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## *A brief history of Socorro County*

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## A BRIEF HISTORY OF SOCORRO COUNTY

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The County of Socorro, New Mexico, is a complex and colorful mass of landforms scattered helter-skelter across central New Mexico. It stretches from the green Rio Grande Valley with its irrigated lands, quaint farms and picturesque agricultural villages, up the steep western slopes of the valley to the rolling grassland mesas and alluvial fans ending in steep and treacherous canyons in the rugged mountains. The Socorro Mountains, the Magdalenas, the San Mateos, the Ladrones, and countless others seem always to ring the horizon. Some of them are timbered and abound in cool refreshing shade and springs. Some are harsh and dry. In the west, the county becomes the famed San Agustin Plains which stretch to the sunset, a wide carpet fringed by black, timbered hills. The complexity of the county's geology, scenery, and terrain, is matched by an equally complex history.

The history of Socorro County (which, until very recent years, included what is now Catron County), is a mosaic of many hues and shades, some harsh and stark like its dry desert mountains, some inviting like the shade and coolness of its timbered canyons and mountain springs. First are the many diverse and sometimes hostile Indian cultures. There were peaceful pueblo peoples tilling their lands, using the Rio Grande's flowing water to produce abundance. Also, prehistoric village dwellers struggled to create agricultural societies along the banks of now dry rivers in western Socorro County, seeking a bare subsistence from these arid lands. And there were the fearsome Apache who founded their homes in the broken mountain fastness and added their own excitement and tragedy to the mosaic. So, too, would the Spaniard make his mark and the Mexican who followed close behind. The place names in Socorro County are mostly Spanish names, although the Spanish would find Socorro County a difficult place in which to maintain himself. Perhaps not so romantic, and not so colorful, but dominating and adding realism to the mosaic, was the Anglo-American who converted this land to the flag of the United States. Finally, two major economic factors left a profound imprint on Socorro County: stockraising and mining. The first originated with the Spanish, was continued by the Mexicans, and commercialized by the Americans. Every-

where we see the signs of this heritage. Mining also played a dominant role, although of shorter duration. The exploitation of mineral resources as a force in Socorro County would strike swiftly and dramatically in the 1880's and would dominate the county until the 1920's, then it declined to a trickle; yet its imprint is clear. One can hardly lift his eyes to the hills without seeing signs of the prospector's shovel or the miner's work. One can hardly converse with citizens of the county without discussing mines of the past or mines of the future. Livestock and mining, then, are woven through the historical pattern and are never far from any part of the story.

### INDIAN HISTORY SKETCHY

The history of the Indian in Socorro County is only partly known, and the chronology is almost completely lacking. Three major Indian cultures inhabited parts of the county in times past. Today, there are but few of the native inhabitants remaining, and they are of tribes of culture groups of relatively recent origin.

The earliest inhabitants found in Socorro County were cave dwellers, people whose cultural achievements were limited by the harsh existence with which they were faced. They lived in natural caves, usually along watercourses. They managed rudimentary handicrafts such as basketmaking, the manufacture of stone tools, and bone work. After about 400 A.D. the Neolithic revolution occurred in the area with the introduction of crude agricultural techniques, based on the production of corn. With the possibility of sedentary life, the Indian cultures of the area evolved into several distinct groups, all heavily influenced by patterns of cultural growth apparent in other regions of the southwest.

The oldest Neolithic cultures were in the western sections of Socorro County and were part of the Mimbres-Cibola group which dominated western New Mexico during the period 600 A.D. to about 1100 A.D. These people flourished in the upper Gila River drainage basin, later around Quemado and as far east as the Gallinas Mountains. After 1100 A.D. they gradually dispersed and eventually disappeared as a cultural group. The prime factor in their disappearance we will see more clearly when we introduce the Athapascan people to the Southwest.

In eastern Socorro County, primarily in the Rio Grande Valley and in the mountains that rim the eastern bank of the river, another important Indian culture developed. With the collapse of the older Indian cultures in northern and western New Mexico (the Mimbres-Cibola, the Mesa Verde, Chaco, and others), there developed, after 1200 A.D., a pueblo complex in the Rio Grande Valley. Generally, the pueblos which grew along the Rio Grande watershed gathered into them the remnants of the earlier cultures who were leaving their traditional homes. They were, therefore, an eclectic accumulation of the earlier cultures. The part of this complex that developed in Socorro County were called Piro Indians. They inhabited such places as Abo, Guarai, Gran Quivira, Socorro, San Antonio, and countless other places in the Manzano Mountains and along the banks of the Rio Grande. The Spaniards were to found some of their most important missionary churches among the Piros, and of all the pueblo peoples of New Mexico, the Piros became most loyal to the Spanish administration and the Roman Church. The Pueblo peoples of the upper Rio Grande Valley turned against the Spanish oppressor in 1680, but the Piro remained loyal. When the Spanish were forced to retreat from New Mexico most of the Piros, fearing retaliation by the other pueblos, went south to El Paso with the Spanish. There they founded new villages and there they remained. Those Piro who stayed in New Mexico were dispersed or destroyed by the Apache and Comanche who constantly raided their villages.

Both the Piro and the peoples of western Socorro County were peaceful farmers wanting nothing more than to work their lands and to practice their handicrafts and their religion. Not so with the Athapascans who flooded into the country sometime after 1000 A.D. The Athapaskan, or Apache as we now call them, migrated from the northern plains seeking new homes, pushed either by population pressure or by a stronger people, probably a combination of both. Along the high plains of eastern New Mexico the migration split into two groups, one continuing south down the plains into southwestern Texas and southeastern New Mexico. The second turned west and left the plains behind them, entering the arid and mountainous regions of central and western New Mexico, thence into Arizona. Along its route it left remnants of the migration who appropriated local areas for their own use. Left behind was their plains culture. The Indian was forced to adapt to the harsh conditions of mountain and desert. His food supply sharply curtailed, he turned to the easiest source available: the corn

raised and stored by the various farmers with whom he came into contact. Since he had already perfected his warlike talents, he found the pueblo peoples an easy mark and pressed his advantage relentlessly. The result was the collapse of many established cultures across the Southwest. By the time the Spaniard arrived, the Apache was master of the borderlands with the exception of the upper Rio Grande Valley (the modern Pueblo peoples, including the Piro), and the Moqui or Hopi of northern Arizona. Also, by this time, they had taken on special characteristics and names: the Navajo, Chiricahua, Mescalero, Nataje, Lipane, and others. In Socorro County various Apache groups used the Magdalenas, the San Mateos, the Ladrones, and other mountains as their strongholds. From these points of vantage they raided and pillaged, first Indian, then Spanish, Mexican, and American communities.

Today, signs of Indian culture abound everywhere in Socorro County. Along dry arroyos, on buttes overlooking the Rio Grande and in mountain valleys, one need only to search and he will be amply rewarded by finding countless Indian artifacts. While the Indians are lost to antiquity, their contribution to the history of the county lives dramatically in the culture they created.

#### SPANISH LEAVE MARK

The imprint of Spanish culture on Socorro County is not so deep as one might think. With the exception of a few isolated spots along the Rio Grande River, the Spanish colonized very little of the county. For the most part their influence came through the effort of the Franciscan fathers working among the Piro Indians.

The Spanish era can be divided into two general periods. The first began with the first Spanish exploration and occupation and ended with the Pueblo Revolt in 1680. The second began in 1692 with the Reconquest and continued until the 1820's when the Spanish empire in America came to an end.

All of the early Spanish explorers of the southwest passed through or explored parts of the country. Coronado saw parts of western Socorro County, and later, elements of his command penetrated down the Rio Grande river passing through eastern portions. Later expeditions, including Rodriguez, Espejo, and the colonizing expedition of Oñate, using the Rio Grande river valley as their highway into New Mexico, also had opportunity to explore eastern Socorro County. The early place names in the county are attributed to Oñate and his colonists

when they passed through in 1598. As they slowly progressed north up the valley they gave names to their campsites and to outstanding landmarks. Among these appears the name Socorro, applied to the Piro Indian village (called Pilabo by the Indians) on the site of modern Socorro, when the Indians gave aid to the colonists in the form of food.

Socorro County did not immediately feel the impact of Spanish colonization. The attention of the Spaniards was on the more heavily populated and better-watered upper Rio Grande Valley. With the extension of the Franciscan mission program, however, it was not long until the Piro groups received padres and churches. Fray Benevides, the greatest of the early leaders of the Franciscan order in New Mexico, says of the missions established in what is now Socorro County,

Though this (Piros) is the first province of that kingdom, it was among the last in its conversion. God pleased that its hour should come; and in the year one thousand six hundred and twenty-six, being Custodian of these conversions, I dedicated myself to the Lord in the conversion of these souls, dedicating their chief pueblo to the most Holy Virgin of Socorro. And so in this first year our Lord was pleased to favor me in such wise that all became baptized and are very good Christians. And I have founded in this province three monasteries and churches; the one in the pueblo of Senecu, dedicated to San Antonio de Padua; another in the Pueblo of Pilabo (Socorro), dedicated to the Virgin of Socorro; the other in the pueblo of Sevilleta, dedicated to San Luis Opispo of my order.

The walls of the Socorro church, founded by Fray Garcia de San Francisco y Zuniga on the instructions of Benevides, were standing in 1692, according to reports of the De Vargas expedition of reconquest. The ruins were still visible as late as 1725, but no trace of the former settlement is now to be seen.

The missions at Senecu and Sevilleta were not important Spanish centers, nor was the one at Socorro. All were missions, located at Indian villages. Certainly there were Spanish padres in residence, but there was little or no other Spanish population. All of the missions would disappear after 1680, along with the Spaniards, never to return. There were, however, a few spots that did exist as mainly Spanish centers prior to 1680, some of which remained important before and after the Pueblo Revolt. One of the most important roads in North America was laid out between Santa Fe and Chihuahua City; it was called the Camino Real (a name given to many "Royal Roads" in the Spanish Empire). This famous road struck north from Chihuahua City directly to El Paso Del Norte (modern Juarez), crossed to the east bank of the Rio Grande, following the river to the area of Hatch. There it left the river and entered the famed waterless pass-

age of some 90 miles called, for obvious reasons, the Jornada del Muerto, journey of death. It returned to the river at Fra Cristobal, again following the course of the river until it reached the vicinity of Santa Fe. From Fra Cristobal to La Joya, it passed through what is now Socorro County, and there were a number of important points along this road where travelers or caravans stopped for water and rest. Some were ranches, some campsites, some Indian villages. Many of these famous places still exist, occupied in some cases, in others only names from the past: Fra Cristobal, Valverde, Luis Lopez, La Joya de Sevilleta, Felipe Romero. What of Socorro? Socorro was on the west side of the river and never a stop on the Camino Real.

The western part of Socorro County felt no influences from the Spanish in the period before 1680. The Pueblo Revolt ended, temporarily, any Spanish influence anywhere in Socorro County. The failure of the Spanish to hold out against the combined efforts of the Pueblo people, the abandonment of the region, and the fact that the Piro Indians in the area decided to leave their homes, left the county largely in the hands of the Apache. For all practical purposes, these wild, untamed sons of the desert would remain the dominant force in and around Socorro County until the nineteenth century.

From 1680 until the end of Spanish rule in the southwest, the area of Socorro County remained relatively dormant. Only in isolated places and at irregular times did the white man leave his mark on the land. Of course, after the reconquest by De Vargas in 1692, and with the reopening of contacts with northern Mexico, many, many Spaniards passed along the Camino Real. Again there was sporadic activity at Fra Cristobal, a ranch developed at Luis Lopez, at La Joya, and a few isolated spots along the trail. In a few instances, hardy Spanish colonists tried to wrest a living in the Rio Grande Valley, despite the danger from hostile Indians. But each of these was no more than an oasis, and was concerned with the trade along the Camino Real, not in developing the area that is Socorro County. Their influence was confined to the narrow margins of the Rio Grande river. And what of the village from which the county takes its name? It remained abandoned and empty of people until after the end of the Spanish empire in America.

Only on rare occasions did the Spanish penetrate the regions of western Socorro County. This country belonged to the Apache. In the late eighteenth century the Apache, who had always been a menace to Indian and Spaniard alike, became adapted to the use of the horse, imported into the new world by

the Spanish. While he was dangerous as a warrior on foot, mounted, the Apache threatened the very existence of the white man's control of the borderlands. As a result of increasing Apache raids the Spanish made several attempts to meet and conquer him in his own country. In 1767, an expedition leaving from Janos, Chihuahua, led by Lope de Cuellar, fought a pitched battle against a large band of Apache on the Plains of San Agustin. The Spanish were badly defeated and forced to retreat back to Chihuahua. Later, after a sweeping military and administrative changes on the frontier, there were several efforts to liquidate the Apache in western Socorro County and in other areas of western and southwestern New Mexico. These were led by Hugo Oconor in 1774 and in 1775, and by Juan Bautista de Anza in the 1780's. Although many Indians were killed, and many rancherias destroyed, the over-all effect did not seriously weaken the Apache.

While it is true that there was little or no development in most areas of Socorro County in the eighteenth century, this same generalization will not apply during the Spanish portion of the nineteenth century. After 1800 there is evidence that the Spanish population of the Rio Grande Valley communities did increase, and it is in the years between 1800 and 1846 that the heaviest Spanish-Mexican influence was felt. However, even during this time the population was very small, and relied for its economic life upon the trading caravans that passed along the Camino Real and upon subsistence agriculture.

#### MEXICAN INTERLUDE

During the Mexican period, 1825-1846, the history of the county, and of New Mexico as a whole, was one of stagnation. Mexico, struggling to establish herself as a nation and plagued with crisis after crisis, was in no position to care for a far-flung, poor and troubled frontier. Hence, the people of Socorro County suffered a period of acute poverty. Trade along the Camino Real dwindled and the entire province declined. There was one saving grace. Beginning in 1821, a long thin line of wagons threaded their way across the treacherous plains, over the high passes, finally reaching Santa Fe after many weary miles out from the Missouri communities. The Santa Fe trail would play a major role in keeping the New Mexico communities alive until the whole area became subject to United States' control. Some of the merchandise moving from Missouri to Santa Fe was destined to be transshipped over the Camino Real to Mexico, and Socorro would benefit from this. The Mexican period can, therefore, be

characterized by the maintenance of the status quo in Socorro County. There was little growth in population or in economic wealth. The communities along the river remained much the same as in the late Spanish period, except for one major development. Sometime before the time of Mexican independence, the town of Socorro again appeared. In and among the ruins of that ancient Indian community, and its ruined church so long in disuse, stirrings of activity were again apparent.

A generalization, then, is in order. Socorro County, during the two and a half centuries of Spanish-Mexican rule, was poor and thinly populated. It was a beginning, however, and so many of the places we yet know date from this period.

#### ANGLO-AMERICAN ACTIVITY

The spectacular growth of Socorro County, and all of New Mexico for that matter, came with the occupation of the southwest by the Anglo-American. The Mexican war, 1846-1848, wrested half of the national territory away from Mexico and deposited it in the public domain of the United States. With the signing of the treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo ending the war, a flood of people crossed the plains. Some were headed for the gold fields in California, some came as traders to Santa Fe. There were ranchers, adventurers, health seekers, soldiers, and tourists. Many simply passed through, others stayed. They spread to all corners of the territory, and Socorro County got her share. They searched for wealth in land, in cattle, and in minerals. Very early it was determined that there were stores of precious minerals in many parts of New Mexico and the clamor for exploitation began. There was, however, one major block to this demand. The Apache menace still persisted, and until the vicious raids were contained, there could be no growth.

The result was a growing pressure on those in high places to bring in troops in sufficient quantity to stop the Apache. All across the southwest forts sprang up to accommodate the increasing soldiery. Eventually a ring of forts surrounded the Apache lands and thousands of trained infantry and cavalrymen stood poised against the Apache. Against this new force the Apache had no chance. The American army was not armed with lances and smooth-bore muskets as were the Spanish soldiers against whom the Apache were so successful. Now the Apache faced repeating rifles and pistols, and new military techniques. The end was inevitable. In this warfare Socorro County played a substantial role. Many of the mountains in Socorro County were old and well established Apache strongholds. The valley com-

munities in the country were constantly subjected to devastating raids by the Apache, much more so than any other communities in New Mexico. Several key forts and Indian agencies were established in Socorro County in an effort to control the situation. The Indian wars lasted from 1846, with the first American penetration into New Mexico, to the 1880's. The end came in 1886 when Geronimo and his few ragged followers surrendered to General Miles in Skeleton Canyon, Arizona. The final defeat of the Apache, set the stage for sudden and rapid growth of Socorro County.

With the elimination of the Apache menace, Socorro County became the center of political and economic life in New Mexico. This sudden growth was directly connected with mining and stockraising.

Settlers in and around Socorro County had long been aware that the mountain regions in the county were rich in mineral resources. While the Apache controlled the mountain fastness these riches remained locked in the earth. But when peace and tranquility returned after 1880, wealth-seekers unlocked the secrets hidden beneath the earth's surface. Prospectors roamed the hills sinking shafts in likely outcrops, exploring canyon walls, seeking that vein or ore body which resulted in the frenzied cry *gold!* (or silver). Behind the prospector came the miner and the metallurgist, and towns sprang up and the lonely mountain canyons became bustling and active communities.

In the Mogollon Mountains (in what is now Catron County) gold camps came into being which would prosper, and the thunder of their riches was heard throughout the southwest. At the town of Mogollon, built on the steep slopes of a sharp and rugged canyon, at Cooney, not far distant, and at other mining camps in these rugged mountains, wealth poured out into the county and lured the kind of elements traditionally associated with mining camps throughout the American west. Some were good, some evil, depending upon one's own point of view. There were gamblers, prostitutes, saloon keepers, highwaymen, land swindlers, and a host of others who sought to reap a rich harvest in camps gone crazy with gold or silver fever. Also came the shop keepers, blacksmiths, doctors, lawyers, clergymen, lawmen, sometimes no better than the highway men and swindlers, but often bent upon making permanent and civilized communities out of the "roaring camps." By the 1920's the impact of this area had run its course, the thunder faded, and the men, good and bad alike, passed into obscurity.

In the Magdalena Mountains, not far to the west

of the town of Socorro, a second spectacular mining boom occurred. Again it grew out of the peaceful conditions following 1880. On the western slopes of the Magdalenas prospectors opened rich deposits of lead, zinc, and silver ores. Nearby, perhaps a mile and a half south of the town of Magdalena, the town of Kelly grew and prospered. Ores from the mines in the mountains above Kelly were hauled by wagon to Magdalena where railroad facilities were available. Magdalena became the supply center for the mining camp and thus underwent tremendous growth and prosperity. Kelly, like the camps in the Mogollons, would disgorge its wealth throughout the county, attract its share of good and bad elements, and finally decline in the 1920's to become a ghost town.

There was other important mining activity in the county. On the mountain that rises directly west of the town of Socorro, locally bearing the name "M" mountain after the symbol carefully white-washed each year by freshmen at New Mexico Institute of Mining and Technology, rich silver deposits were found. These discoveries, plus the benefits from the other mining camps, would awaken the sleepy village of Socorro, and within a short time it became the most important single town in the county. Its location made it the general supply terminal for all of the county's mining camps. Located on the main line of the Santa Fe Railway, it had access to all necessary supplies for the mines, and to markets for the mineral products pouring out of Socorro County. With the discovery of silver in the nearby mountains, it also became a mining camp in its own right. During the peak of the mining boom in Socorro County, the town of Socorro not only became the most populous and most important in the county, but it was also the most populous town in New Mexico. In 1889 the importance of Socorro was attested to by the establishment of the New Mexico School of Mines to be located at this important mining center. Socorro, too, would suffer decline with the failure of ores, low metal prices and the general collapse of the mining industry in the county after 1920.

Mining was not limited to metals alone. Carthage, south and east of the town of Socorro, would become a major producer of coal; coal which supplied the mills and smelters with their necessary fuel requirements, coal used by the Santa Fe Railway to power their locomotives. But coal, too, temporarily passed from the scene as an important mining operation in the state and in the county. The failure of the mines, and the smelters, and the gradual con-

version from steam to internal combustion engines by the railroads made coal mining uneconomic.

#### RANCHING INDUSTRY BORN

While mining and the activities associated with mining were instrumental in causing rapid economic growth in the county, livestock raising also served as a stimulant. Again the rapid development of this industry was tied directly to the settlement of the Indian problem. The areas of the county subject to extensive grazing operations were located in regions previously controlled by the Apache. The best graze, and the areas open to exploitation, were in the western portion of the county. The lands on the western fringes of the Magdalenas, the grassy San Agustin Plains, the hills and valleys immediately surrounding the plains, and in the mountains of western Socorro County (Catron County), were subjected to a land rush. Although the numbers of people engaged in livestock production never rivaled the numbers engaged in mining, the area between the Rio Grande and what is now the Arizona line became a cattleman's empire. Ranches and homesteads sprang into existence, and cattle roamed the thousands of hills and valleys of Socorro County. The cowboy and the miner rubbed elbows in the towns and exchanged pleasantries, and unpleasanties. Cattle by the tens of thousands flowed from the ranges of Socorro County to feed the hungry millions in eastern cities.

Merchants in the small communities prospered, the railroad prospered, and Socorro County as a whole prospered from the cattle industry. Magdalena and the town of Socorro were the centers through which the cattle flowed, and from which ranch supplies found their way to the ranch headquarters. While much of the beef, hides, and other products associated with the cattle industry flowed into the larger United States market, there was a flourishing local market among the mining camps.

While mining and its related activities would decline very rapidly in the county after 1920, the livestock industry still remains important today. It is true that the cattle empire that once existed is no more than a shadow of its former size, but it has weathered the test of time. Several prime factors have been responsible for the decline of the range cattle industry. First, much of the country adaptable to cattle was tragically overgrazed, resulting in the destruction of the harvestable pasture areas. Second, the cost-price relationship put the squeeze on the small producer in the past 40 years, making the production of beef a low-profit, high-volume operation.

Also, the cost of land has, in the first half of the twentieth century, made it difficult to amass the capital necessary to enter the cattle business.

Mining and cattle were the prime economic factors in the growth of Socorro County, but it must be pointed out that agriculture played an important role. Whereas subsistence agriculture was the rule prior to the mining and cattle boom, commercial agriculture was made possible after the boom. Markets appeared, and prices were high enough for substantial profits. Agricultural activity was largely confined to the Rio Grande Valley. This, of course, because of the lack of necessary natural water supplies in other regions of the county.

#### TODAY—WHAT?

From 1880 to 1920, the pattern of development in Socorro County centered around mining and cattle, with agriculture emerging as a natural outgrowth of the other two. After 1920, the picture changed. Mining declined rapidly and eventually came to a complete standstill. Ore bodies failed, prices collapsed, and only for brief periods have the mines of Socorro County been opened for business in recent decades. While mining was drying up, so too was the cattle industry shrinking. With these events Socorro County entered into a period of depression from which the county has not yet recovered. The mining camps became ghost towns. Magdalena and Socorro found themselves faced with rapidly declining populations. Merchants closed their doors, businesses failed, and the great expectations of the late nineteenth century faded into memory. Agriculture returned to its subsistence level as its markets disappeared. What of Socorro County today? Throughout Socorro County, and Catron County, which was formed out of western Socorro County in 1921, the mines still exist as do the smelters and mills. But they are empty tunnels and deserted buildings, for there are almost no miners left and few mine operations. The cattle industry still persists, but only a fraction of the cattle once raised in the county still roam the hills and valleys. Agriculture, spurred on by the development of new crops and new techniques, is now a mixture of subsistence agriculture and commercial agriculture, the latter primarily concerned with cotton culture. Efforts have been made and are being made to stimulate economic growth in other areas with some minor success. Today Socorro County lies somewhere between the very shaky days of the Spanish period and the opulent days of the 1880's.

## NOTICE CONCERNING ABSTRACTS OF TECHNICAL PAPERS

Guidebooks in the past have contained abstracts of technical papers presented at the previous annual meeting. The last annual meeting of the New Mexico Geological Society was held May 15-18, 1963, simultaneously with the meeting of the Rocky Mountain Section of the Geological Society of America in Albuquerque, New Mexico. These abstracts will,

therefore, be published in the Geological Society of America Special Paper containing abstracts of all papers submitted to meetings with which the Geological Society of America was associated. The reader is referred to this forthcoming Special Paper for the technical program of the last New Mexico Geological Society meeting.



So geht's mit alten Redakteuren!