



MEXICALI
(CENTRO)



MEXICALI!

A mini-gem guide to surgery
in Mexicali, Baja California

K. Eckland, ACNP-BC &
Dr. Carlos Ochoa, MD

Mexicali:

A 'mini-gem' guide to surgery in Mexicali, Baja California

Kristin Eckland

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Acknowledgements

Special thanks needs to be given to my Mexicali team; the people who made this project possible. This includes my co-author, **Dr. Carlos Cesar Ochoa Gaxiola** who provided me with invaluable information and opportunities during the research and writing of this book. In many cases, he introduced me to Mexicali surgeons and opened doors that might have otherwise remained closed without his assistance. However, I would like to note, for readers who may question my impartiality in assessing Dr. Ochoa's surgical skills that preliminary interviews and surgical observation were performed in November – January 2011 & 2012, well prior to my arrival in Mexicali. It was this foundation that served to deepen my interest in writing about the surgeons of Mexicali. In fact, despite all of his contributions, I have not extended Dr. Ochoa the courtesy of an advanced proof-reading of data compiled regarding his practice and my observations thereof. In addition, in fairness to Dr. Ochoa and his colleagues, he did not participate in the critiques or interviews of his peers. So, hopefully, this book does not serve as an unpleasant insult to a surgeon who has been a colleague, mentor and friend. As a co-writer and collaborator on this project, Dr. Ochoa has been invaluable for his input on Mexicali and Mexican culture.

This project would certainly not have been as much fun without **Dr. Joanna Calzada, MD** who adopted the role of unofficial historian, chauffeur, tour guide and companion and eventually morphed into one of our major contributors. No question was too silly to research, no venture too ridiculous to explore during our wild rides in and around Mexicali. As a Mexicali native, her keen insight and insider knowledge really brought some of the more intriguing facets of the city to life. I am indebted to her in some many ways. When I first arrived at Hospital General de Mexicali, things could have gone much differently, but she immediately embraced me, and became a close, trusted and beloved friend.

Dr. Cuauhtemoc Robles Cairo, from the faculty of architecture and design at the Universidad Autonoma Baja California (UABC) was exceedingly gracious, helpful and informative to my inquiries about the history of architecture and design in Mexicali. Without his assistance, much of the depth of this work would be lost.

Thanks again to **Elizabeth "Libby" Warren**, my dear friend, who has been editing and reviewing my work since we were roommates in college. Without her grammatical expertise, this manuscript would certainly be lacking.

Special thanks to **Carla Kanatt**, and all of the other friendly guides at local museums and UABC archives who bent over backward to help me find historical photos and other documents to give shape to Mexicali and its fascinating history.

As always, I need to extend my gratitude to my friends and family who served as my support system and lifeline during this project. There are few people in the world more supportive than my husband, **Peter Gustafson**. He is endlessly patient and understanding of my drive and need to contribute to the betterment of patient care through these books. He is also skilled at packing and remains uncomplaining despite the various situations that my travels have often engendered.

Lastly, I would like to thank all of the participating providers, without whom this book could not be completed. Lest we take this opportunity for granted, these surgeons embarked on this endeavor with the knowledge that their skills were being evaluated critically but did so, nonetheless.

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Author's Note:

While many of my readers are more familiar with my previous guidebooks that specialized in the medical tourism genre, this offering is different. This book was created during my time as a student in Mexicali, and is not intended to be a comprehensive guide to the surgical services of this city. In contrast to my prior books, which provide readers with critical analysis and objective information on hospitals, facilities and procedures in Latin America, this book gives more a personal look at Mexicali. The surgeons interviewed were, in part neighbors, colleagues and people I encountered during my day-to-day activities as a student. This creates a significant but unavoidable bias that must be acknowledged here, since surgeons who encountered me in the role of a student were probably more likely to consent to be interviewed. While I attempted to balance this by specifically seeking out other surgeons from different facilities across Mexicali, I quickly realized that this is *not* Bogota, and in many cases, even after formal introductions, surgeons were unwilling to be interviewed.

While *Mexicali* was written with a different audience in mind, I created it for the same reason as all of my previous works – as a labor of love, to provide readers with more information on topics essential to their health and well-being in an age of international health care.

This volume is more casual and relaxed in nature and was created to serve as an informal guide to friends, families and others traveling to Mexicali, Mexico. I created it based on my observations during the several months I lived and studied in Mexicali, Mexico. As such – this is not a definitive or exhaustive guide to the city, but just some shared tidbits, news and other information. During my time in Mexicali, I came to love this charmingly chaotic city, and its friendly and kind inhabitants.



Why Mexicali?

While I've written several books, I don't make my living as a writer. I am a nurse by trade, specifically a nurse practitioner in thoracic surgery. I wasn't looking to write another book when I came to Mexicali. Initially, I traveled here to interview a surgeon for another one of my projects.¹ But after interviewing Dr. Carlos Cesar Ochoa Gaxiola, and following him around for an exhausting 43 hours in a 48 hour period – I knew that I needed to return to Mexicali. Not as a writer, but as a student.

As a nurse practitioner in the eastern United States, the majority of my experience in thoracic surgery was related to the treatment of cancer; esophageal, lung and mediastinal cancers with some occasional infectious processes and other pathologies mixed in. In the short time I spent with Dr. Ochoa during my first few visits, I knew all of that was about to change. The realm of thoracic disease is heavily correlated with the demographics of the area, meaning that in the wealthier communities of the United States, surgery for tuberculosis or advanced pulmonary infections are relatively uncommon.² However, this is not the case in a city like Mexicali, which draws many of its clientele from outlying rural or more impoverished areas. In these areas, diseases like tuberculosis, complicated pneumonias and advanced empyemas are endemic.

Many of the conditions I was previously familiar with only from textbooks and journal articles became part of my daily routine as a student at Hospital General de Mexicali. These diseases and their treatment were often complicated by many of the hardships that go along with poverty; a high prevalence of HIV/ AIDS, Hepatitis C, intravenous drug use and chronic alcoholism. All of this is complicated by a national epidemic of obesity, diabetes and related malnutrition, and delayed access to healthcare.³ While these conditions certainly do not recommend Mexicali or Mexico as a destination for health care, it is an excellent opportunity for health care providers like me to get another glimpse at the realities of public health care, shortages and epidemiology at a time when many of us are cloistered within private healthcare systems.

These are my reasons for choosing Mexicali – certainly yours are very different.

Kristin Eckland

¹ www.cirurgiadetorax.org, a website devoted to thoracic surgery.

² But according to the CDC, due to antibiotic resistance, many of these diseases are making a rapid comeback.

³ Malnutrition is not restricted to insufficient caloric needs; it also refers to inappropriate caloric intake; thus patients can be obese but deficient in necessary vitamins and nutrients needed to fight infection and maintain wellness.

Mexicali: the city by the fence

To the outsider looking in, Mexicali, Mexico is just one of a string of border towns between the United States and Mexico. Less infamous or crime-ridden than its counterparts; Tijuana to the west and Juarez to the east – Mexicali sits just across the border of the frankly unimpressive agricultural community of Calexico California. Mexicali is the big sister of the two, dwarfing Calexico's modest population of 36,000 with almost a million and a half residents of its own.

Despite negative attitudes and stereotypes regarding Mexican workers, without the thousands of Mexicans that cross the border into Calexico daily, this small California town would cease to exist. Certainly, now during one of the worst economic periods for the United States in recent decades, Calexico would not have the thriving economy it does today.⁴

While many of the people crossing the border into Calexico every day are agricultural laborers working at less than minimum wage, picking crops and caring for the farms that dot the Calexico landscape, the real economic force behind the influx of daily visitors is commerce. If the myriad of clothing stores, discount shops, grocery stores and restaurants on the California side of the border wasn't evidence enough, a recent article in the Imperial Valley press brings home this fact: every day, Mexicali residents spend over three million dollars in Calexico. If anything, this should bring home both the purchasing power of our southern neighbors and our own dependence on their good will.⁵

As the capitol and seat of government for the Mexican state of Baja California, this relative wealth and financial resources of Mexicali are readily apparent. Just a few streets in from the central border crossing, the commercial areas give way to grandiose homes and upscale neighborhoods.

At first glance, Mexicali seems ideal for medical tourism due to the close proximity to the United States, low crime rates and the installation of a new 'fast pass' lane for medical tourists to bypass long customs lines. But as one takes a closer, more in-depth view of the city, and its facilities, the truth becomes more complex. While there are excellent physicians, as profiled in this book, many of the working conditions, particularly in the more public facilities are less than optimal. There are supply shortages and disruptions in internationally accepted protocols in almost every area, from acute myocardial infarction care to general and specialty surgery. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the realm of cardiac surgery and transplant procedures, both of which will be discussed in more detail.

Does this mean that medical tourists should avoid Mexicali? By no means! With care and due diligence, people can access themselves to lower cost treatments without sacrificing care, quality or their health. By reading this book, you have taken the first step.

⁴ A recent story in the *Imperial Valley Press* highlights this fact, stating that Mexicali residents spent over three million dollars a day in Calexico during these mundane shopping runs. "Mexicali residents urged to shop locally," 5 April 2012.

⁵ Mexican visitors also play an important role in the economy of Yuma, Arizona, and other nearby American cities. Knaub, M. (2012). "Tourists spend mucho dinero in Yuma," *Yuma Sun*, dated June 30, 2012. Available on-line at <http://www.yumasun.com/articles/mexican-80080-yuma-visitors.html>.

Getting Here

From Calexico: Central Gate

Whether arriving to Calexico by car, bus or plane, the easiest way for many people to get to Mexicali is to walk. Many people drive to Calexico and park their car at a secure lot before walking across the border to Mexico, and taking a cab to their destination once they crossed into Mexico. This usually makes for a much quicker return, since the lines for pedestrians are always much shorter than the motor vehicle lines to the United States.

If you are coming from the Calexico Airport, it is about a mile walk to the border (see Map 1). Taxi cabs are also available to bring visitors to the border, with taxis readily available on the Mexican side once you have successfully crossed.

Parking at the border

If you are arriving to Calexico by car, turn down Imperial Avenue toward the border. Turn right on Second Avenue and proceed about half a block. Just across the railroad tracks is a secure parking lot. The prices are fair (about 3 dollars per day – with discounts for long-term parking) and there are on-site bilingual attendants 24 hours a day. Take your valuables with you – and proceed down Imperial Avenue about four blocks to Rockland Street. Then turn right onto Rockland Street. There is a large government building at the end of the street. On one side of the building is a small sign, “To Mexico” and a set of turnstiles. Enter the turnstiles and you are on your way. There is a small walkway – and a second set of turnstiles. When you emerge from the second set of turnstiles, you are in Mexico.

You will then proceed down the walkway which leads to Avenue Madero. Take note of the line of people on your right. This is the line to return to California. Depending on the time of day and day of the week – the line can be relatively short (fifteen to thirty minutes) to several hours long.

Driving to Mexicali:

Prior to entering Mexicali, you will be strongly encouraged to purchase Mexican Auto Insurance. It is a legal requirement for visitors to Mexico to carry this insurance unless you plan to stay within the ‘border zone’.⁶ However, having additional coverage while in Mexicali is a good idea since many American carriers balk at paying claims for accidents even within this zone.

This insurance, while costly at daily rates, is more reasonable for longer stays. (Daily rates can be as much as 12 – 15 dollars a day, while 6 month and yearly rates run around 300 to 350 dollars, so if you are planning on a several week stay, consider purchasing a six month policy.) There are several agencies on Imperial Avenue and the surrounding streets offering insurance for purchase.

Driving into Mexicali, is easy and stress-free. There are no lines and the majority of cars enter without incident. However, if you are stopped for inspection, this is usually only a brief delay.

⁶ The area surrounding the city of Mexicali is considered a ‘border zone’ where many of the requirements for living, traveling or staying in Mexico are waved due to the proximity to the United States.

Returning to California once again – is not so easy or hassle-free. The lines may be several hours in length. Luckily, vendors hawk their wares including ice cold soft drinks and water for thirsty motorists on the sun-baked streets.

The US Border control maintains a website, www.apps.cbp.gov/bwt with estimated border wait times for motorists at each of the several crossing gates, but the actual time to cross are often twice the time listed. This site also posts the hours of operation. Generally, the border is closed from midnight to three am in the morning, but this may vary. The Mexicali papers also publish wait times, but these wait times are retrospective to the previous day, which may be less helpful for people traveling on weekends and holidays.



Returning to California by car may entail a lengthy wait

Medical Lane

However, there is a new option to speed the wait through customs when returning to California. Implemented in May of 2012, the US – Mexican border and customs departments have initiated a 'medical tourist' lane. This lane entitled returning patients (with a doctor's note, proper documentation and a small fee) a chance to skip the longer lines when traveling home after receiving care in Mexicali.⁷



Traffic waits while the Medical Lane remains clear

There is also second border crossing area for motor vehicles, called the 'new gate' by locals. The East gate is located in a more industrial area on the east side of Mexicali.

⁷ This medical tourist lane only applies to the central gate, and at the time of this writing, it was too early to see how effective the lane was at easing congestion for medical travelers.

Frequent visitors to Mexico can apply for Sentri, and Fast Passes to facilitate rapid travel between borders. In several northern states, these passes are a part of the official driver's license. For the rest of us occasional travelers, the Sentri passes are an expensive hassle with several sets of fees.⁸

Flying to the Mexicali Airport:

Mexicali International Airport, also known as the General Rodolfo Sánchez Taboada International Airport, is a small but busy place which serves domestic destinations. It is located several miles outside the city, but the highway is well marked for travelers traveling both to and from Mexicali. Unfortunately, at the present time, there are no direct flights to Mexicali from the United States.⁹ Currently, direct flights are limited to Mexico City, Guadalajara, Hermosillo, Monterrey and several small vacation destinations within Baja California.

Inside the airport, random luggage screening applies to all travelers whether your final destination/ origination is foreign or domestic. Travelers are selected as they pass through the hallway to exit the airport. If selected, soldiers and policemen will check your luggage for narcotics, weapons and other restricted items. They will check your luggage in a public area, in front of you. Stay calm and polite if this happens.

Other Practical Matters

Cell phones and cellular service: USA based phones will work in Mexicali, however, international fees and roaming will apply. In some areas, very close to the border, it is possible to continue to pick up United States based carriers, but please check your cellular display before making calls. If you are planning to stay in Mexicali for an extended period of time, consider investing in a Mexican SIM card¹⁰, which costs about ten dollars. Ask for a prepaid SIM, "prepago" which you can add money to as needed. Adding money to prepaid plans is fast and easy, and can be done at numerous vendors including the Oxxo convenience stores which are located on just about every corner.

Currency Exchange

The standard unit of currency is the Mexican Peso.

Most places accept American dollars though it is often considered poor form to expect to pay this way, and the exchange rate at a restaurant or grocery store is unlikely to be as competitive as one of the money changers on the street.

Do not change money in California. The exchange rate offered on the American side of the border is usually worse than the exchange rates offered by vendors in Mexico with a few notable exceptions. Surprisingly, some of the most competitive and fair rates are offered on the walkway leading to Madero Avenue after walking across the border. Currency exchange offices are located throughout the city, and post their exchange rates in large numbers on the windows, and electronic billboards nearby. If you are exchanging cash there are no additional fees.

⁸ Information about Sentri passes is available at the US Customs and Border Protection website, <https://goes-app.cbp.dhs.gov/main/goes>

⁹ Inquiries to the local carriers serving the Mexicali airport regarding service to the United States were not answered.

¹⁰ Unfortunately, certain companies such as Verizon offering CDMA phones are proprietary and do not allow you to swap out SIM cards.

Using an ATM or a credit card for currency exchange is a bad bargain – typically users can be charged as much as 5 % of their transaction.



The border fence (Mexicali side)

History of Mexicali

No trip to Mexicali would be complete without a brief overview of the history of the city and the surrounding area. Without this, Mexicali is merely a desert city of scorching heat, dry baked roads and large swaths of industrial areas. But the rich history of this city brings the culture, charm and friendliness of its residents to life.

While the history of Baja California is extensive, with numerous archeological finds dating back through all of the pre-historic eras, particularly in the coastal regions, the history of Mexicali is significantly younger.¹¹ In Baja itself, evidence of early humans is rampant, with multiple burial sites, including the nearby archeological discovery, El Vallecito.¹² While there were native Indian tribes in the Baja California region, including the Yuman, Kumiai, Cucapa, Cochimi, Pai Pai and Kiliwa bands, these hunter - gatherer tribes were generally nomadic in nature due to the climate and seasonal resources of the area.¹³

In other areas of Baja California, Spanish explorers first arrived in 1533, and the extensive network of missions (Los Cabos, Loreto, San Pedro Martir, San Felipe and others) dotting the coast began during a 70 year period of religious exploration starting in 1697.¹⁴ Due to the relatively isolated nature of the region, as well as the extreme climate, the first permanent settlement in Mexicali was not formed until the beginning of the twentieth century. This initial agricultural community forms the basis for modern Mexicali.

The word "Mexicali" is a combination of "Mexico" and "California" and is attributed to Colonel Augustine Sanchez in 1902. Colonel Sanchez was the head of the Northern district of Baja California at that time. Several years earlier, in 1888, the Mexican government had given a large tract of land including the area containing modern day Mexicali to Guillermo Andrade to encourage the development of settlements in the areas close to the border of the United States. Actual development of this area had to wait for the completion of an irrigation system to bring water to the area, and make the land suitable for agriculture. This water system was completed in 1898.¹⁵ The city itself was officially founded on March 14, 1903.¹⁶ The early residents of Mexicali were primarily farmers and agricultural laborers.

Many of these residents were Chinese immigrants, and for several years, these Chinese residents outnumbered Mexican-born citizens, by 3 to 1 at one point.¹⁷ The Chinese workers were brought from mainland China by several companies such as the British company, *China Mail*, or the American *Colorado River Land Company*; first to build the irrigation system, and then to pick cotton and perform other manual fieldwork, similar to the importation of Africans in the preceding

¹¹ However, remains of animals such as the woolly mammoth have been excavated in the nearby area of Rancho Algodones in Mexicali, and early human cremation sites have been found in El Vallecito.

¹² El Vallecito is located near the town of El Rumorosa (about 85 km/ 52 miles west of Mexicali), and is noted for the recovery of multiple Mesoamerican artifacts as well as cave paintings documenting the daily activities of these early inhabitants.

¹³ Los Algodones, now a nearby town was a Cocopah community.

¹⁴ Information from the Regional Museum of Universidad Autonoma Baja California.

¹⁵ Information from the Government of Baja California, official history.

¹⁶ Love, S. (1990). The Chinese border: Many agree that Mexicali owes its development to Asians. LA Times, August 16, 1990.

¹⁷ There are several interesting immigration patterns in Baja California. In Ensenada, around the same time period, large numbers of Russian immigrants arrived, fleeing the Tsar.

centuries in the United States.¹⁸ However, unlike slavery, these Chinese immigrants were able to settle into the growing Mexicali community, and by the early 1920's, had branched out into other industries, and established their own businesses in Mexicali's early Chinatown. By the height of prohibition, this included the majority of the city's bars, casinos, brothels and opium dens.¹⁹

Museo Regional de la UABC

Av. Reforma y Calle Pino Suarez

(on the corner after calle K)

Mexicali, B. C.

Hours of operation: 9 am to 6 pm Monday to Friday

10 am to 4 pm weekends

Cost of admission: 15 pesos



Museum (spring 2012)

While there is no printed information in English, several of the guides speak English and are happy to answer questions. The museum consists of three permanent displays about Baja California, including information about pre-historic finds (fossils), early inhabitants, native tribes, and settlement of the Mexicali area. One of the interesting things about this museum is that even the building serves as a canvas and is frequently repainted to display new art. Adjacent to the museum is both the Institute of Culture of Baja California and the Baja California informational archives.

¹⁸ While many of these workers were misled with promises of good wages, they were 'free men', free of the burdens of indentured servitude or slavery, which had befallen early generations of commercially imported peoples to the USA.

¹⁹ Cummings, J. (2002). Sweet & sour times on the border: a review of chinese immigration to mexico. Published on-line at: <http://www.blueroadrunner.com/chinos.htm>



Museum (August 2012)

Mexicali during prohibition

During the American prohibition of the 1920's, the Mexican border cities were a popular escape for many Americans including film stars of the silent era.²⁰ While Tijuana is better known for its luxurious, glittering excess including the famed *Agua Caliente* casino during this period, Mexicali wasn't entirely ignored by the hordes of alcohol-starved thrill-seekers from the United States.²¹

Most famously, Rudolf Valentino, the Italian heartthrob, known as the "Latin Lover" married his second wife, Natacha Rombova, in Mexicali on May 13, 1922. They were married at the home of Otto Moller Lizardi, who was the mayor of Mexicali. This might have remained a little known historical footnote, except that this marriage resulted in Valentino's arrest for bigamy.²² On his return to the United States, Valentino was arrested and imprisoned until several of his friends were able to collect funds and post bail for the actor after his studio, the *Famous Players – Lasky Corporation* refused to do so.²³



During the roaring 20's the domination of the seedier side of Mexicali (and other parts of Mexico) by the Chinese led to the "Tong wars" as rival Chinese organizations battled over territory, prostitution and gambling. This wave of organized crime resulted in an anti-Chinese movement which resulted in the murders of hundreds of Chinese in northern Mexico. By most accounts, the sheer size and strength of the Chinese community in Mexicali spared residents from the fate of Chinese immigrants in other communities of northern Mexico.

²⁰ As a Mexican city, Mexicali was exempt from the Volstead Act (or the 18th amendment) which prohibited the sale of alcohol in the United States, and was enacted in 1919 and repealed in December of 1933.

²¹ Reynolds, C. (2007). Before Las Vegas, Tijuana was Southern California's glitzy escape. *LA Times*, 16 September 2007. Published on-line at: <http://www.latimes.com/travel/la-trw-before-las-vegas-tijuana-was-escape12sep07,0,3622015,print.story>

²² Technically he had divorced his first wife, Jean Acker, in 1921 but California law at that time required a one year wait prior to remarriage. As a side note, his marriage to Jean Acker had been an attempt on her part to shield her from gossip surrounding a lesbian love triangle which also included actresses Grace Darmond and Alla Nazimova. His hasty marriage to Acker was reportedly never consummated, but information obtained from the Rudolf Valentino Society suggests that Valentino was unaware of her sexual orientation and married Acker for the traditional reasons.

²³ Readers may be more familiar with Famous Players by their current name, *Paramount Pictures*, which they assumed in 1927.



The wedding of Rudolph Valentino, 1922, Mexicali²⁴

Mexicali and the Second World War

At the beginning of European hostilities in the late 1930's, President Cardenas declared neutrality on behalf of Mexico. But in the midst of presidential elections, political maneuvers and German submarine attacks, all of this changed. As Cardenas had previously nationalized the oil industry within Mexico, these submarine attacks against Mexican tankers was tantamount to a direct attack on the nation of Mexico, and Mexico responded accordingly. Thus in 1942, Mexico declared war against the Axis nations.²⁵

²⁴ Photograph preceding page, still from *The Sheik*, 1921, one of Valentino's most famous roles.

²⁵ During the Second World War, Mexico was one of only two Latin American countries (along with Brazil) that sent troops in support of Allied forces in Europe.

What is the “Mexicali Rose”?

The “Mexicali Rose”

Contrary to a popular misconception, ‘Mexicali Rose’ is not the name of a desert hybrid variety of a flower or plant. It was the title of a popular song which was originally written in 1923 by Jack Tenney and Helen Stone. It was popularized by numerous singers including Bing Crosby, and cowboy crooner, Gene Autry. The identity of the woman referred to as the “Mexicali Rose” in the song has never been confirmed, but Mexican actress Delores del Rio fought against the nickname and ‘fiery Latina stereotype’ for much of her career. Mexicali Rose later served as the title of several films including an early talkie, the 1929 romantic film starring Barbara Stanwyck and the 1939 Western starring Gene Autry.



¹ A story regarding the origins of the song can be found at:

<http://www.chapala.com/chapala/ojo/best-articles/mexicali.html>

A recording of Gene Autry singing Mexicali Rose can be found on YouTube.

In addition to serving in the armed forces of both Mexico and the United States, Mexicali residents supported the Allies in other ways; such as the Bracero program (the US Emergency Labor Program) which encouraged Mexican laborers to come to California to replace American agricultural workers that were serving in the armed forces. Over four million Mexican workers, many from Mexicali, participated in this program which ran from 1942 to 1964.²⁶

However, an artifact at the Mexicali Municipal Cemetery No. 1 (Pioneer Cemetery) also gives rise to speculation to another twist in this dark period of human history.²⁷ While many of the gravestones in the cemetery harken back to the earliest settlers of Mexicali, there is one grave of particular local interest.



Unmarked grave at Pioneer Cemetery

This mysterious, unnamed grave lends credence to earlier published histories of Nazi activity in Mexico in the 1930's. The grave, with a large swastika appears to confirm reports of a Nazi presence in the city in the 1930's.²⁸ A book entitled, *Secret Armies, the New Technique of Nazi Warfare* alleges that there were Nazi party meetings in Mexicali in 1933, and secret shipments and caches of

²⁶ University of California photography collection, Bracero program.

²⁷ Morales, V. (2008). Mexicali grave flaunts Nazi association. *Imperial Valley Press*, January 19, 2008.

²⁸ The grave may have been vandalized since it was first reported by Mr. Morales. It appeared significantly different in appearance during our visit to previous reports of additional iron cross and swastika decorations.

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