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DOŇA ANA COUNTY, NEW MEXICO: HISTORIC THEMES

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The history of the area surrounding Las Cruces and old Mesilla is, in general, a microcosm of the history of the American West. The major forces which shaped that history were not local in nature, but were, in most cases, generated far from the scene of their happening. For much of Dona Ana County historical processes are difficult to measure because of the thinness of the population in the past. There were ranches, of which we have only scanty histories, or even worse, only scanty mention, and there were trails over which passed military expeditions, supply trains, or Butterfield stages. There was sporadic mining activity in isolated areas, but again only meager records remain, and mining history is clouded by myth and legend. Finally there were forts which protected this vital frontier from local hostile Indians and defended the trade routes. The story of the area can best be told in terms of its themes.

The influences from Spain, which controlled this region from the late sixtenth century until 1824, were not extensive in terms of settlement or permanent occupation. The most important Spanish themes had to do with military activities against the Apache, and the effects of trade between Chihuahua City and Santa Fe along the Camino Real. The prime Spanish influence in the region is the prevalence of Spanish place names—mountains, streams, prominent geographic features—throughout Dona Ana County.

There has been discussion by local people and by some historians of a Spanish fort established 12 miles north of Las Cruces at a place called Robledo (there is still a peak nearby called Robledo Mountain). The fort was to guard the Camino Real from the onslaughts of the Apache who regularly raided supply trains which were inadequately protected. For many years following the reconquest of New Mexico in 1692 there had been discussion and even plans for establishing forts along the trade route. Sites at Robledo, Socorro, and others were mentioned. Interestingly enough, there was never a Spanish Fort at Robledo. Local artifact hunters have insisted that military artifacts have been found in the vicinity, but despite this, the historic documentation is clear: there was no fort. The artifacts can be explained by the fact that the site was one of the most popular camp areas along the trail. It was also one of the best fords where the trail crossed from the west to the east bank of the river. It had excellent forage for livestock and good water. After the river crossing for caravans moving north the trail soon entered the Jornada del Muerto. Travelers along the trail frequently spent several days at the ford resting themselves and their animals before moving on to this waterless desert. Southbound caravans also used this spot to recouperate after the hard journey across the desert. After several centuries of constant use by freighters, soldiers, and colonists, Robledo became well stocked with discarded or misplaced Spanish artifacts.

Although Indian cultures continued in the Mesilla Valley for 10,000 years, peopling the valley by the white man had to await the nineteenth century. Permanent settlement came in 1839 when Jose Maria Costales and 116 colonists settled in the Mesilla Valley. They were so authorized by a land grant (El Ancon de Dona Ana) issued by the Governor of the Mexican state of Chihuahua. Most of the colonists soon departed the region due to harsh conditions and constant Indian harrassment. A few, however, remained and formed the nucleus for later growth.

Following the signing of the treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo in 1848, ending the Mexican War, some of the inhabitants of the small village of Dona Ana chose not to become American citizens, which was their option. They established the town of Mesilla on a small mesa overlooking the Rio Grande in what they thought would be a part of Mexico. Arguments, uncertainty over surveys, and a variety of political problems made it uncertain to which country the territory of the town belonged. The question was settled in 1853 when a second treaty, the Gadsden Purchase, was arranged which gave the United States the Mesilla Valley and much of the southern watershed of the Gila River. The new international boundary placed the town of Mesilla well within the territory of the United States.

Subsequent settlement continued up and down the Rio Grande Valley from these early villages. Development away from the narrow confines of the valley was slow and dependent upon a solution to the Indian question and upon transportation. Ultimately Las Cruces became the center of activity in this part of New Mexico. The village of Dona Ana was originally the county seat, but lost that privilege as Mesilla and Las Cruces developed after 1853. When rail lines penetrated the region, Las Cruces was picked as the town on the line, and Mesilla declined rapidly.

Probably one of the most interesting historical themes of Dona Ana County was the development of transportation and its influence on the area. The need of the nation to tie the territory acquired by the Mexican cession of 1848 to the rest of the country initiated efforts leading to trans-continental systems. The first efforts utilized stagecoaches and freight wagons, later efforts brought the western railroads.

The federal government contract for an overland mail to California, which was awarded to John Butterfield and his associates, called for service beginning on September 15, 1858. The route began at Fort Smith, Arkansas, continued in a great arc to the south through Preston, Texas, El Paso, Fort Yuma, Arizona, across desert to Los Angeles, and finally north to San Francisco. The great arc led to the name "The Oxbow Line." Preparation for service was an immense task, requiring 141 stage stations, 1,500 horses and mules properly distributed, 250 coaches "suitable for conveyance of passengers, as well as the safety and security of the mails," corrals for livestock, support freight and water wagons, food and other supplies distributed throughout the system, and about 800 employees to operate the line. For all this the federal contract paid the Butterfield concern $600,000.

The section of the line involving New Mexico was Division

IV of the Butterfield, which was the run from El Paso to Fort Yuma. The route through Dona Ana County ran from Franklin City (El Paso) to Cottonwoods, 23 miles to the northeast. The Cottonwoods station was located on the Cottonwood ranch, the only place of habitation between El Paso and Fort Fillmore in 1858. From Cottonwoods the road continued northwest to Fort Fillmore, 18 miles from Cottonwoods. The station at Fort Fillmore was constructed of adobe and was located near the sutlers store. It was a small station utilized mostly for mail. From the Fort Fillmore station the road went to Mesilla, some five miles distant. The Mesilla station was the largest and most important station on the route between El Paso and Los Angeles. It was a large adobe building with extensive corrals, with facilities for the comfort of the passengers. It also served as a mail distribution point.

Picacho was the next station, 51/2 miles beyond Mesilla. Picacho was a ranch named for the cone-shaped peak nearby. When the Butterfield first operated in 1858 Picacho station was only a change station (change of horses), but soon a post office was established and later a store and a small village grew around the station. From Picacho the line turned west, along the northern side of Picacho Mountain, and continued on the high mesa to the next station, Rough and Ready, 14 miles from Picacho. This was also a change station. The station took its name from a range of hills nearby. The Rough and Ready station was partly constructed from stone and part from adobe. From Rough and Ready the road continued to Goodsight, 23 miles distant.

On the way to Goodsight the route passed through the southern extension of the Uvas Mountains. One of the gaps or saddles through which the route passed was named Massacre Gap after a bloody massacre there in 1870. An entire family from Mesilla was murdered, reportedly by angry neighbors dressed as Indians.

Goodsight, like Rough and Ready, was a relay station between Picacho and Cooke's Springs. The station at Goodsight was stone and adobe construction, measuring about 30 by 45 feet. It had two rooms with fireplaces in both, a corral, and an earthen tank for water. The water was brought by tank wagon from Goodsight Spring on Goodsight Peak, or from Cooke's Springs.

Fourteen miles slightly northwest of Goodsight was the Cooke's Springs station. This station, located in Luna County, was named for Colonel Phillip St. George Cooke, famous military figure and Indian fighter in the Southwest. The station was located a quarter of a mile east of the springs. Thus ended the journey through Dona Ana County. The stage route continued on to Fort Yuma and Los Angeles, finally ending its long "oxbow line" in San Francisco.

There were a variety of coaches utilized on the Butterfield Overland Mail, but the most famous and the most satisfactory was the Concord coach. Constructed of only the best wood, iron, ox-hide leather, and brass, it was oval shaped and rigged with thorough-braces (heavy leather straps) which caused it to roll rather than jerk or bounce on rough roads. The Concord coaches had leather upholstery, curtains, and were generally colorful (depending on the wishes of the buyer). They had seating in the interior for nine passengers. A seat for a driver and guard was on top, and if necessary for short runs, there was room for nearly a dozen more passengers on top. The coaches weighed nearly 2,500 pounds and cost $1,220 to $1,500 delivered. Most of the coaches manufactured during the last half of the nineteenth century were used on far western roads. They were pulled by either four- or eight-horse teams. While some western freighters and stagecoach drivers preferred mules, most stagecoachers preferred horses.

The coaches utilized, Concord or other, were all adequate for mail and successfully fulfilled federal contracts calling for mail delivery between California and the eastern states. As to the comfort and ease of passengers, "luxury" coaches like the Concord only reduced the misery of trans-continental stagecoach travel. Long hours, crowded coaches, dusty, rough roads, the terror of mountain roads, the constant rolling or bounding motion, and a multitude of other inconveniences were the lot of the traveler on the Butterfield Overland Mail. Not infrequently the monotony was broken by Indian attacks, which left the passengers badly frightened, if they survived at all. Despite the hardships the Butterfield stages were popular, and during the peak periods of travel there was often a ten-day waiting period to get on a westbound stage for California.

The stage stations spaced along the way, either as relay for men and horses, mail distribution points, or as rest stops for passengers, frequently left much to be desired. The food that was sometimes available at the stations was generally rated from "plain" to "terrible." Salt pork, beans, hard tack or soggy biscuits and "a miserable apology for coffee" were common fare. Many travelers carried their own food rather than take any chances on the food served along the way. In rare instances, particularly at the important way stations where time was allowed for more leisurely rest stops, good food or lodging were available. Most of the stations were designed for the benefit of the drivers and the livestock, not for the passengers.

The passage of the Butterfield stage through Dona Ana County had all of the elements of trans-continental travel, and the remains of the road, the ruins of some of the stations, and memories of the hardships, remain one of the highlights of the county's history. While the Butterfield Overland Mail did not survive the hostility building toward the Civil War, stagecoaches continued to operate, connecting local areas across the southwest until railroads and the internal combustion engine replaced them.

Without the military influence it would have been difficult to maintain the frontier settlements that first arose in the southwest or in the local area such as Dona Ana County. The Spanish were constantly threatened by Indian raids on trading caravans passing over the Camino Real, attacks on ranches and frontier communities, and of the constant threat of other European powers intruding into Spanish Territory. While their defenses did not include any permanent installations in what is Dona Ana County, there were constant military activities in the region during the several centuries of Spanish control.

The American inherited the Indian problem from the Spaniard and, during the years following the American occupation of south-central New Mexico, a strong military establishment was created to cope with this problem. Three forts were built in Dona Ana County as a part of a chain of forts intended to control the Apache. This line of forts ran up and down the Rio Grande and across southern New Mexico into Arizona. They became the bases from which the Apache were finally controlled following the Civil War. Two forts were constructed shortly after the American occupation. Fort Thorn, just north of Hatch, was first manned in 1853. It continued to play a role in Indian control until 1859 when it was aban-

doned. Fort Fillmore, six miles south of Las Cruces, was commissioned in 1851. It was abandoned following the Confederate invasion of southern New Mexico in 1862. Fort Selden, at Radium Springs, 12 miles north of Las Cruces, was established in 1865 (after the Civil War) to replace Fort Thorn and Fillmore as a part of the line of forts to control the Apache. Fort Selden remained a key part of this system until 1879 when it was abandoned, as were most of the frontier forts in New Mexico shut down at this time.

The first military action of the Civil War in New Mexico took place in Dona Ana County in 1862. The resulting events in Dona Ana County turned out to be a comedy of errors on the part of Union troops. Although the troops at Fort Fillmore (the only fort in the area at that time) were considered adequate to the defense of the fort, their commander, Major Isaac Lynde, was inept and failed to make the necessary decisions that might have led to success. His timidness resulted in a full retreat from Fort Fillmore. His route of withdrawal was toward Fort Stanton, far to the northeast. His troops, without adequate supplies or water, were overtaken by the Confederate force at San Agustin Springs in the Organ Mountains and there the entire force was surrendered without firing a shot. For a brief time Dona Ana County was in the hands of the Confederate forces. Only after the failure of the confederate invasion following their disastrous defeat at Glorieta Pass near Santa Fe did the region return to its normal processes.

One of the battles of the Mexican war was also fought in Dona Ana County. Colonel A. W. Doniphan was dispatched by General Stephen Kearney from Santa Fe to penetrate the state of Chihuahua, Mexico. As he proceeded south through Dona Ana County, he was met by Mexican dragoons at Brazito (little arm) on Christmas day, 1846. The resulting battle, the Battle of Brazitos, was the only battle of the Mexican war fought in New Mexico. The Mexican detachment numbered 1,200 men. A cavalry and an infantry charge were repulsed by the Americans and the Mexicans quickly retreated back to El Paso. American casualties were eight wounded, none killed, while the Mexican army suffered 43 killed, 150 wounded, and five captured. Doniphan and his Missouri Volunteers continued into Chihuahua without further opposition.

The economic history of Dona Ana County has been dependent on four major themes during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These themes are agriculture, ranching, mining, to a lesser degree, and the impact of the missile age in recent years.

It was the lure of the wide and fertile bottom lands of the Rio Grande Valley that first lured settlers into Dona Ana County. The region was well watered, with a climate insuring a long growing season. The area has produced excellent vineyards in the past (destroyed by disease early in the twentieth century), various field crops, orchards, truck farming, and more recently cotton. In the 1920's, Elephant Butte dam and reservoir was constructed to increase the irrigation potential of the southern Rio Grande Valley. It is interesting to note that this system, the finest in the world at the time, was developed to enhance the agricultural production of that part of the valley encompassed by Dona Ana County. Later, other irrigation developments came with deep well technology. Where reliable water was available at great depths and in large quantities, it was tapped for irrigation. The drilling rigs that could sink deep water wells were developed in the rapidly expanding oil fields of the nation. Their adoption to water wells revolutionized irrigation agriculture in New Mexico, and for the first time broke farmers' reliance on surface water. Since the advent of deep well technology much of the irrigation in New Mexico comes from deep wells, even in the Rio Grande Valley, where the volume of water in the river fluctuates widely from year to year. Despite the fact that New Mexico cannot be considered an "agricultural" state, in Dona Ana County it plays a significant role in the total economic resources.

Mining played only a sporadic role in the economic history of the area. Two mining districts developed, each with only limited production. The oldest in Dona Ana County, and one of the oldest in New Mexico, was located in the Organ Mountains, east of Las Cruces. In 1849 the Stephenson mine was discovered and for a number of years it produced lead, copper, some silver and a little gold. Later developments at the Modoc mine nearby continued to make the Organs a productive area in terms of lead and copper. About 3 million dollars in values was taken from the mines during the history of their operation. Rumors or legends of vast amounts of gold in the Organ Mountains has no basis in fact.

To the west of the Rio Grande, in Cookes Range, a second mining district developed. It was primarily a producer of lead (oxidized lead ores, eagerly sought by smelters) with an important silver byproduct. The production in the area began about 1880 and over the next 25 years about $3 million in production was realized (about 4/5th lead, 1/5 silver).

The most visible industry in Dona Ana County, and for that matter in New Mexico, is the livestock industry. Much of Dona Ana County lacks that necessary ingredient, water, with which to develop the country. The sky powers are sparing of the rain that makes for dry farming, or that produces the runoff necessary for irrigation. On the high mesas and arid mountains only the fragile desert grasses grow, and they have no economic value except when fed to livestock. The Spanish quickly learned this, as did the American later (the Indian had no domesticated livestock). Scattered across the county, even in the remotest areas, one finds the livestock operators. The cattlemen and the cowboy, with all of the romance and lore attached to them, are a dominant theme in the region.

Thus flowed the history of Dona Ana County. Much of that history was worked out in vast spaciousness, empty of people. But then the emptiness is one of the charms of the area. In the great expanses of mountain and desert, people of the ancient past or a recent past have lived and worked and died. Sometimes the fruits of their labors are clear and evident and live on in cities and towns. In many instances, however, the mountains and desert have reclaimed their own and the works of man have succumbed. A mental picture must then be cast over the landscape on which great historical events took place but that are now empty of signs of man's effort. If the travelers are fortunate, there may still be some sign—a ghost town, a ruined ranch or stage station, some old artifacts—to tell the story; if not, imagination must be given free rein. The search is the adventure!

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