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New Mexico's southwest

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NEW MEXICO'S SOUTHWEST

PAIGE W. CHRISTIANSEN

Seldom does one find in the history of an area the intricate patterns made up of vastly diverse cultures and varied elements which have blended to produce the history of the southwestern portion of New Mexico. Geologically, it is complex to a point of perplexity. Geographically, it encompasses great expanses of harsh Sonoran deserts, lush river valleys (the Rio Grande, Gila and Mimbres Valleys), and high mountains where alpine flora abounds and cool streams tempt the fisherman. Into this scene one must inject first the Indian, then the Spaniard, the Mexican in his turn, and finally the American. One must also add specifics of human activity to the story—frontier forts, bulwarks against marauding Indians and outposts of conquest; overland trails, for man's weary wandering, for caravans and wagons, for stagecoaches, and finally for ribbons of steel and asphalt; mines and mining camps on a thousand hills, some to sputter and die, others to live on to feed the hungry industrial plant of twentieth century America; and, there were cattle, the only way yet found to harvest the nutritious grasses of desert and mountain. Blend the land, the people, and the activities dictated by the land, and one finds in southwestern New Mexico all of the elements which contribute to romance and excitement in history. But only the highlights of the story can be unfolded here, the rest remains for the reader's own research, imagination, or dreams.

THE INDIANS

The Indians of southwestern New Mexico fall into two distinct groups. First were the builders, known as the Mogollon Culture, which emerged from primitive foodgatherers (the Cochise Foragers) and a higher culture group entering the southwest from Mexico. As this mixed group evolved the arts of civilization, they constructed homes in caves and along the watercourses of the Gila and Mimbres rivers. They reached their peak of development between 800 and 1100 A.D. For half a millennium they lived peacefully along the rivers, raising crops of corn, squash, and beans, developing pottery techniques, practicing their beautiful and simple natural religion, always content to remain a part of nature. But nature is a fickle thing. During the century spanning 1100 to 1200 A.D., the climate changed and the country dried out, making agriculture increasingly difficult. As the struggle for survival increased, the leisure for non-food-acquiring pursuits decreased, and cultural vitality declined. At this same moment another of nature's children, the second In-

dian group in southwestern New Mexico, entered the scene.

These Athabascan speaking people whom we know historically as Apache, began to spread out across the Southwest. Between 1100 and 1540 they completely displaced the older, peaceful Indians cultures. When the Spaniard arrived in the Southwest, the Mogollon people were gone and only the ruins of their villages gave mute evidence that they had ever existed. Southwestern New Mexico became the central stronghold of the Apache Indians. In fact it became the last great stronghold of the American Indian in his defense against the white man. It was in the mountains of this region that Geronimo found sanctuary. In the end, however, even the Apache were forced to relinquish these lands, and today, in a land that was Indian for perhaps as long as 10 millennia, there are no Indians lands, there is no Indian population.

THE SPANIARD

The Spanish impact on southwestern New Mexico is not as heavy as one might think. Instead of being an area for colonization and exploitation, it was a crossroads. It lacked the sedentary Indian population to attract great missionary effort such as was the case in the upper Rio Grande valley. The mineral wealth, which became so important to the region in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, was discovered by the Spanish only in the last fleeting moments of empire. The very nature of the country did not entice the Spanish to undertake agricultural pursuits. Finally, this was Apache land, and the Spanish were never able, during 250 years of contact, to dislodge them from this region. The Spanish, then, stayed on the fringes of the area and never made concerted effort to occupy southwestern New Mexico.

What influence there was came in two local areas, and for very different reasons. The eastern bank of the Rio Grande from El Paso del Norte (modern Ciudad Juarez) was the main route of entry to the pueblos in the upper valley. New Mexico's link to the world was over the trail that threaded its way along the river, over the Jornada del Muerto, thence to Santa Fe. For centuries the Spanish passed through southwestern New Mexico, but he rarely stopped, except to camp or rest on the trail. He named those camps, he named the landmarks, and it is in the place names along the Rio Grande that the Spanish influence remains. Here there is nothing comparable to the Palace of the Governors in Santa Fe; there are no Spanish mission churches

such as one finds in the communities of the north; there are only names at lonely rest stops along the river or on the sentinel mountains that border the stream.

The second area of Spanish influence was in the Silver City area, particularly at the copper mines of Santa Rita. It is discussed as a part of the mining history of the region, for this influence was in a limited area and only for a brief moment.

THE MEXICAN

The period of Mexican domination over southwestern New Mexico lasted only some twenty-five years and produced little lasting influence on the region. Mexico, engaged in a struggle for political stability following its independence from Spain, had little time or inclination to develop what seemed a harsh, unfriendly, and poor area, far from its centers of population.

Trade continued to flourish along the Camino Real, now spiced with goods moving from the Missouri communities over the Santa Fe Trail and thence into Mexico. But again things moved through, not to, southwestern New Mexico. At Santa Rita, mining continued, but under increasingly difficult conditions, for the Apache threat was at its height. Mexican domination ended with the crash of cannon and the irresistible push of an American nation rushing headlong to the Pacific.

THE AMERICAN

While Spain lost its empire, and New Mexico under Mexican rule sank into poverty and decay, yet another force was on the march, a force that welled up in an Anglo-American people clinging to the Atlantic Coast of North America. As these people built a nation they also developed a sense of destiny which turned their faces to the west and their footsteps toward the sunset. With them moved their culture. At first it was a trickle, a few traders crossing the plains on the Santa Fe Trail; then the trickle became a flood. For New Mexico, these men came as saviors, for the Missouri traders broke the Chihuahua trade monopoly. Again there was conflict, for this American, with his gaze fixed on western skies, refused to turn aside, and he strode on, grinding the feeble effort of Mexican resistance into the desert sands. The Mexican War (1846-48) suddenly transferred ownership of Texas, New Mexico, Utah, Nevada, Arizona, and California from Mexico to the United States.

The most significant cultural influence in southwestern New Mexico came from the Anglo-American impact after 1846. All of the forts, most of the towns, most of the mines, and the most significant develop-

ments in agriculture and stock-raising are manifestations of this American westward push. The historical ingredients of American occupation include the building of forts to contain the Apache, the development of transportation, mining, and stock raising. As one roams the hills and valleys of this region, the signs of one or another of these will always be close at hand. In some places the influence will be clear and distinct, for that which was old still lives in the present, little changed. In other places the imagination will have to be given full rein, for the old has all but disappeared, and one must search for elements of the past among newfangled patterns of twentieth century America.

But before any progress could be made by the American newly arrived in New Mexico's Southwest, an age old problem had to be solved, one that had plagued Spaniard and Mexican alike. The Apache Indian had made the desert and mountains of the region his home. Holding fast to these lands, he had consistently refused to adapt to the ways of the Europeans. And he was a predator, taking what he required for survival from other Indians, Spaniards, Mexicans, and finally Americans.

The Americans solved the Indian problem whereas the Spanish and Mexicans had not. The technique was simple—bring in sufficient troops, arm them with the most modern repeating rifles, and exterminate those Apaches who refused to accept reservation life. To effect this policy the American built a series of forts which eventually formed a ring around southwestern New Mexico, literally surrounding this vital stronghold of the Apache. Since there was no set plan in establishing the many forts in this region there can be no chronology. Many of the forts were occupied for very short periods, others served the Army of the West for many years. At different periods nine forts existed:

Fort Thorn near Hatch
 Fort Seldon near Radium Springs
 Fort Fillmore south of Las Cruces
 Fort Webster in the Mimbres Valley
 Fort Cummings near Florida
 Fort Bayard near Santa Rita
 Fort McLane at Hurley
 Forts Floyd and West at Cliff

Fort Seldon was established in 1865. Located where the Butterfield Stage route crossed the Rio Grande, it was an important link in the defense against the Apache. For over a century the Spaniards considered establishing a presidio at this same place, then called Robledo. Some local citizens claim there was a Spanish fort at the Seldon location, but there never was. Finds of Spanish artifacts are evidence that the same

area was one of the significant campsites on the Camino Real between Santa Fe and Chihuahua City. Fort Seldon was abandoned in 1879 when the railroads began to draw travel away from the overland trails. During the uprisings of the Apache (Victoria, Nana, and Geronimo) in the 1880's it was reoccupied, only to be permanently closed in 1892. Today, traveling north from Las Cruces, one is startled by the ruins of old Fort Seldon, seen to the east as the Rio Grande is approached. The bleak, brown, adobe walls, roofless, rising from a low bluff close by the river are surrounded by valley growth. Through the efforts of the Doña Ana Historical Society, it will be preserved as a New Mexico State Monument.

Fort Cummings was established in October 1863, in what is now Luna County. It was located at Cooke's Spring, an important watering stop on the Butterfield Trail, at the Eastern edge of Cooke's Canyon. Prior to the establishment of Fort Cummings, the Apache made frequent and fatal attacks upon travelers as they passed through the four miles of Cooke's Canyon or stopped at the spring. This was considered one of the most dangerous stretches of the Butterfield Trail. The fort was abandoned in 1873, reoccupied briefly during the 1880's, and finally abandoned in 1886. Little remains of Fort Cummings today. A few weathered walls here and there among the mesquite and creosote bushes mark the site. The spring still flows, supplying water for the stock which now graze upon this "protector of the trail."

Fort Bayard, established in 1865 to protect the miners and settlers moving into the area of Santa Rita and Silver City following the Civil War, allowed the orderly development of what was to become New Mexico's most important mineral-producing area. The original fort consisted of log and adobe buildings forming a square around the parade ground. In 1899 the fort was designated as an Army General Hospital, and in 1922 it was taken over by the Veterans Administration and remains under their control today. It appears, however, that its role as a veteran's hospital may be over.

The remainder of the forts of southwestern New Mexico played less significant roles in the history of the region and were only briefly occupied. Their purpose, the protection of travelers on the overland trails, protection of property, and the pacification of the Apache, was successfully carried out. Many of their locations can yet be seen, and should be looked for as one searches out the excitement of history.

Though the history of transportation may seem dull, it is not, particularly in the region under discussion. Through this area passed some of the most famous transport routes of the North American continent. The famed Camino Real from Santa Fe to Chihuahua

City (and then to Mexico City) which passed through the region, was New Mexico's only access to world markets until the opening of the Santa Fe Trail in 1821. When the United States acquired the Southwest, and particularly California, speed of transport across the continent became essential. As a result, the Butterfield Overland Stage Company was formed in 1857 to supply twice weekly mail and passenger service between Tipton, Missouri, and the west coast. On September 15, 1858, two coaches started their lonely journey, one from Tipton, the other from San Francisco. The first eastbound coach reached El Paso on September 27, 1858, the first westbound three days later. For the next three years Butterfield Overland Mail Coaches raced over the trails blazed by those pioneers, two each week in each direction. The Butterfield Overland Mail carved out an important trail across the continent, one that passed through southwestern New Mexico. While the Butterfield Overland Mail ceased to exist in 1861, the trail named for it continued to be an important transportation route for the rest of the century.

The railroads, of course, were to make the older overland trails obsolete. Two major transcontinental lines passed through New Mexico. Pushing east from California the Southern Pacific reached Deming in 1881 and finally New Orleans in 1883. Further north the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad was built westward from Kansas City and reached Albuquerque in 1880. A spur line south from Albuquerque, through Socorro, San Marcial, Hatch, and then to Deming allowed the Santa Fe to make a transcontinental connection using the Southern Pacific tracks from Deming to the west coast. In the meantime the Santa Fe continued building west from Albuquerque to Los Angeles. Again southwestern New Mexico became an important crossroad for transcontinental transport.

The forts and military personnel connected with them made southwestern New Mexico safe from marauding Indians, and the overland trails and later the railroads brought more and more people to the region. The natural wealth of the area could now be exploited. For well over half a century it had been known that valuable mineral wealth abounded in the mountains sheltering the sources of the Gila River. The history of mining activity in this area gives another dimension to an exciting history.

There were numerous mining areas, but two spectacular developments deserve special treatment. By far the most interesting copper mine in the United States is the old Santa Rita mine. This celebrated mine was discovered by an Apache Indian in 1798 and shortly thereafter the information was passed on to Lieutenant Colonel Manuel Carrasco. Carrasco was in com-

mand of some of the Spanish presidial troops in the Spanish province of New Mexico. The colonel, unable to work the property himself, sold his rights to Don Francisco Manuel Elguea in 1804. Elguea was a wealthy Chihuahua merchant. Don Francisco secured a concession from Spain for the Santa Rita de Cobre Grant covering the principal mines of the Santa Rita basin. When the mine was developed, it produced large quantities of native copper. Since precious metal production in New Spain was all consigned to Spain, there was constant need in the colony for circulating currency, and Santa Rita would, for a time, supply it. The metal was transported 1300 miles from Santa Rita to Mexico City on the backs of mules. Mule trains averaged about 100 mules; each mule was reported to carry a load of 300 pounds, and there were about 200 trains annually. The circulating coins of the late colonial period in Mexico found their origin at Santa Rita. In 1909, the Santa Rita copper mines became the property of the Chino Copper Company, which was later incorporated into the Kennecott Corporation. It remains one of the important copper producers in the United States and the massive open pit at Santa Rita is legendary throughout the Southwest.

A second and even more spectacular mining development took place to the east of Santa Rita, across the rugged Black Range. The entire region around Kingston and Hillsboro was an important mineral producer, but in the Lake Valley District, near Hillsboro, was discovered one of the most fabulous silver deposits in the world. In 1878, George F. Lufkin, a cowboy, accidentally discovered the Lake Valley mines. News of his find quickly spread and the area was subjected to a "rush." The small operations which quickly sprang up were soon absorbed by three mining companies. Activities of all three companies were conducted for a number of years by the Sierra Grande Company, and it was under this management that the famous Bridal

Chamber was found. This chamber was roughly 100 feet square and it ranged from 10 to 20 feet in height. Much of the space was filled with horn silver so pure that it was sawed and cut into blocks instead of being blazed. The Bridal Chamber of the Lake Valley district yielded 2,500,000 ounces of silver. The Thirty Stope, the next richest ore body in the district, about 125 feet in length, 12 to 30 feet high and 90 feet wide, yielded 1,000,000 ounces of silver.

Though mining played a major role in the early development of southwestern New Mexico, there were other forms of natural wealth awaiting exploitation. Where steady watercourses flowed, agricultural communities began to develop. Where people live, there is need for food. But surface water is an uncommon occurrence in this part of the world, and agriculture was limited to those areas suitable for irrigation. Basically those areas were found only in the Rio Grande valley, the Mimbres valley, and along some of the Gila drainage in New Mexico. Although never noted as an agricultural area, southwestern New Mexico did and does produce crops important for the welfare of the state.

Farming can only be accomplished in areas with suitable water. There are, however, vast grasslands which flourish on meager rainfall. These too can be harvested, but in their natural form are of little benefit to man. A natural method of harvesting this valuable natural resource is to raise cattle to convert the nutritious grass into beef for our tables. Southwestern New Mexico like many other areas in the American west became a cattle kingdom.

These are the early cultural elements which make up the history of New Mexico's Southwest. It is a heritage that belongs to all the Southwest, or perhaps in a larger sense it is a part of the story of man's effort to tame a hostile and unknown continent, to see it, live in it, and to make it his own.