IT’S A CLASSIC AMERICAN story. Dedicated individuals with a shared vision build a grassroots consensus among peers, attract a broader acceptance in their community, capture the attention of government policymakers, and effect significant change on an international scale. That this particular classic story resulted in the North American Free Trade Agreement may strike many as surprising, yet it is documented in the correspondence, position papers, meeting minutes, and daily press reports of the newly acquired Mexico-U.S. Business Committee archives at the Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection. “This behind-the-scenes view of the origins and early development of NAFTA will be an invaluable resource for researchers looking at it from many angles as far into the future as we can imagine,” says Ann Hartness, head librarian at the Benson Collection. “Rarely are records documenting the interactions of private citizens and the governments of two nations made available to the public in such a systematic way.”

The Mexico-U.S. Business Committee (MEXUS) archives at the Benson Collection currently comprise the records of Rodman Rockefeller, chairman of the U.S. Council from 1981 to 1994, and those of executive director of the U.S. Council Guy Erb and Trade Subcommittee chairman Robert Herzstein, central figures to the efforts for trade liberalization that contributed directly to NAFTA. In its more than seventy boxes of documents, the collection presents a rich resource for examination of the private sector’s perspective on international trade and economic development and the actions by which the committee was able to accomplish its goal of the free trade agreement between the United States and Mexico. Erb, who along with Herzstein was recently in Austin to attend the conference NAFTA and U.S.-Mexico Relations: In Retrospect and Prospect sponsored by LLILAS, the Mexican Center,
Herzstein presented their call for action. The first step was a bilateral framework agreement to establish the ground rules for trade: “The changed U.S. attitudes toward Mexico and other advanced developing countries, Mexico’s greater weight in the world economy—most notable as regards petroleum and international finance, but significant as well in industrial sectors—and the magnitude of U.S.-Mexican bilateral trade make it necessary for both nations to examine alternatives to their current lack of a commercial agreement. A stable and well-defined trade policy framework would enhance Mexico’s capacity to diversify its exports and contribute to U.S. expectations that Mexico would continue to be

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strict exchange controls. Capital fled Mexico along with nervous investors. Official channels for dispute resolution and consensus building were not functioning as lawmakers lacked the motivation and vision of the marketplace. In this environment, members of MEXUS agreed that decisive action was needed. They saw an opportunity at their 1982 plenary meeting in Ixtapa, Mexico, when there was “a hiatus between Mexican administrations … and the designated officials for the next term are seeking business’s advice on economic policy much more than is the case once they and their policies are in place.”

In their paper for the 1982 meeting in Ixtapa, U.S. Council members Erb and Herzstein presented their call for action. The first step was a bilateral framework agreement to establish the ground rules for trade:

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a significant partner for long-term trade and investment. Prospects for renewed growth in trade and investment between the two nations would be enhanced if the two governments made progress toward a mutually acceptable commercial agreement."

While MEXUS members intentionally maintained a low profile—they were known for their "non-papers" that described key talking points for the use of Mexican and American policymakers—they began deliberate and targeted efforts in the U.S. and Mexico. Their early action plan included, "a meeting in the U.S. arranged by the Commerce Department or the USTR’s Office; a meeting in San Antonio during the visit there of high Mexican officials, including President-elect de la Madrid; and a smaller meeting in Mexico than the one in Ixtapa with no more than 10 American business persons with a similar number of Mexican counterparts.” Always aware of how the public could be distrustful of business interests, they noted, “Some concern was expressed that even a meeting of that size would attract negative and counterproductive Mexican press attention.”

The committee’s work achieved a breakthrough in February 1985 at a meeting of MEXUS members with Mexican President de la Madrid at Los Pinos, the presidential palace. “My friends, Mexican and American businessmen,” de la Madrid said, “I agree that Mexico must seek, together with its trading partners and especially with the United States of America, a frame of reference that will give us all greater assurances and thus make it possible to plan exporting efforts that are so necessary for the country’s economic recovery.” Signaling a significant shift in Mexican policy, he continued, “The convenience of a bilateral treaty between the U.S. and Mexico to cover the basic aspects of our economic relations has been mentioned. The Mexican government is willing to consider an arrangement [of] this nature.” Herzstein recalls that de la Madrid’s speech, “even though worded in a rather dry and undramatic way, caught the attention of the business leaders. The President obviously took pains to be sure we heard the message: the next day Rodman, Guy and I were called to Commerce Secretary Hector Hernández’s office, where he asked us to help see that this message got attention in the U.S. media.”

After President de la Madrid’s groundbreaking speech, Mexico made rapid advances toward trade liberalization with the United States. In an op-ed for the New York Times Herzstein wrote that the shared border could “bring enormous benefits if suspicious neighbors are willing to acknowledge their joint destiny and permit greater economic integration.” Mexico entered GATT, the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs, in 1986. In November 1987, the bilateral framework agreement that MEXUS had advocated since the beginning of the decade was signed.

 Barely had the ink dried on the framework agreement than MEXUS was pushing for the next objective: a full free trade agreement. In a 1988 letter to Presidents-elect George H. W. Bush and Carlos Salinas de Gortari, Rockefeller and Juan Elek, then chairman of CEMAI, urged that the leaders “make steady progress toward a comprehensive agreement to liberalize, and eventually remove, obstacles to trade and investment between our two countries. This measure will enable enterprises and workers to combine their talents, capital, and technology to compete more effectively in global markets and will promote development in both countries.” Within six years the agreement had been negotiated by Bush and Salinas, and signed by the Clinton administration. “MEXUS developed a consensus among key Mexican business leaders in favor of a comprehensive trade and investment agreement [FTA],” Erb remarks about the Business Committee’s contributions to the landmark agreement. “Thus when President Salinas announced his support for an FTA he had a foundation of support that allowed him to confront the protectionism that had been common in the Mexican business community until then. In the U.S., as a result of the Business Committee’s work major corporations and business organizations lined up in support of the NAFTA soon after the Bush-Salinas agreement to open FTA negotiations.”

In 1996, Mexican President Ernesto Zedillo presented Rodman C. Rockefeller with the Orden Mexicana del Águila Azteca, the highest decoration given by Mexico to foreign nationals. In his acceptance speech, Rockefeller described his work with the Mexico-U.S. Business Committee: “We promoted an exciting, powerful, novel idea—that the private sector has the power to provoke change. Through our ideas and our capital, we could influence public policy, economies and people’s well being. Imagine our excitement when President Miguel de la Madrid, and subsequently President Carlos Salinas de Gortari, not only believed in the concept but openly espoused it for the future of Mexico.”

At the February 2007 conference on NAFTA, participants examined the impact of the agreement—positive and negative—and analyzed the negotiation process to “understand who benefited and who lost after the implementation of the treaty.” The Benson Collection hosted a reception and exhibit highlighting key documents from the Mexico-U.S. Business Committee archives. The display also featured a few of the hundreds of books and journals available in the library that examine the history and consequences of NAFTA. Mexican and American businessmen and women, policymakers, and academics continued their discussions from the conference over wine and quesadillas. “It was an exciting event,” observes head librarian Ann Hartness, “but the Benson Collection’s work has just begun. The archives receive thorough cataloging, preservation, and a detailed online inventory [available at http://www.lib.utexas.edu/taro/]. As more collection material gets digitized, scholars will be able to begin their investigations on the Internet, though for the foreseeable future a visit to the library for immersion in the collection will be necessary to get the full scope and context of the history.”

The Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection is the special collection library and archives at the University of Texas for materials by and about Latin America and Latinos in the United States. Begun in 1921 with the purchase of the extensive private library of Mexican bibliophile Genaro García, the Benson Collection now holds nearly one million bound volumes and four thousand linear feet of archives. One of many recent exciting additions to the Benson Collection, the Mexico-U.S. Business Committee archives illustrate the depth of the library’s and the university’s commitment to the study of the U.S. relationship with Mexico and other Latin American countries. The Benson Collection is currently working to acquire more archives from the committee—from both the American and Mexican sides—to sufficiently document the historical negotiations that led to the North American Free Trade Agreement.

Christian Kelleher is the Archivist for the Benson Latin American Collection of the University of Texas Libraries.