

Statement of Phillip C. Bowen, Attorney at Law
Before the Water and Power Subcommittee
Committee on Resources
U.S. House of Representatives

Legislative Hearing on
H.R. 862, a Bill to Re-designate the Rio Grande American Canal in El Paso, Texas
as the “Travis C. Johnson Canal”

December 7, 2005

Chairman Radanovich, Ranking Member Napolitano and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today in support of H.R. H62, *a Bill to Redesignate the Rio Grande American Canal in El Paso, Texas as the “Travis C. Johnson Canal”*.

My name is Phillip C. Bowen, and I am a practicing attorney in El Paso County, Texas. Travis Johnson is an attorney and he and I were associated for in excess of thirty years as law partners. He was the senior partner in our firm and it is a privilege and honor to tell you why I believe it is appropriate and fitting to rename the canal in his honor.

Travis's family has deep roots in El Paso County. His grandfather, Herman Camp, owned the Fabens Mercantile Store in El Paso County which was doing business in the late 19th century. His grandfather's customers included many of the Mexican Revolutionary figures, including Francisco Madera and Pancho Villa. Travis was born in El Paso County and grew up in the farming community along the Rio Grande. He graduated from Ysleta High School and then attended and graduated with honors from Texas A&M University. Thereafter, he graduated from the University of Houston School of Law. After graduation, he returned to El Paso to establish his law practice. He was very active in politics, at the local, state and national levels. During the early sixties, Travis served as County Judge of El Paso County. He was one of the youngest men ever to serve as the chief administrative officer of any Texas county. In that capacity, he worked closely with Presidents Kennedy and Johnson to settle a century old land dispute between the United States and the Republic of Mexico. The Rio Grande River had changed course during a flood stage in the 19th century and left a large tract of land, previously south of the river, now north of the Rio Grande. Mexico continued to claim that this land, although now north of the Rio Grande, was Mexican territory. When President Kennedy visited El Paso in 1962, Kennedy committed to the President of Mexico, Lopez Mateos that this dispute would be settled. Under the Chamizal Treaty which followed, the disputed territory was ceded to Mexico. This required a massive relocation of businesses and residences along the Rio Grande. As county judge, Travis played a key role in formulating the policy, as well as the details, of this settlement which was brought about through the Chamizal Treaty.

After his term as county judge, Travis established his law practice. A significant aspect of his practice included representing the agricultural interests up and down the 200-mile stretch of the Rio Grande that encompasses El Paso and Hudspeth Counties. His representation of the agricultural community once again involved him in a role that required addressing disputed claims between Mexico and the United States. Under a Treaty of 1906 between the two countries, Mexico was entitled to divert and use 60,000 acre feet of water annually at a point on the Rio Grande, located just north and up river of the municipal limits of the city of El Paso. Under the treaty, all of the water remaining in the Rio Grande below the Mexican diversion point was allocated to the United States. Serious problems between the two countries existed and grew more aggravated over the years because of direct diversion from the Rio Grande by Mexican citizens below the diversion point. A solution to this problem was needed. Mexican citizens considered it to be their right to place pumps in the Rio Grande and take whatever water they needed. United States citizens correctly viewed the water in the river below the diversion point to be the exclusive property of the United States. The construction of the American Canal on the American side of river ended the dispute. With the construction of the canal, the water to which the United States was entitled remained in the exclusive control of United States authorities. Travis was the principal author of the legislation, which approved the construction of the canal. In his always quiet and unassuming manner, he supervised the step-by-step process from inception to passage of the bill. He is the only person who has played a key role in the settlement and resolution of the two major border disputes of the 20th century between the United States and Mexico.

Because of his desire to avoid the spotlight, his role in the Chamizal Treaty, the construction of the American Canal, as well as numerous other contributions to West Texas, have largely gone unnoticed. The renaming of the American Canal to the Travis C. Johnson Canal would be appropriate and long overdue recognition of the accomplishments of this great American.