



## ***La Ventana: A New Mexico Ghost Town Dependent on The Rio Puerco, Coal, and A Short-Lived Railroad***

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# LA VENTANA: A NEW MEXICO GHOST TOWN DEPENDENT ON THE RIO PUERCO, COAL, AND A SHORT-LIVED RAILROAD

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**ABSTRACT**—La Ventana is a ghost town located along the Rio Puerco, 21.7 km (13.5 mi) south of Cuba. Farming and related settlement by Hispanics probably began in the middle of the 19th century but is poorly documented. By 1910, the Rio Puerco eroded a deep arroyo and this made irrigated farming very difficult. Local coal mining during 1925–1932, coupled with the availability of water from the Rio Puerco, supported a town of 150–260 people (in the town and including the nearby population). Centered on the east bank of the Rio Puerco, La Ventana featured a 16-room hotel, general merchandise stores, restaurants, two churches, a school, and a post office. Essential to the coal mining operations was the construction of the 45-km (28-mi)-long Santa Fe, San Juan, and Northern Railroad. This spur line followed the Rio Salado and Rio Puerco, connecting La Ventana with the Santa Fe Northwestern Railroad in San Ysidro. Coal mining and the town thrived when coal demand was high during the late 1920s. But with dampened demand and lowered prices during the early part of Great Depression, coupled with the cost and difficulty of maintaining the railroad spur to the town due to flood-related erosion, coal mining became uneconomical. The railroad and major mining operations shut down by 1932, and not even its location along the road between San Ysidro and Cuba (State Road 44 and U.S. Route 550) could keep La Ventana alive.

## INTRODUCTION

At a point 21.7 km (13.5 mi) south of Cuba, a small cluster of buildings can be observed in the Rio Puerco Valley approximately 300 m (1,000 ft) west of U.S. Route 550. These buildings occupy the former business center of La Ventana. La Ventana is not one of New Mexico's well-known ghost towns, and many state residents probably associate the place name with the majestic sandstone arch near Grants (La Ventana Natural Arch). La Ventana (the town) has an interesting past that involves a transition from a sleepy agricultural/ranching village to a short-lived coal-mining town. This paper summarizes the history of La Ventana, gives a brief background on the stratigraphic framework of its coal mines, and shares photos and descriptions of some of the publicly accessible ruins that can be reached via a 6.5-km (4-mile)-long dirt road on the west side of the Rio Puerco.

## HISTORY

### Prior to Coal Mining

Like along the middle Rio Puerco approximately 30 km (20 mi) to the south (e.g., near Guadalupe and Cabezon), 19th-century Hispanics saw economic opportunities in farming the fertile soils on the Rio Puerco alluvium. The river maintains a relatively constant (but low-flow) discharge in this part of the valley and could support limited irrigated farming—an endeavor that perhaps was more feasible near the end of the Little Ice Age (middle 19th century; Mann, 2002). These farmers attempted settling and farming near La Ventana in the middle 19th century, and there is documentation of people living there in 1848 (Romero, 1984; Van Hart, 2013). Navajo raiders may have driven out these early settlers (Sherman and Sherman, 1975).

The area lay largely deserted until the Padilla family arrived in 1914 (Sherman and Sherman, 1975). By that time, the Rio Puerco had likely deepened and widened (based on interviews and downstream and upstream measurements of arroyo widths and depths; Bryan, 1928), and farming at La Ventana had ended prior to 1910 (Widdison, 1959). Florentino Padilla, who was raised in La Ventana and stayed after the town's demise, recounted herding sheep and climbing around the “window in the rock” located east of La Ventana (a feature which gave the town its name, since “ventana” means window in Spanish). The arch collapsed in 1919 (Sherman and Sherman, 1975).

### Coal Mining Period and Railroad

Coal mining boosted the town tremendously from the mid-1920s to the early 1930s. Coal seams in the area attracted the attention of eleven individuals from Albuquerque, and several coal mines were opened in the La Ventana area between 1923 and 1930. These were the San Juan (also known as Cleary), Wilkins, Sandoval, Anderson-Sackett, Kistler, and White Ash mines. Coal mining was conducted by underground methods. These and other details of the area's mining history are provided by Nickelson (1988).

Key to the economic viability of La Ventana's coal mining operations was the construction of a railroad that was spearheaded by the San Juan Coal and Coke Company. Organized in 1923, the railroad was originally called the Cuba Extension Railroad and then the Santa Fe Northern Railroad (Myrick, 1990). After the railroad was sold and reorganized in 1928, it was named the Santa Fe, San Juan, and Northern Railroad (SFSJN Railroad; Nickelson, 1988; Myrick, 1990). This spur line connected with the Santa Fe Northwestern Railroad at San Ysidro, whose main line led north to logging camps in the western Jemez Mountains and extended southeast to connect with the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe main line at

Bernalillo. The route of the SFSJN Railroad followed the main course of the Rio Salado for 34 km (21 mi) northwest of San Ysidro. Near what is now the eastern end of State Road 279 (the paved road from U.S. Route 550 to San Luis), the railroad headed northward over the low drainage divide into the Rio Puerco Valley. From there, the SFSJN Railroad followed the Rio Puerco Valley northward 11 km (7 mi) to La Ventana. It never reached Cuba and only extended 3 km (2 mi) north of the former town and depot of Tilden, which in turn was located 5 km (3 mi) north of La Ventana (Nickelson, 1988; Van Hart, 2013). During its peak period during 1928–1929, the railroad allowed delivery of 15 cars of coal a week to the Santa Fe Northwestern at San Ysidro (Myrick, 1990).

The railroad arrived in La Ventana in 1927 and a spur was constructed to the San Juan mine by the middle of 1929 (Van Hart, 2013; Nickelson, 1988). This allowed a high activity of coal mining and heralded prosperity for the town. Between 1927 and 1931, the town and local environs supported a population of 150–260. La Ventana featured a hotel, general merchandise stores, restaurants, a stage line, post office, two churches, and a school (Dane, 1936; Sherman and Sherman, 1975). The most well-known business was the El Nido Hotel, which was built around 1925 and had 16 rooms (Sherman and Sherman, 1975).

### End of Railroad and Coal Mining Decline

By the end of 1932, the combined effects of the Great Depression and costly upkeep of the railroad halted railroad traffic and terminated major coal mining operations at La Ventana (Nickelson, 1988; Myrick, 1990; Van Hart, 2013). Flooding in the spring of 1931 and in mid-1932 did heavy damage to the railroad, and there was no cash on hand for repairs. In general, upkeep of the railroad was costly due to the easily erodible, alluvial soils of the Rio Salado and Rio Puerco. Another costly factor was the many arroyo crossings, which likely were eroding in light of the regional arroyo incision documented between 1880 and 1930 (Bryan, 1928; Aby, 2017, this volume). In early 1933, the SFSJN Railroad applied to the Reconstruction Finance Corporation for loans worth \$278,824 but was rejected (Boatright, 1966). The railroad lay idle a few years and was dismantled in the late 1930s (Nickelson, 1988). Today, the railroad scar on the landscape can be readily traced on Google Earth imagery, and it makes a nice datum (for 1931, after which maintenance ended) to assess geomorphic activity such as drainage meander-loop growth and valley-bottom sheetflooding.

Major mining efforts ended in the early part of the Great Depression, as detailed below. Small mining efforts for coal that was mostly used locally continued until 1969 (Nickelson, 1988). In the mid-20th century, Florentino Padilla and his family were the only La Ventana residents, conducting limited coal mining and operating the El Nido Bar Lounge in what was formerly the El Nido Hotel (Sherman and Sherman, 1975; Nickelson, 1988). This building later served as a store (La Ventana Trading Post) but now is unoccupied.

## STRATIGRAPHY OF THE COALFIELD

Coal seams occur throughout the Menefee Formation but are particularly thick and abundant in its lower part (Cleary Coal Member). A single thick coal bed also lies just below the upper contact of the Menefee Formation (Dane, 1936; Shomaker et al., 1971; Nickelson, 1988). The Menefee Formation in this area consists of carbonaceous shale, gray shale, and tannish to white sandstone (Shomaker et al., 1971). These terrestrial strata represent deposition in swamp and fluvial paleoenvironments. The Menefee Formation is underlain by the Point Lookout Sandstone and is capped by the Cliff House Sandstone. It intertongues to the northeast with tabular, laterally extensive tongues of the Cliff House Sandstone, which are collectively called the La Ventana Tongue and deposited in a nearshore paleoenvironment, primarily as barrier island sands (Shomaker et al., 1971; Lucas et al., 1992). The age of these strata is approximately 80 Ma (Sealey and Lucas, 2019; Singer et al., 2023). A stagnation of the transgression of the Western Interior Seaway allowed relatively thick coal seams to develop in swamps located south-southwest (landward) of the sandy barrier islands flanking the Western Interior Seaway (Lucas et al., 1992; Van Hart, 2013).

### SAN JUAN (CLEARY) AND PEACOCK MINES

The largest coal mine near La Ventana is the San Juan mine (also known as Cleary mine, namesake of the Cleary Coal Member of the Menefee Formation; Beaumont et al., 1956) of the San Juan Coal and Coke Company. Immediately adjacent to this mine on the west lies the Peacock mine (Fig. 1).

Background information on both mines is summarized primarily from Dane (1936). The San Juan mine is located ~1.6 km (~1 mi) west-northwest of La Ventana in NW1/4SW1/4 section 31, T. 19 N., R. 1 W., New Mexico Principal Meridian and Base Line. It was developed between 1925 and 1927, during which 500 tons of coal were produced. A total of 58,500 tons were produced during the mine's heyday between 1928 and 1930. But with adverse economic conditions in 1931, production dropped to 8,000 tons (Dane, 1936; Shomaker et al., 1971), and only 362 tons were produced during the winter of 1932 (Nickelson, 1988).

The mine employed up to 35 men at a time during its peak operation (Nickelson, 1988). Rope haulage was used since the adit was inclined downward along the 3° NW stratal dip of the coal seam (the adit had a bearing of ~N 20° W). The coal seam averaged 2 m (6.0 to 6.5 ft) in thickness and was located in the lower-middle Menefee Formation, about 30 m (100 ft) above the top of the Point Lookout Sandstone (Fig. 1). Surface equipment included a boiler and hoist, tippie (structure for loading coal into train cars; Fig. 2), and screens. A spur railroad track (Fig. 3) connected the tippie with the main line of the SFSJN Railway in La Ventana. In early 1937, the coal seam caught fire. A complicated story of bureaucratic bungling in efforts to adequately seal the mine and repeated opening of tunnels and seals by private parties resulted in the fire continuing to burn until 1951 (Nickelson, 1988).



A series of mines called Peacock No. 1, 2, 3, and 4 lay within 550 m (1,800 ft) to the west of the San Juan mine (Fig. 1). These mines were small operations spearheaded by Nick Luciani from 1936 to 1940, after the San Jose mine closed. The efforts involved several illegal endeavors, including mining prior to receiving permits and trespassing on land belonging to the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). Two of the mines, Peacock 3 and 4, punched into the San Juan mine and rekindled its simmering coal fire. The Peacock mines closed for good in 1940 after producing about 13,000 tons of coal (Nickelson, 1988).

### VISITING LA VENTANA TODAY

Permission is needed to walk in the center of the former La Ventana business district near U.S. Route 550. But ghost town enthusiasts can view the former El Nido hotel, corresponding to the northeastern large building in Figure 1, from outside the fence. However, a narrow dirt road can be used to access ruins on the west side of the river. From the town-site, drive U.S. Route 550 north 3.5 miles and turn west on a graded road. About 80 m (280 ft) after crossing a straight, engineered and abandoned channel of the Rio Puerco (see Hobbs, this volume), turn left (south) on a narrower road. This dirt road travels southward back toward La Ventana, mainly on top of a Holocene terrace (the pre-1885 valley floor), occasionally getting disconcertingly close to the vertical edge of the Rio Puerco channel. At 3.8 miles, the narrow dirt road crosses

a low sandstone ridge (Point Lookout Sandstone), and then descends via a sharp switchback onto the valley floor alluvium ~0.6 mi northwest of La Ventana. At 0.6 mile past the ridge, an imposing stone wall can be seen on the north (Figs. 1 and 2). This wall is the remains of the San Juan Coal and Coke Company tippie (Fig. 2), where coal was loaded onto trains that connected to the SFSJN Railroad ~1.6 km (~1 mi) to the southwest (Figs. 1 and 3). The blackish dump of the San Juan lies ~24 m (~80 ft) above the base of the tippie (55 m [180 ft] horizontal distance to the north) and can be accessed by the inclined dirt road on the lower hillslope to the west.

One can walk onto the Point Lookout Sandstone ledge to the south of the tippie and view features related to the part of La Ventana west of the Rio Puerco (labeled “viewpoint” in Figure 1). Note the railroad grade (Figs. 1 and 3) raised about 0.5 m (~1.5–2 ft) above the valley floor and still has wooden ties and spikes (Fig. 4). Remnants of two stone-walled structures can be spotted from this ledge, the southern one being on BLM land and publicly accessible (Figs. 1 and 5). The presence of intricate glass and food-related cans suggest it was used as a residence. A rectangular wood frame, about 1.2–1.5 m (4–5 ft) long, was probably a door (Fig. 5).

A short walk northwestward from the viewpoint to just past the north-south fence (260 m [850 ft]) and then 150 m (500 ft) north brings you to the most interesting structure in the area: a large stone-walled building that had a cellar and a main floor (feature 2 on Fig. 1). The floor level can be deduced by the presence of slots in the stone wall that held joists (Fig. 6).

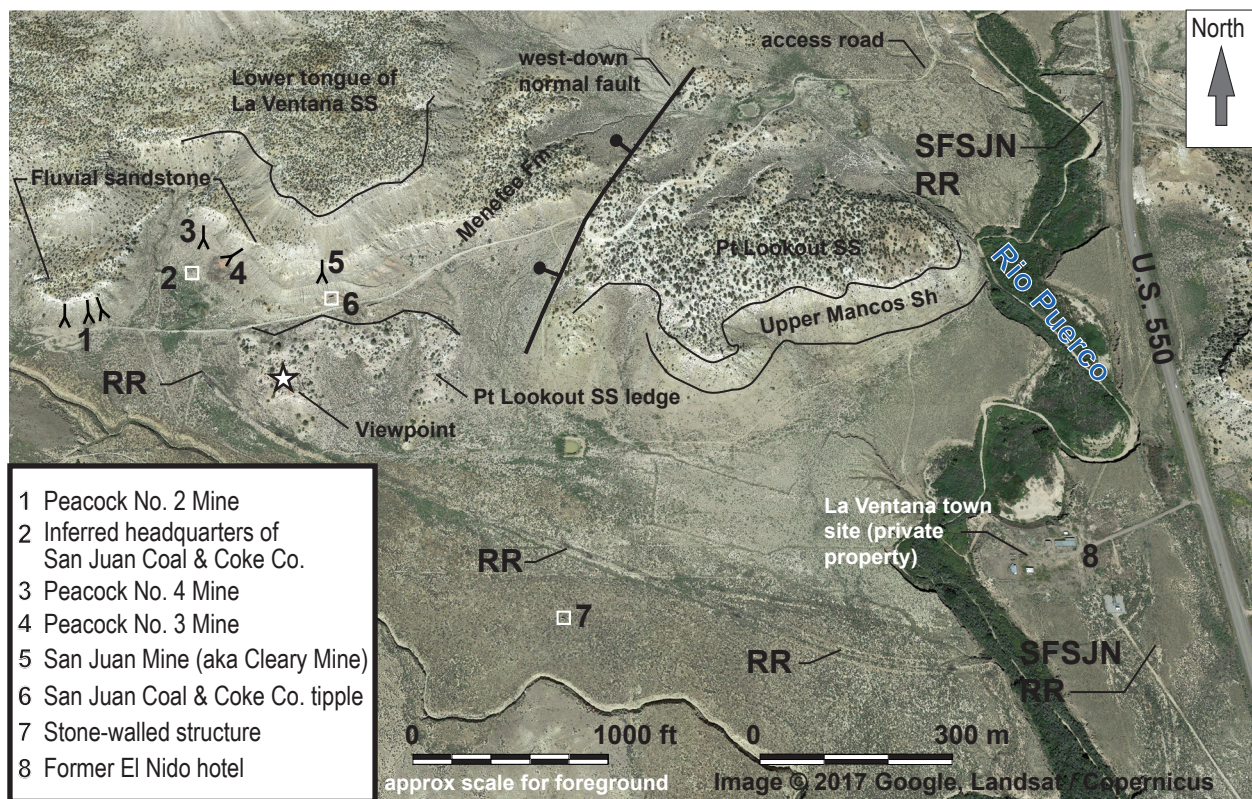


Figure 1. Annotated satellite imagery showing various geologic and historical features related to La Ventana. Numbered features are explained in lower left. SFSJN = Santa Fe, San Juan, and Northern Railroad grade. RR = spur line that led to the coal tippie of the San Juan Coal and Coke Co. Image is from Google Earth, © 2017 Landsat / Copernicus



The cellar was low-roofed and only had small windows; it may have been used as a storage room. Remnants of two large windows, facing northwest, are preserved on the main floor

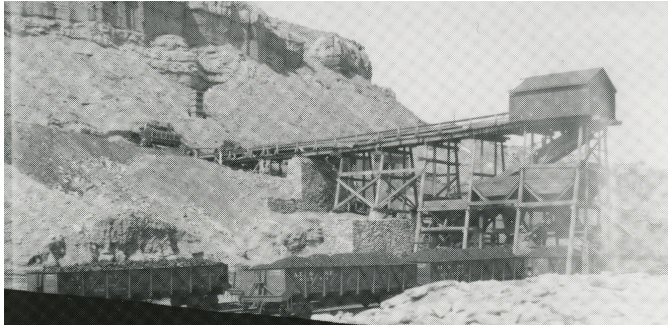


Figure 2. Historical (top) and modern (bottom) photographs of the tipple at the San Juan mine (location in Fig. 1). View is to NNE. The lower rock wall of the tipple foundation is an estimated 5–6 m (~15–20 ft) tall. Historical photograph taken by W.G. Pierce (per Dane, 1936).



Figure 3. Photo from the top of the Point Lookout Sandstone (“viewpoint” labeled in Figure 1) looking southeast to the grade of the railroad spur line (white arrows) that led southeastward from the San Juan Coal and Coke Company tipple to the SFSJN Railroad in La Ventana. The location of the southern stone-walled house (Fig. 5), which is on BLM land, is shown by the gray arrow. The yellow trees in the middle-ground denote the location of the Rio Puerco arroyo. The Sierra Nacimiento lies in the background.

(Fig. 6). Such windows and the relatively large dimensions of the building are not typical of structures housing the average farmer or miner. These observations combined with the structure’s proximity to the San Juan mine support the inference that the building likely served as the headquarters for the San Juan Coal and Coke Company.

Roads lead northwestward and westward to other coal mines, but the author has not visited them. Google Earth imagery suggests their remains are minimal. Locations and names of these mines and other mines east of La Ventana can be ascertained from perusal of Dane (1936) and Nickelson (1988).

## FINAL THOUGHTS

The existence of La Ventana as a town depended on three factors: water from the Rio Puerco, economic mining of coal from several seams in the Menefee Formation, and a railroad built to transport the coal (which, in turn, heavily influenced the economic factor). When the Rio Puerco arroyo deepened between 1886 and 1910, irrigated farming became increasingly difficult (Bryan, 1928; Widdison, 1959). Coal mining thrived when coal demand was high during the late 1920s. This mining and the availability of water from the Rio Puerco supported 150–260 people. But with dampened coal demand and lowered prices during the early Great Depression, along with the cost and difficulty of upkeeping the railroad spur to the town, coal mining became uneconomic, and not even La Ventana’s location along the busy U.S. Route 550 could keep the town alive.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Figure 4. Photograph of the railroad spur leading to the coal tipple, with some wooden ties remaining. The earthen foundation (bed) of the railroad is raised about 0.5 m (1.5–2 ft) and no gravel was used.





Figure 5. Southern stone-walled house on BLM land (see location in Figs. 1 and 3). Kevin Hobbs for scale. Inset depicts an inferred 4–5 ft-tall door frame. Food-storage cans (not pictured) are consistent with a residential use. The cans do not have soldered side seams and lack soldered hole and caps, supporting a post-1904 date (Sagstetter and Sagstetter, 1998).

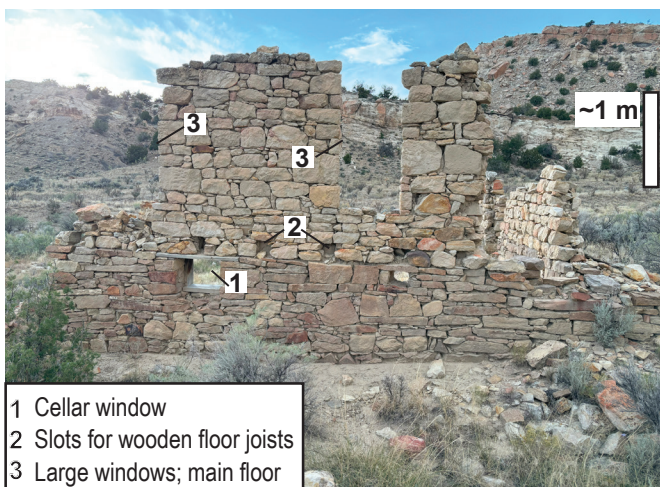


Figure 6. Stone-walled structure located 300 m (1,000 ft) west of the coal tipple (Feature “2” labeled in Fig. 1). View of photo is to the WNW. The structure is L-shaped, with the other end extending away from the viewer in the right-center of the photo, just right of the far-right wall. The structure had a cellar (a small cellar window is annotated [#1]) and a main floor. Slots for wooden joists, supporting the main floor, are seen (#2). Note the large, 1.5-m (5-ft)-long openings in the stone wall (#3), which are inferred to be windows because their bases are not flush with the floor. Having such elaborate windows and a large cellar, together with its proximity to the San Juan mine, supports the inference that this structure may have served as the headquarters of the San Juan Coal and Coke Company.

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Quaking aspen (Ts'íisbéii, *Populus tremuloides*) showing off in Cañoncito de las Lleguas (mile 5.5 of Day 2 Road Log).