

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

## 1. Name of Property

Historic Name: Pan-American Courts and Cafe  
Other name/site number: Pan-American Courts & Coffee Room  
Name of related multiple property listing: NA

## 2. Location

Street & number: 3301 San Bernardo Avenue  
City or town: Laredo State: Texas County: Webb  
Not for publication: ☐ Vicinity: ☐

## 3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this  
(☒ nomination ☐ request for determination of eligibility) meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the  
National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my  
opinion, the property (☒ meets ☐ does not meet) the National Register criteria.

I recommend that this property be considered significant at the following levels of significance:

☐ national ☐ statewide ☒ local

Applicable National Register Criteria: ☒ A ☐ B ☒ C ☐ D

*Mark Wolfe*  
Signature of certifying official

State Historic Preservation Officer

12/15/2021  
Date

Texas Historical Commission  
State or Federal agency / bureau or Tribal Government

In my opinion, the property ☒ meets ☐ does not meet the National Register criteria.

Signature of commenting or other official

Date

State or Federal agency / bureau or Tribal Government

## 4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that the property is:

- ☐ entered in the National Register  
☐ determined eligible for the National Register  
☐ determined not eligible for the National Register.  
☐ removed from the National Register  
☐ other, explain: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

Pan-American Courts and Cafe, Laredo, Webb County, Texas

## 5. Classification

### Ownership of Property

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Private
<input type="checkbox"/>	Public - Local
<input type="checkbox"/>	Public - State
<input type="checkbox"/>	Public - Federal

### Category of Property

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	building(s)
<input type="checkbox"/>	district
<input type="checkbox"/>	site
<input type="checkbox"/>	structure
<input type="checkbox"/>	object

### Number of Resources within Property

Contributing	Noncontributing	
3	0	buildings
0	0	sites
0	1	structures
1	0	objects
4	1	total

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register: NA

## 6. Function or Use

**Historic Functions:** DOMESTIC: Motel; COMMERCE/TRADE: Cafe

**Current Functions:** DOMESTIC: Motel; COMMERCE/TRADE: Cafe, Bar

## 7. Description

**Architectural Classification:** MODERN MOVEMENT: Moderne; OTHER: Motor Court

**Principal Exterior Materials:** CONCRETE, WOOD, GLASS

**Narrative Description** (see continuation sheets 7-12)

Pan-American Courts and Cafe, Laredo, Webb County, Texas

## 8. Statement of Significance

### Applicable National Register Criteria

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<b>A</b>	Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>B</b>	Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<b>C</b>	Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>D</b>	Property has yielded, or is likely to yield information important in prehistory or history.

**Criteria Considerations:** NA

**Areas of Significance:** Commerce (*local*), Architecture (*local*)

**Period of Significance:** 1946-1972

**Significant Dates:** 1946

**Significant Person** (only if criterion b is marked): NA

**Cultural Affiliation** (only if criterion d is marked): NA

**Architect/Builder:** Saenz, Pablo

**Narrative Statement of Significance** (see continuation sheets 13-20)

## 9. Major Bibliographic References

**Bibliography** (see continuation sheet 21)

### Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- ☐ preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested. Part 1 approved on (date)
- ☐ previously listed in the National Register
- ☐ previously determined eligible by the National Register
- ☐ designated a National Historic Landmark
- ☐ recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey #
- ☐ recorded by Historic American Engineering Record #

### Primary location of additional data:

- ☐ State historic preservation office (*Texas Historical Commission, Austin*)
- ☐ Other state agency
- ☐ Federal agency
- ☐ Local government
- ☐ University
- ☐ Other -- Specify Repository:

**Historic Resources Survey Number** (if assigned): NA

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## 10. Geographical Data

**Acreage of Property:** Less than one acre (approximately 0.852 acres)

### Coordinates

#### Latitude/Longitude Coordinates

Datum if other than WGS84: NA

1. Latitude: 27.529343°N Longitude: -99.503809°W

**Verbal Boundary Description:** The nominated boundary consists of approximately 0.852 acres. LOTS 1-2-3- & 10-11-12 BLK 857 WD PAN AMERICAN COURT & CAFE (Property ID: 165440), Laredo, Webb County, Texas. The nominated boundary follows the current legal boundary as recorded in the Webb Central Appraisal District, accessed March 31, 2021 (Map 4).

**Boundary Justification:** The boundary includes all property historically associated with Pan-American Courts and Café since its construction in 1946.

## 11. Form Prepared By

Name/title: Jesús Najar

Organization:

Street & number: 2525 E. Main Street, Apt. 405

City or Town: Richmond State: Virginia Zip Code: 23223

**Email:** jesusmnajarf@hotmail.com

**Telephone:** 434-409-9055

**Date:** January, 2021

## Additional Documentation

**Maps** (see continuation sheets 22-29)

**Additional items** (see continuation sheets 30-41)

**Photographs** (see continuation sheets 5-6, 42-57)

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**Photograph Log**

Name of Property: Pan-American Courts and Cafe  
City or Vicinity: Laredo  
County: Webb County  
State: Texas  
Name of Photographer: Jesús Najar  
Date: December 2020

Photo 1

Partial view of property, camera facing northeast.

Photo 2

Primary elevation and south elevation entrance canopy, camera facing northeast.

Photo 3

Neon sign and motel (arrow) sign on background, camera facing north.

Photo 4

Entrance driveway and reception office entrance, camera facing northwest.

Photo 5

Courtyard, camera facing northwest

Photo 6

Courtyard and car bays, camera facing west.

Photo 7

View of courtyard and detached suites from upper level of hotel, camera facing southeast.

Photo 8

Upper level balcony, camera facing west

Photo 9

Interior view Coffee Room (now restaurant) with lunch counter with original maroon Mexican cement tile, camera facing northeast.

Photo 10

Interior stair from reception office, camera facing north.

Photo 11

Interior vestibule at reception office entrance, camera facing south.

Photo 12

Upper level interior hallway, camera facing south.

Photo 13

Typical guest room.

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Photo 14

Typical guest room.

Photo 15

View of typical bathroom with original blue Mexican cement tile.

Photo 16

Typical bathroom shower with blue Mexican cement tile.

**Paperwork Reduction Act Statement:** This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C.460 et seq.).

**Estimated Burden Statement:** Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 100 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Office of Planning and Performance Management, U.S. Dept. of the Interior, 1849 C. Street, NW, Washington, DC.

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## Narrative Description

Pan-American Courts and Café<sup>1</sup> is a Post-World War II motor court located at 3301 San Bernardo Avenue, the historic Pan-American Highway in Laredo, Texas.<sup>2</sup> The property consists of three contributing buildings and a non-historic steel canopy in a vaguely U-shaped configuration enclosing a central courtyard. The courtyard provided an informal sitting area for guests and visitors. The 1946 main motel building's plan features a combination of a two-story L-shaped portion with a one-story wing. The building originally contained 21 units and was constructed of concrete block and reinforced concrete featuring a flat roof, cantilevered canopy, and streamlined horizontal emphasis. Original multi-light fixed and casement windows, and many historic finishes including Mexican cement tile are extant. In the late-1950s, two one-story freestanding lodging units were constructed of concrete block and reinforced concrete on the landscaped yard at the south side of the property. The 1946 "Pan American Courts" metal neon roadside sign is extant at the front of the property and is a contributing resource. The non-contributing steel canopy was added to the southwest corner of the property in 2003. Designed by prominent local architect Pablo Saenz, Pan-American Courts and Café is a rare remaining example of Moderne architecture in Laredo. The property has had few alterations since its construction and retains much of its original form, plan, and design, and most of its rooms continue to serve as overnight lodging for travelers on Interstate Highway 35. Overall, the property retains a high level of historic integrity.

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## Location and Setting (Maps 1-4, 7)

Pan-American Courts and Café is located approximately 2 miles north of downtown Laredo, Texas. The main motel building (Resource A) was built in 1946 as the "Pan-American Courts & Coffee Room" facing the historic Pan-American Highway and it has been in continuous operation at this location since its construction. During the 20th century, the historic Meridian Highway and Pan-American Highway (former U.S. 81) followed the alignment of San Bernardo Avenue, a main south-north thoroughfare in Laredo. The nominated property occupies the southern half of the block bounded by San Bernardo Avenue on the west, Burnside Street on the south, Santa Ursula Avenue on the east, and an adjacent parcel on the north. The main access to the property is from San Bernardo Avenue and the other driveway is off Santa Ursula Avenue, which serves as the Interstate Highway 35 southbound frontage road.

The San Bernardo Avenue corridor developed as an early 20th century commercial and transportation corridor with tourist courts and gas stations that catered to travelers going to and from Mexico. The property is surrounded by a mix of one-story commercial buildings, gas stations, and Mexican imports lots that were once the location of other historic-age motor courts. Although newer businesses presently line IH 35, some of the historic tourism-related properties still survive on San Bernardo Avenue.

## Property Overview<sup>3</sup> (Maps 2, 5-8, Photos 1-9)

Pan-American Courts and Café is a historic motor court comprised of four contributing resources and one non-contributing resource, organized in a somewhat U-shaped configuration. The contributing concrete block and reinforced concrete buildings serve as intact examples of Moderne architecture designed by local architect Pablo Saenz. Buildings on the property include the main two-story, L-shaped motel, office, and restaurant and an abutting

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<sup>1</sup> It is fitting to nominate the property under the name Pan-American Courts and Café, rather than Pan-American Courts & Coffee Room, as it was the most commonly used name for the property during the period of significance.

<sup>2</sup> This property retains many of the character defining features of post-war tourist court as outlined in Table 12. Tourist Court Subtype by Time Period in Property Types and Registration Requirements in Hardy-Heck-Moore, Inc. (HHM), "The Development of Highways in Texas: a Historic Context of the Bankhead Highway and Other Historic Named Highways. I. Statewide Historic Context," Texas Historical Commission. 2014, 447.

<sup>3</sup> Historic architectural drawing were not located for this property.

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one-story linear wing that runs parallel to the northern edge of the property (Resource A) and two one-story freestanding lodging units (Resources B & C). The motor court wing has an alternating carport-room configuration with carports interspersed with individual lodging units, a design that catered to overnight guests who wanted to park directly next to their room. The two detached lodging units run parallel to Burnside Street facing the courtyard and were built in the late-1950s.

Character defining features of the Moderne main motel building (Resource A) include the streamlined horizontal emphasis given by the concrete block masonry and projecting flat roofs. Every three courses of block is visually separated by a continuous recessed joint creating a pattern that provides horizontality. Each concrete block unit is shaped like brick which adds texture to the design. Windows have soldier course concrete headers, and cement window lintels. While Pablo Saenz implemented the use of concrete block in his contemporary work, this pattern was only used on the Pan-American Courts and Café. The flat roof projects about two-and-a-half feet from the wall in all directions. Exposed tapered rafters support a wood roof deck and is surrounded by a wood fascia. Additional Moderne elements include the building's flat entrance canopy on the south elevation.

The courtyard is accessed by a driveway that enters from San Bernardo Avenue under the projecting canopy. The courtyard provides vehicular access to most of the rooms. In the past, the courtyard provided a small area for travelers to socialize, and offered a sense of security and privacy from the bustle of the busy highway. A landscaped yard extended along the southern edge of the property where the two Moderne detached units (Resources B & C) were added in the late 1950s. While the courtyard retains its original outline, it is minimally landscaped. Planting islands located between the drives were originally well landscaped with grass, palm trees, banana trees, rose bushes, bougainvilleas, and Brazilian orchid trees. The driving surface was originally gravel but it was paved over with asphalt at an unknown date. A remaining grass area located between the detached units was asphalted in 2008.

In front of the building along San Bernardo Avenue is an original 1946 metal neon roadside sign supported by a steel post (Resource D). This sign originally had neon letters that spelled the name of the property. The sign's neon is missing. Also on the property is a 2003 steel canopy which is included as a non-contributing structure (Resource E).

Each of the following is considered a contributing resource to the nominated property unless otherwise noted (Map 2).

**Main Motel Building (1946) - Resource A** (Figures 1-5, 8-10, Photos 1-5, 8)

Constructed in 1946 as the primary lodging facility, the main two-story, L-shaped motel, office, and restaurant and abutting one-story linear wing consists of a 4,206-square-foot concrete block building with Moderne elements that include a flat synthetic membrane roof. The shorter portion of the building faces San Bernardo Avenue and contains the office, café/restaurant, laundry, and storage shed on the ground floor, and seven guest rooms on the upper level. The longer portion of the building faces south to the courtyard in a linear motor court configuration making it easily visible from the road. The lower level contains four pairs of units with mirrored floorplans with entry doors from the carport bays, while the upper level contains seven contiguous units. The wing is divided by carports located between the units. In front of each door is a concrete step.

*Exterior*

The primary elevation faces west to San Bernardo Avenue. It is a five-bay facade with the restaurant on the lower level and four guest rooms above. The west wall of the cafe is recessed creating a partially covered concrete terrace or patio facing the street and parking. A railing with horizontal wood boards was added recently to enclose the patio. Four rectangular concrete columns support a reinforced concrete beam and the units above. Four original multi-light windows and an original multi-light door are visible on the lower level. The upper level has three large original multi-



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light windows corresponding to the three of the four rooms above, and two smaller original windows for two of the bathrooms. The central window retains a metal awning, which was added in c. 1960s. The painted signage on the main facade dates to at least the early-1950s when photographs and postcards featured the name of the property "Pan-American Courts & Coffee Room." (Figures 4-5) Recently the words "Coffee Room" have been painted over to denote the current restaurant tenant "Clementine's Kitchen."

On the south elevation, an original cantilevered canopy projects out from the two-story portion over the entrance driveway. A small step flanked by built-in planters leads to the office entrance. The windows are original rectangular multi-light wood casements. One window on the upper level of the main building has been covered over with plywood and painted white to make room for an air-conditioning window unit. The original casement windows are still intact under this cover.

The guest rooms face south to the courtyard spanning the entire length of the property. On the upper level, the rooms are connected by a cantilevered wooden balcony with an iron railing, accessible by a wood staircase. These stairs were replaced in 1998 with code-compliant stairs with a landing. The wing is divided by carports located between the units. The carport bays hold two cars and have a central steel support post.

The east elevation of the 2-story portion has a secondary entrance. The entrance features an original multi-light glazed door. A wooden sign with the word "Cafe" tops the entrance. A partially curved concrete step leads to the entrance. Outside the vestibule, a one-story tool shed abuts from the east wall. It has a thin reinforced concrete roof and an air condensing unit. Two sets of original multi-light casement windows are visible at the second story. Facing Santa Ursula Avenue to the east is the sidewall of the wing. It has two sets of original multi-light casement windows.

The north elevation faces a narrow service alleyway or easement and it contains only small bathroom windows on the one-story portion.

*Interior* (Figures 6, 11, Photos 9-16)

The main motel building largely retains its original floor plan. Access to the office is provided by the entrance located at the south elevation underneath the projecting canopy. A secondary entrance is located on the east elevation of the 2-story portion. This east entrance opens up to a small vestibule with a concrete staircase providing access to the upper-level units. Paired multi-light doors with a multi-light transom and sidelights separates the vestibule from the office. The office features a small reservation desk and small seating area. A doorway on the north wall of the office provided direct access to the café restaurant. This doorway is currently blocked with drywall but the opening is still visible. The restaurant contains a lunch counter with original maroon Mexican cement tile (Figure 11, Photo 9). The entrance to the restaurant is on the patio along the primary elevation.

The upper floor is also largely intact. On the west side of the 2-story portion, a cluster of guest rooms is connected by an interior double-loaded corridor with rooms located on either side. Corridor finishes include painted gypsum board walls with cement tile baseboard, wood flooring covered by carpet, and painted gypsum board ceilings and modern florescent lighting throughout. The rooms are accessed by single-leaf wood doors and feature a single recessed panel configuration. Each room has a sleeping area, an open closet nook, and a bathroom. The individual rooms are finished with hardwood flooring covered by carpet, drywall walls, and cement tile baseboard.

On the courtyard facing portion of the building the floor plan is intact. The lower level contains four pairs of rooms with mirrored floorplans with entry doors from the carport bays, while the upper level contains seven contiguous rooms. All upper level rooms are connected by a linear balcony. The entry opens into the sleeping area which ells around the bathroom. The walls and ceilings are plastered, and with the original wood floors covered by carpet in some

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of the units, and still exposed in others. All the bathrooms in the building still have the original Mexican blue cement tile floors, blue tile wainscoting, and white porcelain wall sinks and toilets.

**Unit 22 and Unit 23 (late-1950s) - Resource B** (Figure 6, Photo 7)

Resource B contains one-story 1,320-square-foot concrete block units. The building has a flat roof and the units have mirrored floorplans. The building appears to retain its original windows and is at grade with a concrete slab foundation.

Unit 22 retains its original interior configuration and an open carport. The entry for Unit 22 opens from the carport into the sleeping area which ell around the bathroom. Interior materials are ceramic tile flooring, likely on the concrete slab, with plastered walls, 2'x4' acoustic ceiling tiles, and wood trim. The bathroom has a white porcelain wall sink and toilet. Entry doors are wood panel units.

Unit 23, on the east end of the building, retains its original interior configuration like Unit 22 but the carport has been modified. The area that was once a carport has been enclosed for additional space. It is unclear when the enclosure occurred, however, the materials suggest it is a historic-age alteration.

**Unit 24 (late-1950s) - Resource C** (Figure 6, Photo 7)

Resource C contains a one-story 2,781-square-foot concrete block suite with a flat roof covered with rolled asphalt. Most windows are original multi-light casements. Entry doors are replacement wood. The suite is at grade on a concrete slab foundation. The main entrance faces the courtyard. Three other entrances on the north, east, and west elevations are not original and provide separate access to the reconfigured interior space. Similarly, fenestrations on the north and west elevations have been filled-in or increased in size but are still visible. On the west elevation, a new sliding window was opened to connect the bar with the courtyard. Fenestrations on the south and east elevations are a combination of original windows and non-historic openings for air conditioning units.

The interior was originally a large suite with a living room, kitchen, one bedroom, bathroom, walk-in closet, and a hanging closet. In the late 1970s a second bedroom was added to the east, likely the result of a carport enclosure. In 2012 the wall dividing the kitchen and primary bedroom was removed and is now a single space that functions as a bar. Two more restrooms were added along the south elevation and a corridor now separates the bedrooms. The east bedroom is a rental space and has a separate entrance which opens to a paved area on the southeast corner of the property. Interior materials are a concrete floor, except in the bar which is ceramic tile. Other surfaces are plaster walls and ceilings, and wood trim.

**“Pan American Courts, Cafe” Metal Neon Roadside Sign (1946) - Resource D** (Figures 3-5, Photo 3)

A metal roadside sign advertises “Pan American Courts” on San Bernardo Avenue next to the main entrance, which is used to draw in travelers. The sign is a metal box with rounded edges supported by a round metal post. The words “Pan American” are in the upper section, the word “Courts” is displayed in larger format immediately below, and the word “Cafe” appears in faded block letters on the lower section. A different roadside sign is shown in the drawings in Figures 1 and 2, but the current sign is believed to date to the original construction and is visible in a historic postcard from the late-1940s (Figure 3). Based on historic photographs and postcards, by the late-1950s the metal box was repainted replacing the words “Air Cooled” and “Coffee Room” with the current “Cafe” lettering. The sign is in fair condition, and the neon glass tubing has been removed. Once brightly colored, it needs refurbishment and repainting.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Table 24. Commercial Signage Subtypes by Time Period in Property Types and Registration Requirements in Hardy-Heck-Moore, Inc. (HHM),

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Hanging on the same post just below the main sign, is a black metal sign with the words "Notary Public." This sign was probably added in the early 1970s. A separate post with an arrow-shaped sign with the word "Motel" is adjacent to the main historic sign. This sign also dates to c. 1970s outside the period of significance. The arrow-shaped sign is not large enough to be included in the resource count.

**Non-Contributing Steel Canopy – Resource E (Photo 1)**

The 2003 non-contributing canopy (Resource E) is a steel utilitarian structure located on the southwest corner of the property. The dimensions of the structure are roughly 40 feet north to south, and 60 feet east to west, and approximately 20 feet in height. The canopy is a free-standing structure, completely open on all sides, and is not physically attached to any other feature on the site. The structure was built on a formerly green space that was paved over to provide additional parking.

**Alterations**

Over the years Pan-American Courts and Cafe has witnessed minor physical changes. At the exterior, on the primary (west) elevation the painted lettering along the café's facade has been modified throughout the years. Shortly after its construction a large awning was installed to provide shade to the café patio (Figures 4-5) but was later removed, and metal awnings were installed over the windows of the upper floor. All but one of the upper floor window awnings was removed. The painted lettering was modified on the neon metal roadside sign between the late 1940s and the late 1950s, but appears to have been consistent since then. The neon glass tubing was removed. The two detached buildings with lodging units were added in the late-1950s.

Several changes were implemented during Saul Rocha's ownership of the property. After acquiring the property in 1962, the Rochas relocated to the motel and occupied units 9 and 10. By the mid-1960s the family moved to unit 24, which was the largest detached unit that offered more privacy. By the late 1970s, the suite was enlarged likely through a carport enclosure and a new bedroom and connecting corridor was added to better accommodate the family. The other major alteration was the closure of a former breezeway on the upper level of the main motel building to create a small-size lodging unit, unit 14A.

The most recent bulk alterations occurred in the 1998 to 2008 period. After Rocha's death, the property had multiple deferred maintenance and code-related issues. Sandra Rocha, the current owner, upgraded the buildings' plumbing and electrical service, replaced the balcony railing and staircase on the wing portion. A deteriorated wooden balcony that spanned along the south elevation of the main two-story portion was removed due to safety concerns. When the café space was leased to a separate business, the city's building and health department required the closure of the doorway that connected the motel's office with the restaurant for separate uses. Minor alterations to building interiors include the application of floor carpeting and installation of window air conditioning units.

In the courtyard the green space between the detached units was paved over, and a formerly green space by the office entrance has now brick pavers. This meant the removal of much of the historic vegetation. A fence was also installed along part of the perimeter of the property. On the west side is wrought iron, and on the south and east is chain-link. The main motel building has continued to be used for overnight lodging, as well as short-term and long-term rentals but all rooms in the one-story wing are currently vacant due to deferred maintenance issues. The two detached buildings have been rented separately for commercial uses since the late-1990s. The interior of Unit 24 has

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"The Development of Highways in Texas: a Historic Context of the Bankhead Highway and Other Historic Named Highways. I. Statewide Historic Context," Texas Historical Commission. 2014, 513.

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experienced the most change over time and nearly all of the original finishes have been removed. While most of the interior was reconfigured into a bar, the guest rooms are easily identifiable. The detached building containing units 22 & 23 largely retains its floor plan dating back to its original construction in the late-1950s, but the carport was enclosed on unit 23. A green space located on the southwest corner of the property was paved over and a non-contributing steel canopy was built in 2003 and an arrow-shaped sign with the word "Motel" was added in the 1970s.

### Integrity

Pan-American Courts and Café retains integrity of location, setting, design, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association. It retains integrity of location as it remains sited along the alignment of the historic Meridian Highway and Pan-American Highway, although these highways have been decommissioned. The setting has been somewhat compromised since the property is now surrounded by a mix of one-story commercial buildings, gas stations, and Mexican imports lots that were once the location of other historic-age motor courts, but it is still a locally-owned motor court along San Bernardo Avenue where some of the historic tourism-related properties survive. Integrity of design is visible in the intact post-war site plan, with a vaguely U-shaped building configuration, iconic signage, central courtyard, and overall circulation pattern. Despite the addition of the steel canopy and loss of landscaping, the original configuration of the courtyard is extant.

The Moderne buildings exhibit excellent integrity of design and materials. The main motel building still features concrete block and reinforced concrete with a flat roof, exposed rafters, cantilevered canopy, and streamlined horizontal emphasis. The two detached buildings also retain their concrete block and flat roofs. A majority of the original multi-light windows and doors are extant on the property. Integrity of workmanship and materials is visible in the intact original finishes including Mexican cement tile, wood trim, plastered walls, gypsum board walls and ceilings, wood flooring (though much is covered with carpet), single leaf wood doors, and white porcelain sinks and toilets. Apart from some changes to the detached units, the buildings largely retain original floor plans. With all of these aspects combined, the property evokes the feeling of a post-war motor court and is still easily recognizable as such. It remains associated with the local family-owned Pan-American Courts and Café business.

### Inventory of Contributing and Non-Contributing Resources within the Nominated Boundary

Resource	Resource Name	Type	Date	Status
A	Main Motel Building	Building	1946	Contributing
B	Unit 22 and Unit 23	Building	Late 1950s	Contributing
C	Unit 24	Building	Late 1950s	Contributing
D	"Pan American Courts, Cafe" Metal Roadside Sign	Object	1946	Contributing
E	Steel Canopy	Structure	2003	Non-Contributing

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## Statement of Significance

Pan-American Courts and Café at 3301 San Bernardo Avenue in Laredo, Texas, is a representative example of a historic motor court that proliferated along the historic Meridian and Pan-American Highways after World War II. Motor courts came into vogue in Laredo in the early 1930s as the latest development in tourist accommodations for travelers en route to and from Mexico. Pan-American Courts and Café is nominated to the National Register of Historic Places under Criteria A in the area of Commerce at the local level of significance for its association with the development of both the Meridian and Pan-American Highways and its relationship to the growth of the tourism economy of South Texas during the second half of the twentieth century. The property is also nominated to the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion C in the area of Architecture at the local level of significance as rare and exceptionally intact example of a 1940s motor court property type with a full-service restaurant in a border city. Distinguishing characteristics are the intact post-war site plan including the vaguely U-shaped building configuration with central courtyard, circulation pattern, and size and scale of intact historic concrete block buildings, and iconic neon signage. Designed by Pablo Saenz, the first Hispanic architect registered in Texas and the first Hispanic member of the Texas Society of Architects, the Moderne architecture is distinctive for its concrete block and reinforced concrete, flat roof, cantilevered canopy, and streamlined horizontal emphasis, and interior building finishes with imported Mexican cement tile. While Laredo boasted several motel courts from the early 1930s through the 1970s, Pan-American Courts and Café is one of two extant examples with integrity. The period of significance begins in 1946, with the construction of the main motel building, and ends in 1972, the year that the Lincoln-Juarez Bridge opened to international traffic, which made IH-35 the city's main thoroughfare for travel and prompted the decline of San Bernardo Avenue as the prime motel corridor. During this time, the property served largely the same function which justifies extending the period of significance to 1972 without claiming Criteria Consideration G for exceptional significance.

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## Brief History of Texas Highways

Between 1880 and 1916, prior to the creation of the Texas Highway Department, public road administration—the construction, funding, and maintenance for roads, was left up to the county or local government, or private property owners. Interested citizens and various highway organizations united to lobby the federal government to assist with building better state roads and highways across the country during the Good Roads Movement from the 1890s to the 1920s.<sup>5</sup> With the rise in popularity of the automobile, the private organizations and governmental groups “worked cooperatively to build and promote a comprehensive and integrated transportation system throughout the country.”<sup>6</sup> The lobbying was successful and the Federal Road Act of 1916 provided \$75 million for federal road construction on the condition that states create a central highway agency. Thus, the Texas Highway Department was created in 1917 as the agency to first serve as a middleman passing federal funding down to the individual counties still responsible for road construction and maintenance, and later to oversee the construction, expansion, and standardization of Texas roads and highways.<sup>7</sup> By the 1920s, the “Bankhead Highway (Washington, DC, to San Diego via Texarkana, Dallas, and El Paso), the Meridian Highway (Winnipeg to Mexico City, via Fort Worth and Laredo), and the Old Spanish Trail (St. Augustine, Florida to San Diego, via Houston, San Antonio, and El Paso)” stretched through various parts of Texas.<sup>8</sup> It was in the mid-1920s that these highways became integrated into what became known as the U.S. Highway System.

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<sup>5</sup> National Register Criteria for Evaluation, in Hardy-Heck-Moore, Inc. (HHM), “The Development of Highways in Texas: A Historic Context of the Bankhead Highway and Other Historic Named Highways. I. Statewide Historic Context,” Texas Historical Commission. 2014.

<sup>6</sup> Bruce Jensen, “Historic Road Infrastructure of Texas, 1865-1965 MPS,” National Register of Historic Places Multiple Property Form, 2015, 20.

<sup>7</sup> Hardy-Heck-Moore, Inc. (HHM), “The Development of Highways in Texas: A Historic Context of the Bankhead Highway and Other Historic Named Highways. I. Statewide Historic Context,” Texas Historical Commission. 2014, 53.

<sup>8</sup> Gregory Smith and Stephanie Goodrich, “Abilene Courts, Abilene, Taylor County, Texas,” National Register of Historic Places Form, 2013,

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*The Meridian Highway*

The Meridian Highway as it became known by 1919, followed the Sixth Principal Meridian line. The highway spanned from Winnipeg, Canada, to Mexico City, Mexico and became the principal route through the middle of the United States. During the Good Roads Movement, the Meridian Highway Association composed of interested citizens from Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas lobbied on behalf of the Meridian Highway. Later, the International Meridian Road Association, composed of constituents from Canada, North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas were responsible for road maintenance and providing signage on the route.<sup>9</sup> “In 1917, the Meridian Highway became SH 2 along its route through Texas, although it also continued to be marketed as the Meridian Road. SH 2 and the Meridian Road traveled through Wichita Falls, Henrietta, Fort Worth, Cleburne, Meridian, Waco, Austin, San Antonio, and Laredo.”<sup>10</sup> By the mid-1920s, the Meridian Highway was incorporated into the U.S. Highway System and became known as U.S. 81.<sup>11</sup>

**The Pan-American Highway, Post-War Development, and Tourist Courts in Laredo, Texas**

Laredo is located in Webb County in South Texas along the Rio Grande, on the Mexican border, approximately 150 miles south of San Antonio, and 140 miles north of Monterrey, Mexico. The Pan-American Courts and Café is located on San Bernardo Avenue in central Laredo approximately two miles from the Rio Grande and border with Mexico. Laredo became the southern terminus of the Meridian Highway and later of the Pan-American Highway, which ran along San Bernardo Avenue. Like other communities along the route, the Meridian Highway and its path through Laredo changed over time. The area north of downtown Laredo was flat, undeveloped agricultural land prior to the rise of automobile culture. As the area developed and city additions were platted, new roadways were aligned. Santa Maria Avenue connected Laredo with San Antonio, Texas. 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.” These two routes simultaneously bore the burden of the north-south traffic, but travelers began to gravitate toward San Bernardo Avenue. Businesses on both thoroughfares competed for the growing out-of-town tourist trade. The northern entrance of the city shifted east when Santa Maria Avenue was abandoned, and traffic shifted to the new Meridian Highway, which ran south into the city, turned east onto Matamoros Street, and finally south onto Convent Avenue towards Mexico.

By 1936, the Texas Highway Commission had officially designated San Bernardo as the route of U.S. 81/SH 2 and subsequently constructed a tourist information bureau just north of the Laredo Highway. U.S. 83, running east-west, also extended along San Bernardo Avenue. This designation transformed the physical character of the route as it extended through the city. This realignment, providing developable land along the road with significant and increasing traffic, created tremendous economic opportunity for entrepreneurs. As the automobile proliferated and became seen as a household necessity, the roadway developed to accommodate the new and rapidly growing automotive culture. San Bernardo Avenue consequently developed into a tourist transportation corridor and was lined with numerous gas stations, motor courts, and motels that catered to the growing number of tourists heading to Laredo and into Mexico. The Pan-American Highway was formed in 1928 as an extension of the Meridian Highway to connect Winnipeg with Mexico City and beyond to the rest of the American continent, 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.”

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<sup>9</sup> Bruce Jensen, “Historic Road Infrastructure of Texas, 1865-1965 MPS,” National Register of Historic Places Multiple Property Form, 2015, 22-23.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 23.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 23.

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The commercial development in the San Bernardo Avenue corridor, similar to that found in other highway corridors throughout the country, catered to travelers, the automobile, and cross-country trucking. San Bernardo runs through multiple early twentieth century, pre-World War II city additions, which were generally laid out in a grid-iron pattern. Over time, the highway-facing lots were combined and reconfigured to adapt to changing commercial needs. Commercial enterprises were sited to attract highway travelers and to provide easy access for cars and trucks. Stylistic tactics developed to capture this high-speed customer base and new businesses began adopting them. This included several new systems of design and decoration, including Art Deco or Zigzag Moderne, and the Streamline Moderne architecture. Along the San Bernardo Avenue corridor, several pre- and early post-World War II buildings employed the Moderne stylistic approach to express the technological excitement of the times. Examples of these are the Frontier Motel, Graf's Motel, and El Motel. Other simple streamlined buildings included several gas stations and the 1949 Pontiac dealership, designed by Pablo Saenz.

Modern styles were not the only source for roadside design on this route. Concurrent was the surge in romantic regionalism which had been successfully employed in commercial architecture from the late 1890s, enticing tourists to the southern border. Thus, Laredo highway entrepreneurs utilized regional styles in the architecture of their hotels and restaurants, evoking Spanish Missions and Southwestern Pueblos. Along the Pan-American Highway, Spanish Revival styles were featured in Land's Court, Dodd's Motel (later Evelyn Motor), Las Palmas Court, El Patio Court, El Cortez, The Ranch Mo-tel, and the Rio Grande Court. Pueblo Revival was adjusted to give it a more Spanish Revival flair with the addition of red tile porches such as in the Alamo Court, just across the street from the Pan-American Courts and Café. Many amenities for the traveler were located in close proximity, such as the Cactus Garden Cafe, auto insurance agencies, and tourism offices.

The new federal Interstate Highway system of the mid-and late-1950s brought a substantial change to the highway network, as most of U.S. 81 through Texas was upgraded as IH 35. The approval of the construction of IH 35 through Laredo in 1959 led to the third and final alignment shift of the Pan-American Highway approximately one block east of San Bernardo Avenue. Constructed as a divided four-lane highway beginning in 1961, the entire block between Santa Ursula and San Dario avenues was acquired for the construction of the interstate (Figure 7). 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. With the construction of Interstate Highway 35 in Laredo starting in the 1960s and the opening of the Juarez-Lincoln international bridge to Mexico in 1972, traffic began to bypass San Bernardo Avenue and numerous tourist courts suffered and were forced to close their doors. Once common along this strip, such businesses lost prominence as the interstate highway system and corporate hotel chains gained favor. Over the next decades, most of the tourist courts and motels on the Pan-American Highway alignment closed and were demolished. In Laredo, just only two examples of early motor courts stand and retain their architectural character and original configuration, the Evelyn Motor Court and the Pan-American Courts and Café.

**Pablo Saenz, Architect**

The Pan-American Courts and Café was designed by local architect Pablo Saenz. Pablo Saenz was born in Nuevo Laredo, Mexico, on January 29, 1895, to Leonardo Saenz and Expectación Escamilla. Pablo was the eldest of four children, Mercedes, Lilia, and Arturo. His family emigrated to Laredo when he was eight years old in April 1903 by crossing the international bridge on foot. The family relocated to the Plaza de la Noria neighborhood, on 310 San Dario Ave. Once in Laredo, his father worked as a carpenter building homes. He married Sara Garcia on September 8, 1918, and had seven children: Carmen Estela, Alicia Sara, Pablo, Esther Lidia, Rosa María, Irene Idalia, and Olivia Olga. The family lived at 1119 Garcia Street. He became an American citizen on April 21, 1936. The naturalization ceremony took place at the Federal Courthouse at 10:00 a.m. by Judge T. M. Kennerly. A patriotic ceremony followed when a small American flag and a copy of the D.A.R. Manual of Citizenship was handed to each of the twelve new

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citizens.<sup>12</sup> Two years later, he became a registered architect, on June 21, 1938, was the first Hispanic architect registered in Texas, and thus was the first Hispanic member of the Texas Society of Architects (Figure 12).<sup>13</sup> He advertised as a member of the Texas Society of Architects offering plans, designs, supervision, and consulting services. Saenz became involved in several local organizations; he was a member of the Knights of Columbus and volunteered in charitable committees and became a member of LULAC in 1940.<sup>14</sup> Saenz died in Laredo, Texas, on February 4, 1957 at the age of 62.<sup>15</sup>

Saenz' architectural career started in the 1930s when he worked as a clerk, salesman, assistant manager, and finally as a draftsman for two of the local lumber companies. During World War II, he was employed by the War Department as an Architectural Engineer with the Post Engineer Department at the Laredo Army Air Field. When the base was deactivated in 1946 and after four years of work with the Army, Saenz opened his architectural office becoming a prolific designer.<sup>16</sup> Saenz developed architectural plans for numerous residences and commercial buildings across Laredo, San Diego, and Alice, Texas, for both Hispanic and Anglo-American clients.

Saenz residential work was very extensive in both amount of projects and architectural styles. During his career he designed homes for the growing middle and upper middle class of Laredo in the Heights and Montrose neighborhoods. The styles ranged from wood frame Craftsman Bungalows, in the 1930s, to English Tudor, Dutch Colonial, and Spanish Colonial Revival cottages in the 1940s. The latter style was favored by his clients thus developing numerous plans for large residences in that style. He became very adept in the use of the regional architectural vocabulary and with materials such as stucco walls, clay tile roof, and tile accents. Noteworthy was the two-story Monterey style house for rancher and Jim Hogg County politician Alonso Lopez built in San Diego, Texas in 1943. In downtown Laredo he would also built Spanish style homes for Joaquín González Cigarroa with a watchtower and wings,<sup>17</sup> and the two-story home for Juan Benavides. One of his largest and most important commissions was the Webb County Tuberculosis Association Hospital, a large facility built outside of the city in 1939.

Towards the late-1940s Saenz began to adopt a more Moderne architectural aesthetic in his work. Saenz executed this type of design on commercial buildings such as the Pontiac Dealership (1949) in stark Streamline Moderne style. The building has a large curved glass window and projecting roof with round corners evoking the aerodynamic design of the vehicles. In 1950 he implemented a similar design for the Red & White food store for Mr. Ramírez in the Heights neighborhood. At another large commission, the Hill Machinery Company in Alice, Texas, Saenz created a showroom for farm equipment, tractors, and hardware. The building was built in reinforced concrete, tile walls, plate glass front, built-up roof over steel decking and it covered 13,000 sq. ft. of floor space.<sup>18</sup> Another example is the Slaughter-Lewis Co. building which still stands at 301 Market Street. The building's streamline style combined a farm equipment showroom, gas station, and restaurant.<sup>19</sup> Modern styles and the use of concrete block were also applied to residential architecture. The residence of local entrepreneur Paul H. Young in the Heights neighborhood featured clean lines, corner windows and glass block details.<sup>20</sup> A more utilitarian building was Laredo's first international airport, built in 1947. There, Saenz readapted existing offices left by the former Laredo Army Airfield for a new terminal building.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> "D.A.R. Participates in Naturalization of 12," *The Laredo Times*, April 21, 1936, p. 1.

<sup>13</sup> Ad. *The Laredo Times*, April 5, 1950, p. 8; Uribe, Velia E. Shanks, Ann. Laredo Reflections. United States: Velia E. Uribe, 1985, p. 45.

<sup>14</sup> "KC's to gather toys for Laredo orphans," *The Laredo Times*, December 18, 1941, p. 1.

<sup>15</sup> "30 New Lulacs, Standing Committee Named," *The Laredo Times*, March 12, 1940, p. 1.

<sup>16</sup> "Saenz Reopens Office Here," *The Laredo Times*, October 13, 1946, p. 6.

<sup>17</sup> "Obra que se terminará Pronto," *El Tiempo de Laredo*, June 23, 1940, p. 8.

<sup>18</sup> "Laredo Business Review," *The Laredo Times*, January 5, 1949, p. 8.

<sup>19</sup> "New Home Of The Slaughter Lewis Co.," *The Laredo Times*, June 23, 1948, p. 4.

<sup>20</sup> "Architect's Drawing," *The Laredo Times*, May 26, 1948, p. 10.

<sup>21</sup> "Officials to Plan Air Traffic Site," *The Laredo Times*, January 5, 1947, p. 3.



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Saenz designed many of the earliest motor courts that were established along the Pan-American Highway in Laredo and across South Texas. Among them, the Hacienda and Dodd's Tourist Courts, 1936 and 1937 respectively; the Alamo Court, 1939 across the street from the Pan-American Courts; and the Pan-American Courts and Café in 1946. Laredo Courts was completed in 1950. Saenz also designed a tourist courts complex in Three Rivers, Texas, for Charles H. Smith in 1947.<sup>22</sup> Although small in scale and modest in design, Saenz' motor courts combined the latest forms of technology and amenities including: air-conditioned rooms, automobile access and parking, and landscaped courtyards with exotic and native plants.

### 1946 Pan-American Courts and Café

Pan-American Courts and Café was constructed in 1946. Mary Elizabeth and Charles E. Davis, the developers and first owners of the property, exemplify the typical Pan-American Highway entrepreneurs. With prior experience in the hotel industry in Florida, the Davises acquired a parcel of land along the Pan-American Highway in 1946, just one year after the end of World War II where they built a motor court capitalizing on the boom of postwar leisure travel to Mexico. After multiple different short-period ownerships, the property was acquired by Saul Rocha Jr. in 1962 becoming its longest-serving manager and owner.

Charles Emory Davis (1913-1990), a native Texan and World War II veteran, drove across the country along with his wife, from California to Daytona Beach, Florida, in the fall of 1945 looking for a place to settle and open a motel business. In November 1945, the couple stopped in Laredo, Texas, and considered buying a small court for sale but they continued their trip to Florida. Along the way, however, Davis found only "inflated prices" for his dream property. In Florida, he found that both land and materials were high and labor was "just not available." According to Davis, tourist courts in the Phoenix, Arizona resort area were also inflated, pointing out, "you can't buy or build a thing on the West Coast unless you have a terrific lot of money." He chose Laredo as it offered the best proposition for the money, in addition to its warm, dry climate. The Laredo Chamber of Commerce wrote to Davis and invited him back to settle, offering to do everything it could to help him acquire the land he needed to build his courts. The Davis couple drove back to Laredo in January 1946 and shortly after began to build the Pan-American Courts.<sup>23</sup>

Davis was born in Denton, Texas, on June 21, 1913, and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts from the University of Texas at Austin in 1936.<sup>24</sup> After his studies, he worked for resort hotels in North Carolina and at the Lake Court Apartment Hotel in West Palm Beach, Florida. In April 1941 Davis was drafted and entered the army serving until October 1945. From September 1942 to April 1945 he was in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Italy, and China as an officer in charge of a Quartermaster Corps truck company. The developer and owner of the new motor court was described in a Laredo newspaper as a blond, blue-eyed, 33-year old of medium height, affable, and having "a lot of good humor." According to Davis, the Pan-American Courts was to be a unique combination of hotel and tourist courts in the manner of a "type of hotel accommodations popular in California." Davis hired local architect Pablo Saenz to design and oversee the construction. The property was Laredo's first two-story tourist court and had hotel-like amenities such as a restaurant or coffee shop with a seating capacity of fifty people. With twenty-one sleeping units, the property was built in concrete block painted white in a "modernistic design" and the exteriors were landscaped with native plants.<sup>25</sup>

Construction at the Pan-American Courts and Cafe started on March 5, 1946. In only five months it was completed and by August 7, 1946, they hosted a soft opening for neighbors and friends. The property formally opened to the public the next day, on August 8, 1946. Davis expressed how challenging it was to build during the postwar era's

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<sup>22</sup> "Completes Plans," *The Laredo Times*, November 4, p. 10.

<sup>23</sup> "New Courts Here Nearing Completion," *The Laredo Times*, July 25, 1946, p.2

<sup>24</sup> "Candidates," *Austin Daily Texan*, August 6, 1936, p. 4.

<sup>25</sup> "New Courts Here Nearing Completion," *The Laredo Times*, July 25, 1946, p.2

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“reconversion shortages.” Also, the construction proved to be “quite an experience” with multiple bills to be paid and workmen underpaid and overpaid. He recalled, for instance, hiring three different plumbers to do the work but had to complete it himself. Most of the building materials were regionally sourced from Laredo, Nuevo Laredo, San Antonio, Austin, Dallas, and Houston, Texas. Carpet grass was difficult to source locally and was shipped from Austin, Texas. Mrs. Davis was particularly proud of the “baby blue” tile in the bathrooms. The tile was purchased locally but it was most likely imported from Mexico where that type of material was of popular use. The coffee room had an enticing color scheme of tan, cream, and red and was to be open from 7:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m. offering travelers a menu that included steaks, shrimp, triple-decker sandwiches, salads, and French fries.<sup>26</sup>

The Davises eventually became active players in the local business community. In 1947, just a few months after the opening of the motor court, they became one of the sponsors of the 50th anniversary of the Washington Birthday Celebration Association, Laredo’s premier annual event.<sup>27</sup> By the end of 1950, only five years after owning the property, Davis sold the Pan-American Courts to local dentist and real estate investor W.I. Wilson. Dr. Wilson had just recently remarried in San Antonio, Texas, and made the property his residence at the beginning of 1951.<sup>28</sup> It was under his ownership that the two detached units were constructed at the south end of the property. Wilson had previously been involved in the development of another early motel in Laredo, The Ranch Mo-Tel, which opened in 1940 partnering with his son-in-law Robert Bauer.<sup>29</sup> By 1956, an advertisement published in a Kansas City newspaper announced the sale of the property by Dr. Wilson’s wife, who was retiring from the business.<sup>30</sup> Two years later, the sale of the Pan-American was still being advertised on the San Antonio, Texas, papers as one of the “finest motels in Laredo” and with an established clientele.<sup>31</sup>

The property was then acquired by John J. Redin. Redin was also active in the Laredo business community and was heavily involved in the promotion of Laredo as a tourist destination. In 1962, Redin sold the property to two of his long-time employees, Saul Rocha, Jr., and his wife Antonia. Rocha, born on July 5, 1933, in San Diego, Texas, lived near the property, at 3303 Santa Ursula Avenue.<sup>32</sup> Rocha had worked at the motel as a cook’s helper since 1949 when he was 15 years old. There he met his future wife, Antonia Rodriguez when she worked as a waitress. They married on August 2, 1953, during Rocha’s Air Force career. Rocha was eventually based in Morocco, Iceland, Amarillo, Del Rio, and Bryan, Texas, and Antonia managed the motel operation by herself during his multiple deployments.

Pan-American Courts and Café became a family affair for the Rochas as they lived and worked from there for the next several decades. Multiple family celebrations took place there including the wedding of Saul’s brother, Cuauhtémoc Rocha, in 1960.<sup>33</sup> The entire family became involved in the daily operation and management of the property and Rocha’s four daughters worked as cashiers and sometimes as waitresses and housekeeping. During this time and due to its central location, the motel functioned as a community center for much of Laredo’s social life. Tejano and Texas Conjunto bands performing at the nearby Civic Center would stay overnight at the motel. Student celebrations from the Tirza & Raymond Martin High School, located a few blocks south would be hosted at the restaurant. During the week, “cafeteros” a group of local men would meet every morning at the café. Rocha made long-lasting friendships and acquaintances from this group which included local businessman and politician, Tony Sanchez, Jr. Rocha also ran businesses and services from the office. These included a Western-Union telegraph service and a notary public. From

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<sup>26</sup> “New Tourist Courts Open,” *The Laredo Times*, August 8, 1946, p.4

<sup>27</sup> Advertisement, *The Laredo Times*, Feb 19, 1947

<sup>28</sup> “Mrs. Stella Smith, Dr. I.W. Wilson Are Wed,” *The Laredo Times*, January 4, 1951, p. 4.

<sup>29</sup> “Tourist Court is Sold Here,” *The Laredo Times*, September 8, 1947, p. 5.

<sup>30</sup> “MOTEL for Sale,” *The Kansas City Times (Kansas City, Missouri)*, Aug 7, 1956, p. 26.

<sup>31</sup> “MOTEL,” *San Antonio Express (San Antonio, Texas)*, Sep 28, 1958, p. 25.

<sup>32</sup> “Nació Ayer,” *El Tiempo de Laredo*, October 4, 1949, p. 8.

<sup>33</sup> “Announce Engagement,” *The Laredo Times*, November 27, 1960, p. 26.

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his office Rocha frequently assisted Spanish-speaking customers in translating their tax forms, social security, and naturalization documents for a discounted fee or for free.<sup>34</sup>

In the 1970s, Pan-American Courts and Café gradually shifted from tourist lodging to a budget motel with majority long-term leasing. The decline of its tourist business was likely the result of changing hotel/motel trends in the latter half of the 20th century when large hotel chains opened motels along IH-35, pulling clientele from San Bernardo Avenue's independently-owned tourist courts like Pan-American Courts and Café. Saul Rocha died on March 12, 1998, and his daughters Enedina Antonia, Mary Joyce, Sandra, and Katherine Linda inherited the property.<sup>35</sup> A year later, in December of 1999, Sandra Rocha Taylor acquired the totality of property from her sisters and continues to operate the historic complex as a motel, restaurant, bar, and special events rental space, while promoting the art and culture of South Texas.

### Motor Courts

New Deal funding made the expansion of the Texas Highway system possible in the 1930s. This often included road construction and maintenance, and other improvements like roadside parks. These improvements and the rise in automobile ownership contributed to the growth of the tourism industry.<sup>36</sup> After World War II, the automobile epitomized individualism and travel became more democratized. The rise of the tourism-based economy transformed the landscapes of cities and small towns alike through the construction of service-oriented amenities such as gas stations, restaurants, motor courts, auto shops, and more, which ensured the ease of travel for individuals and families alike.

Motor courts appeared along well-traveled highways in virtually all major Texas cities. Motor courts generally had a linear, L-shaped, or U-shaped configuration which allowed them to be clearly visible from the road and had large iconic neon signage to entice motorists. Guests entered the property with direct access from the highway and were oriented to the front portion of the property which contained the office, and coffee shop or restaurant, sometimes both. The post-war site configuration meant that the buildings were generally organized around a central landscaped courtyard—sometimes equipped with a swimming pool. Ample parking was provided within the courtyard, including the use of carports. Parking was usually available at the perimeter of the property as well. Increasingly standardized accommodations, including furniture, air conditioning, toiletries, and televisions ensured the comfort of a guest's stay.<sup>37</sup> The emergence of the Interstate Highway system in the 1950s pulled commercial development away from existing U.S. highway routes and facilitated the construction of new hotels and motels owned by national chains. Family-run motor courts often found it hard to compete and many closed as a result.<sup>38</sup>

The design of Pan-American Courts and Café reflects many of the key character defining features of a post-war motor court. The 1946 property was designed with an L-shaped main motel building in a vaguely linear configuration. Tourists entered the property via a driveway off San Bernardo Avenue under the cantilevered canopy of the main motel building. The front (west) portion of the building contained the office, café/restaurant, and laundry services. Originally the wing of the main motel building faced south onto a lushly landscaped courtyard area. By the late 1950s, two one-story detached buildings were added along the south side of the site, resulting in a loosely U-shaped

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<sup>34</sup> Scott Shaffer "Enterprising Entrepreneurs -Pan American Courts & Café Motel & Restaurant" Laredo Morning Times -LMT Business Journal, February 20, 2006, p. 5.

<sup>35</sup> Mike McIlvain "Saul Rocha Jr. left a legacy of generosity, kindness, hospitality and helpfulness almost to a fault" Laredo Morning Times, April 5, 1998.

<sup>36</sup> Hannah Curry-Shearhouse and Victoria Myers with assistance from THC Staff, "River Oaks Courts, Medina, Bandera County, Texas," National Register of Historic Places Nomination, 2018, 20-21.

<sup>37</sup> John A. Jackle, Keith A. Sculle, and Jefferson S. Rogers, *The Motel in America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996) 43-49.

<sup>38</sup> Hannah Curry-Shearhouse and Victoria Myers with assistance from THC Staff, "River Oaks Courts, Medina, Bandera County, Texas," 21.

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configuration. All of the Moderne buildings were concrete block with flat roofs and had a streamlined horizontal emphasis. Free parking spaces as well as carports attached to units were available to guests and parking was also offered near the front of the café on San Bernardo Avenue. A large iconic neon sign was placed at the front entrance. Little is known about the historic furnishings, but air-conditioning was advertised as an amenity. Throughout its history, Pan-American Courts and Café has remained a family-owned business since the 1960s.

**Conclusion**

Pan-American Courts and Café is nominated to the National Register of Historic Places under Criteria A in the area of Commerce at the local level of significance for its association with the development of both the Meridian and Pan-American Highways and its relationship to the growth of the tourism economy of South Texas during the second half of the twentieth century. The property is also nominated to the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion C in the area of Architecture at the local level of significance as rare and exceptionally intact example of a 1940s motor court property type with a full-service restaurant in a border city. Distinguishing characteristics are the intact post-war site plan including the vaguely U-shaped configuration with central courtyard, circulation pattern, and size and scale of intact historic concrete block buildings, and iconic neon signage. Designed by architect Pablo Saenz, the Moderne design is distinctive for its use of brick-shaped concrete blocks coursed in horizontal bands and interior building finishes with imported Mexican cement tile. While Laredo boasted several motor courts from the early 1930s through the 1970s, Pan-American Courts and Café is one of two extant examples with integrity. The period of significance begins in 1946 and ends in 1972.

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*The Laredo Times*

*The Laredo Morning Times*

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**Maps**

Map 1: Webb County, Texas



Pan-American Courts and Cafe, Laredo, Webb County, Texas

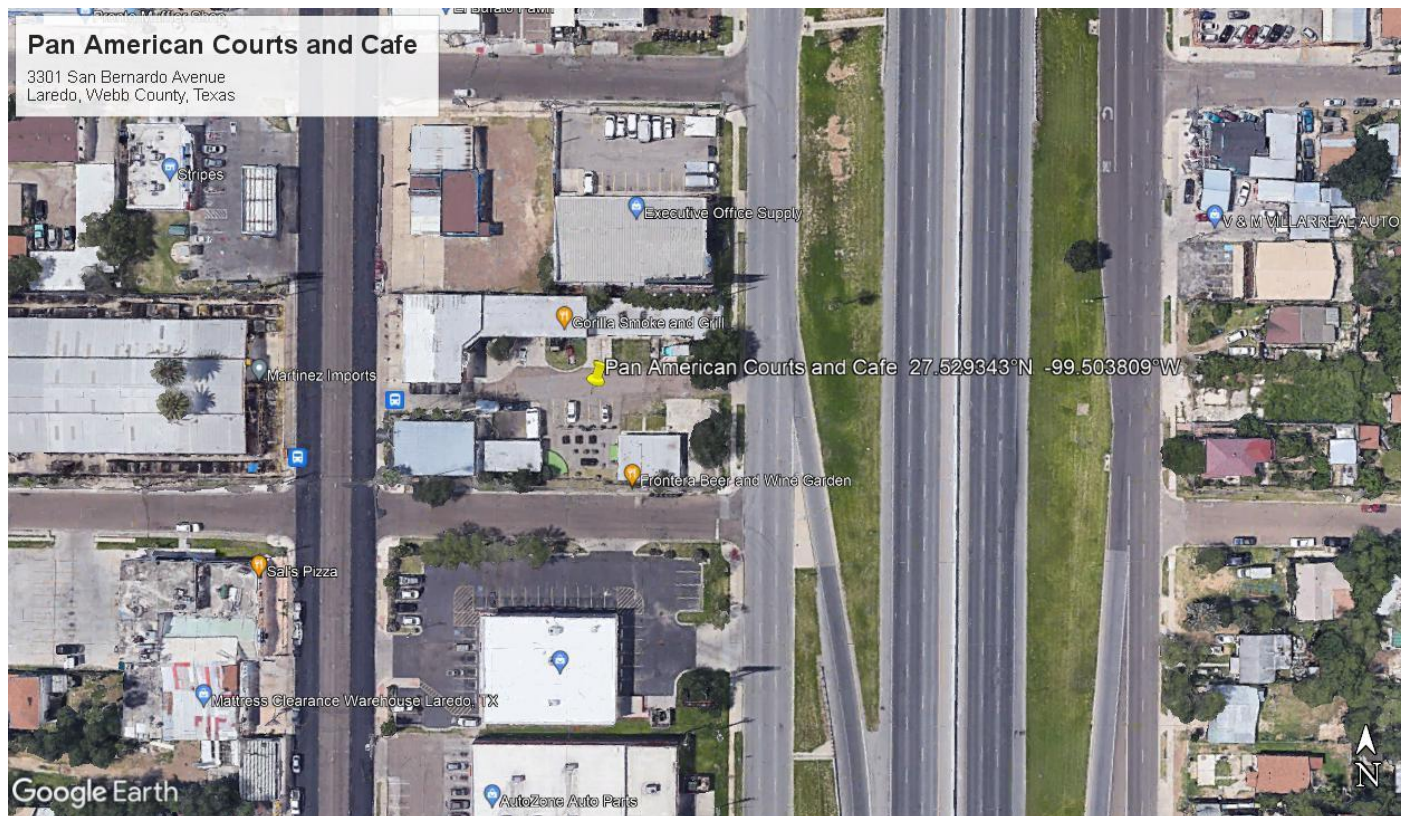
Map 2: Google Earth view (April 22, 2017), accessed May 30, 2021, edited and annotated by Jesús Najjar, July 15, 2021.





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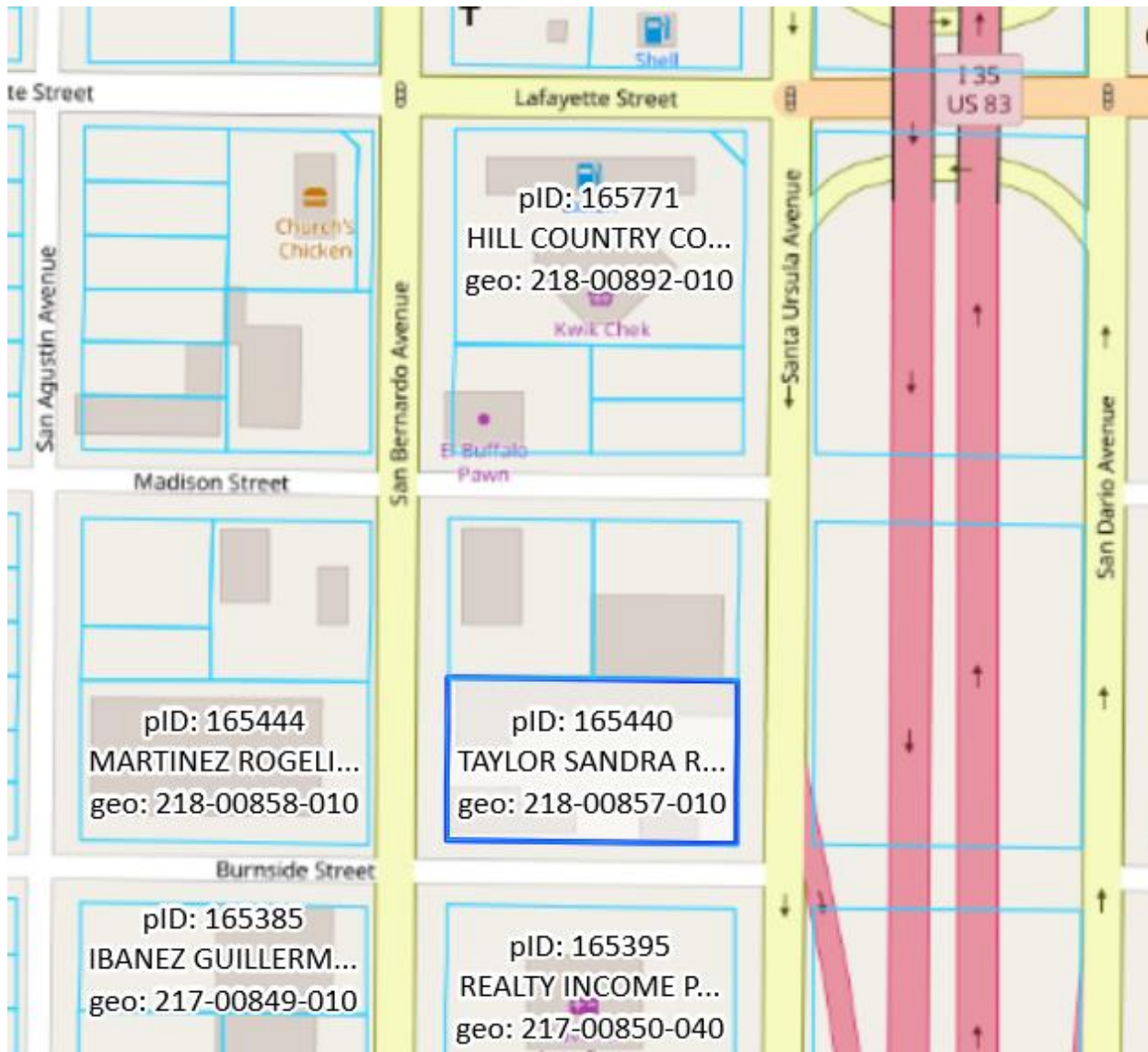
Map 3: Google Earth Map, accessed December 10, 2021.





Pan-American Courts and Cafe, Laredo, Webb County, Texas

Map 4: Webb CAD Map showing nominated boundary in dark blue. The nominated boundary consists of approximately 0.852 acres. LOTS 1-2-3- & 10-11-12 BLK 857 WD PAN AMERICAN COURT & CAFE (Property ID: 165440), Laredo, Webb County, Texas. The nominated boundary follows the current legal boundary as recorded in the Webb Central Appraisal District, accessed March 31, 2021. The parcel covers half a city block and is bounded on the west by San Bernardo Avenue, on the south by Burnside Street, on the east by Santa Ursula Avenue/IH-35 southbound frontage road, and on the north by an adjacent parcel. The boundary includes all property historically associated with Pan-American Courts and Café since its construction in 1946.



Pan-American Courts and Cafe, Laredo, Webb County, Texas

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Map 5: Google Map 3D showing Pan-American Courts and Café facing northwest. Accessed May 30, 2021





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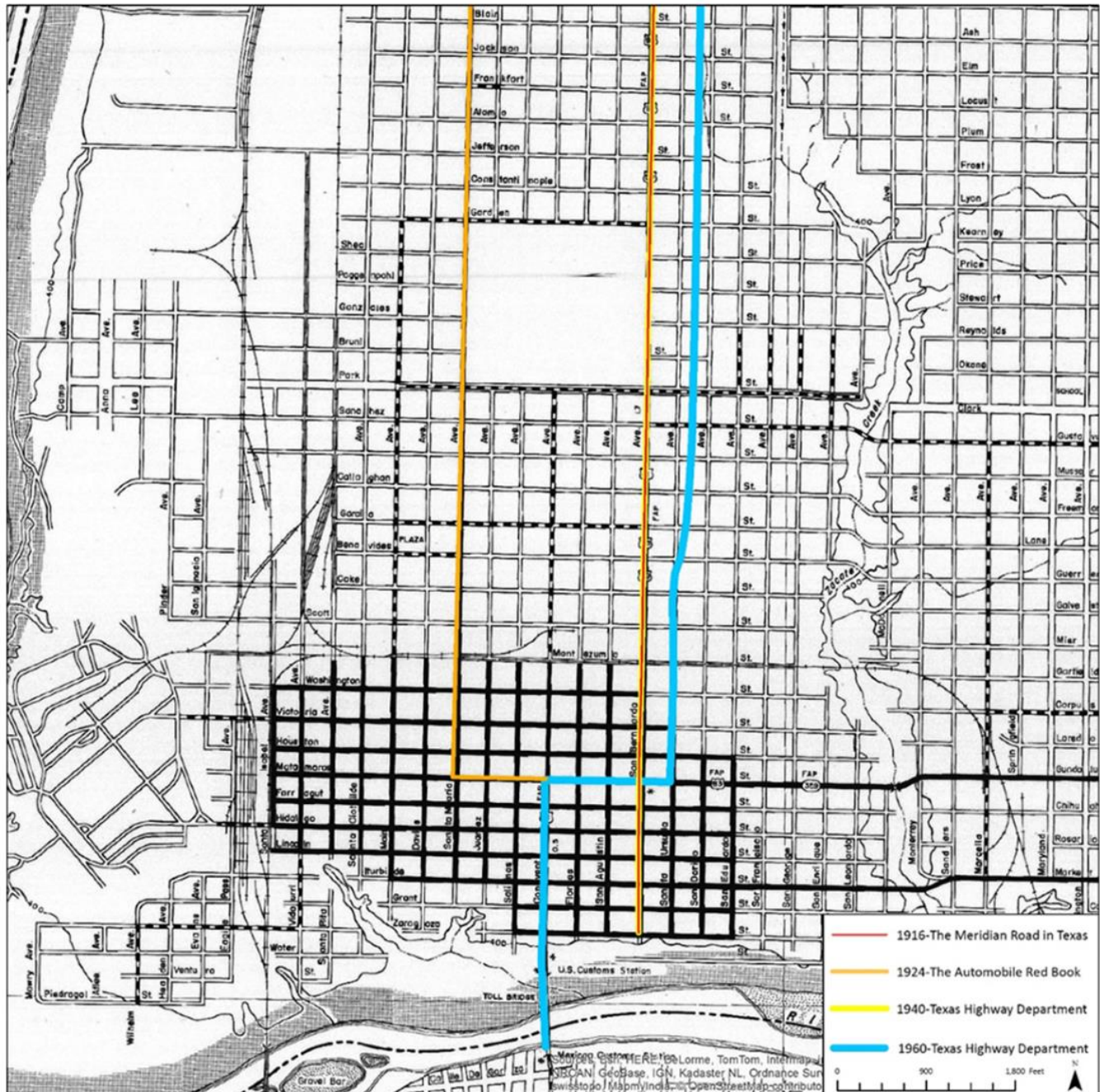
Map 6: Google Map 3D showing Pan-American Courts and Café facing southwest. Accessed May 30, 2021.





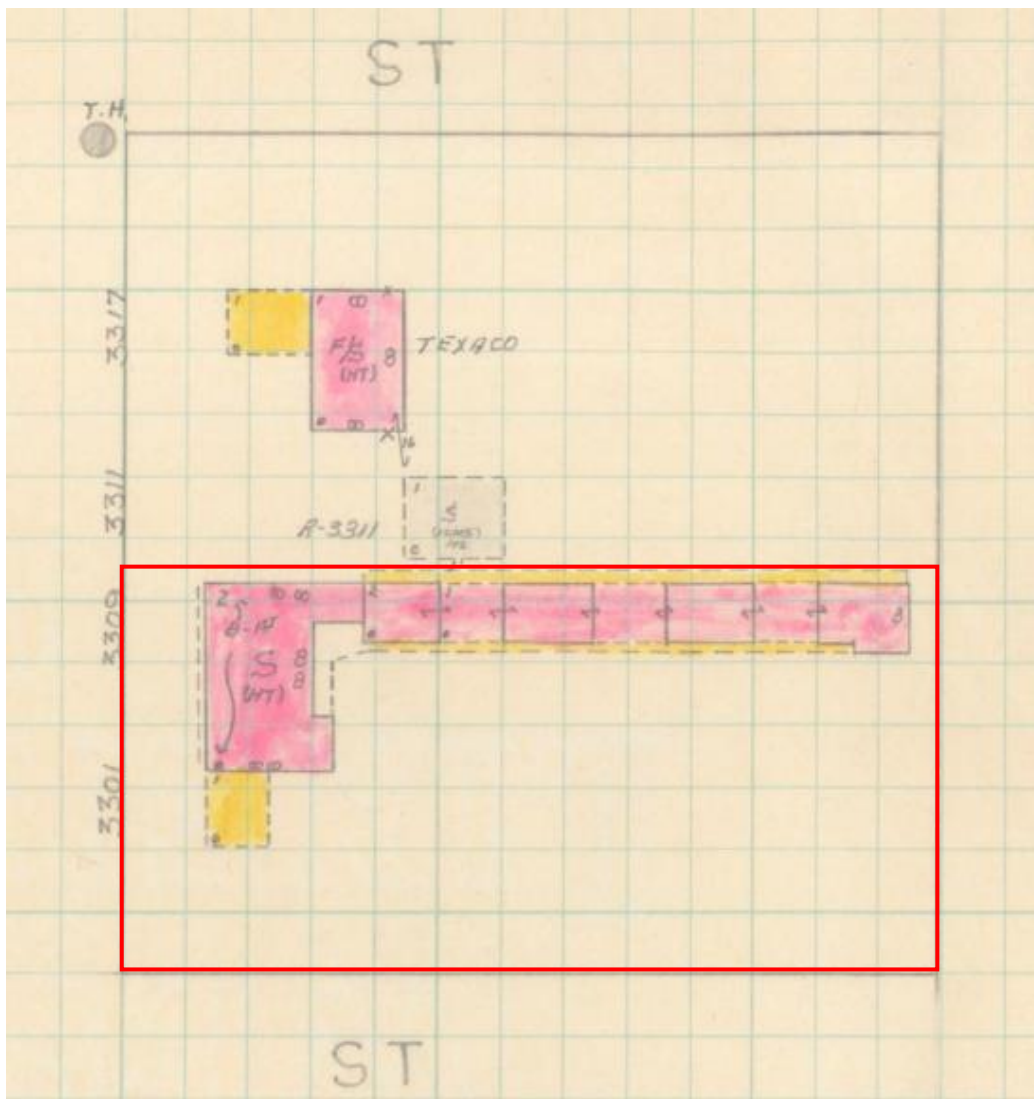
Pan-American Courts and Cafe, Laredo, Webb County, Texas

Map 7: The Meridian Highway in Laredo, Texas. The Meridian Highway in Texas, Case Studies: Laredo, Texas Historical Commission, 2016, page 237. Original Source: Texas State Library and Archives Commission, Austin.



Pan-American Courts and Cafe, Laredo, Webb County, Texas

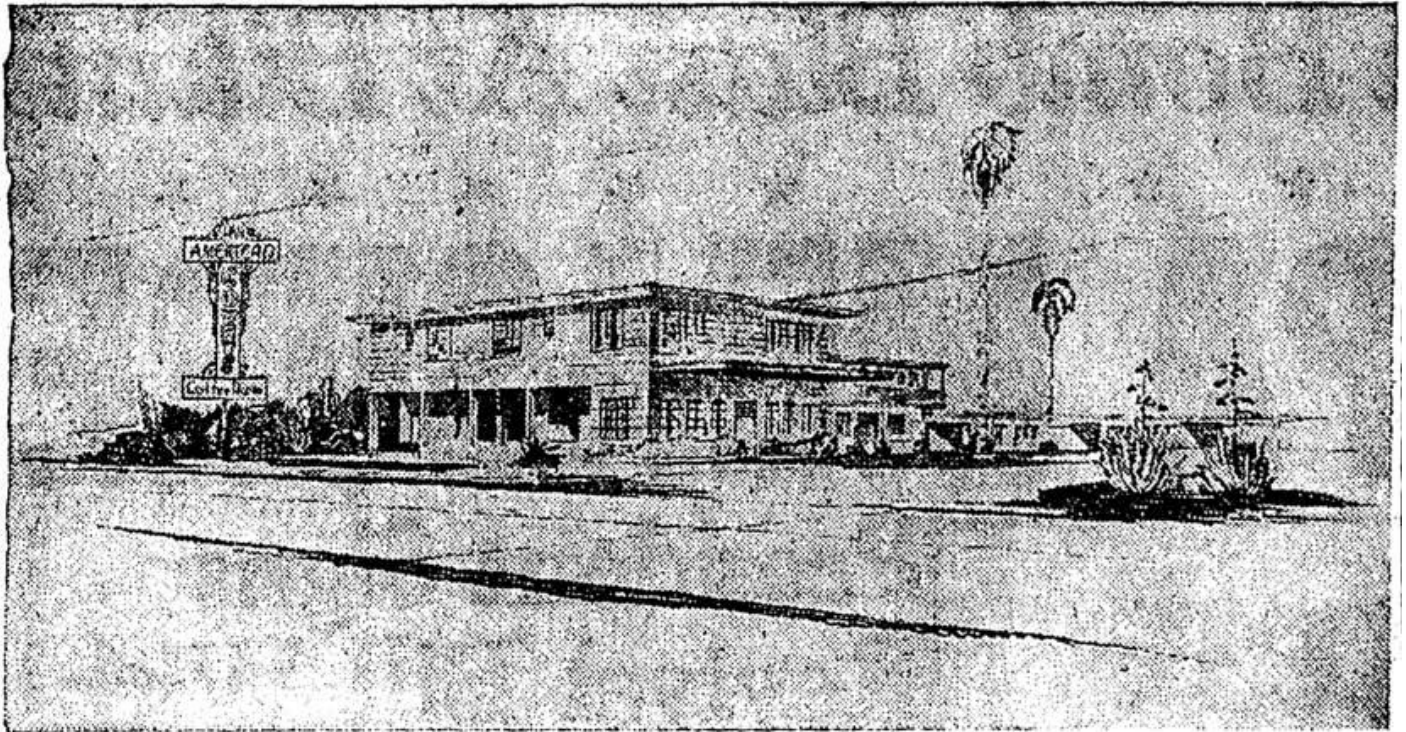
Map 8: 1967 Fire Insurance Map, Texas State Board of Insurance. Courtesy Texas State Library and Archives Commission, [https://tsl.access.preservica.com/uncategorized/IO\\_cb8a63b9-c2ba-47cb-bde7-163b978c42f2/](https://tsl.access.preservica.com/uncategorized/IO_cb8a63b9-c2ba-47cb-bde7-163b978c42f2/). Detached suites and non-historic detached canopy not shown.



Pan-American Courts and Cafe, Laredo, Webb County, Texas

**Figures**

Figure 1: Pan-American Courts construction with artist's rendition, *The Laredo Times*, July 25, 1946.



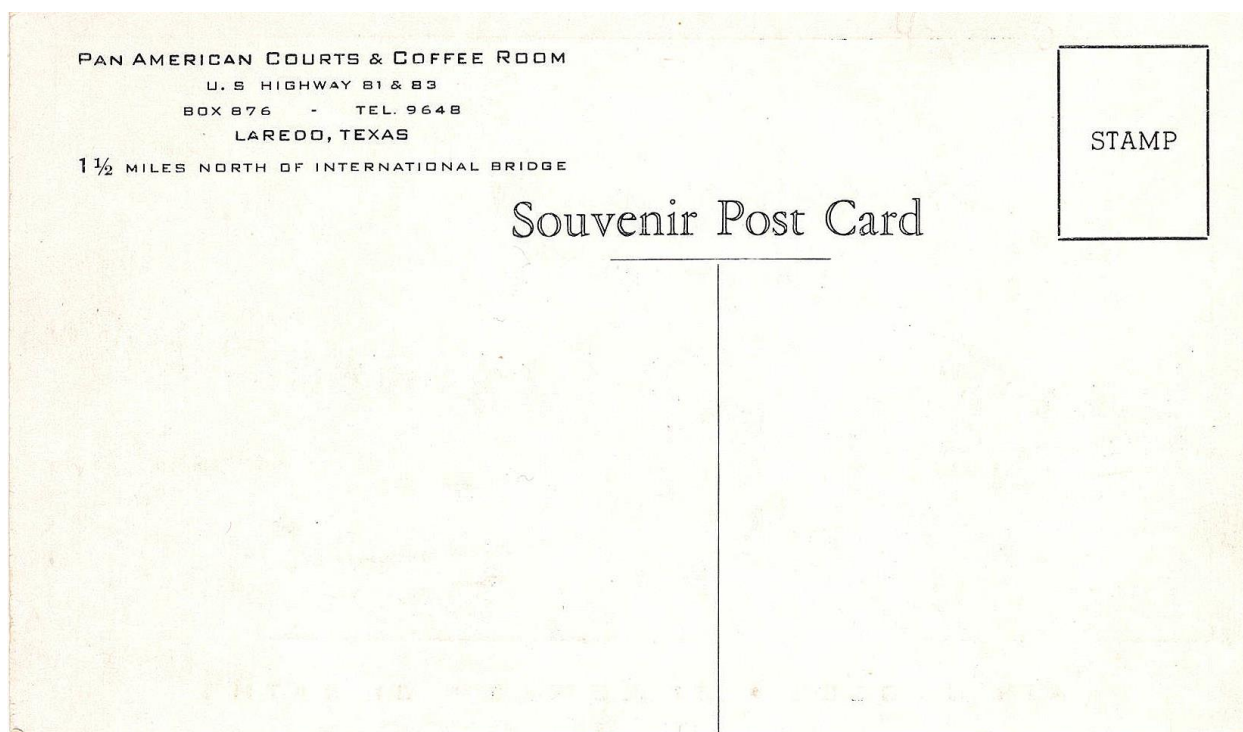
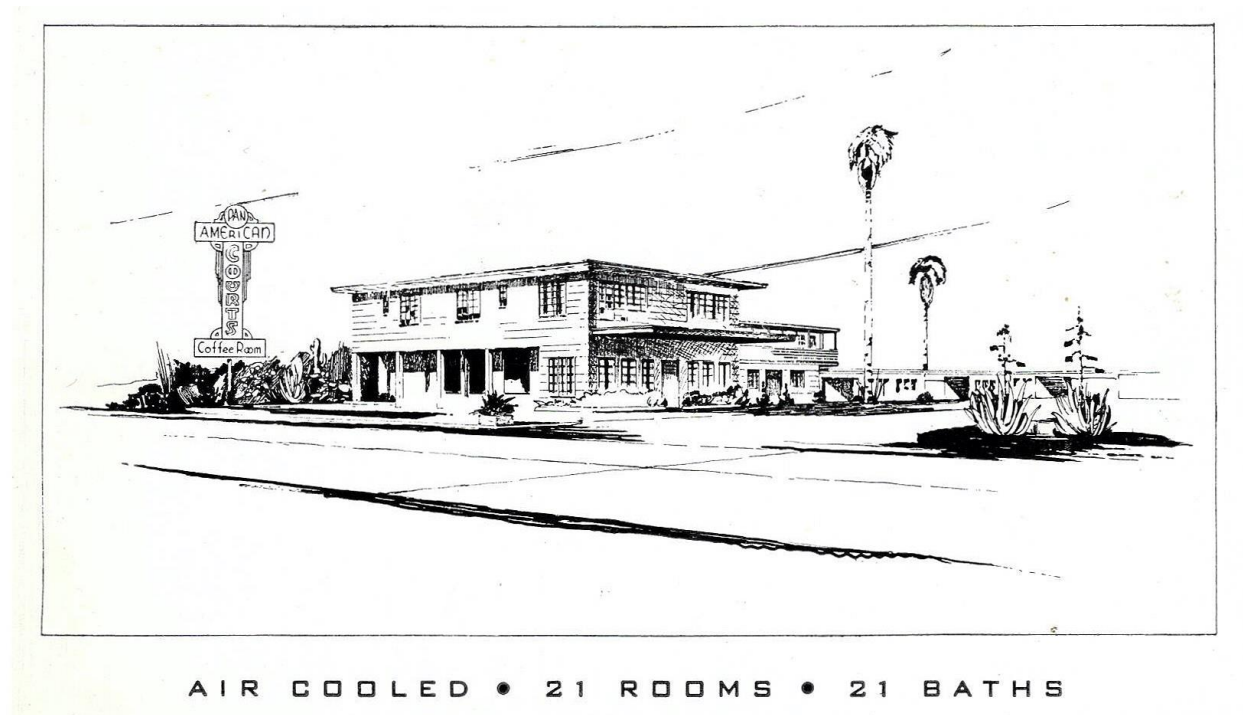
**NEARING COMPLETION**—The Pan-American Courts being built in the 3300 block of San Bernardo Avenue by former Florida hotelman, Charles E. Davis, are scheduled to be completed and open by Aug. 1. Laredo's first two-story tourist courts, they will have hotel-like accommodations and a coffee shop with a seating capacity of 50 persons. Of concrete block construction in modern design, the courts will be painted white. Landscaping will be with native plants. A native Texan and veteran of World War II, Davis tells in the accompanying article how he drove from California to Florida last fall looking for the best location for his courts and then chose Laredo.

## New Courts Here Nearing Completion



Pan-American Courts and Cafe, Laredo, Webb County, Texas

Figure 2: Late-1940s postcard with drawing of building by Pablo Saenz, architect. Source: Collection of Jesús Najár.



Pan-American Courts and Cafe, Laredo, Webb County, Texas

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Figure 3: Late-1940s postcard (oldest known photo). Source: Collection of Jesús Najjar.





Pan-American Courts and Cafe, Laredo, Webb County, Texas

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Figure 4: Mid-1950s postcard. Collection of Sandra Rocha Taylor (property owner).



Pan-American Courts and Cafe, Laredo, Webb County, Texas

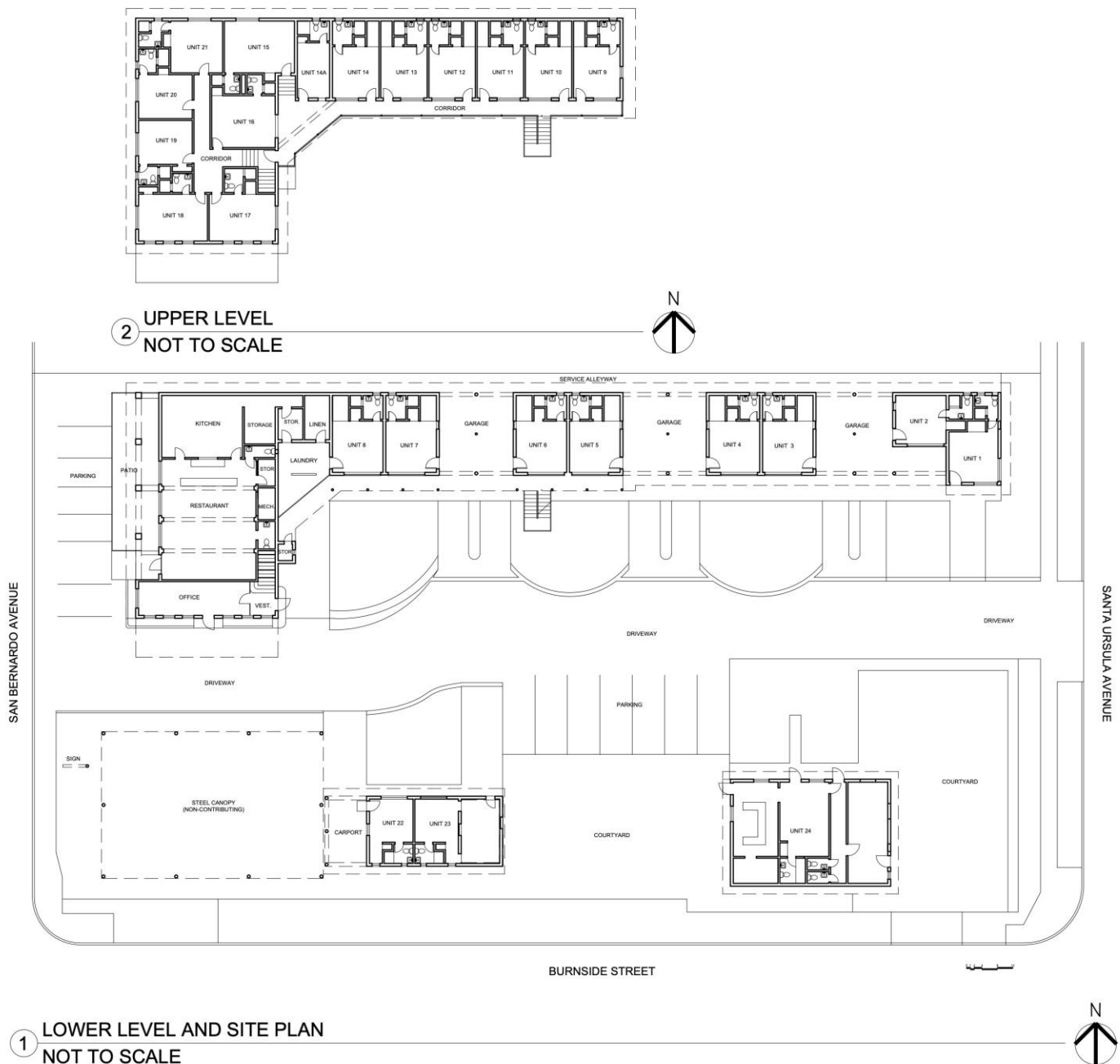
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Figure 5: Late-1950s photograph. Source: Collection of Sandra Rocha Taylor (property owner).



Pan-American Courts and Cafe, Laredo, Webb County, Texas

Figure 6: Existing Lower and Upper levels floor plans. Provided by Jesús Najar, 2021.



Pan-American Courts and Cafe, Laredo, Webb County, Texas

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Figure 7: Aerial photo, Laredo, Texas, 1964. USGS (1964-02-23 - 1964-03-19), <https://www.historicaerials.com/>. Pan-American Courts and Café, center of image, historic tourist courts to the west and south, city blocks demolished for IH 35 to the east.





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Figure 8: c. 1960s photograph of courtyard from entrance driveway. Source: Collection of Sandra Rocha Taylor



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Figure 9: c. 1950s photograph of courtyard and Unit 22 carport. Source: Collection of Sandra Rocha Taylor (property owner).



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Figure 10: c. 1950s photograph of courtyard looking northeast. Source: Collection of Sandra Rocha Taylor





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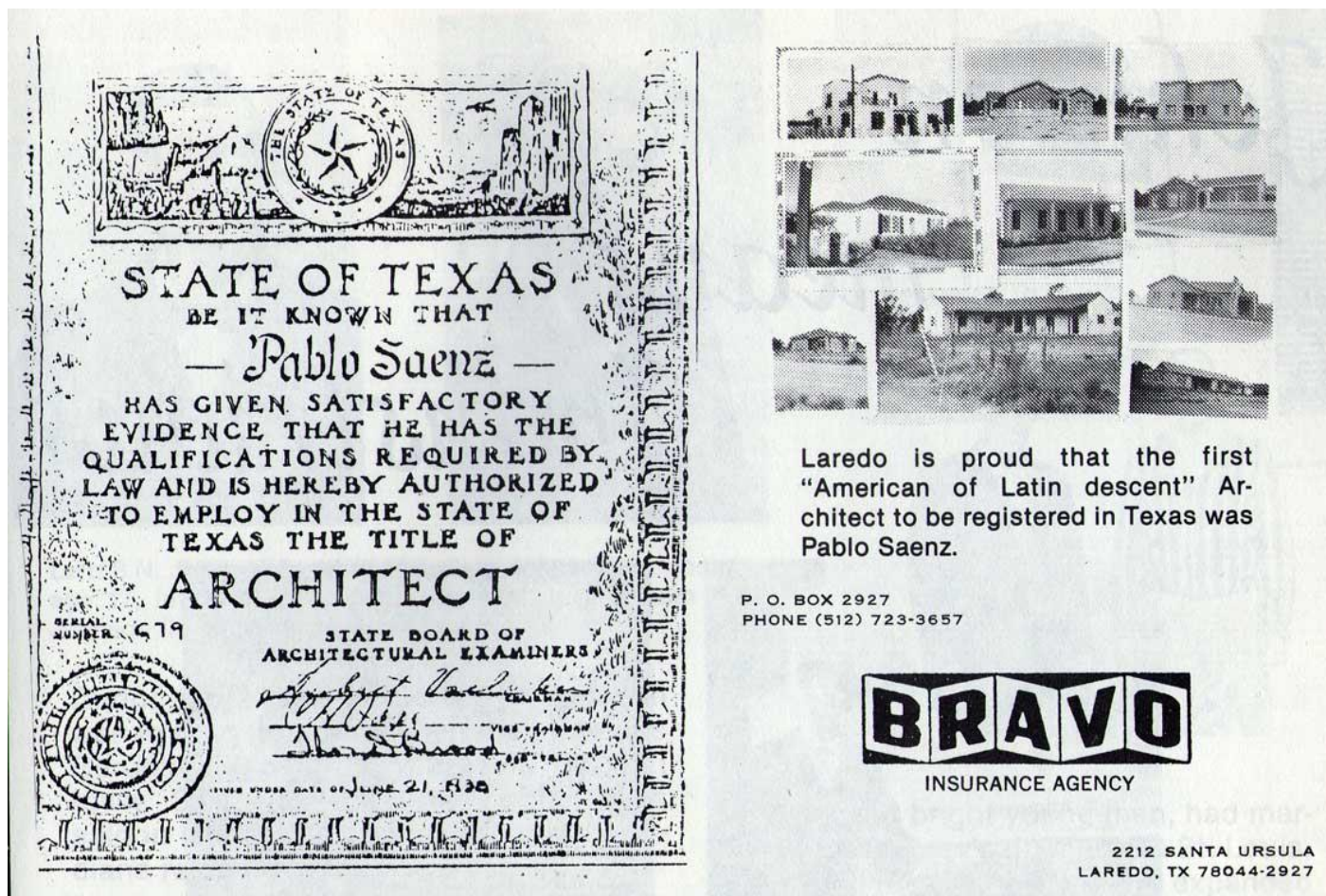
Figure 11: c. 1960s photograph of interior of restaurant. Source: Collection of Sandra Rocha Taylor





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Figure 12: Pablo Saenz' State of Texas architectural registration and advertisement. Source: Uribe, Velia E., Shanks, Ann. Laredo Reflections, 1985.



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**Photos**

Photo 1: Partial view of property, camera facing northeast.





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Photo 2: Primary elevation and south elevation entrance canopy, camera facing northeast.



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Photo 3: Neon sign and motel (arrow) sign on background, camera facing north





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Photo 4: Entrance driveway and reception office entrance, camera facing northwest.



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Photo 5: Courtyard, camera facing northwest





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Photo 6: Courtyard and car bays, camera facing west.





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Photo 7: View of courtyard and detached suites from upper level of hotel, camera facing southeast.





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Photo 8: Upper level balcony, camera facing west.



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Photo 9: Interior view Coffee Room (now restaurant) with lunch counter with original maroon Mexican cement tile, camera facing northeast.





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Photo 10: Interior stair from reception office, camera facing north.



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Photo 11: Interior vestibule at reception office entrance, camera facing south.



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Photo 12: Upper level interior hallway, camera facing south.





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Photo 13: Typical guest room.



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Photo 14: Typical guest room.



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Photo 15: View of typical bathroom with blue Mexican cement tile.





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Photo 16: Typical bathroom shower with blue Mexican cement tile.

