

Breweries and Beer Bottles at El Paso, Texas



Bill Lockhart
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Chapter 7a
Harry Mitchell's Early Life and the Juárez Years

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The Harry Mitchell Brewery

Chapter 7a – Harry Mitchell’s Early Life and the Juárez Years

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Although Harry Mitchell is best remembered for his brewery in El Paso, he was probably even better known throughout the country in the 1920s for the Mint Bar and Restaurant in Juárez, Mexico. The Mint served notables from all over the U.S. But Harry Mitchell’s story began much earlier . . .

The Early Life of Harry Mitchell

Although he spent most of his life in the U.S., Harry Mitchell began his existence in England. He came to the U.S. via Canada but remained for the rest of his life.

England

Harry Mitchell was born in, Fritwell, Oxfordshire, England¹ (just seven miles from Oxford University), in 1888 and his first job was as a “buttons” (bell hop). His boyhood ambition was to be a stage comedian, and he was fond of musical comedies (Chavez 1988; 1995:4; El Paso County Historical Society [EPCHS]; Frew; “Hobby”; Harry Mitchell’s tombstone). His given name was Noble Mitchell, although he did not like the name and took the nick-name, Harry, used by his father, William Henry Mitchell, as well as one of his brothers. The name was obviously quite popular in the family and was used by the El Paso Harry Mitchell for the rest of his life. His mother’s maiden name was Elizabeth Nobel Parsons.

¹ All references in El Paso newspapers claim Blechington [*sic*], England, as Harry’s birthplace, but his nephew, Don Frew, was adamant that Harry was born in Fritwell (Frew). Fritwell is ca. seven miles north (and a bit east) of Blechingdon (the correct spelling), so these were two distinctly different communities. Note that El Paso newspapers also misspelled the name of the town.

Migrations and Family

The second of ten children, Mitchell, his sister, Agnes, and his parents migrated to Brantford, Ontario, Canada, in 1890 (Frew; Mitchell 2002 – Figure 7a-1). Young Harry was raised there. At an early age, he attempted to enter the United States but was turned back at the border because he was too young for immigration. At the age of 17, Mitchell again left Brantford for the U.S. (Figure 7a-2). He was more successful the second time and arrived in San Francisco, California,² just after the great fire of 1906. He began his bartending career at the Palace Hotel which was still intact despite the conflagration (Mitchell 2002; “Hobby”).



Figure 7a-1 – The Mitchell family – Harry is first row, far left (Courtesy of Wil Mitchell)



Figure 7a.2 – Young Harry Mitchell (Courtesy of Wil Mitchell)

Many of the family members had a high regard for Mitchell. Wil Mitchell (Harry’s nephew) remembered that Harry and his father “had great respect for each other.” The family called Harry “Uncle Noble.” Harry’s mother stayed with him for awhile in the winter of 1930-1931, but she “did not care for the high life,” and she returned to Brantford. Harry also helped put some of his brothers and sisters through school (*El Paso Evening Post* 9/30/1930; Mitchell 2002).

In a letter to Harry from the family home at 14 Washington St. (at Brantford – Figures 7a-3 & 7a-4), in December of 1934, his mother congratulated him on the opening of his brewery and commented that “Mac Colquhaun . . . was so kind to me and the children when Daddy left us” (Harry senior died of Typhoid on November 11, 1911). She also referred to Noble (Harry) as “one of Old Harry’s Boys” (Mitchell 1934). Elizabeth Mitchell died just a few years later, on March 11,

1937 (Mitchell 2002).

² Norma Frew, Harry’s niece, remembers a family tradition that Harry left home at age 14. He made it as far as St. Louis and ran out of money. He married there, although family memory has long forgotten the name of his spouse. They were later divorced (Mitchell 2002).



Figure 7a-3 – Mitchell family house at Brantford, Ontario (Courtesy of Wil Mitchell)

Mitchell could also be very generous with family members, especially those in need. When Harry’s brother, Jack, lost his arm in an industrial accident in 1958, Harry “took care of [Jack’s] ego” and “arranged to pay off the mortgage on the house.”

Jack was a proud man and would not ask for help, but a cousin informed Harry. Because there were 14 in the family, Harry’s help was both needed and appreciated. Harry also remembered his family generously in his will (Mitchell 2002).

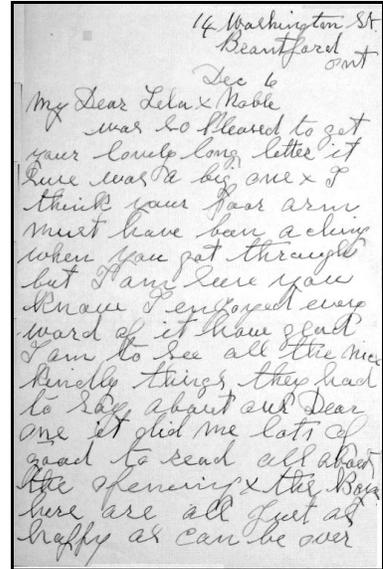


Figure 7a-4 – Letter from Harry Mitchell’s mother (Courtesy of the El Paso County Historical Society)

Mitchell did not stay long in San Francisco. By at least November of 1907, he had migrated to Los Angeles. He worked at the Hotel Hayward Bar at Spring and Sixth Streets for 18 months as a bartender. In a letter dated March 12, 1909, the manager, T.W. Brown, gave Mitchell a glowing recommendation. Brown (1909) noted that Mitchell was

leaving on his own accord and carries with him our best wishes. During the time he was with us we found him a careful, obliging and trustworthy workman. To anyone wishing the services of a good man we cheerfully recommend him and would consider it a personal favor to anyone showing him a kindness.

El Paso

Because of health reasons, Mitchell migrated to El Paso, possibly soon after terminating his employment at the Hotel Hayward. At some point, he married a local woman named Lela,³

³ Lela’s maiden name may have been Melton; she mentioned at least three people named Melton in her will (Mitchell 2002). However, she was listed in the El Paso city directory for 1947 as Lela P. Mitchell, so her maiden name may have started with the letter “P.”

although I have not been able to find details about the marriage or Lela's background, except that she was born in 1898 (Lela Mitchell's tombstone).⁴

With his previous experience, Mitchell soon became a bartender at the Hotel Paso del Norte (Chavez 1988; 1995:4; *El Paso Herald Post* 5/17/1971; *El Paso Times* 5/17/1971; "Hobby"). On October 1, 1913, S.G. Humphreys, president of the Board of Directors, and M.A. Shenic, assistant manager of the hotel, promoted Mitchell to head bartender, "being in full charge of our bar." The new promotee had "full power to act in regard to the carrying out of the policy of the bar at all times, including the hiring of the necessary help" (Shenic 1913). Harry was renowned for his ability to mix any drink then known (Chavez 1988).

Mitchell may have returned to California for a time. When Charles E. Fisk visited Harry in 1929, the *El Paso Evening Post* (2/15/1929) noted that Mitchell worked for Fisk at Mexicali "15 years ago." That would have placed Mitchell in Mexicali ca. 1914. It is possible, of course, that Fisk remembered an earlier time, although I have found no other reference to Mitchell during the 1914-1916 period.

When the United States declared war on Germany on April 6, 1917, many young men joined the fighting forces. Mitchell enlisted in the United States Army on July 19, 1918, and served in World War I for almost five months, returning to El Paso upon his discharge on December 17.⁵ According to an *El Paso Times* article from the Mitchell scrapbooks, he resumed his old job at the Hotel Paso del Norte and worked there until he undertook the management of the Oasis Café from its opening on April 23, 1921, until it closed in 1923 (EPCHS; *El Paso Times* 5/13/1937; "Hobby").

⁴ Family memories (Mitchell 2002) suggest that Mitchell moved to El Paso so Lela could be with friends in case his decline in health should result in his death, but it is more likely that he met and married Lela at El Paso or Juárez

⁵ This may have been the time to which Wil Mitchell's family tradition (see above) actually refers. Possibly Mitchell was wounded or taken seriously ill during the war and returned early. The couple then may have come back to El Paso so Lela could be close to relatives.

The Mint: Harry Mitchell in Juárez, Mexico

Two interesting items cause me to question the scrapbook article (see above). First, an article in the *El Paso Evening Post* (11/21/1928) noted that Mitchell had been in Juárez for ten years. That would have made 1918 the year that he arrived. Second, a 1920 ad for the Oasis Café listed Mitchell as the manager (*El Paso Herald* 11/24/1920). Thus, Mitchell was in Juárez no later than Thanksgiving day 1920 (Figure 7a-5).



Figure 7a-5 – Oasis Café at the Hotel Rio Bravo (eBay)



Figure 7a-6 – Harry Mitchell – early Juárez years (Courtesy of the El Paso County Historical Society)

Our second glimpse of Harry Mitchell in Juárez is when he managed the Oasis Café (Figure 7a-6). The Oasis opened on April 23, 1921, with Harry as an integral part of the business. Along with food and drink, the Oasis featured jazz music, girls, and theatrical performances. The café went through two owners and was finally closed by the authorities in late 1923 for allowing open gambling (Langston 1974:106).⁶ Mitchell’s whereabouts during the next three years is currently unknown.

According to an article in Mitchell’s scrapbook (EPCHS), the Mint opened “on Christmas Eve, 1926.” An advertising card (reproduced in Chavez 1988) noted that the Mint was a “Five Minute Car Ride From Leading Hotels . . . What Delmonico’s was to New York, the Poodle Dog to San Francisco and Fabacher’s to New Orleans, the Mint Café is to El Paso and Juarez” (Figure 7a-7) The card further described the mint:

⁶ Langston (1974:228-229) interviewed John Donahue on April 9, 1968. Donahue recalled that “Morris lent the initial capital to Harry Mitchell to enable him to open the Oasis Café.” George Evans owned the Oasis; Mitchell was his manager. It is unclear whether Donahue was remembering a loan to Evans for the Oasis or to Mitchell – to Open the Mint.



Figure 7a-7 – Matchbook from the Mint (eBay)

Finished in a green color scheme to fit its name, the Mint is a cool, inviting café where men may take their wives and families and where an air of quiet refinement makes the wonderful food and service doubly enjoyable.

Wild game, Mexican dishes, steaks, fish and chops are served at the Mint Café to your order and the chef will be glad to prepare any special dish you may desire and to arrange in advance for dinner parties.

Also available was lobster thermidor and “medium rare K.C. strips [i.e., Kansas City strip steaks]” (Langston 1974:9). An undated ad (EPCHS) for the Mint noted that the restaurant “provides three essentials—refined environment[,] excellent food[,] unexcelled service.”

The article also quoted the price of dinner: \$1.00. A menu in the EPCHS collection revealed prices such as \$1.00 for Filet Mignon, “Planked K.C. Tenderloin for one \$1.75,” or a whole wild duck for \$1.10. Page 2 promised that “our chef will gladly prepare for you your favorite dish, whether on the menu or not. This includes special cuts of steaks” (Figure 7a-8) No wonder the Mint was so popular! A single opening at the front of the establishment led to separate doors for the Mint Bar and the Mint Café.

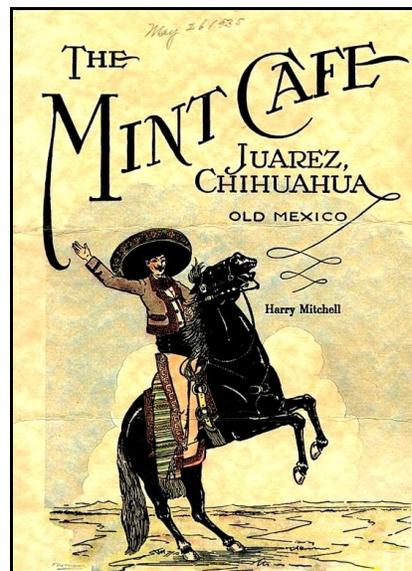


Figure 7a-8 – Menu from the Mint Cafe (eBay)

Some of the most important people of the day visited The Mint. Included in the long list was Will Durant, Tommy Armour, Billy Mitchell, Sidney Smith (creator of the comic strip, “The Gumps”), Amilia Earhart, Fanny Brice, Jim Thorpe, Jimmy Jeffries, Jack Dempsey, Oklahoma Governor “Alfalfa Bill” Murray, Frank A. Cook of the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Baily Circus, New York Mayor Jimmy Walker, Admiral Richard Byrd, and Eddie Rickenbacker (Chavez 1988; 1995:5; 2000:4; *El Paso Times* 5/17/1971; Langston 1974). Mitchell encouraged customers to sign his log book as a memento for his later enjoyment.

Mitchell also offered membership in the “Bar Fly,” a worldwide organization of regular bar drinkers (Figure 7a-9 & 7a-10). The Mint was Trap No. 34 of 77 “traps” (and the second largest in the world) located at upper-middle class drinking establishments. Dr. B.U.L. Connor, president of Trap No. 34 and author of a regular newspaper column (The Fence) occasionally published some of the rules of the organization in his column. The rules were found in a printed, pocket-sized book with a red cover, according to Connor. One rule was, “Members who bump their chins on the bar, are subject to suspension for 10 days.” Mitchell was the vice president of the local trap with C.A. Feenay, his chief bartender, as secretary (undated, uncited articles in scrapbook at EPCHS).



Figure 7a-9 – Inside the Mint (Mangan 1971:108)

On December 18, probably 1932, as Prohibition was about to end, The Fence reported the inauguration of the Bar-Butterflies, a women’s auxiliary. The ladies were subject to rules in a blue-covered book. Rule No. 1 stated, “The Bar-Butterflies is a white shoulder and evening gown organization, devoted to merry laughter, sparkling eyes, and high nonchalance in all situations.” There is little doubt as to the race or social class of the members. A related article (EPCHS) noted that the organization was Trap No. 1, the first of its kind.



Figure 7a-10 – Harry (at right) behind the bar at the Mint in Juarez (Courtesy of Wil Mitchell)

At a currently unknown year during the Mitchell’s stay in Mexico, the Mexican government presented *la medalla de valor* to Lela Mitchell for bravery during a small, late flare up of the Mexican Revolution. On March 8, nine people (including her husband, Harry, C.A. Feeney, his head bartender, other friends, and at least two reporters) had taken refuge in the Mitchell house at 206 Lerdo, Ciudad Juárez, when shooting broke out in the neighborhood. According to an uncited and undated article in the EPCHS scrapbook, “Mrs. Mitchell proved the bravest person in the house.” Even though every man in the house “got flattened out on the floor,” Lela “insisted on making coffee” for the men, although they encouraged her to go to the basement for safety.

She commented, “When the guns first cracked outside the house the first thing I thought of was to run to a window and see what was going on. I might have been killed at once if you men hadn’t set the example of diving for the floor below the windows.”

Two articles praising Lela Mitchell are pasted into a scrapbook in the El Paso County Historical Society collection. Although both are undated, another article on the same page of the scrapbook is dated May 11, 1927. As the dated article discussed the Mint Café, it is likely that all articles on the same page are from the same general time period. That assumption held true with most of the scrapbook pages.

One of the undated articles from the EPCHS scrapbooks discussed Mitchell’s generosity while in Juárez and Lela’s kindness. Hamilton Bayner wrote a letter to the *El Paso Times* praising Mitchell for preparing 1,500 to 1,600 “sacks of candy and nuts, each containing about two pounds” and distributing them to an equal number of poor children in Juárez. Four or five of Mitchell’s bartenders “assisted by two or three Juarez officials” handed out the bags of treats to the children while Lela stood at the head of the line talking to them. Bayner complimented Lela’s compassion, stating that “when some poor child cried for fear he wouldn’t get a gift, she patted him on the head telling him not to cry and saying kind words.”

Mitchell’s home in Juárez was burglarized in October 1928. Pablo Terrazas confessed to the crime and was sentenced to one year, ten months, and 15 days imprisonment. Although Terrazas had been armed with a butcher knife, the Michells were not home, so no one was hurt (*El Paso Evening Post* 1/12/1929). The Mitchells’ time in Juárez was certainly not dull!

Mitchell understood the importance of advertising. According to Langston (1974:111):

he pioneered the practice of producing live radio broadcasts direct from the orchestra stand and dance floor of the Mint. A new 5000 watt radio station, XEJ, complete with a two-hundred-foot antenna, came on the air during January 1931. Because of the abundance of musical talent in El Paso and Ciudad Juárez, the station operators used only a limited number of phonograph recordings. Their listeners seemed to prefer the evening broadcasts originating from the cabaret during the evenings. The listener felt as if he were tuned in directly to an evening in the ballroom of the Waldorf-Astoria. The airwaves over the border resounded with the gaiety coming from the Mint and other night spots in Ciudad Juárez.

Dealing with Enrique Fernández and the Law

Mitchell's partner in the enterprise was Enrique Fernández, well known in Juárez for his underworld activities. Fernández was involved in the local feuds over control of illegal gambling and was suspected of smuggling drugs and alcohol into the United States. Mitchell admitted loaning his partner \$24,000 to reopen the Tivoli Gardens Casino (Langston 1974:112). As part of the loan agreement, Fernández sold his interest in the Mint to Mitchell on November 21, 1928. Mitchell, in turn, sold the establishment to Frank O. Mackey, an owner of the D&M Distillery five days later. Feeney stayed on as manager (*El Paso Times* 11/23/1928; .11/27/1928; *El Paso Evening Post* 11/21/1928; 11/26/1928; Langston 1974:112).

With his newfound freedom, Mitchell and his wife enjoyed a nice vacation to California. However, in January 1929, Mitchell repurchased the Mint from Mackey (*El Paso Evening Post* 12/7/1928; 1/3/1929). I have not discovered the reasons behind this rapid series of sales, but this may be a record for the most sales of a bar and restaurant in a short period of time. The establishment was sold three times within a two-month period, with the original owner making the final purchase! Apparently, Mitchell intended to remain this time. He spent \$10,000 remodeling the kitchen in December 1929 (*El Paso Evening Post* 12/3/1929).

But the stigma of association with Fernández continued to plague Mitchell. On July 11, 1930, Mitchell affirmed that he had signed a trust agreement to create an education fund for the Fernández children in the sum of \$19,480. Mitchell claimed that fear inspired him to sign the papers, but he never saw any of the money. When Fernández' son, Rafael, later attended St. Michael's Academy in Santa Fe, New Mexico, however, Mitchell helped with the cost. Mitchell remained silent about his dealings with Fernández until his death (Langston 1974:112).

His shady partner, however, was a fairly minor problem. According to Chavez (1988; 1995:5) and the Harry Mitchell Scrapbooks (EPCHS), on August 28 [1932] at 1:00 AM, Mitchell and one of his bartenders, Rogelio Sanchez, were arrested by Ramon Muela and other members of the Chihuahua State Police while on the way home from the Mint. Police accused the pair of transporting an ounce of heroin "concealed in the side of Sanchez' car" (EPCHS). At the time, Mitchell said, "There has been a big mistake somewhere. . . . I'm sure the whole thing will be cleared up by morning, and I will be released." Mitchell was later found not guilty of the drug charges. Although the paper erroneously stated that Mitchell was a Mexican citizen, Mitchell –

in a June 12, 1936, article – claimed he had filed for Mexican citizenship but never actually obtained it (EPCHS).

The Beginning of the End

Later that day (August 28), the mayor of Juárez ordered the Mint closed because the walls were unsafe and “in danger of falling.” For reasons that were never disclosed, the governor of Chihuahua ordered the Mint to remain closed after the repairs were affected. On September 12, 1931, while the Mint was still closed, a fire broke out. According to the documents in Chavez (1988) and the Mitchell scrapbooks (EPCHS), someone called the Juárez fire department, but they refused to battle the blaze, claiming that they had insufficient water and equipment. The El Paso fire department was then called and, when they responded, the fire was finally controlled. In gratitude, Mitchell sent the El Paso Fire Department a check for \$150. The Lobby bar, next door, was also badly damaged by the fire.

The Mitchells were visiting friends in New York when the blaze erupted, and the manager, C.A. Feeney, had laid off all the employees because the establishment had been closed. The decision may not have been a sound one. There is some evidence that there was an employee drinking problem (including Feeney). When Mitchell returned to Brantford (Ontario, Canada) for a visit in 1929, Malcolm Shelton and George Haughton sent him a telegram (dated August 25) to keep him informed about his employees. The telegram, delivered to his brother’s address of “fourteen Washington Street Brantford Ont.,” said, “Punch and John have quit drinking[.] Feeney and Geo[.] Younger have been drinking three days[.] Mack is in charge and everything is OK[.] Hurry back so the house will buy a drink” (EPCHS).

Upon Mitchell’s return, he obtained a new permit and reopened the Mint. Due to the layoffs, however, Mitchell was confronted by a union representing his workers. According to an uncited article in Mitchell’s scrapbook (EPCHS), the “thirty-four employes (sic) of the Mint . . . were not members of the Juárez Bartender’s Union, but had established a union of their own about four years ago [i.e. ca. 1931],” although Langston (1974:113) claimed that the employees belonged to CROM, Mexico’s national labor union. Regardless of which union represented the employees, its lawyers filed suit against Mitchell for Feeney’s layoffs during the closure. On June 6, 1935, “forty-five members of the Juárez Waiters and Bartenders Union succeeded in obtaining a \$22,000 judgment against Mitchell and the Mint” (Langston 1974:112-113).

About this same time (1935), Eduardo S. Buchholz sued Mitchell for \$43,000. Buchholz represented the family of Enrique Fernández, Mitchell's former partner, who had been killed in Mexico City on January 13, 1934, and claimed that Mitchell did not fulfill the terms of the earlier trust agreement for the education of the Fernández children (see above).⁷ Mitchell represented himself and claimed he was intimidated into signing the agreement in the first place and never received any money from Fernández for the purpose of educating his children. Because Mitchell did not read Spanish, he claimed he thought he was signing a receipt for the money Fernández owed him for the sale of his half of the Mint. He was found innocent of all charges (Chavez 1988; 1995:6; *El Paso Times* 5/1/1935; EPCHS).

Mitchell admitted later that he had signed many documents that Fernández had placed in front of him. As a result, the two “were associated in operating the Tivoli gambling casino, slot machines, a shoe store, and were partners in a hog selling enterprise.” He also claimed that \$50,000 “mysteriously disappeared from the gambling house and he never knew where it went.” Mitchell had also invested \$10,600 in the shoe store and “did not get a cent back” (*El Paso Herald Post* 6/12/1936).

Closing the Mint

The combination of lawyers from the union and the Fernández family was the last straw for Mitchell. He negotiated with union officials for two days. They demanded ownership of the Mint until the \$22,000 was realized. Mitchell's answer was clear and unequivocal: “It's all over. I turned it back to them this morning. I'm finished. I'm never going to be interested in anything else in Mexico if I can help it” (Langston 1974:113 – Figure 7a-10).

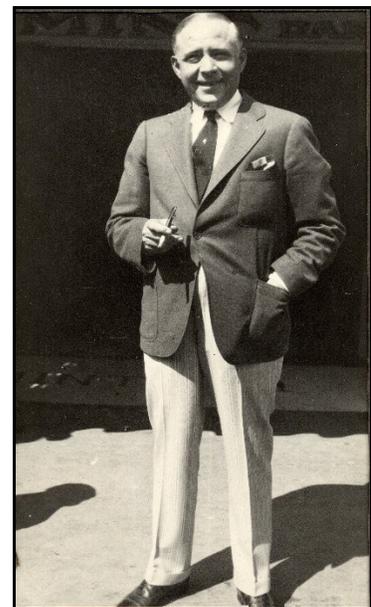


Figure 7a-11 – Harry Mitchell about the time he closed the Mint (Courtesy of the El Paso County Historical Society)

⁷ Langston (1974:163-176, 271-272) told the story of Enrique Fernández and his dealings – legal and quasi-legal – with the Juárez gambling scene. Langston went into detail about the feud between Fernández on one side and Manuel Llantada and Rodrigo Quevedo on the other – which terminated in the fatal shooting of Fernández on January 13, 1934.

An article in Mitchell's scrapbook (EPCHS) stated that "Coleman Feeney, manager of the Mint, turned over the bar and café to the union about noon today [June 6, 1935]. Mr. Feeney had given union officials one hour to return \$1800 in cash taken from the Mint last night, he said. When they failed to return the money, he walked out of the Mint and told the union to take charge." According to Feeney, the stock and furniture in the Mint were worth about \$20,000 when he relinquished control at Mitchell's request.

Mitchell placed a four-column ad in the *El Paso Times* on June 8, 1935. After announcing the closure, he said, "Both Harry Mitchell and Coleman Feeney desire here to pay tribute to the employees themselves, who served loyally for many years and whose fine spirit won the highest praise. To all those wonderful folks from everywhere who helped make the MINT the finest, most distinguished place of its kind on the border, many, many thanks." Mitchell told the newspaper (EPCHS), "I decided to give it up because fighting the case would have cost about \$600, and it would have been throwing good money after bad. . . . Business has been poor at the Mint for some time and the only reason I have kept it open until now was to keep my men employed."

Harry Mitchell kept his word. He never returned to Juárez. Instead, he transferred all of his energy to his newly opened brewery at El Paso. On August 13, 1935, the Mint was offered at public sale at the Juárez City Hall. The business had cost Mitchell \$50,000 to establish, but an arbitration committee set the 1935 value at \$4,000 (Langston 1974:114). At auction, the Mint finally brought \$4,362.38 (*World News* 8/15/1935). The old building remained standing in 1978, when a historic photo (Figure 7a-11) was reproduced in the *El Paso Times* (7/9/1978). The old numbering system had been changed and 110-112 E. Calle 16 de Septiembre was then 151, and the building was occupied by Licores Juárez.



Figure 7a-12 – The Mint

Acknowledgments

As noted in the Preface, Rick Chavez and I became good friends, and he has been kind enough to open all of his files to me as well as sharing his vast knowledge about the Mitchell Brewery (and El Paso brewing in general). Where possible, I have cited the primary sources for each entry as well as the Chavez book. Without Rick's help, this would be a much smaller and poorer history of Harry Mitchell.

In addition, my gratitude goes to Wil Mitchell, Harry's nephew, who shared the information and many photographs he possessed and searched the memories of other family members. Wil and I met at an online auction where we both bid on the same Mitchell beer bottle (Wil won). I asked him for the information found on the bottle, and he replied with all I asked for and much, much more.

Michael Hennech also deserves applause. Mike turned over his entire file on Mitchell (as well as other El Paso brewers) and combed the ranks of collectors to obtain photos of beer labels, bottles, glasses, and other Mitchell breweriana. Without Mike's contribution, this work would have been much duller.

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