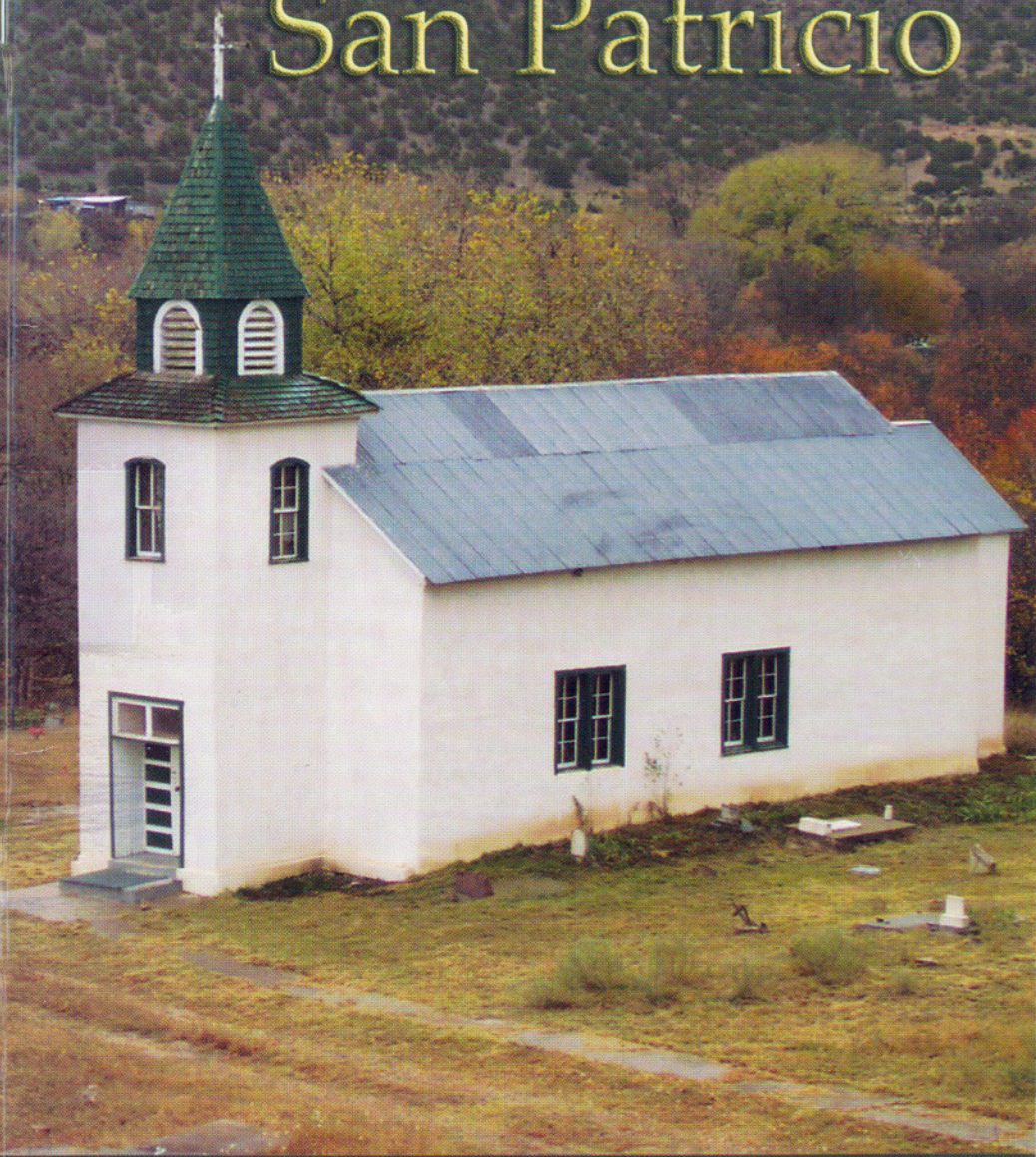
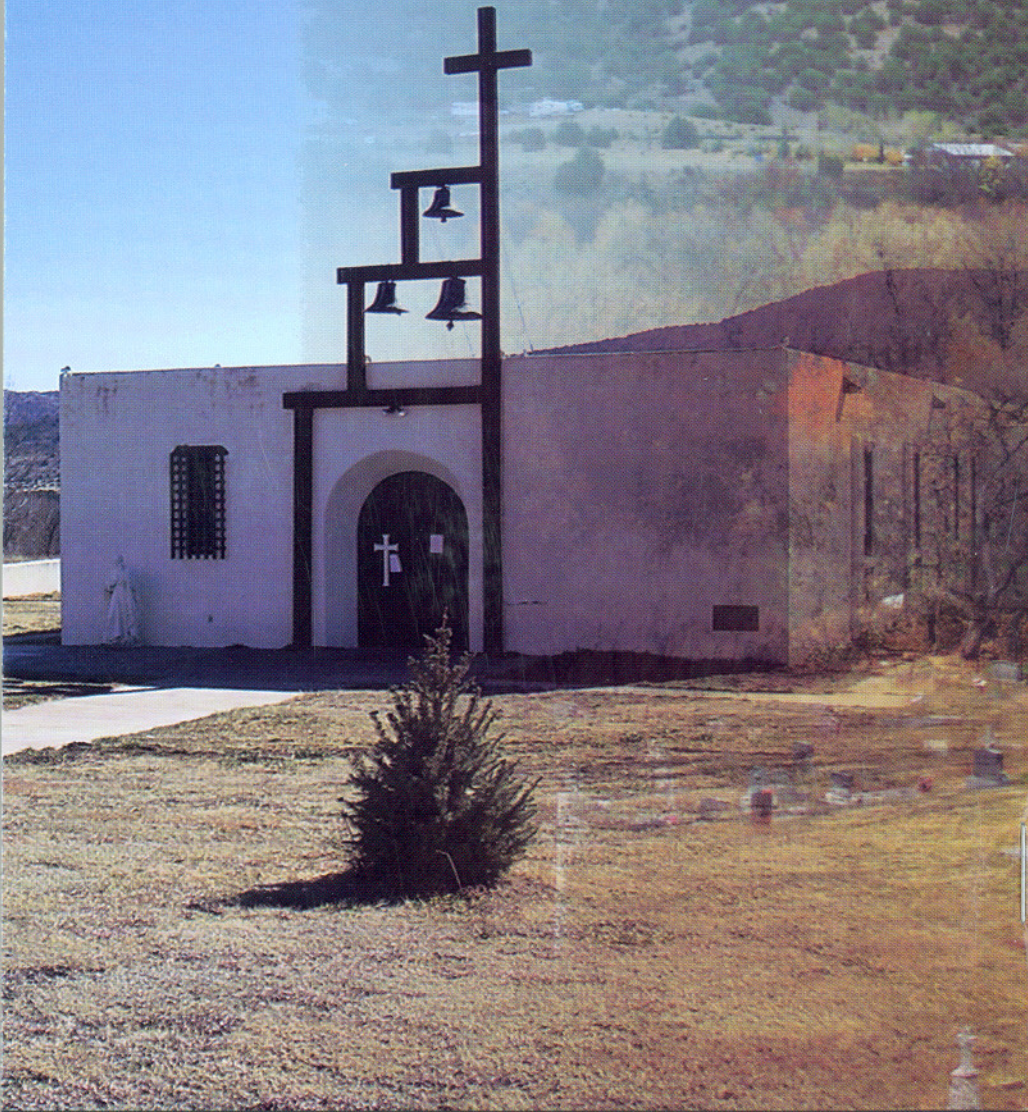


Hondo Valley Snapshots

San Patricio



Credits for Snapshot Publications:

The Federal Highway Administration and the New Mexico Department of Transportation funded this publication series to preserve a record of the culture of the Hondo Valley. Contributors to the publications include Daniel Wells, Rick Wessel, and Samantha Ruscavage-Barz (SWCA), Kirsten Campbell (Parson's Brinkerhoff), and Karen Van Citters (VanCitters Historic Preservation). Billy Crews (SWCA) designed the publications and contributed to the photography, and Jean Ballagh (SWCA) edited the text. Cameron Saffell (New Mexico Farm and Ranch Museum) served as the peer reviewer. New Mexico State University Library Archives and Special Collections generously contributed numerous historic photographs. The following individuals provided oral histories for the publications: Lee Bonnell, Paul and Nellie Ruth Jones, Lupe Kelly, Andreas Salas, Gladys Nosker, Patsy Sanchez, Mary Sedillo, Marjorie Titsworth Slayton, John Thomas, Joe Torrez, Amanda and Ignacio Torrez.

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SAN PATRICIO

INTRODUCTION

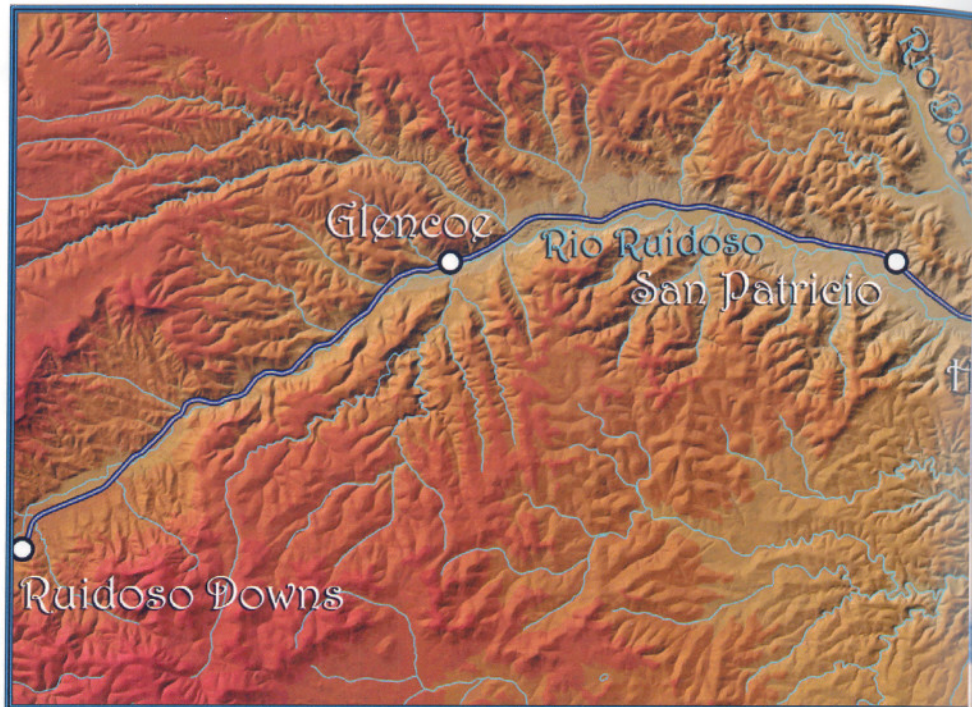
Welcome to the community of San Patricio, located in the middle of the picturesque Hondo Valley in southeastern New Mexico. San Patricio is situated amidst cottonwood and elm trees along the Rio Ruidoso just before it joins with the Rio Bonito. In the book *The Place Names of New Mexico*, it is stated that San Patricio began as Ruidoso, not to be confused with the modern day Ruidoso, which at that time was known as Dowlin's Mill. The original Hispanic settlers named the community for the creek that tumbles down the canyon, but changed the name after the Catholic church was built here in 1885. The church's priest at that time was Irish and the church and town came to be called San Patricio after the priest's patron saint, St. Patrick. To this day San Patricio maintains its native Hispanic and Catholic roots.



Historic Cabin in San Patricio

This book uses both archival and oral historical accounts to tell the stories of life in San Patricio from the beginnings of the community up to recent times. These stories of community lifeways are important, given that much of the history of the community is being lost as a result of changes in land use and land tenure, episodes of highway construction, and movement of the descendants of the original families out of the area. The narrative is organized around three general themes that capture various aspects of historic lifeways through time. The first theme is community settlement and population, which includes a discussion of community beginnings in the middle to late nineteenth century, the pattern of settlement distribution in the community as well as key places of interest, and changes in settlement distribution over time along with the factors influencing those changes. The second theme pertains to how families made a living by farming and ranching, and includes stories about the challenges they faced. The third theme is education, religion, and social life—the community school system and school-related activities, community churches and church-related activities, and activities such as rodeos and dances and the places where these activities were held.

The story of San Patricio is one of a series of six community histories for the Hondo Valley. The other communities covered are Glencoe, Picacho/Sunset/Riverside, Hondo, and Tinnie. A sixth publication covers the prehistory of the Hondo Valley. This series is produced by the New Mexico Department of Transportation (NMDOT) for the dual purpose of mitigating adverse effects to historic properties and providing a public benefit from the U.S. Highway 70 reconstruction project. US 70 is the major transportation route through the Hondo Valley, and changes to this route inadvertently affect the historic character of the communities that have existed along the road since the late 1800s. The series of community histories can help preserve the story of the historic character and lifestyle of the communities for future generations.



A General History of the Hondo Valley

The area referred to as the “Hondo Valley” in this publication series includes both the Rio Ruidoso and Rio Hondo valleys, as the Rio Ruidoso becomes the Rio Hondo after its confluence with the Rio Bonito at the community of Hondo. There are several distinct communities in the Valley, including Glencoe, San Patricio, Hondo, Tinnie, Picacho, and Sunset. While these communities share some similarities in their settlement history and natural environments, they also have unique histories. Most of the communities in the Hondo Valley were occupied for a number of years before they were given formal names, and many changed names several times before they came to have the names we know them by today.

The Hondo Valley has a long history of human use. The first documented settlements were built by the Jornada Mogollon people, who lived in round semi-subterranean pit houses. They built their villages between about A.D. 900 and 1450 on terraces overlooking the Rio Bonito and Rio Hondo and farmed in the valley bottoms. In historic times, parts of the Valley were occupied by Apache groups well into the nineteenth century. Apache people lived and farmed on a small scale in the valleys and hunted in the surrounding mountains. As Apaches acquired horses from Spanish and Mexican explorers and settlers in the 1600s and 1700s, they also staged raids on Mexican and Hispanic trade routes and farms in the surrounding lowlands. Hispanic farmers and traders fought back when attacked, but were unable to muster the military force necessary to pursue the attackers into the mountains. Thus, Apaches exercised military control over the surrounding lowlands throughout the 1700s and early 1800s, until the area became part of the United States through the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo with Mexico in 1848.

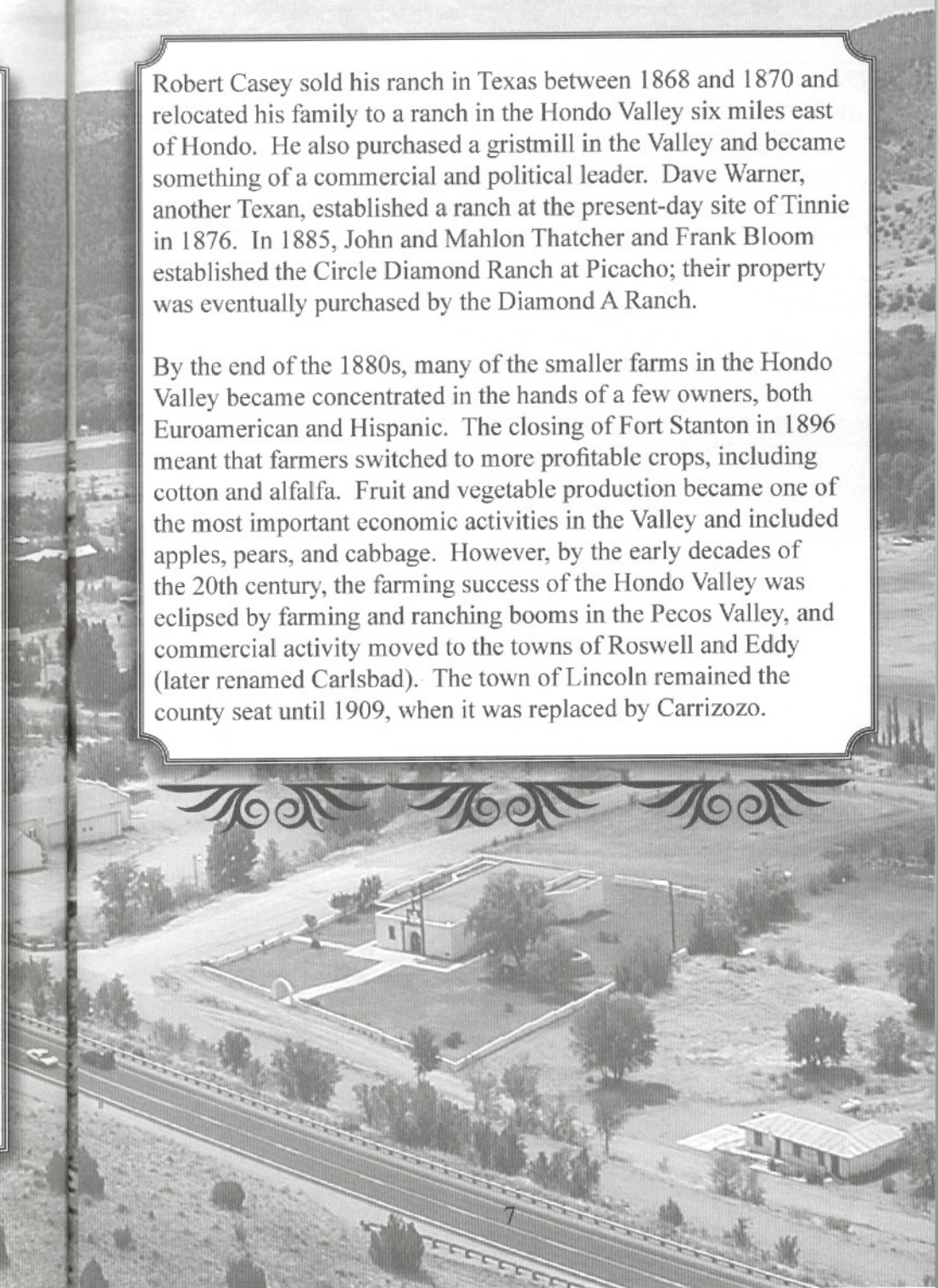
One of the first priorities of the Americans in the newly formed Territory of New Mexico was to build a series of forts to establish a military presence in the area. Fort Stanton was built adjacent to the Rio Bonito in 1855. One of the primary orders of the troops at Fort Stanton was to make the area safe for settlement. Not only did the fort provide protection against Apache raids, but it also served as the major market for agricultural goods for early settlers. With the protection of Fort Stanton, Hispanic and subsequent Euroamerican immigrants to the Hondo Valley prospered by farming and herding sheep, goats, and cattle.

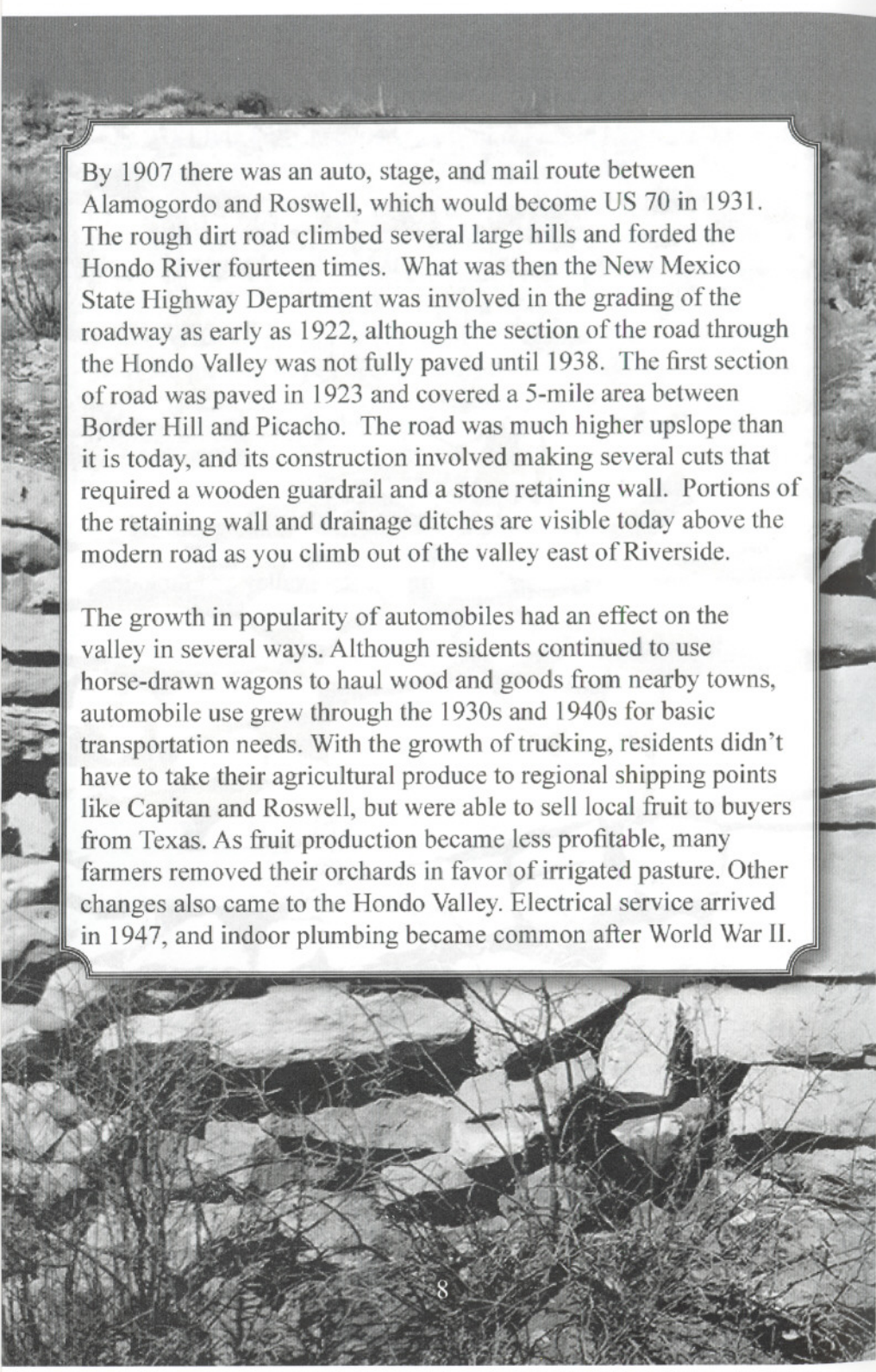
During the late 1850s and early 1860s, small Hispanic farming and ranching communities were established along the Rio Bonito and Rio Hondo. These early settlers most likely came from Rio Grande valley communities and Manzano Mountain villages. They constructed *acequias* (irrigation ditches), grew corn, wheat, and beans, and herded sheep and goats in the surrounding hills. Land was held in common, and property was held by right of possession. The United States passed the Homestead Act in 1862, which allowed settlers to have 160-acre lots of land as long as they improved the land by living and farming it for five years. Many of the Hispanic farmers who had already settled there claimed their land as homesteads. Euroamerican occupation of the southern Pecos Valley, to the east, began in earnest in the Hondo Valley during the 1860s, as ranchers from Texas like John Chisum moved in to utilize the area's rich grasslands. Lincoln County was established in 1869 and at that time included almost all of southeastern New Mexico.

Ranching became more prevalent during the 1870s, as Texas cattlemen discovered the lush valley grasslands and the high demand for beef at Fort Stanton. While most of the large cattle operations were located farther east of the Hondo Valley along the Pecos River, there were a few ranches in the Valley itself.

Robert Casey sold his ranch in Texas between 1868 and 1870 and relocated his family to a ranch in the Hondo Valley six miles east of Hondo. He also purchased a gristmill in the Valley and became something of a commercial and political leader. Dave Warner, another Texan, established a ranch at the present-day site of Tinnie in 1876. In 1885, John and Mahlon Thatcher and Frank Bloom established the Circle Diamond Ranch at Picacho; their property was eventually purchased by the Diamond A Ranch.

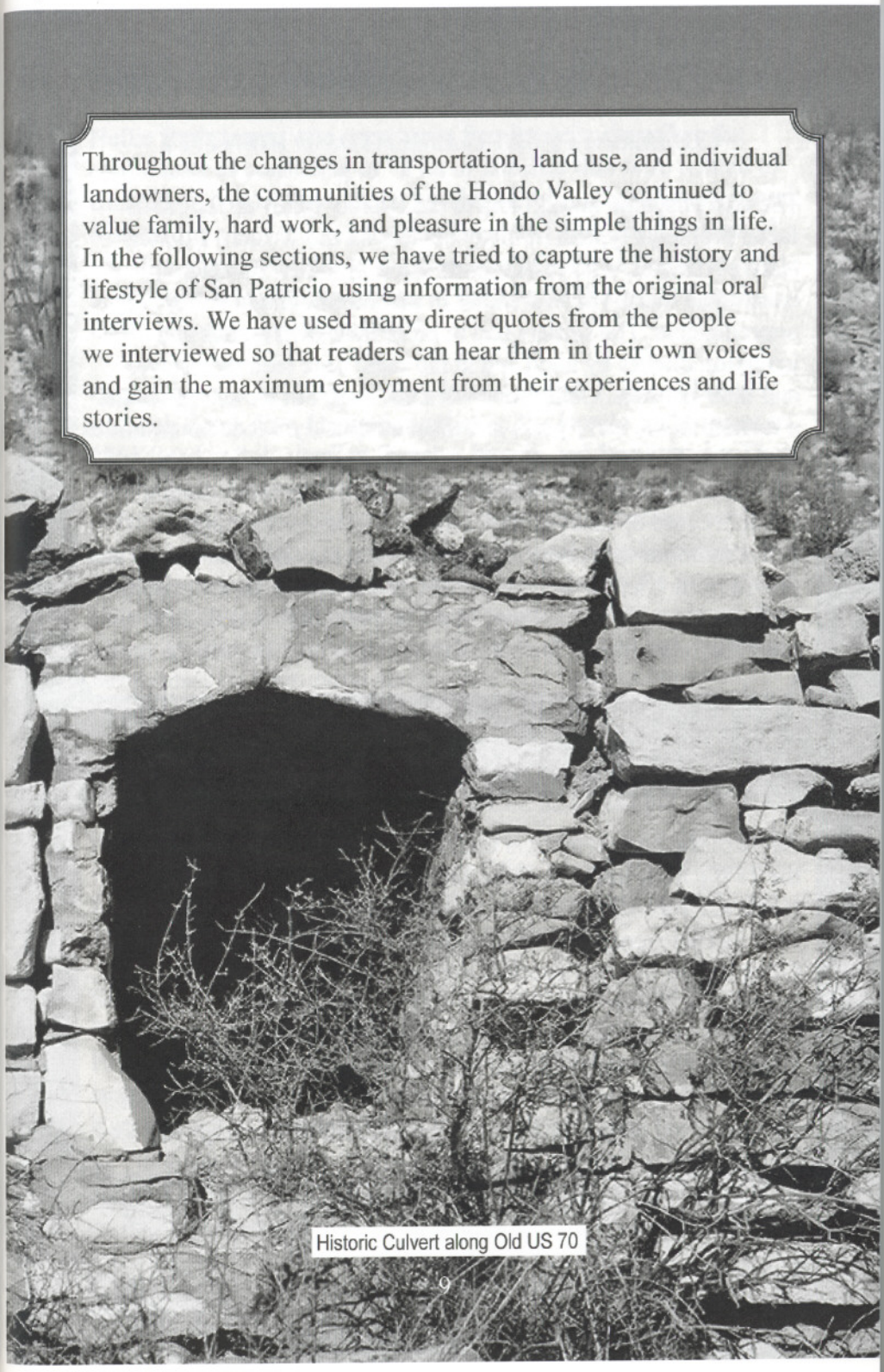
By the end of the 1880s, many of the smaller farms in the Hondo Valley became concentrated in the hands of a few owners, both Euroamerican and Hispanic. The closing of Fort Stanton in 1896 meant that farmers switched to more profitable crops, including cotton and alfalfa. Fruit and vegetable production became one of the most important economic activities in the Valley and included apples, pears, and cabbage. However, by the early decades of the 20th century, the farming success of the Hondo Valley was eclipsed by farming and ranching booms in the Pecos Valley, and commercial activity moved to the towns of Roswell and Eddy (later renamed Carlsbad). The town of Lincoln remained the county seat until 1909, when it was replaced by Carrizozo.





By 1907 there was an auto, stage, and mail route between Alamogordo and Roswell, which would become US 70 in 1931. The rough dirt road climbed several large hills and forded the Hondo River fourteen times. What was then the New Mexico State Highway Department was involved in the grading of the roadway as early as 1922, although the section of the road through the Hondo Valley was not fully paved until 1938. The first section of road was paved in 1923 and covered a 5-mile area between Border Hill and Picacho. The road was much higher upslope than it is today, and its construction involved making several cuts that required a wooden guardrail and a stone retaining wall. Portions of the retaining wall and drainage ditches are visible today above the modern road as you climb out of the valley east of Riverside.

The growth in popularity of automobiles had an effect on the valley in several ways. Although residents continued to use horse-drawn wagons to haul wood and goods from nearby towns, automobile use grew through the 1930s and 1940s for basic transportation needs. With the growth of trucking, residents didn't have to take their agricultural produce to regional shipping points like Capitan and Roswell, but were able to sell local fruit to buyers from Texas. As fruit production became less profitable, many farmers removed their orchards in favor of irrigated pasture. Other changes also came to the Hondo Valley. Electrical service arrived in 1947, and indoor plumbing became common after World War II.



Throughout the changes in transportation, land use, and individual landowners, the communities of the Hondo Valley continued to value family, hard work, and pleasure in the simple things in life. In the following sections, we have tried to capture the history and lifestyle of San Patricio using information from the original oral interviews. We have used many direct quotes from the people we interviewed so that readers can hear them in their own voices and gain the maximum enjoyment from their experiences and life stories.

Historic Culvert along Old US 70

COMMUNITY SETTLEMENT AND IDENTITY

The first Hispanic immigrants to the Hondo Valley in the 1850s faced problems typical of many settlers on the Western frontier. Native Apaches, who resented intrusion into their homeland, confronted them. Harsh weather in the intermountain valley was unpredictable. The settlers had to build their own homes and irrigation ditches by hand and at the same time feed themselves and their families. Conditions were not easy, but the settlers found a toehold in the early years and adapted quickly. Most communities in the Hondo Valley were built in a linear arrangement, with houses along the main road and the edges of the valley so that farmers could be close to their irrigated fields and avoid the periodic floods that come raging down the canyon. The school and the Catholic Church were important gathering places for people living at the various scattered farms and ranches. A decade or so after Hispanics came, Euroamericans began moving into the area.

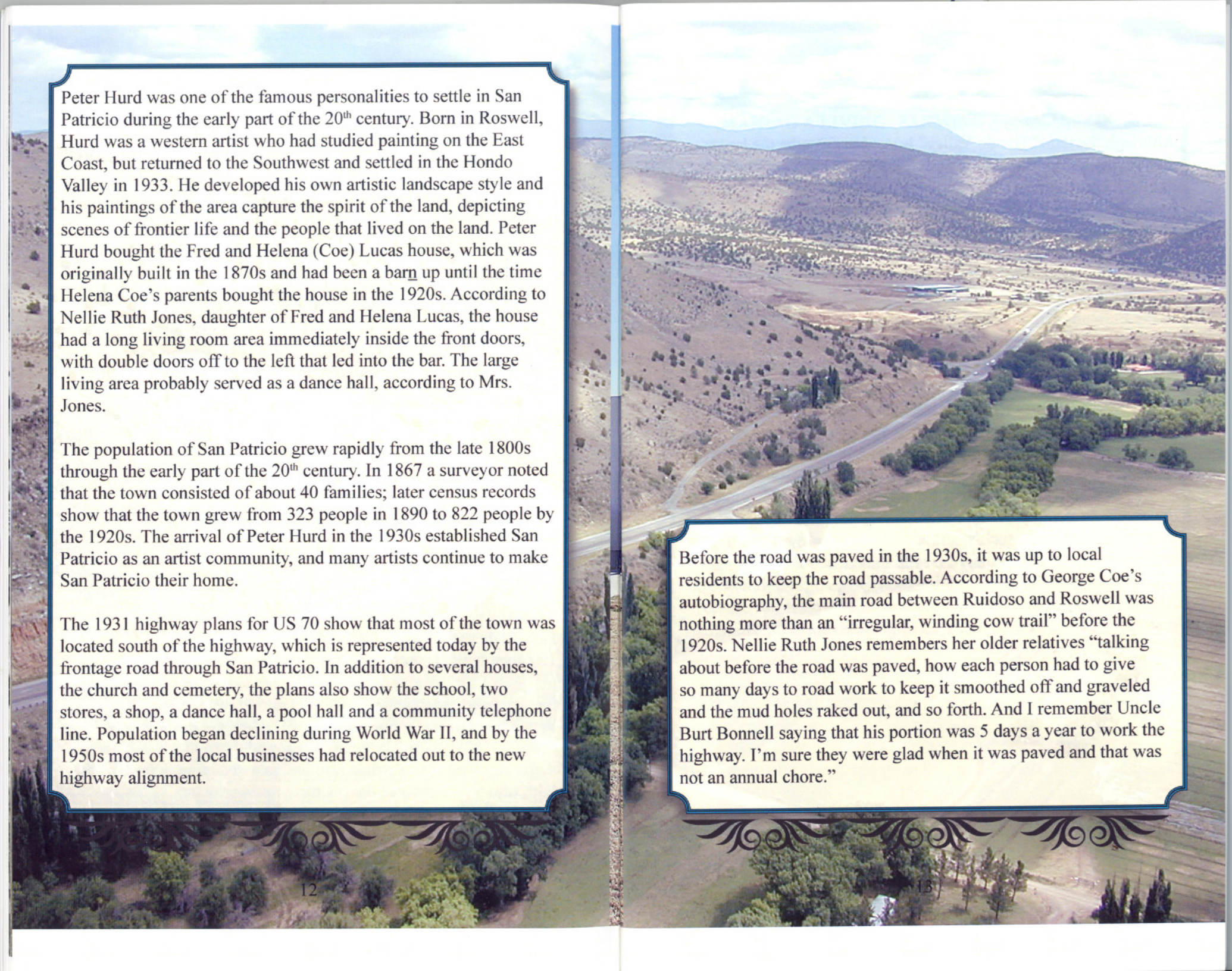
Some of the earliest settlers migrated to San Patricio during the 1870s from towns such as Socorro, Manzano and El Paso. Historical records tell us that Ramon Olguin, Felize Trujillo and Jose Sedillo were some of the earliest settlers in San Patricio. Other names of San Patricio's earliest settlers preserved on land patent claims from the area include Trujillo (1885), Ortaga (1910), Sanchez, Mendosa (1913), West (1920), Lucero (1921), Gallegos, Gutierrez, Herrera, Poe, Sedillo, and Solsberry. Based on several statements by descendents of the earliest settlers, some families lived on the land for several decades before applying for patents. Descendants of these early settlers still live in the area, and many of these families have become interconnected over the generations.

Nellie Ruth Jones, who grew up in San Patricio, describes the community as consisting of "a lot of families that were related to each other, two or three ways, you know, who'd have intermarried. Sisters [from one family] married brothers [from another family], and then somebody else was a cousin over here, so there was a connection between almost any of the people to another family there, or two or three families."

According to a 1927 oral history interview that J. Evetts Haley did with Frank Coe, Hispanic settlers in the Hondo Valley prior to 1861 lived in "*placitas*" at Picacho, Hondo and San Patricio. These early *placitas* were probably adobe family compounds enclosed for defensive purposes. Defense was a consideration because settlers were not necessarily on good terms with local Apache peoples and there are records of occasional skirmishes between the two groups, even after the establishment of Fort Stanton. As time went on, the Valley became safer and people were able to spread out, building farmhouses on their individual parcels. San Patricio, however, retained the *placita* layout, which is visible even in the present-day community.

In his book *Frontier Fighter*, George Coe describes the late 1800s houses in San Patricio as being "built for defense with thick adobe walls and portholes on top." Robery Utley's book *High Noon in Lincoln* describes San Patricio in the 1870s as made up of "some 15 adobe buildings scattered along a single street."

San Patricio saw its share of conflict during the Lincoln County War. The town was ransacked by J. J. Dolan and the Rio Grande Posse in 1878; several buildings were vandalized and horses were stolen or killed. San Patricio also has an association with Billy the Kid, who often attended dances there during the late 1870s.

An aerial photograph of a valley in San Patricio, New Mexico. A paved road winds through the landscape, which is a mix of dry, hilly terrain and greener fields. In the distance, a range of mountains is visible under a clear sky. The foreground shows some trees and a fence line.

Peter Hurd was one of the famous personalities to settle in San Patricio during the early part of the 20th century. Born in Roswell, Hurd was a western artist who had studied painting on the East Coast, but returned to the Southwest and settled in the Hondo Valley in 1933. He developed his own artistic landscape style and his paintings of the area capture the spirit of the land, depicting scenes of frontier life and the people that lived on the land. Peter Hurd bought the Fred and Helena (Coe) Lucas house, which was originally built in the 1870s and had been a barn up until the time Helena Coe's parents bought the house in the 1920s. According to Nellie Ruth Jones, daughter of Fred and Helena Lucas, the house had a long living room area immediately inside the front doors, with double doors off to the left that led into the bar. The large living area probably served as a dance hall, according to Mrs. Jones.

The population of San Patricio grew rapidly from the late 1800s through the early part of the 20th century. In 1867 a surveyor noted that the town consisted of about 40 families; later census records show that the town grew from 323 people in 1890 to 822 people by the 1920s. The arrival of Peter Hurd in the 1930s established San Patricio as an artist community, and many artists continue to make San Patricio their home.

The 1931 highway plans for US 70 show that most of the town was located south of the highway, which is represented today by the frontage road through San Patricio. In addition to several houses, the church and cemetery, the plans also show the school, two stores, a shop, a dance hall, a pool hall and a community telephone line. Population began declining during World War II, and by the 1950s most of the local businesses had relocated out to the new highway alignment.

Before the road was paved in the 1930s, it was up to local residents to keep the road passable. According to George Coe's autobiography, the main road between Ruidoso and Roswell was nothing more than an "irregular, winding cow trail" before the 1920s. Nellie Ruth Jones remembers her older relatives "talking about before the road was paved, how each person had to give so many days to road work to keep it smoothed off and graveled and the mud holes raked out, and so forth. And I remember Uncle Burt Bonnell saying that his portion was 5 days a year to work the highway. I'm sure they were glad when it was paved and that was not an annual chore."

Community Identity

Although the term “Hondo Valley” is used to describe the larger area along the Hondo and Ruidoso Rivers dotted with farm fields and fruit orchards, each community has a distinct identity that exists among the residents of those communities, even if clear community boundaries are not shown on a map. When asked what makes San Patricio distinctive from the other Hondo Valley communities Nellie Ruth Jones, who grew up in San Patricio, characterizes the community as Hispanic and Catholic compared to the Euroamerican, Protestant community of Glencoe. Joe Torrez stated that the communities were more clearly divided back in the days when each community had its own elementary school, but then “we all consolidated to one high school, and so it’s just the Valley now.”

Nellie Ruth Jones remembers a tradition particular to San Patricio:

“On Christmas morning, the children would all come to the door, knocking, and sing, ‘Christmas gift! Christmas gift!’ And we always had a supply of oranges, and would give them one orange each, and some nuts, or maybe some Christmas candy or something. That was a big tradition there [for] all the children who lived within walking distance. In fact some of them rode, because that was their big treat of the day, I think, was that orange”.



The Lucas House in San Patricio, ca 1930

MAKING A LIVING: FARMING AND RANCHING

Farming in the first half of the 20th century meant keeping up with a constant load of work, which was defined by the seasons. Spring meant time to plant, summer to tend crops and fall to harvest. Ranching also had its seasonal rounds as herders moved cattle and sheep to summer pastures, and back for winter. Almost all of the work on a family farm was done by hand; at the time there were not many mechanical tools to assist in plowing, harvesting or herding. It was not until around World War II that basic services like indoor plumbing and running water became available.

We can get an idea of what a typical farm would have been like from Nellie Ruth Jones as she talks about her family farm:

“It was just a usual day, you know. The children went to school. You milked your cows, you fed your chickens, if you had a pig, you slopped the pig. Of course in the spring and summer, gardens were worked. We didn’t get electricity until about ’47 through here; it was well after the war. And so you saw a lot of people hauling water, chopping wood, and most houses had a cistern where they collected water, the rain water, so that they could have good drinking water and not drink the water that came from the ditch, even though at that time it was fairly safe compared to what it is now...Most ranches had good working dogs. They depended on their dogs to help them, too...I know Uncle Wilbur [Coe] and Uncle Bert [Bonnell] nearly always had good cow dogs.”



Electricity was a luxury in the valley before service was extended around 1947. Some residents took advantage of whatever technology was available to have it. By the 1930s individual families might have used wind-powered generators or gas powered car engines to provide some light in the evening. Nellie Ruth Jones provides some detail: "One of my aunts had installed electrical wiring in the house and had a generator. [A]t night, at a certain time, she would turn on that generator and run it for about an hour, so that there were electric lights. Course, we continued after we moved there, but couldn't run it long--about an hour was the optimum time. But it was nice to have lights for a little while."

Farming has its own set of risks to contend with in the southwest. Weather in the region is highly variable, providing too little rain (drought), too much rain (floods), hail, and sudden cold. Some of the farmers in the Hondo Valley reacted with resignation to the whims of mother nature, others fought it tooth and nail, sometimes with surprising success. In 1941 and again in 1965, major floods ravaged the Valley impacting crops and property from Glencoe to Riverside. Cold weather was also a risk to crops. Paul Jones talks about the impact a late spring frost had on the apple crop one year:

"During one Easter they had a dance at Bonnell's, and everybody kept watching the thermometer, and when it got so cold Johnny [Thomas] left. And he had a sprayer that would fog out both sides, and his trees were pretty close together, and he went home about midnight and started spraying his trees. Well, water will freeze at 32. It's got to get 30 before it'll kill an apple, so his trees just looked like a solid sheet of ice. He was the only one who had any apples in the valley that year." Nellie Ruth Jones adds, "We all laughed about [how] we danced our crops away."

Orchards

Fruit orchards became a mainstay of the Hondo Valley economy from the late 1800s well into the middle of the 20th century. Apples were the primary orchard crop along with peaches, pears and cherries. Prior to truck transport, wagonloads of apples were hauled by horse to local markets. The growth of the orchard industry was closely tied to the growth of the trucking industry, which hauled large quantities of fruit to out-of-state markets.

As the market grew, some local producers organized into a cooperative by bringing all of their apples to a central storage place, such as the White Mountain Apple Shed in Hondo, where they could sell in bulk to truckers. Others continued selling produce in roadside stands.

In 1941, John Thomas bought a farm in San Patricio and planted apples. He sold the produce, along with cherry cider, at his roadside fruit stand because he says, "you couldn't make any money selling through the sheds. I tried that [the roadside fruit stand] and I'd get \$2.50 a bushel, you might get 80 cents a bushel at the shed." Mr. Thomas sold his farm after the 1965 flood washed out a lot of his trees.

According to Nellie Ruth Jones, Armando Chavez built a unique rock fruit stand and house in San Patricio. She describes it as "a house [built] into the edge of the hill of the highway. He'd dig out one room at a time...He had quite a house back in that hillside... and then he had his fruit stand out in front of it. I know there was no other cave house in the valley. They lived there several years."





One of the earliest acequias in the Hondo Valley was established in San Patricio

Acequias

Water was a key factor in the success of the San Patricio economy. Crop production would have been impossible without a reliable water supply, so one of the first activities of the earliest settlers would have been building an acequia. This early system would have been small and capable of watering only small parcels of land. Priority dates from the State Engineer's Office indicate that one of the earliest *acequias* in the Valley was established in San Patricio by 1867. Each of the farmers on the ditch had a "right" to irrigate for a specified amount of time during the irrigation season as well as a responsibility to help maintain the ditch.

Nellie Ruth Jones describes the main *acequia* in San Patricio and activities associated with it:

"It was called the Margarita Ditch. There were 18 ditch rights on that ditch. Different people acted as ditch boss, but they had a Spanish name- *mayordomo*. The ditch boss would set a date in the spring when everybody had to have a representative there who had a right, and clean the ditch from the beginning to the lower end of it. I always thought that was one of the nicest times in the Valley, because as you drive to Roswell you could see all along the two valleys, people out cleaning their ditches and the smoke trailing up in the air. And that was a big deal, you know. You shared a meal at noon. Sometimes that ditch took two or three days to clean.

Paul Jones had to do ditch maintenance and describes the work involved: "They'd rake all the weeds into the ditch, then burn them. Somebody'd do that, and then these other guys'd be way behind, cleaning the ditch – the mud and stuff out. They even let school out down there. They let the boys out to go clean the ditch. Dollar a day! I didn't think [the pay was that great], but I had to help clean, and I got the same pay."

Businesses

Each of the Hondo Valley communities had several businesses to serve local residents. From the turn of the century through World War II local businesses typically included a post office, a café and a general grocery or mercantile. San Patricio had a grocery store, a post office, a mercantile, a bar and a gas station. With the exception of the post office, none of these businesses survive today. San Patricio got its first post office in 1906, at which time mail came two times per week. By the 1950s, mail service was available six days per week.

According to Nellie Ruth Jones, Tom and Louise Babers ran a general mercantile store in a long, narrow building located on the highway above the hill from the White Cat Bar. The building also housed the post office. Mrs. Jones remembers the store as having “those big wheels of cheese, real good cheese they’d slice off, and the gas pump was one of those old ones with the glass cylinder in it, and you had to pump it up.” Ben and Trene Sanchez also had a little store in San Patricio for many years. Mrs. Jones says that “they actually had a lot better fresh produce than Tom and Louise Babers had at that bigger store.”



The first San Patricio School

EDUCATION, RELIGION, AND SOCIAL LIFE

Every community has its gathering places, where people come together to talk, learn, and worship, where they can share in the experience of living in a place and feel a common bond with their neighbors. In the Hondo Valley, these places tended to be centered around the school, the church, and the general stores that dot the communities.

School

The first formal school instruction in San Patricio occurred before 1880, since the earliest available school census records for Lincoln County start at 1880. The census records indicate that there were 70 students in the San Patricio School District in 1880 and 153 students in 1920. The San Patricio Elementary School had four rooms for grades one through eight. The elementary school closed in 1960 when the school district consolidated into the elementary school in Hondo. Nellie Ruth Jones attended eighth grade and also taught at the San Patricio Elementary School:

“The primary grades were fuller, because the little children came to school, and as they got older, even by eighth grade most of the boys had dropped out and were working at some trade. But the primary grades usually ran about 20 each. I know when I taught I had first [grade], and I had 26. But it was considered kind of a pre-first and first. They let 5-year olds come, even though it wasn’t legal. So I think that probably up through about the sixth grade they ran about 20 each. And seventh and eighth grade they started dropping off rapidly.”



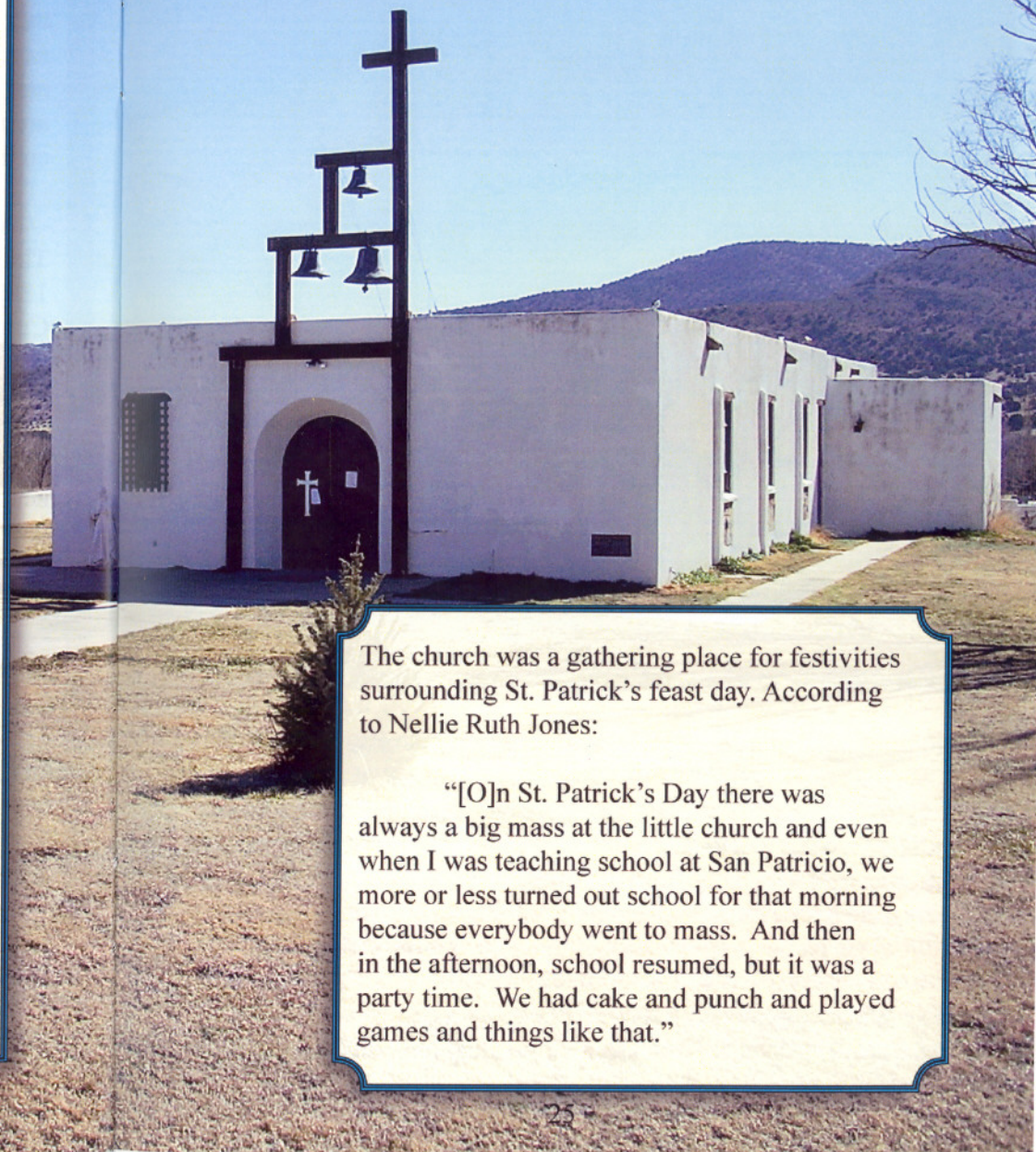
Churches

Like schools, in the early days churches served the community members that were within a short walking or riding distance. They were sometimes no more than a spare room located in a family home. There was not a permanent priest, and services were usually offered only when a traveling priest from larger towns passed through on a regular circuit. Later the community built a church to hold more people. According to archival records, the San Patricio Catholic Church was built in 1885 and named for the patron saint of the church's Irish priest. The community was also renamed San Patricio in honor of the new church. This church was abandoned in 1967 when the new Catholic church was built in San Patricio. The new church, St. Jude's, represented the consolidation of all the Catholic churches in the Valley, and was not without some community conflict as Joe Torrez relates:

“They built St. Jude’s and what they did is they consolidated all of the little community churches into that one. That’s when they had some rivalries because people just did not want to leave their little community churches. And there was a little bit of animosity because it was located in San Patricio. The Hondo people and Picacho people wanted it in Hondo and of course [others] wanted it further up. So it was just a matter of where it was and it took four or five years before the community started getting back together. It was the foresight of one of the priests and it worked out. You know there are always rivalries like that, and of course the communities got together and they built it.”

As part of the church consolidation, the bells from the San Patricio, Glencoe and Hondo Catholic churches were brought to St. Jude's, and these bells still hang outside the church representing the communities from which they came. The original San Patricio Church is still open to visitors.

St. Jude's Catholic Church, incorporating bells from the San Patricio, Glencoe, and Hondo Catholic Churches that preceded it.



The church was a gathering place for festivities surrounding St. Patrick's feast day. According to Nellie Ruth Jones:

“[O]n St. Patrick's Day there was always a big mass at the little church and even when I was teaching school at San Patricio, we more or less turned out school for that morning because everybody went to mass. And then in the afternoon, school resumed, but it was a party time. We had cake and punch and played games and things like that.”

Political Rallies

At one time, San Patricio was the largest voting precinct in Lincoln County. During election season politicians would visit San Patricio and hold a rally to gain votes. Throwing a big party was a good way to get votes since turnout for the party would be big and everyone would go home 'happy', hopefully remembering the good time they had as they considered who to vote for in the upcoming election.

The San Patricio Dance Hall, aka, the Gato Blanco Bar



Nellie Ruth Jones describes a typical rally in San Patricio:

“The Democrats would have a rally. It didn’t matter what party you belonged to, you went to that rally. And they always had a cake sale to raise funds so every woman brought a cake. Sometimes they had box suppers. And the politicians – ALL of the politicians came, not just the county ones, but the state ones. And they all came well armed with cases of liquor. The liquor flowed very freely! And at San Patricio, [the rally] was always held at the old Gato Blanco Bar.”

The Gato Blanco Bar

The local bar in San Patricio gained some notoriety over the years. Also referred to by its English name, The White Cat Bar, its reputation was alternatively that of a hangout of fighting and cussing ne’er-do-wells, or as a welcoming place where dances were held and people had a great time. The bar held many dances until it became a private home in the 1950s. Historic records indicate that John C. West built the bar in 1910, and people from all over the Valley patronized the bar and attended the weekly dances that were held there.

Mary Sedillo would travel from Sunset to socialize at the White Cat:

“The bar was just a small place, you know, about 20 by 20 feet. It was just a bar with the stools, and a mirror behind the bar. And then they had the dance hall, and I figure that was probably 40 by 60 feet. That was the main place to dance because everybody from Riverside up to Ruidoso used to come. And then when they opened the base [Holloman AFB, in the late 1940s], they used to come to that bar. The jail used to be there, and that was no bigger than 10 by 10 feet probably.”

John Thomas remembers the bar’s wilder clientele: “They use to have some wild parties there. And there [was always] a big fight. I didn’t enjoy those fights.” Ignacio Torrez also socialized at the bar: “Oooh! We used to go to the dance and the bar was just across the road, and well, we used to drink beer ‘til we...you know what it does.”

Rodeos, Chicken Pulls and Polo

It is no surprise that rodeos would be an important part of life in the Hondo Valley, given the farming and ranching economy that characterized the Valley communities throughout most of their histories. Rodeos were held locally as well as regionally, and riders from all over the western states participated in these regional events. Rodeos also served as an important source of additional income for many participants, especially during years when farms or herds were not productive. Nellie Ruth Jones says that “at one time they had rodeos in San Patricio; Johnny [Thomas] talks about being in a rodeo at San Patricio. So I think a lot of these communities had little ol’ rodeos, kind of like they have team roping events now.”

Besides rodeos, there were several other games that people in the valley played that involved horse riding, including chicken pulls and polo.

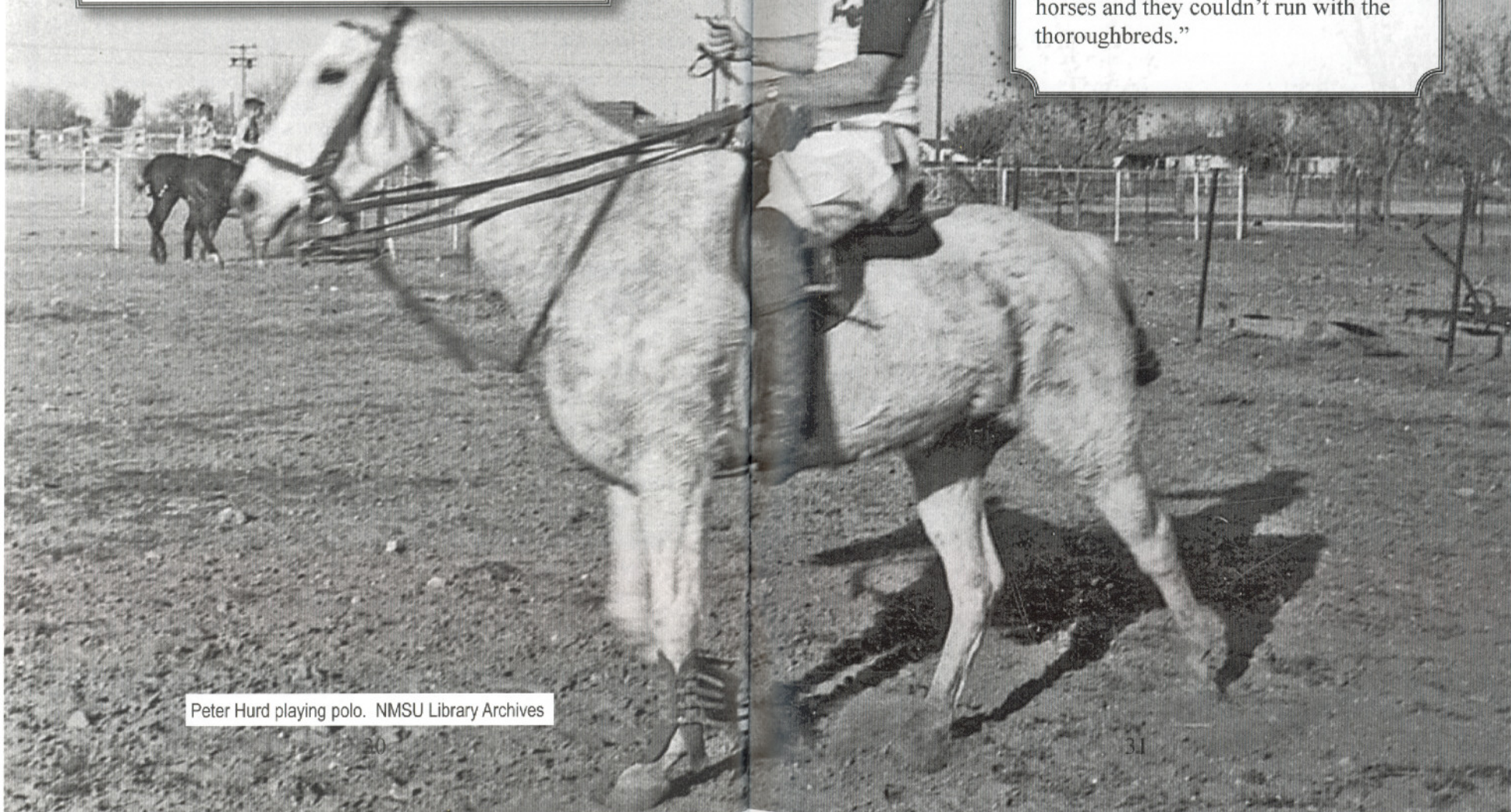
Ignacio Torrez remembers the chicken pulls that were part of the Fiesta de San Juan (June 24th) in the 1930s and 1940s: “They buried the rooster just sticking the head out you know, and the guys used to get on a horse and they used to give them a prize for whoever pulled the rooster out of the hole. And they started fighting, hitting each other while riding the horse. They thought it was a real, real thing, just like they do roping now.”

Polo was another activity that would bring the community together to relax and socialize. Polo games were held in a field on Peter Hurd’s property in San Patricio, and the polo team would sometimes play teams from as far away as Roswell and El Paso. Paul Jones was a frequent player at the weekly polo games:

“Some of us would get together and play [between locals] and then sometimes go down and play teams in El Paso, or they’d come up here and play, but mostly it was just playing with locals...Pete would invite a bunch of people [to watch] and he had a method there...he’d invite a bunch of people to these games, and then he’d throw a big party. That *mescal* really flowed. And he had that down in the gallery, and then they’d get to lookin’ at all the pictures. ‘Boy, I’d sure like to have that one,’ you know, and he sold a lot of them.”

John Thomas also played polo on Peter Hurd’s team and talks about not having the right kind of horse for the game:

“I always rode a quarter horse and you needed a third man horse playing polo. My horse would give out right quick...I never was too good, I never did care for it too much cause it knocked my horses out. Too much running, my horses were quarter horses and they couldn’t run with the thoroughbreds.”



Peter Hurd playing polo. NMSU Library Archives



WHY HISTORY IS IMPORTANT

History is important because it connects modern day people with the past. This publication uses historical records and recollections of what are now the elder members of the community to give the reader a sense of what it was like to live in San Patricio in the early and mid 20th century. The 20th century was witness to tremendous changes in America, and the people interviewed here were witnesses to economic depressions, world wars, the social revolutions of the 1960s, the rise of technology, and the global society that we as Americans are part of today. Although the Hondo Valley communities may seem placid and far removed from these broad movements, the reach of these developments often had concrete effects on the lives of local residents. Improvements like the paving and rerouting of US 70 permitted faster and easier transportation to other parts of the state and, by extension, the rest of the country. New ideas, products, and people followed the road and contributed to the makeup of the valley as it exists today.

Through all the changes of the last century, the residents of the Hondo Valley communities retained the values that they inherited from their forefathers and foremothers and passed them down to their children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. Although those values are ingrained and self-evident for our interviewees, this publication preserves the record of them for all of us. This is the common wisdom of people who lived on and depended on the land. Their example helps us understand what it took to survive and be happy without many of the common conveniences of the modern day such as electricity or cars. With the record of their lives committed to this history, we hold a summary of their lives to read, consider, and learn from.

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