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THE SAN LUIS VALLEY—A LAND OF PARADOX

by

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Today it seems that any discussion of the valley history must begin with Alamosa, for its location is near the geographic center of the area and several accidents both happy and unhappy in the history of the valley have contributed to its prominence, the chief being the bankruptcy of the Rio Grande Railroad in 1878 and the founding of Adams State College in 1921. Other towns of the valley have more right to claim historical importance than Alamosa. La Loma, now an archaeological site, was once considered a possible site for the capitol of Colorado. In general it is agreed that San Luis is the oldest town in Colorado, but this claim can be seriously argued by the citizens of Antonito. With due respect for various historical arguments, Alamosa does represent an ideal base point from which to explore the area in all directions.

Alamosa is located in the center of one of the largest mountain basins in the world—a basin some one hundred miles long and sixty miles wide, enclosed on the east by the Sangre de Cristo Range and on the west by the La Garita, the San Juan, and the Conejos-Brazos Mountains. Alamosa is located in the center of miles of sand and chico which cannot be called desert despite appearances because there is so much water standing around. The ecology of the area has been radically changed by man over the last century. Once the land immediately north of Alamosa stretching to Saguache was excellent for the production of wheat. In 1867 when Otto Mears introduced wheat farming near Saguache, his two hundred acres of wheat averaged sixty bushels per acre. In 1890, when the Villa Grove branch of the narrow gauge was extended to Alamosa, several communities based upon wheat immediately blossomed along the route—Garrison, Mosca, and Moffat. Once the valley was a place of grain elevators and flour mills. Now much of the land to the north of Alamosa is wasteland covered with the growth that comes when land is abandoned in the valley. Apparently wheat farming was cut short by seepage from areas to the north and west, but this is a problem to which a final answer has not been given. It points to the fact that the area because of altitude and climate is marginal. Thus, the impact of man upon the area has been much greater than other locales. To date, changes wrought by man on the valley are primarily known through the tales of old timers.

The story is told that one morning in 1878, in an air of excitement, breakfast was served in the hotel at Garland City, some five miles east of present-day Ft. Garland. After breakfast the hotel was loaded on flatcars, moved, reassembled, and to its regular customers served supper that evening in what was to become Alamosa. Yet today when

one looks at Alamosa and about the valley there is a feeling of change—a newness in appearances which is in fact paradoxical, for much of the history of the San Luis Valley is lost deep in the shadows of centuries.

In the history of the valley are many broken threads, many mysteries. When the first settlers came into the valley between 1800-1860, here and there across the valley great arrastras were found. Arrastras were devices used by the Spanish for crushing ore. They were a mill-like device of stone; massive in proportions. Some of these arrastras were found close to ore sites such as the one found in the vicinity of Summitville. Others were found far out on the floor of the valley. How they were moved such great distances is an unanswered question. One was found on the stream immediately to the south of the Great Sand Dunes; thus, the stream today is called North Arrastras. This milling device and the placer gold to be found in the creek convinced early settlers that somewhere up the creek must be a mother lode of ore. In search of the old Spanish diggings, the towns of Placer and Uracca were founded. For a time these towns survived on the placer gold of the creek. But the ore sources to supply the arrastras have never been found.

These arrastras apparently date before the Indian uprisings in northern New Mexico in 1680. Among the Spanish-speaking people of northern New Mexico there is no myth or memory of these mining operations. At times it is speculated that they date from the 16th century—the first century of Spanish occupation in the New World. At times they have been connected with the legends revolving about the Seven Cities of Cibola. Although no written records exist, there is the opinion that colonists came into the area shortly after 1600 from the San Gabriel settlement—the predecessor of Santa Fe. Oral history holds that they explored the valley and its mountains, mined gold, and even traded with the Utes.

On the eastern slopes of the Sangre de Cristos there is a series of tunnels high on a mountainside marked by a Visigothic cross which indicates Spanish origin. The cross apparently marks a great mine, but exploration has never uncovered an ounce of ore. Between the time of these ore mills and the settlement of the valley in the 19th century there was a period in which the Ute Indians were masters of the area. Because they had dark complexions, the Utes were referred to by neighboring Indians as being “blue” and their valley as the “Land of The Blue Sky.” The valley is often called this by its residents, although now it has come to mean that the sun shines close to 365 days a year.

Perhaps this phase of valley history began in 1641 when

an expedition led by Governor Luis de Rosas captured eighty Utes and returned them to Santa Fe where they were forced to labor in workshops. Indian slavery is part of the valleys' history and records indicate that emancipation did not come to the Indians until some five years after the Emancipation Proclamation was put into effect. From their association with the Spanish the Utes learned horsemanship and by 1670 were ranging widely in all directions. Artifacts indicate that the Utes even traded with Indians of the Great Lakes region. The Moache band of Utes, which centered in the San Luis Valley, made many raids upon the Indian pueblos of northern New Mexico.

For a time the Ute problem was intensified by the fact that the Utes were allied with the Comanches of the Arkansas Valley who were brought into the sphere of French influence. For a time the valley was a kind of "no-man's-land" between New France and Mexico. Not too far from Hucifano, a battle was fought between the French, the Spanish, and their various Indian allies. The alliances of the Comanches with the French were to draw the attention of the Spanish away from the San Luis Valley to the Arkansas Valley; this involvement undoubtedly delayed the settlement of the area by at least a half century.

In the face of the Utes, the Spanish settlements spread north from Santa Fe. They centered about fortified plazas—miniature walled courts containing residences and quite often a chapel. Such a plaza in good repair dating from 1720 can be seen today at Sanctuario, near Chimayo in northern New Mexico.

The first Spanish fort of the valley was built on top of Cerro San Antonito (the round-topped mountain to the south of the valley), in 1768 to defend Ojo Caliente against Comanche raids. This fort was manned only for a summer and then abandoned. The fort is an indication that the Spanish settlements of northern New Mexico were gradually spreading north like the cells of a honeycomb—each cell being a small, self-sufficient, defensible, agricultural community.

With the acquisition of the Louisiana Purchase fur trappers began to follow in the footsteps of the French into the valley. The first to reach Santa Fe did so in 1739-1740. Among those to come from St. Louis was Kit Carson, who arrived at Taos, age 16, in 1826. With the coming of the American trappers the demand for alcoholic beverages prompted Simon Turley to build his famous Taos Lightening Mill on the Arroyo Hondo in 1831.

The turning point in the history of the valley came with the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. With this treaty the United States pledged to grant protection to the Spanish-speaking peoples in the territory acquired by conquest from Mexico. To meet this treaty promise, Ft. Massachusetts was founded in 1852 only to be abandoned and replaced by Ft. Garland in 1858. The United States Cavalry was to provide protection to settlers who flowed into the valley from Taos, Arroyo Hondo, and El Rito in the decade prior to the Civil War.

Ft. Garland was not only to play a role in the Indian wars, but also the Civil War and the Mormon wars. Ft. Garland was an important outpost in the Civil War at a

time when the South was attempting to transport gold and silver from western mining areas. It played a supporting role in the battle of Glorieta Pass, which has sometimes been called "The Gettysburg of the West."

The attractiveness of the San Luis Valley as a base of supply so enticed those who created the Territory of Colorado that the valley was taken out of the Territory of New Mexico and placed under the jurisdiction of Colorado on February 26, 1861. On a map this transfer of territory was quite easy, but in reality it never occurred. The ties of the valley to Santa Fe were too strong. The settlers who came into the valley after the Civil War were Anglos and made up several unique elements of the population. After World War I a significant number of Japanese settled in the valley. Despite the barriers of mountains which surround it, the valley is in fact quite cosmopolitan. For this reason first assumptions about the character of the valley and its people are often wrong. The San Luis Valley is a land of surprises and a land of paradox that remains little explored by historians, social scientists, and geoscientists.

In recent years the San Luis Valley Historical Society, founded in 1968, has been working to collect materials on the valley and to stimulate research in the area. The bibliography which follows first appeared in the quarterly of the Society in July, 1969.

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