meridian Road, and it continued northward to San Antonio. The log book mentioned the "brick church on left" at the intersection of Matamoros Street and Santa Maria Avenue.²⁸² However, it did not note the Bender Hotel, which was built in 1913 and was regarded by some as "Laredo's finest hotel" (see *Figure 139*, to follow).

Another early travel guide of the era was *The Meridian Road in Texas*. Published in 1916 by the Texas Division of the International Road Association, this booklet differed from the other auto logs described earlier because it was a map-based guide that depicted the entire route of the Meridian Road including the path as it entered and extended through Laredo (see *Figure 140*, to follow). The guide shows a meandering route just north of Laredo as motorists had to cross over the I&GN Railroad at multiple locations. Within the city limits of Laredo, the route followed a staircase-like fashion before terminating at the "Hotel Laredo." The 1916 Sanborn map (see *Figure 141*, to follow) includes a listing of major businesses and while it notes several hotels, including the Bender Hotel, it does not include anything under the name "Hotel Laredo." However, the overall configuration of the Meridian Road as shown in the guide matches the route described in other travel guides, and the feature identified as "Hotel Laredo" may actually be the Bender Hotel. One other item of note about these travel guides is that

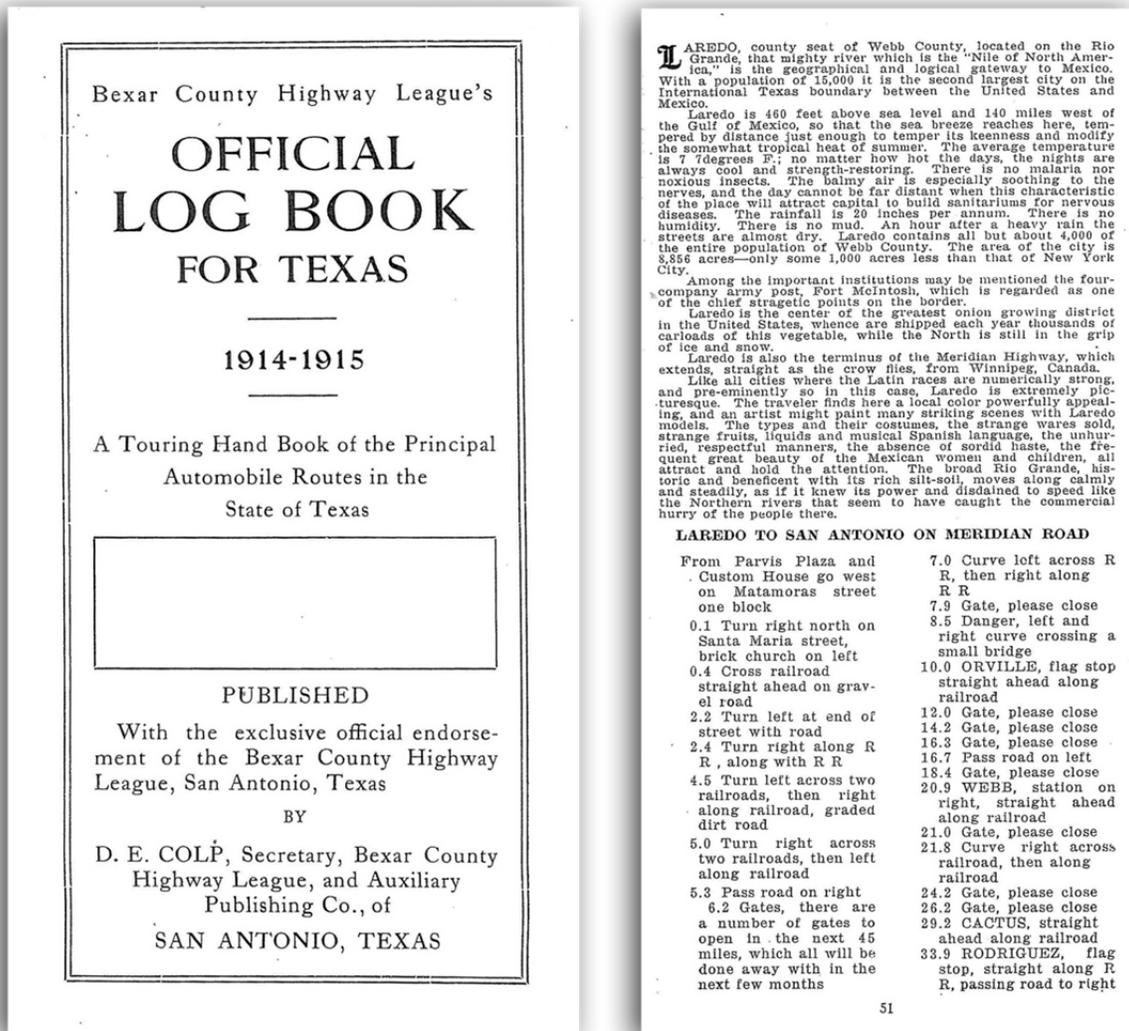


Figure 138. Excerpts from the Official Log Book for Texas, published by the Bexar County Highway League of San Antonio, 1914-1915. This travel guide is one of a series published in Texas during the early years of the automobile era. Narratives in the booklet describe various routes for auto enthusiasts, including a trip from Laredo to San Antonio on the Meridian Road. The route, which notes odometer readings and important landmarks, underscores how closely the route followed the railroad. It also informs motorists of gates that impeded travel but politely asked travelers to "please close" the gates after passing through. Source: Daughters of the Texas Republic Library, San Antonio, Texas.

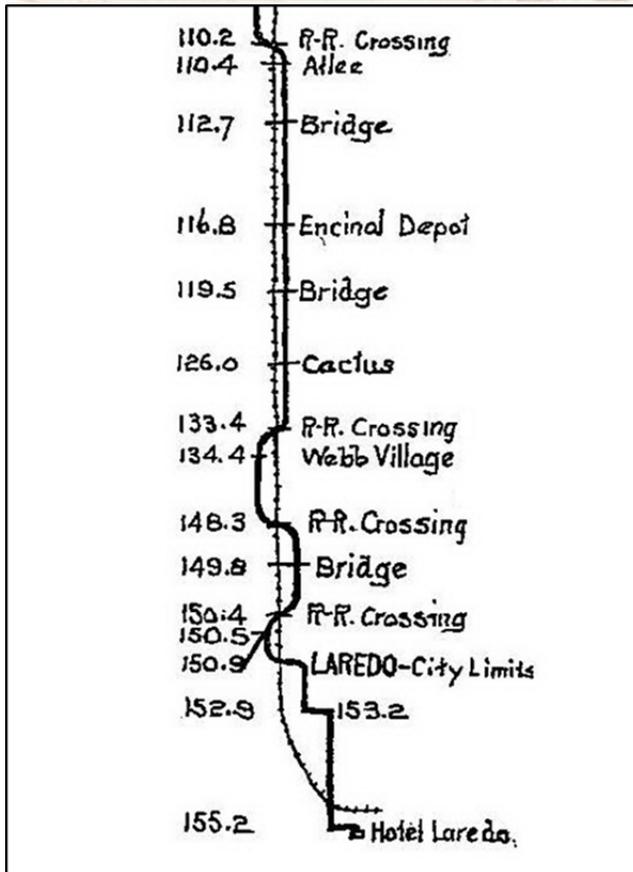
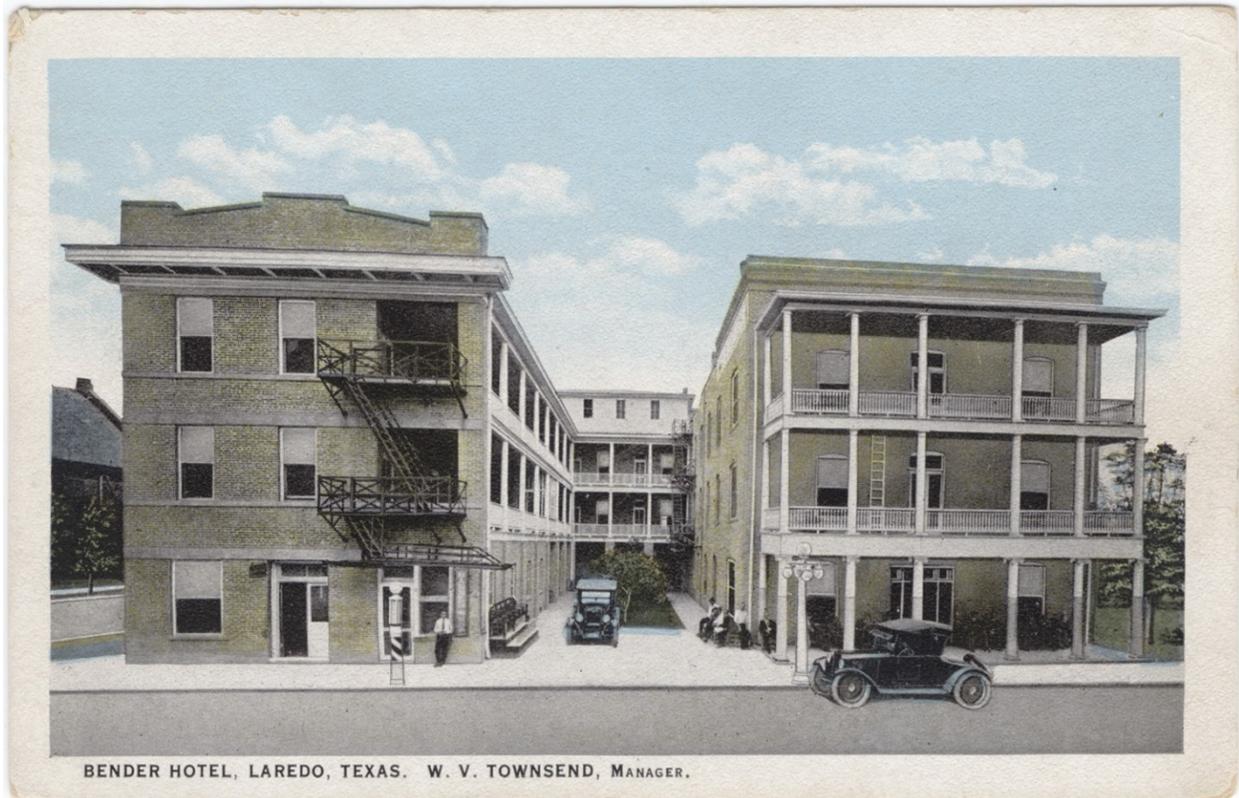


Figure 139. (Above) Bender Hotel, Laredo, 1925–1926. This postcard shows the three-story Bender Hotel at the corner of Matamoros Street and Santa Maria Avenue. Overlooking nearby Jarvis Park, it occupied a prominent location in downtown Laredo and was an early destination of motorists traveling through Laredo. It was something of an anomaly at the time because most of the city’s other hotels were concentrated near the passenger depot of the I&GN depot, six blocks to the west on Santa Isabel between Hidalgo and Matamoros streets. Thus, the Bender Hotel and nearby Hamilton Hotel indicated an emerging trend that reflected the growing influence of automobile travel. Source: *The Portal to Texas History* [original on file at Laredo Public Library, Laredo, Texas].

Figure 140. (Left) Detail of The Meridian Road in Texas, 1916. This is a detail of the route as the highway reached its southern terminus in Laredo. The map shows how the highway closely followed the I&GN Railroad. As it entered Laredo, the Meridian Road extended along Santa Maria Avenue and ended at a hotel on Jarvis Plaza. Source: Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, The University of Texas at Austin.

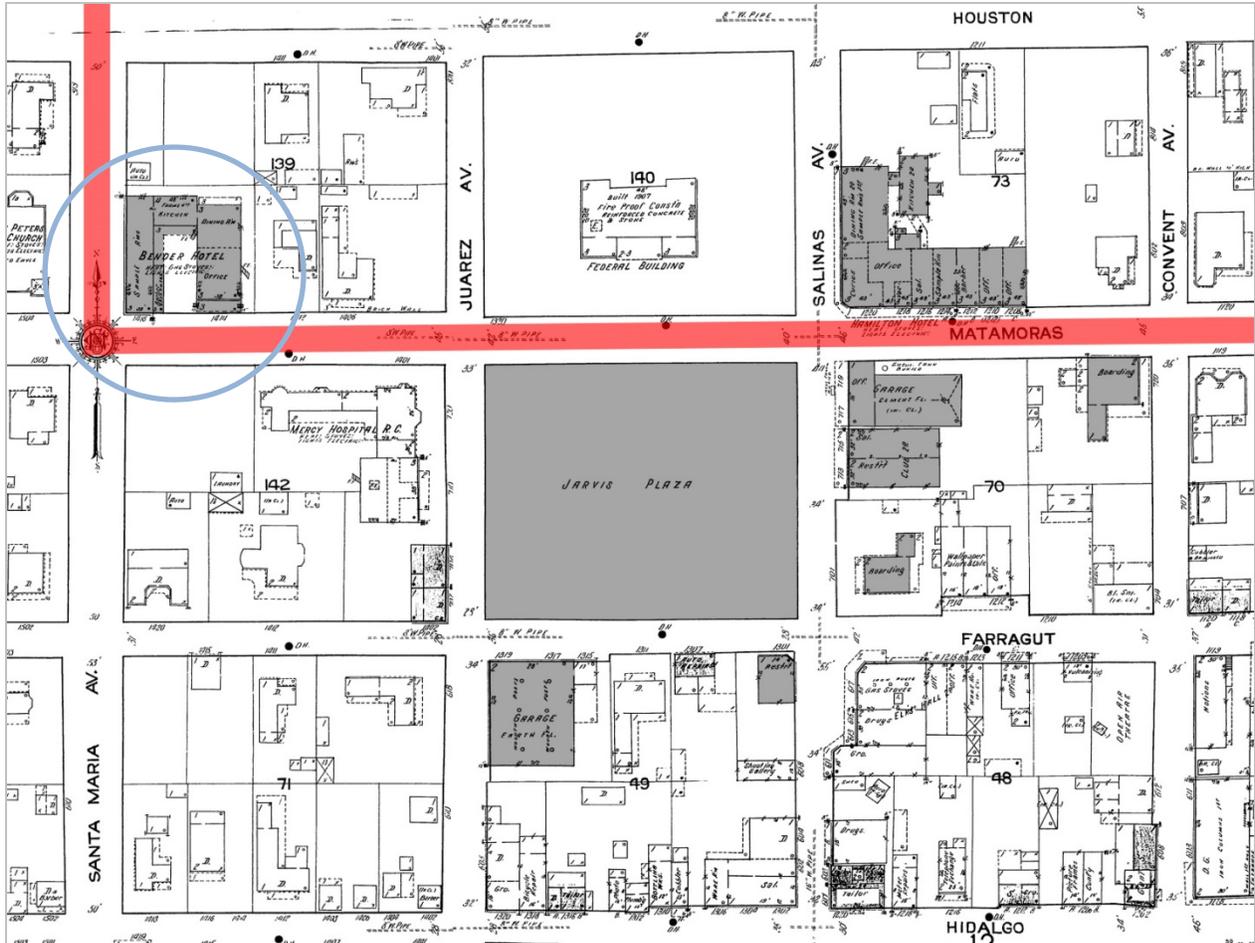


Figure 141. Detail, Sheets 8 and 9, Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps of Laredo, 1916, showing the path of the Meridian Highway in red. This composite map shows Jarvis Plaza and a number of auto- and tourist-related businesses fronting onto this open space in downtown Laredo (shaded in gray). The Bender Hotel is noted at the northwest corner of Juarez and Matamoros avenues (circled in blue). Source: Perry-Castañeda Library, The University of Texas at Austin.

the route always ends in Laredo; none show the highway continuing on to Mexico. As the road developed over time, however, the highway continued along Matamoros and turned south onto Convent Avenue, which extended to the International Bridge, a toll facility that linked Laredo and Nuevo Laredo (see Figure 142 on the following page).

Besides including a list of businesses, industrial, and institutional facilities, Sanborn maps of 1916 provide a glimpse of how the Meridian Highway was beginning to affect land-use and development patterns. However, its impact was not as dramatic as other communities. The most noticeable pattern was the development of a node of businesses that emerged near Jarvis Plaza that catered to the growing number of motorists visiting the city (see Figure 143, to follow). Most of Laredo's older, more established hotels and travel-related businesses were concentrated near the I&GN passenger depot, six blocks west of Jarvis Plaza. However, the Bender and Hamilton hotels, as well as multiple garages, auto repair shops, and restaurants marked a new yet relatively modest-sized trend in Laredo's business climate. Over time, this development trend became more pronounced and assumed greater significance as railroad passenger travel diminished and as the automobile became an increasingly popular choice of transportation.

Figure 142. (Right) International Toll Bridge. This bridge served as the primary link between Laredo and Nuevo Laredo for much of the historic period of the Meridian Highway. Source: *The Portal to Texas History* [original on file with the Laredo Public Library, Laredo, Texas].

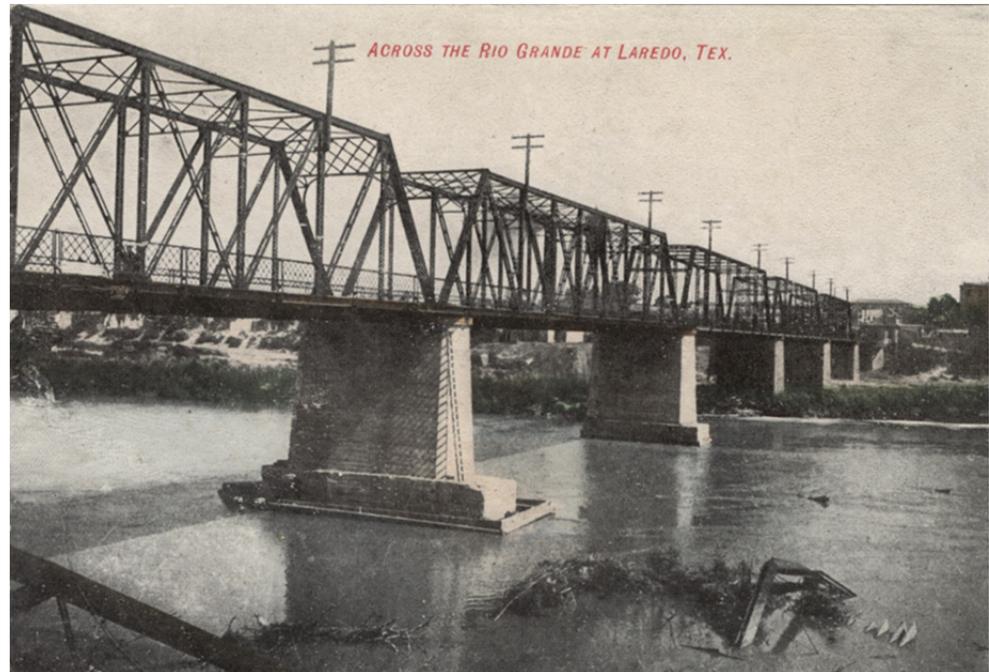


Figure 143. (Above) Jarvis Plaza and Hotel Hamilton, Laredo (date unknown). Jarvis Plaza was featured prominently in various publications geared to traveling motorists. Located near the downtown area, the plaza had well-maintained landscaping that would have been welcomed by weary tourists confined to the automobiles during extended periods of travel. Several hotels, including the Hotel Hamilton featured in this postcard, operated adjacent to or nearby Jarvis Park. Source: Laredo Public Library, Laredo, Texas.

Jarvis Plaza remains a popular downtown landmark in Laredo, and while commerce, traffic, and government buildings surround the plaza, the

landscaped park continues to provide a respite to pedestrians, tourists, and local workers amid the bustling, urban environment (see *Figure 144* below).



Figure 144. Current view of Jarvis Plaza. Mature trees, a green lawn, and park benches provide a peaceful place for those working in or traveling through downtown Laredo. The plaza remains a prominent landmark along the Meridian Highway. Photo by HHM.

Yet another tourist guide that highlighted the Meridian Highway and its path through Laredo was the 1924 *Automobile Red Book*.²⁸³ According to this guide, Laredo contained a number of auto-related amenities and local tourist attractions, such as commercial shops on Flores Street, selected residences, Jarvis Plaza, Mercy Hospital, Laredo High School, and the International Bridge crossing the Rio Grande from Convent Avenue (see *Figure 145*, to follow). It also noted that “Laredo’s modern tourist camp is located on the corner of Santa Maria Avenue and Park Street as travelers enter from the north over the Meridian Highway.”²⁸⁴

By that time, the Texas Highway Department had designated the Meridian as SH 2 and identified Laredo as its southern terminus. However, civic and business leaders in Laredo continued their efforts to extol the benefits of the Meridian Highway as a vital and increasingly significant link to Mexico and other countries to the south. In 1925, the first Pan-American Highway Congress met in Buenos Aires, Argentina, and promoted a more cooperative, deliberate, and coordinated approach to highway construction. This trend gained support, and the Meridian Highway and Laredo were key elements of the growing Pan-American Highway movement.

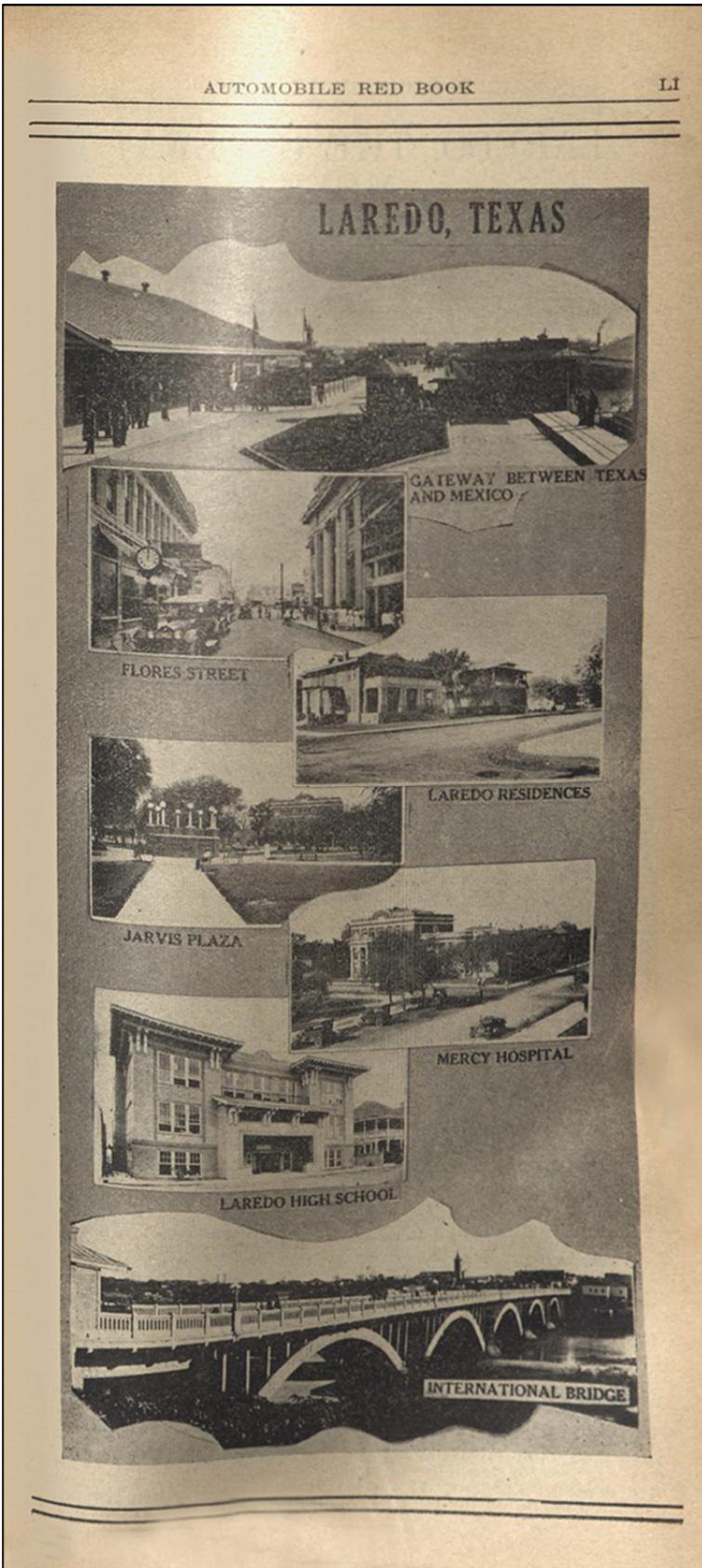


Figure 145. Selection from the 1924 edition of the Automobile Red Book. This travel guide included maps, photos, and other information for motorists. Source: Texas State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, Texas.

Subsequent editions of Sanborn fire insurance maps documented the growing popularity of the automobile and its influence on the city's physical character, particularly along the Meridian Highway. By 1925, Sanborn maps showed a shift in land-use patterns along Santa Maria Avenue, the primary segment of the Meridian Highway in Laredo, and an increase in the number of auto-related businesses. While domestic buildings continued to line most property fronting onto the thoroughfare, a degree of commercialism had begun. Besides having several grocery stores, Santa Maria Avenue contained a number of auto repair stores, filling stations, automobile garages, and two rooming houses. This trend typified property fronting onto highways in similarly sized cities along the Meridian Highway and other auto trails at the time. The 1925 Sanborn maps of Laredo also show one- and two-story garages near the Bender, Hamilton and new Penna hotels in the densely developed area near Jarvis Park (see *Figure 146*, to follow).

As had happened within other communities along the route, the Meridian Highway and its path through Laredo evolved over time. In the late 1920s, the Webb County Commissioners and Laredo city officials worked to acquire sufficient right-of-way to widen and pave San Bernardo Avenue and extend it to what locals referred to as the "San Antonio Highway."²⁸⁵ These routes simultaneously bore the burden of north-south traffic, but travelers began to gravitate toward San Bernardo Avenue. As the proprietor of a Gulf gas station at the corner of San Bernardo noted, "many tourists are coming to Laredo these days over the San Bernardo highway. Most of these tourists replenish their gasoline, oil and water before proceeding into Mexico."²⁸⁶ Businesses on both thoroughfares competed for the growing out-of-town tourist trade. In 1935, for example, a local newspaper reported the arrest of a man who was directing traffic onto San Bernardo Avenue; he was later released since he had not violated any law. The article also noted that someone else had placed a large sign on the north end of town that urged motorists to use Santa Maria Avenue.²⁸⁷ By 1936, the Texas Highway Commission had officially designated San Bernardo as the route of US 81/SH 2, and subsequently constructed a tourist information bureau just north of the Laredo Highway.²⁸⁸ This route consequently developed into a tourist transportation corridor and was lined with numerous gas stations, motor courts, and motels that transformed the physical character of the route as it extended through the city (see *Figures 147–149*, to follow).

Increased traffic and the many turns necessary to connect with the only vehicular bridge over the Rio Grande at Convent Avenue led to multiple proposals to construct a new structure. On July 18, 1938, a joint committee of representatives from the Texas Highway Department and the Department of Communications and Public Works of Mexico met in Laredo to discuss the project. The proposed free bridge would cross the Rio Grande between Laredo and Nuevo Laredo and would replace the

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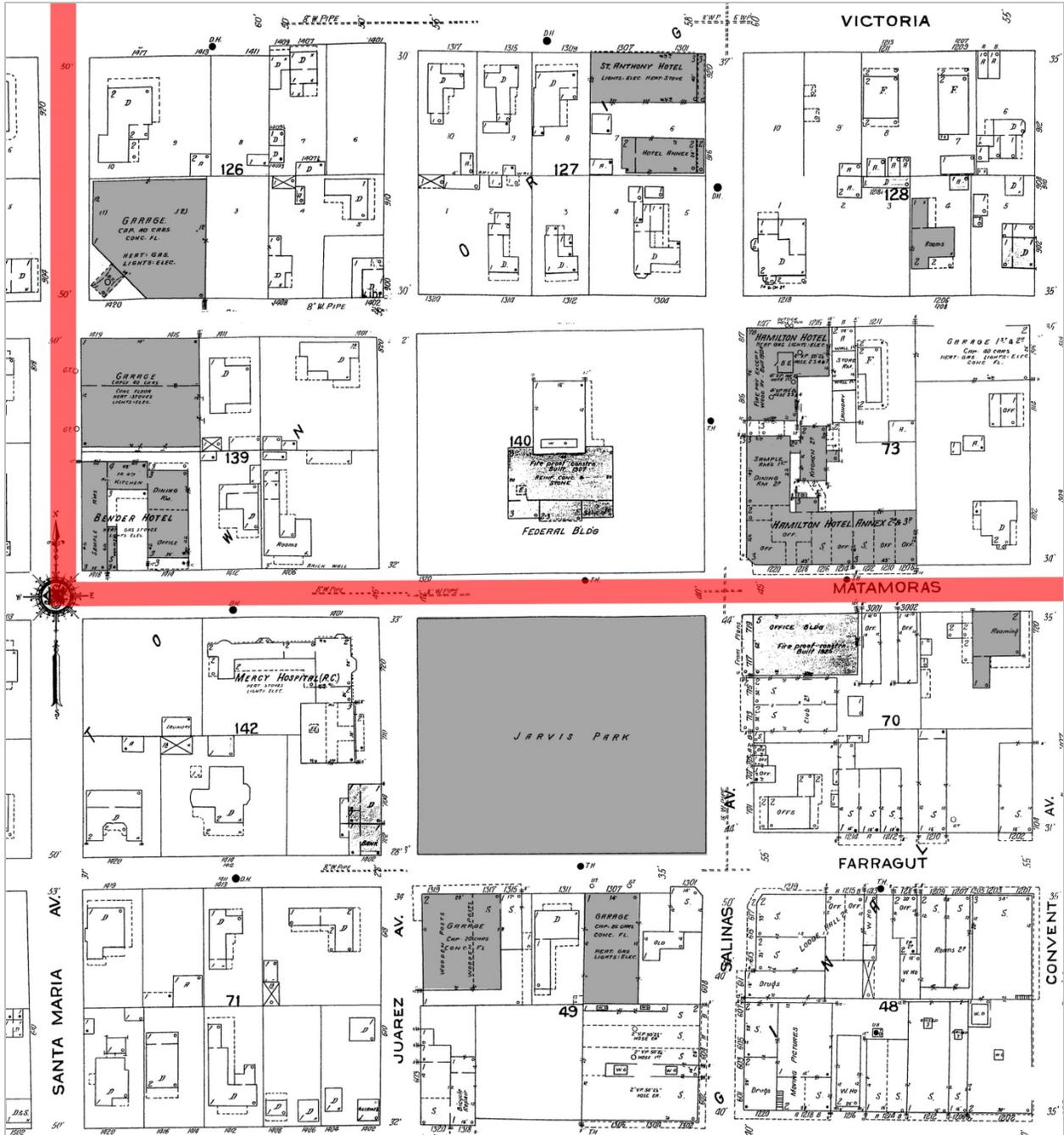


Figure 146. Composite of Sanborn Maps, 1925, showing the path of the Meridian Highway in red. This map depicts conditions surrounding Jarvis Plaza in 1925. Notable tourist-related features include the hotels and the automobile garages (shaded in gray). Source: Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, The University of Texas at Austin.

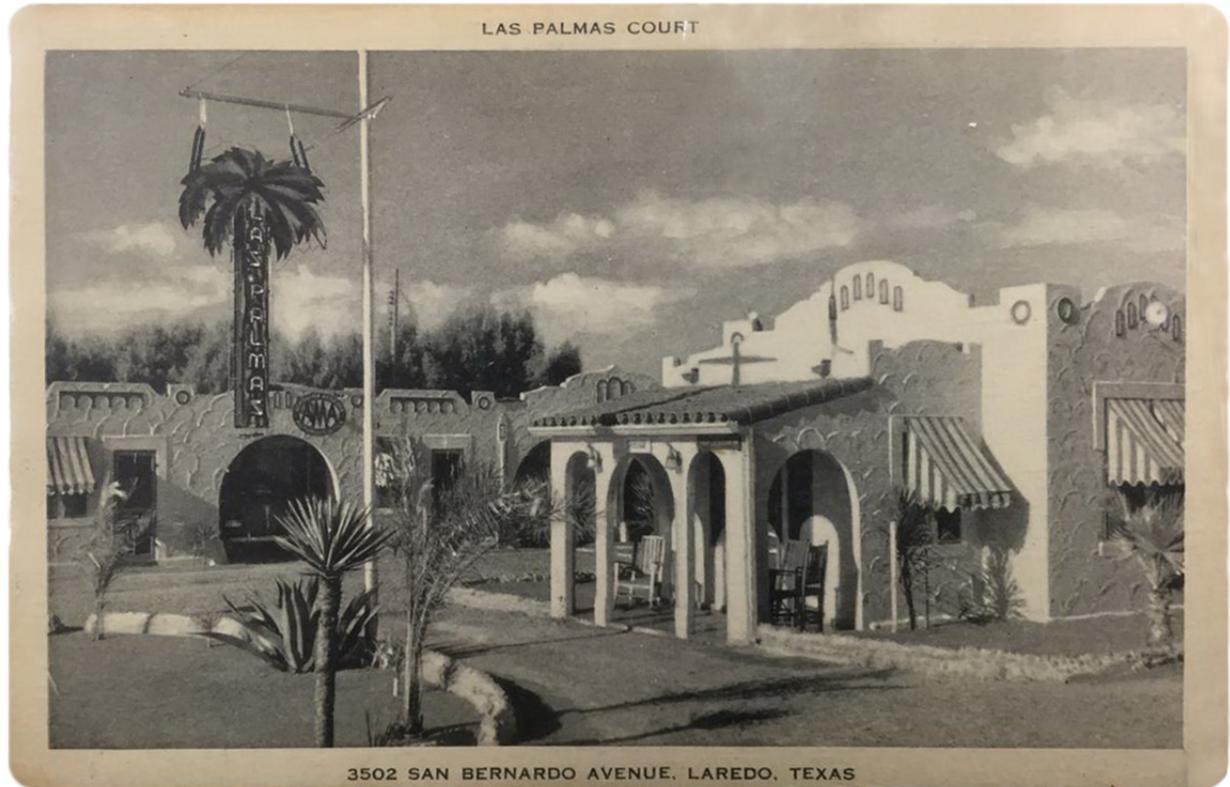


Figure 147. Postcard of Las Palmas Court, Laredo. This postcard is one of many that proprietors of tourist courts along San Bernardo Avenue generated to publicize their businesses from the late 1920s through the 1950s. During this period, San Bernardo Avenue became a major commercial corridor that offered a variety of services to meet the needs of motorists traveling to and through Laredo. Source: Laredo Public Library, Laredo, Texas.



Figure 148. Current view of a former Sinclair gas station located at 919 San Bernardo Avenue. Constructed ca. 1930, the Mission Revival gas station represents the many automobile-related businesses that emerged along San Bernardo Avenue in the 1930s, catering to US 81/SH 2 travelers. In this particular example, the building has been repurposed, the original doors and windows have been replaced and the garage bays have been enclosed; however, the tile roof, shape of the canopy and its Mission Revival style remain distinguishing features of the original form and function of the edifice.



Figure 149. Postcard of the Siesta Motor Hotel, a ca. 1955 hotel located at 4109 San Bernardo Avenue. The Ranch style motel featured a swimming pool and restaurant and typified the numerous lodging establishments that once thrived along this segment of the Meridian Highway. Source: <http://www.playle.com/browse.php?t=s&s=1198>.

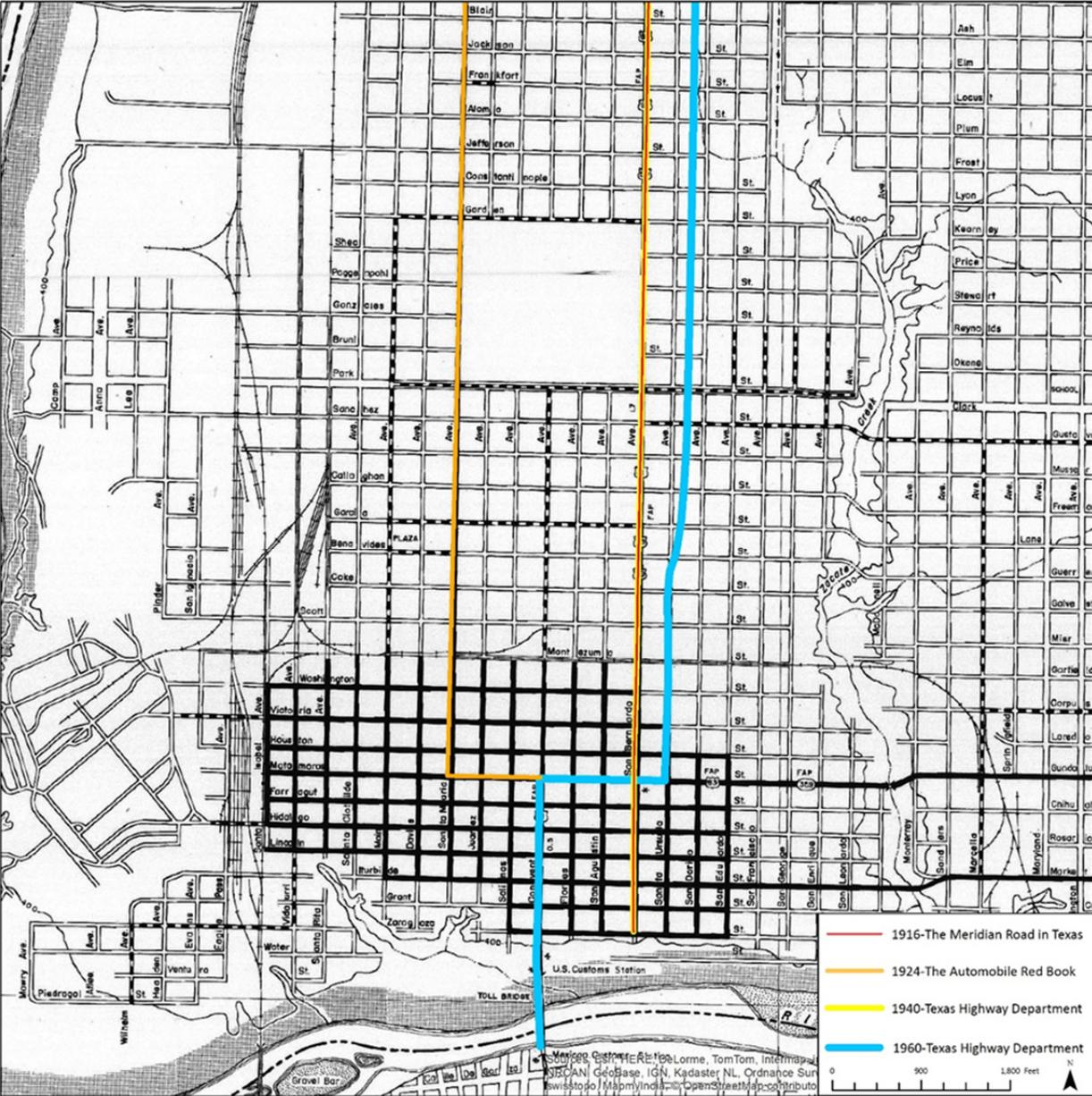
existing toll bridge that extended south over the Rio Grande from Convent Avenue. This bridge would be located several blocks to the east – midway between Santa Ursula Avenue and San Bernardo Avenue, according to a report submitted by L. R. Cardio of Mexico’s Department of Communications and Public Works, and John E. Blair, Division Engineer of the Texas Highway Department, in September 1936. The idea was to have the proposed bridge align with the revised route of SH 2 along San Bernardo Avenue, creating a more direct route for travelers.²⁸⁹ This effort failed, and the International Toll Bridge at Convent Avenue remained the sole means of crossing into Mexico from Laredo.

Although Laredo remained a densely populated area, with heavy traffic and an active military reservation (Fort McIntosh) during the mobilization period preceding World War II, the city was not among those locations deemed to be a priority for the new interregional highway system introduced in the late 1930s. The route remained unchanged through and immediately after World War II, and property along San Bernardo continued to develop for the persevering tourist traffic extending to and through Laredo.

The new interstate highway systems of the mid- and late 1950s brought a substantial change to the highway network, as most of US 81 through Texas was upgraded as IH 35 (see Figure 150, to follow). The approval of the construction of IH 35 through Laredo in 1959 led to the third and

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Figure 150. Detail of General Highway Map of Webb County, 1961. This maps shows that the Texas Highway Department had formally designated San Bernardo Avenue as the main northbound route to San Antonio. Santa Maria Avenue, which had originally served that role when the Meridian Highway was initially established in the 1910s, remains an important arterial within the local road network. US 83 also extended along San Bernardo Avenue, which contained a high concentration of gas stations, motor courts, and motels that catered to the growing number of tourists heading to Laredo and into Mexico. Source: Texas State Archives and Library Commission, Austin, Texas.



final alignment shift of the Meridian Highway approximately one block east of San Bernardo Avenue. Constructed as a divided four-lane highway beginning in 1961, the interstate was proposed to “come south from Del Mar Boulevard to a point just east of the Holiday Inn Motel, where it will swing east about 300 feet, putting it in line with the block between Santa Ursula and San Dario Avenues, which will be the route into Laredo.”²⁹⁰ The entire block between Santa Ursula and San Dario avenues was acquired for the construction of the interstate. This plan also included widening the north end of San Bernardo Avenue, which would become the southbound frontage road, from 20 feet to 68 feet. An interesting side note to the construction of the interstate is that approximately 97 percent of property owners kept their residences and moved them elsewhere, thus selling only the land to the state.²⁹¹ A 1965 USGS topographic map shows the completed construction of IH 35 terminating at Victoria Street (the current terminus of IH 35) and a detour along Victoria to Convent Avenue, at which point the traveler must head south to reach the international bridge (see *Figure 151*, to follow). A new, second bridge—the Juarez-Lincoln International Bridge—was constructed in 1976 on San Dario Avenue, immediately south of the interstate. To date, both bridges remain intact and in operation.

The Meridian Highway has had a lasting effect on land-use and development patterns in Laredo (see *Figure 152*, to follow). When originally established, the route entered Laredo from the north paralleling the I&GN railroad, along Santa Maria Avenue. It extended to Jarvis Plaza, before continuing to the International Bridge and into Nuevo Laredo. The downtown boasted several hotels catering to the growing number of automobile tourists who came to the city with the intent of traveling further south into Mexico. This influx of people fostered the development of new businesses, such as gas stations, motor courts, and garages that catered to the growing number of tourists who visited Laredo. These new businesses initially developed along Santa Maria Avenue, but a shift in the alignment led to San Bernardo Avenue’s becoming the main corridor. By the 1930s and 1940s, the street contained a dense concentration of such businesses, many of which remain today. The subsequent construction of IH 35 just a few blocks to the east helped to maintain the commercial viability of many of the motor courts, motels and other tourist-related businesses on San Bernardo Avenue. Although newer businesses presently line IH 35, many of the historic tourist-related businesses still survive on nearby San Bernardo Avenue.

See *Figure 153* for a map showing the Meridian Highway and its successors through Laredo over time.

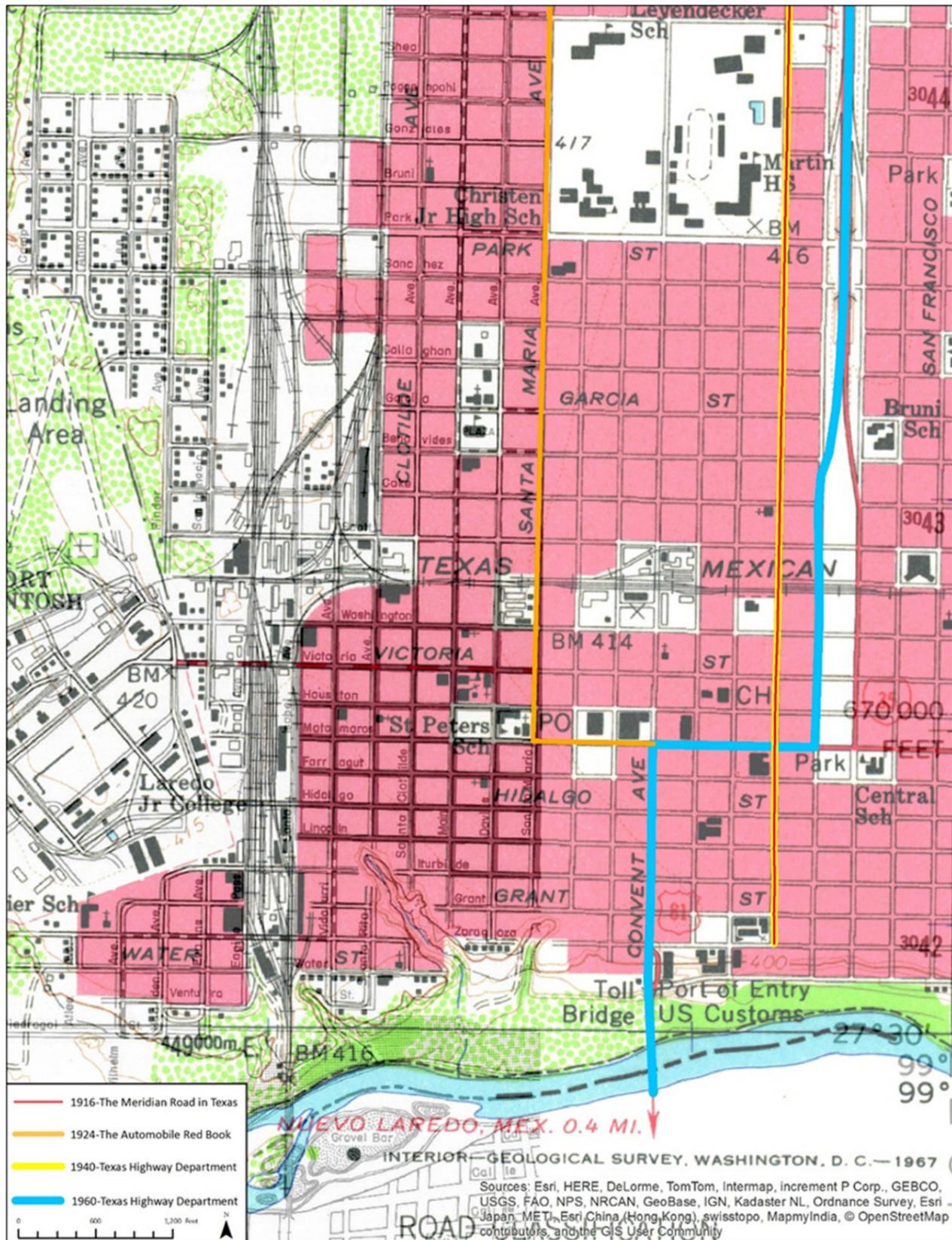
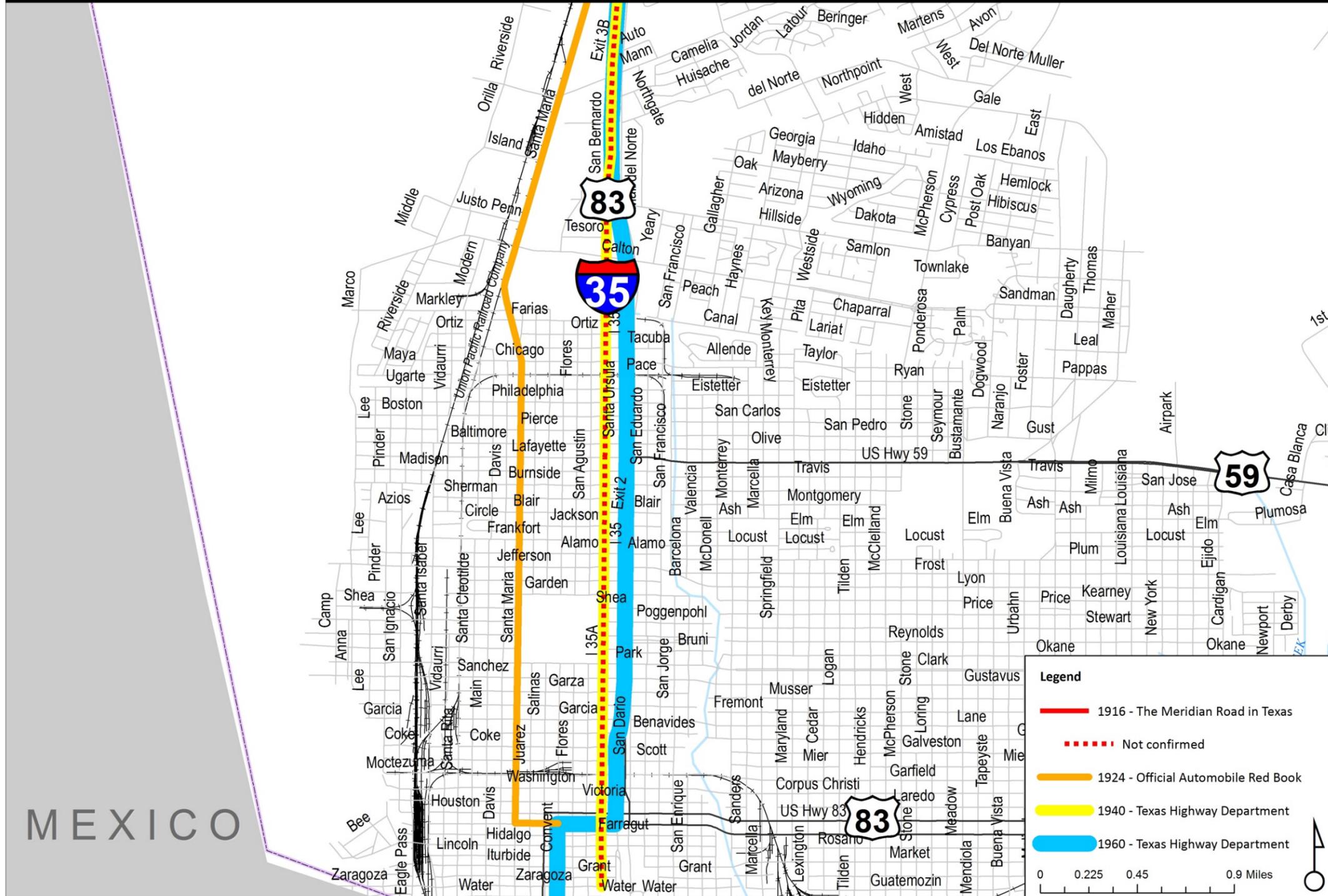


Figure 152. Detail of USGS topographic General Highway Map of Laredo West, Texas, 1965 and Laredo East, Texas, 1965. This composite shows the progress of IH 35 by 1965. The highway ended a few blocks north of the Rio Grande, which marked the border between the United States and Mexico. The highway was extended following the opening of the Juarez-Lincoln International Bridge in 1976. Source: USGS TopoView, <http://ngmdb.usgs.gov/maps/TopoView/viewer/#4/40.01/-100.06>.

LAREDO



Figure 153. Map showing the Meridian Highway and its successors through Laredo over time.



MEXICO

²⁸⁰ *Official Automobile Red Book*, Volume D (Temple: Automobile Red Book, Co., 1924), LI.

²⁸¹ Carlos E. Cuéllar, "LAREDO, TX," *Handbook of Texas Online*, available from <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/hdl02> (accessed May 20, 2015).

²⁸² The 1916 Sanborn map indicates the building as St. Peter's Roman Catholic Church.

²⁸³ This book also states that the southern branch of the Bankhead Highway terminates in Laredo.

²⁸⁴ According to the *Red Book*, the Meridian Highway follows the same path along Santa Maria Avenue as the 1915 *Texas Goodrich Route Book of 1915*. *Official Automobile Red Book*, LII. Texas State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, Texas.

²⁸⁵ "County and City Committee Secures Boulevard to Highway," *The Laredo Times*, June 13, 1929.

²⁸⁶ "Mainly About People," *The Laredo Times*, June 30, 1932.

²⁸⁷ "Merchants Vie For Tourist Route Into Business Sector." *The Laredo Times*, June 28, 1935.

²⁸⁸ "Information Bureau Here to Be Continued," *The Laredo Times*, October 6, 1940.

²⁸⁹ "Report of the Joint Committee from the Department of Communications and Public Works of the Republic of Mexico and the Texas State Highway Department, Regarding the Proposed International Free Bridge Across the Rio Grande between the Cities of Nuevo Laredo, Tamps., and Laredo, Texas," Box 2002/101-3, Folder Webb County International Bridge Across Rio Grande at Laredo, Hwy. No. 2, Texas State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, Texas.

²⁹⁰ "Local Firms Bid Lowest on New Highway 35 Job," *Laredo Times*, 19 July 1961: 1.

²⁹¹ "Highway 35 ROW Work Continuing," *Laredo Times*, November, 12 1961: 6.

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