

## CHANGING LIFE-WAYS IN THE HONDO VALLEY

The area referred to as the "Hondo Valley" includes both the Rio Ruidoso and Rio Hondo valleys. The Rio Ruidoso becomes the Rio Hondo after its confluence with the Rio Bonito at the community of Hondo. Archaeological evidence shows that people have lived in the vicinity of the Hondo Valley for 12,000 years. Over this time people made a living in many different ways, but, for the most part, people subsisted by hunting wild animals, gathering wild plants, cultivating domesticated plants, and, in the historical period, raising livestock. The way of life practiced by a group of people was largely conditioned by their environment, the technology available to them, and their interactions with other groups of people.

### **Pre-Contact Native American Occupants of the Hondo Valley**

#### *Paleoindians*

During the Paleoindian period (11,000 B.C. – 6000 B.C.) people lived in small groups of highly mobile hunter-gatherers that traveled across the landscape following herds of large game animals rather than settling down in villages. Archaeological evidence of Paleoindians mostly consists of camp sites, hunting sites, and isolated discoveries of the period's characteristic projectile points.

These distinctive Paleoindian projectile points have been recovered in association with the remains of now-extinct big-game animals, such as mastodon, camel, and several bison species. While the specialized big-game hunting strategies of Paleoindians are often emphasized, plants were also important dietary staples. However, evidence of plant use is difficult to recognize archaeologically, especially in sites of such antiquity. Paleoindians probably pursued relatively diverse subsistence strategies that included the use of wild plant resources and hunting small game, as well as the hunting of big-game animals.

Sites dating to the Paleoindian period have not yet been found in the Hondo Valley; however, Paleoindian people are known to have lived in the vicinity of the valley and would have been familiar with the valley and its plants and animals.

#### *Archaic Period*

As the glaciers receded and the climate of North America became warmer and dryer around 10,000 years ago, there was a widespread extinction of the big-game animals that had been hunted by Paleoindian groups. In response to these changes in climate and the type of animals available for hunting, the peoples of the Southwest gradually developed new life-ways. People practiced these life-ways for about 6000 years during what archaeologists call the Archaic period (6000 B.C. – A.D. 600). During Archaic times, people traveled in small groups composed of individuals and families who were related to each other. These small groups spent much of the year moving among a series of places, where certain foods were seasonally abundant and where water was available. The need to be close to water limited the places where people could locate their camps. When they found a desirable spot close to water they would sometimes settle there for several weeks or months, and build structures and deep storage pits. Sometimes smaller parties would temporarily leave such residential camps to hunt and gather plants in more distant areas.

During the Archaic period, people both hunted and gathered wild plants. Animals that made up an important part of the diet include deer, cottontails, and jackrabbits. People also could have fished in the Rio Hondo and Rio Ruidoso. Plants gathered included nuts, such as walnut and piñon, grasses, sunflower, and cholla and prickly pear cacti. Corn became a part of the Archaic period diet in the Sierra Blanca region prior to 1000 B.C., and there is evidence for maize in the Hondo Valley as early as 400 B.C. Small-scale agriculture would have been integrated into existing hunting-gathering subsistence practices. In

addition to hunting tools, Archaic people also had tools for grinding grains, seeds and nuts, including the mano and metate and mortar and pestle. Knives and scrapers were used for both plant and animal processing. Baskets were important for carrying and storing food items.

### *Archaic Period Sites in the Hondo Valley*

The Sunset Shelter Site is located along the Rio Hondo, east and downstream of the juncture of the Rio Bonito and the Rio Ruidoso. The site was inhabited from the Late Archaic period (1800 B.C. – A.D. 200) through to historic times, and consists of two small caves and two small rockshelters. It sits in a semidesert grassland zone characterized by a mixed vegetation community of native xeric shrubs, such as cholla, mesquite and range grasses, and riparian woodland trees along the river, such as cottonwood, willow, poplar and juniper. The people who lived there collected wild plants such as goosefoot, purslane, Mormon tea, yucca, grasses, sagebrush, and walnuts. Although people have been using the Sunset Shelter Site for thousands of years, archaeologists found relatively few artifacts, suggesting that people used this location for very short periods of time. However, the presence of a metate fragment found near one of firepits indicates that food preparation occurred there. There is also evidence that the site occupants hunted cottontails and jackrabbits.

The Sunset Archaic Site, also located in the semidesert grassland zone near the community of Sunset, was occupied toward the end of the Archaic period sometime between A.D. 140 and 239. This site has several bell-shaped storage pits and hearths, and was used as a seasonal camp during the spring and fall months. The people living at this site gathered wild plants and also did some small-scale farming of both corn and beans. Among the wild plants that they collected were globemallow, cacti, goosefoot, tansy mustard, piñon nuts, squawberry, and dropseed grass. Archaeologists recovered mammal bones and teeth from the site indicating that people hunted cottontails, jackrabbits, deer, and antelope.

Three additional Archaic sites in the Hondo Valley were excavated as part of the recent US 70 road improvement project. These sites have not been named; instead they are referred to by their site numbers (LA 129573, LA 139944, and LA 5377). LA 129573 is located between Hondo and Tinnie and dates to sometime between A.D. 10 and 650. Archaeologists have inferred that this site is a residential base camp because it contains a possible pit house, several basin- and bell-shaped storage pits, roasting pits, and hearths. Some of these features occur in discrete clusters, which suggests use by different family groups. The occupants of this site also practiced a mixed strategy of hunting, gathering, and horticulture to obtain subsistence resources. In addition to corn, people also grew cotton, which would have been used to make blankets, twine, clothing, and other textiles.

The other two recently excavated sites are located near the community of Glencoe in the conifer woodland zone. This environmental zone occurs between Hondo and Ruidoso and is characterized by a mix of piñon-juniper woodland and grassland, with scattered yucca and prickly pear. A riparian community including cottonwood and willow is present along the river. Sites in this zone range from 5900 to 6000 feet in elevation. As with the other sites discussed above, the occupants of both of these sites practiced hunting, gathering and gardening. LA 139944 dates sometime between 400 B.C. and A.D. 130, and was used as a residential base camp between the summer and fall; this site has six storage pits, three roasting pits, and three hearths. LA 5377, dating sometime between approximately 200 B.C. to A.D. 200, was also used as a residential base camp, but it was used annually for a longer period of time that spanned spring, summer, and fall; this site has three possible pit houses and several storage pits and hearths. Previous investigations also indicated that this site was later occupied by the Jornada Mogollon (see below).

## *Jornada Mogollon*

The appearance and spread of pottery in the archaeological record marks the beginning of the Jornada Mogollon culture, which starts around A.D. 250–500 and extends up until about A.D. 1400–1450. Early in this period people began to use the bow and arrow. The acceptance of the bow and arrow required that projectile tips, whether made of stone, bone, antler, or wood, be smaller than before and attach to arrow shafts in a distinctive way. The size, shape, and weight necessary for these tipped arrows resulted in simultaneous changes in technological production and even in choice of raw stone materials. As corn became a more important part of the diet, subsistence practices shifted toward plant cultivation and groups tended to become more sedentary, as evidenced by the fact that people built more substantial pit houses. Population size in the Hondo Valley increased as more people settled near the Rio Ruidoso and Rio Hondo.

There appears to be some overlap in subsistence and settlement practices between Late Archaic and Jornada Mogollon cultures in the Hondo Valley, and it is likely that over time the Late Archaic culture evolved into the Jornada culture. Food resources for Jornada groups in the Hondo Valley included a mix of wild plants and crops, such as corn and beans. Cotton was also grown by the Jornada and used to make textiles. Jornada groups used a mixed subsistence strategy of farming and wild plant gathering supplemented by hunting that was similar to that used by Archaic groups in the Hondo Valley. Similarities in Archaic and Jornada grinding tools indicate these cultures had comparable food processing strategies. Furthermore, the Jornada grinding tools do not resemble tools typical of full-time farming groups. The Jornada Mogollon also hunted and their diet included cottontails, jackrabbits, deer, and flying squirrel. These animals were an important food resource for the Jornada, much as they were for the Late Archaic people.

As with the Late Archaic groups, Jornada people would have moved between semisedentary residential base camps and multiple seasonal or special-use camp sites. Archaeological sites with pit structures are thought to represent longer periods of occupation because the labor investment required to build a structure would not have been practical if people were planning to use the place for only a short period of time, such as a few days or weeks. Similar activities were carried out at all of the sites containing structures including storage, plant processing, and hunting.

Although people previously used baskets and storage containers made out of animal products, the addition of ceramics to the Jornada Mogollon culture represents the use of a new storage technology that was both portable and durable. Items could be easily transported in smaller ceramic containers, while larger ceramic jars were well-suited to storing liquids. It is also likely that new methods of food preparation accompanied the introduction of ceramics. As a result, it is also likely that nutrition and health improved.

### *Jornada Sites in the Hondo Valley*

The Bonnell Site, located in Glencoe, is the largest Jornada Mogollon site in the Hondo Valley. There were four separate occupations of this site sometime between A.D. 1100–1200. The Bonnell Site includes four small trash mounds and 26 closely packed, square structures, which were typically set into shallow pits and had plastered floors and central hearths. Several of the structures had four large interior support posts, and two of the structures incorporated some stone in their walls, including both rough cobbles and upright slabs. Two of the structures were very large, and could have been used for community gatherings.

Four additional Jornada sites in the Hondo Valley (LA 116531, LA 139419, LA 139420, and LA 138800) were excavated as part of the recent US 70 road improvement project. All of these sites are located in the Great Basin Conifer Woodland zone between Glencoe and Ruidoso Downs. The pit houses at these sites

lack the formal construction features found at the Bonnell Site, such as prepared floors, plastered walls and benches, suggesting people lived at the sites for short periods of time. Evidence from these four sites indicates that people were both gathering wild plants and growing crops. At most of the sites people collected similar wild plants, including yucca, and chenopodium or amaranthus-type greens. Corn is most abundant at LA 116531, a habitation site dating sometime between A.D. 600 and 1000. Evidence for bean cultivation is found at LA 139420, the earliest of the four sites, which was most intensively occupied sometime between A.D. 340 and 710. Cotton is present at LA 138800, which dates to sometime between A.D. 450 and 1300, indicating cultivation of non-food plants in addition to food crops. Artifact evidence from LA 139419, a site that was reused multiple times between A.D. 400 and 700, reflects a range of subsistence practices. At LA 139419 people hunted, made tools, and processed domesticated and wild plants, including piñon nuts, walnuts, and grass seeds. Several unique items also were found at LA 139419, including shell fragments, beads, and a bone gaming piece. The mixed subsistence strategy of farming and wild plant gathering used by Jornada groups is similar to that used by Late Archaic groups in the Hondo Valley.

It is not known why evidence of the Jornada Mogollon fades from the archaeological record around A.D. 1500 or where descendants of the Jornada Mogollon eventually settled; some descendants may have stayed, while others may have joined the ancestors of other groups who currently inhabit the area we call New Mexico today.

### **Historic Native American Occupants of the Hondo Valley**

From the mid-1400s to the mid-1800s, the Hondo Valley was primarily occupied by the Mescalero Apache. Before Euroamerican settlement, the Mescalero Apache were hunter-gatherers who lived off of wild plants and animals from the deserts, plains, mountains, and river valleys of southeastern New Mexico. They hunted bison, deer, antelope, and also smaller animals like cottontails, jackrabbits and prairie dogs. Equally as important to their survival were plants, which may have represented up to 50 percent of their food. Plants collected include mescal, mesquite, piñon nuts, acorns, datil, sotol, cactus fruit, grass seeds, tubers, and greens. Mescal, which the tribe is named after, is a type of agave and was a dietary staple that required roasting for several days in a pit. Because plants and animals may only be available in certain seasons and at specific locations, the Mescalero Apache would make seasonal rounds. Having seasonal camps allows people to collect a wide variety of resources from the environment throughout the year. Camps were always located near sources of fresh water to make it easier to cook and gather firewood. The mobile lifestyle of the Apache was aided by their use of dogs as a source of labor. The dogs made it easier to travel by pulling *travois* loaded with peoples' possessions.

Another important method of subsistence for the Mescalero Apache was trade with the Pueblos. The Apache would trade buffalo meat and hides for products such as pottery, textiles, beans, and corn. In times of stress and hardship, raiding replaced trade as a way for the Apache to get the essentials they needed from the Pueblos. Later, Hispanic and Anglo settlements also became trading partners and, alternately, targets of raiding.

After European contact, interactions with Europeans and other Native American tribes changed the Apache way of life. The Mescalero Apache originally had relied on bison as a primary source of food and had followed the migration of the herds on the Southern Plains. As the Comanche encroached upon Apache territory in the early 1700s, the Mescalero Apache were forced off the plains and into the highland areas. The change in environment and shrinking of territory caused the Mescalero Apache to refocus their subsistence efforts on the hunting of deer and gathering of mescal.

Contact with the Spanish also produced important changes to the Mescalero Apache way of life. In the 1600s and 1700s, the Mescalero Apache had increasing access to horses, metal tools, and guns supplied

by the Spanish. The horse allowed for an even more mobile lifestyle and increased the effectiveness of Apache raids by providing a quick get-away. Thus, heightened economic stress caused by the arrival of the Comanche coupled with the introduction of the European horse increased the importance of raiding in the Mescalero Apache culture.

The Mescalero Apache came under more pressure and their way of life became even more disrupted when New Mexico became a territory of the United States through the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848. To encourage settlement in the newly acquired territory, the American government needed to provide settlers with protection from Indian raids. The U.S. government employed two main tactics to provide its settlers with this security. First, the government signed a treaty with the Mescalero in 1855 that specified a confined area in which they could hunt. The idea was to compel the Mescalero Apache to give up their traditional lifestyle and adopt a sedentary and agricultural way of life. This had obvious problems; being restricted to living in a specific area was at odds with the nomadic, hunter-gatherer way of life. The second method was to use military force to protect the settlers. Fort Stanton was constructed near the Rio Bonito in 1855. The military's presence at Fort Stanton lasted until the fort's closure in 1896. For 40 years, Fort Stanton would be home to many soldiers, including the famous "Buffalo Soldiers", whose presence would promote Euroamerican settlement of the Hondo Valley. Some of these soldiers would stay in New Mexico after their terms of service were completed.

The Mescalero resumed their traditional way of life during parts of the Civil War (1861–1865) when Fort Stanton was temporarily vacated. In 1862, however, General Kit Carson and the Union soldiers reoccupied Fort Stanton. They helped round-up the Mescalero Apache and imprison them at the Bosque Redondo Reservation near Fort Sumner, where the government tried to turn the Apache and Navajo into farmers. Most of the imprisoned escaped in 1865, but were later settled on the Mescalero Reservation in 1873. Conflict with Euroamerican settlers continued in the 1870s because of disputes over the boundaries of the reservation, insufficient and substandard rations, and continued raiding parties led by Apache leaders such as Victorio and Nana. The forced settlement of the Mescalero provided a livelihood for some of the new settlers, who bid on government contracts to supply rations to the reservation. The Mescalero were eventually "settled" on their reservation during the 1880s. The Mescalero Apache people now hold many different occupations and have become an important part of the tourism and recreation enterprises that developed in the area of the Rio Hondo and Rio Ruidoso.

### **Euroamerican Arrival in and Settlement of the Hondo Valley**

Euroamerican settlement increased after the founding of Fort Stanton for two primary reasons: (1) the soldiers provided protection from Apache raids, and (2) the supplies needed to operate the fort created a market for agricultural products. While a few Hispanic families were living in the area as early as 1849, most of the early Hispanic settlers in the Hondo Valley were farmers and shepherds who came during the late 1850s and early 1860s and established farms and ranches along the Rio Hondo and Rio Bonito. These early settlers founded the villages of La Placita (Lincoln), San Jose (Missouri Plaza), San Patricio, and Picacho. 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.

These Hispanic pioneers raised livestock and practiced subsistence farming, where people raised just enough to feed themselves and their families. Any excess produce or livestock could be sold or traded to provide the family with the essentials that they could not produce. These farmers mainly grew corn, wheat, and beans, and raised sheep and goats. The Hispanic settlers modified the environment through the construction of acequias, or irrigation ditches, to provide water for their crops. Fort Stanton provided a

ready market for the surplus that the farmers produced, but large-scale exploitation of Fort Stanton as a market did not occur until Anglo settlement.

Anglo settlers began moving to the Hondo Valley during the 1860s after the permanency of Fort Stanton had been established. Anglo settlement further increased after the Civil War and the establishment of the Mescalero Apache Reservation. Some of the Anglos were homesteaders; others came to bid on government contracts to supply goods to Fort Stanton and the Mescalero Apache reservation. The needs of these government institutions created farming and ranching communities in the Hondo Valley, whose initial purpose was to supply the local markets of the fort and reservation. The government would purchase local meat, flour, and vegetables. The cavalry horses at Fort Stanton also needed to be fed, which provided a market for hay and grain. Grist mills were built to grind the grain into flour. Saw mills also were built to process lumber that was used locally for construction of the fort and later exported via the railroad.

Because demand outweighed supply, extremely high prices were charged for the provisions. Competition for these contracts increased when their lucrative nature became better known. This era also saw the growth of cattle ranching in the area, as Texas cattlemen relocated their herds to New Mexico to reap the benefits of the high beef prices. 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 grist mill 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.

After being discharged from the military, former soldiers stayed in the area and became rich by establishing a monopoly on supplying goods in Lincoln County. The challenging of this monopoly led to the Lincoln County War of the late 1870s. The Lincoln County War caused some people to leave the Hondo Valley. Some returned after the war, when Governor Wallace gave pardons to those involved in the war.

The drought of the 1880s, coupled with the decline in the number of soldiers stationed at Fort Stanton and its eventual closure in 1896, brought the era of the cattle empires to an end. Although Fort Stanton closed in 1896, it was reopened as a tuberculosis hospital in 1899. The hospital provided jobs and a market for livestock and produce. During this time, however, Hondo Valley residents began to sell their products to markets outside of the local area, and this caused a change in the main types of crops produced in the valley. Farmers started to grow more profitable or exportable crops like cotton, alfalfa, cabbage, and fruit. Export of the crops was aided by the railroad, which reached Capitan in 1899. The railroad also helped bring more people to the valley by increasing access to the area and reducing the price of general provisions. Despite aid from the railroad, the farmers from the Hondo Valley faced severe competition from their neighbors in the Pecos Valley. By the early 1900s, growth in the Pecos Valley had surpassed that in the Hondo and Bonito Valleys, resulting in the movement of the political and commercial centers to the Pecos Valley.

## **Twentieth Century**

### *Fruit, Cars, and Livestock*

Around the turn of the nineteenth century, Hondo Valley residents began to place increasing effort into growing and selling fruit, such as apples, plums, cherries, peaches, prunes, and pears. Apples of various kinds, including Red Delicious, Golden Delicious, Rome Beauties, Winesaps, and Jonathans, were the

main fruit produced the valley. Initially, harvesting and pruning was done by individual families with occasional help from hired workers; grading and sizing of apples was done by hand. To sell the apples, a farmer would become a traveling salesman of sorts, loading his apples in a wagon and peddling apples from community to community. Markets for the apples included Fort Stanton, Roswell, White Oaks, Nogal, Capitan, and Carrizozo. Later, the market expanded beyond distances able to be traveled by wagon when apples could be shipped by rail. Wagons were still used to haul the apples to the railroad stations in Capitan and Roswell; it could take up to a week to load a single railroad car.

After the railroad, the next technological development to influence Hondo Valley fruit businesses was the invention and mass production of the personal automobile in the 1920s. Loading times for railroad cars were reduced by using automobiles, which, unlike the animals that hauled wagons, did not need to rest. After loading the railroad cars, pick-up trucks were used to transport and sell excess fruit to local, regional, and even out-of-state customers. By using a car or truck, a farmer could travel longer distances and sell apples in more areas in New Mexico and even into Texas.

Eventually, the automobile increased the number of people driving through the Hondo Valley. In the 1920s, this gave rise to a new variation in the fruit business—the roadside fruit stands. The fruit stands continued and even prospered during the Great Depression of the 1930s, as people migrating from Oklahoma to California provided a steady supply of customers for the apple farmers selling along the road.

The fruit industry in the Hondo Valley continued to grow throughout the 1920s and 1930s when roads were constructed and improved, which allowed semi-trucks to come into the valley and fill up their trailers right at the farms. Truckers would load 300 to 400 bushels, or 3,000 to 4,000 apples, at a time. These trucks would then deliver the apples to cities in Texas like El Paso, San Antonio, or Houston. This style of marketing became known as truck farming and applied to other crops, one being cabbage. The invention of machines for grading and sizing apples also allowed orchard owners to process more apples with less labor.

In addition to strengthening the apple industry, better roads and access to personal cars created jobs in recreation and tourism in the Hondo Valley. Automobiles and highways helped to start tourism because of the ability to independently explore the country. The town of Riverside sprung up as a car camp and various other service stations, rest stops, and summer cabins were set up along US 70. One of the earliest tourist enterprises in the Hondo Valley was the Bonnell Ranch. Originally a stop on the Pickwick stage line, it became a guest or dude ranch catering mostly to guests from the eastern U.S.

The decline of the apple industry was catalyzed by two major events. In the 1940s US 70 was realigned, and this caused some farmers' land to no longer adjoin the highway. These farmers were then unable to operate former roadside fruit stands. A decade later, apples grown in Washington state started to compete with the apples grown in the Hondo Valley. Fortunately, Hondo Valley residents did not rely solely on apple sales to make a living. They had always needed other sources of income because apple crops were dependent on the weather conditions and existence of parasites. Residents grew other crops, raised livestock, or worked in occupations outside of ranching and farming, such as teaching, art, and the grocery business. Once the apple industry became less profitable, people started to replace fruit orchards with permanent pasture for livestock.

Hondo Valley livestock, such as horses, goats, and sheep, was marketed in other areas of the country. Animals to be sold were herded to Capitan and loaded onto freight cars. The livestock would then be transported to places like Kansas City and sold by an accompanying rancher. Sheep's wool was also marketed until there was too much competition from Australian wool producers.

### *Providing for a Family*

In summary, residents of the Hondo Valley generally made their living through self-employed subsistence ranching and farming supplemented by bailing hay and working at Ft. Stanton hospital or, in later times, at the racetrack in Ruidoso Downs. People needed these second jobs because crop yields varied with environmental conditions.

Many people grew or raised their own food. In addition to orchards, people also maintained vegetable gardens with carrots, corn, squash, green beans, cabbage, and other vegetables. People also raised cows, sheep, turkeys, goats, chickens, pigs, horses, and mules. Extra vegetables or table scraps could be fed to pigs or hogs. Food for other animals came from the alfalfa and hay that people cultivated. People often slaughtered and ate their animals. However, animals were raised for more than just their meat. Cows and goats provided milk, butter, and cheese for the families and chickens supplied fresh eggs.

Staples, such as beans and flour, were purchased in bulk during monthly trips to bigger cities like Roswell. They would be bought in large quantities because the trip to Roswell could take two or three days. People of the Hondo Valley also supplemented their diet with fish, wild ducks, deer, or cottontails.

Maintaining this way of life required looking after acequias and the collection of rainwater from cisterns for drinking. A farming and ranching lifestyle could be very difficult, especially before people had electricity.

### *Social Events*

Life in the Hondo Valley was not all work and no play. Making music and dancing are pastimes with a long history in the Hondo Valley. Hispanic members of the community held *bailes* (dances) and celebrated events such as weddings by dancing. Other families used to enjoy dances almost every Saturday night from 7 p.m. to midnight at the Bonnell Ranch, where members of the Coe family and friends would congregate for square, ballroom, and country western dances. These dances would be for the whole community and for guests at the Bonnell's dude ranch. Most of the music was played on the fiddle, but other instruments such as the piano, guitar, and voice served as accompaniments. Other, more informal, events were hosted at family residences by moving the furniture out of the living or dining room and turning the space into a dance floor. The White Cat Bar in San Patricio was also a popular dancing venue.

As well as hosting dances, Bonnell Ranch served as an informal community center for Glencoe. People came there for rodeos, baseball games, and picnics. At San Patricio, Peter Hurd's Sentinel Ranch had a field where people came to play and watch polo matches. Schools and churches served as de facto community centers for other towns in the Hondo Valley. Churches would hold events such as feast days, weddings, and funerals. Schools would have fundraisers, put on Christmas pageants, show movies, and hold dances. The Hondo School was and still is the location for the Hondo Fiestas.

Another important pastime for Hondo Valley residents was the rodeo. Rodeos were held all over the Hondo Valley and surrounding area, including Fort Stanton, Ruidoso, Mescalero, Carrizozo, Tinnie, Picacho, and Turkey Canyon (south of Ruidoso Downs). Rodeos were less formal in the 1930s and 1940s. After WWII they became bigger and more organized and were held in fewer places. Rodeos often were followed by a big meal and dance. Roping at the rodeos was not just a recreation for some residents of the Hondo Valley. Winning rodeo prizes was also a way to supplement an income and sometimes an individual could win more money roping than by working on a farm or ranch.