

Steller: Arizona's Stance on Mexico Lurches from Slap to Embrace

January 5, 2014 • By Tim Steller

To some of us in Southern Arizona, the state's sudden embrace of cross-border trade is a bit jarring.

The same people in Phoenix who so recently bashed Mexico over border-security issues now talk excitedly about the need for more staff to facilitate border-crossings at the expanded Mariposa Port of Entry in Nogales.

Even **Sen. Al Melvin**, the SaddleBrooke Republican who's running for the party's gubernatorial nomination, has gone from promoting armed Minuteman groups on the border to promoting the Guaymas deep-sea port. It's enough to make heads spin here in Baja Arizona.

The completeness of the transition came home to me Dec. 9, when **U.S. Rep. Matt Salmon** held a field hearing on trade with Mexico at Tucson City Hall. Much of the discussion focused on technical issues related to expanding commerce, such as how to pay for infrastructure improvements with private money. I didn't hear any mention of decapitated heads rolling around the borderlands, an image made infamous by Gov. Jan Brewer in 2010.

"Trade is not a partisan issue," said Salmon, a Republican.

Afterward, I asked him about his reference during the hearing to "water under the bridge" in Arizona's relationship with Mexico. What was he talking about?

"I was referring to perceptions in Mexico — their perceptions of our feelings about the relationship," he explained.

So that's where we are now in this Arizona-Mexico relationship. The recent past — Brewer's signing of SB 1070 in 2010, the subsequent canceled Arizona-Mexico commission meeting and border governors conference, the nonexistent rolling heads — that was all a sort of vague misunderstanding, a perception issue. Anyway, it's the past — now on to the future!

For Tucson, the future envisioned in excited talk of trade with Mexico resembles our city's more distant past. As a one-time northern outpost of Mexico, Tucson has never lost that Mexican connection, though the relationship has grown more distant as migrants from the rest of the United States have diluted the regional population and the border has become harder to cross.

Consider famous Tucsonans such as **Federico (Fred) Ronstadt**. Born in 1868, he grew up mostly in Sonora, came to Tucson as a teen, spent time in upper and lower California and finally landed back here to launch his wheel and wagon business.

“By 1906, we had built up a good trade for custom-made wagons and other lines in Southern Arizona and in the state of Sonora, Mexico. We had established an agency in Cananea and also had subagents in Nogales, Hermosillo and Guaymas,” Ronstadt wrote in his memoir.

That trade was interrupted by the Mexican revolution, but the company evolved, becoming the regionally significant F. Ronstadt Hardware and Machinery Co., and continued commerce with Sonora. It was natural.

That history matters now, **John Boyd** told me on a visit to Tucson last month. Boyd, a site selector who heads his own New Jersey-based company, said Tucson is poised to take advantage of today’s trends, such as “onshoring” — bringing manufacturing operations back from Asia to North America.

Tucson has “longstanding business relationships with Mexico,” he said. “You speak Spanish. You’re working with trends rather than against them.”

Compare that with Great Lakes cities such as Detroit — turning their economy around means working against trends, Boyd said.

His recommendation is not only to embrace Mexico, but also to try attracting Canadian businesses, making this a stronger node for broader North American commerce. Boyd, who has experience helping Canadian firms seek U.S. locations, said Tucson can exploit the parity of our dollar with Canada’s, and the tendency of Canadian firms to sink roots in the United States once they reach a certain size.

Tucson Mayor **Jonathan Rothschild** last month listed trade with Mexico as one of his “Five T’s” — new economic pillars for Tucson’s future. Among his specific ideas is to open a trade office in Mexico City, something Phoenix is already moving toward, and to add nonstop flights to Mexico, something Phoenix already has.

What a difference in attitude a few years has made in Phoenix.

It would be a shame if Arizona’s capital city, fresh from spoiling Tucson’s relationship with Mexico, got the jump on trade and surpassed the Old Pueblo.

Taking advantage of our deeper history with Mexico may require us overlooking the hostile recent past.