**Archaeology and History in Your Back Yard**

**A Little History of Socorro**

Hello Everyone! This is Archaeology and History in Your Back Yard and my name is Dixie. X 88.7 FM and the Torrance County Archaeological Society are pleased to bring you a series of programs designed to acquaint you, our listening audience with little known people, places and events that took place in the past, right here in your own back yard. For the most part, we will be covering interesting facts, stories and legends about the past, and people that lived right here in the Estancia Valley and surrounding area in central New Mexico. Our goal is to inform, educate and possibly enlist your help in preserving and protecting our past.

Our show today will focus on the History of Socorro.

This program was written by Dixie Boyle and produced by Bill Simms. Thank you for joining us today.

Socorro, a Spanish word meaning help or aid was named by Onate and the first Spanish settlers traveling the Camino Real in 1598. The group nearly perished when they took the eighty mile shortcut known as the Jornada del Mureto (journey of the dead man). Upon reaching the Rio Grande River they were given food and water by the Piro Indians prompting Onate to supply the name.

The first Catholic mission was established in 1626 and named Nuestra Senor de Socorro. A Spanish census lists six hundred people living in the vicinity. During the Pueblo Revolt the Spanish were pushed out of New Mexico or New Spain for twelve years. Spanish refugees fleeting the revolt warned those living in Socorro as they rushed southward toward El Paso and reasonable safety. Socorro was destroyed during the Pueblo Revolt and many of the friendly Piro Indians killed.

The Spanish did not settle Socorro for another one hundred and thirty seven years. In 1817 seventy residents from Belen petitioned for land in Socorro. They soon built the Mission of San Miguel de Socorro on the ruins of the Nuestra de Socorro. The settlement as others along the river developed into an agriculture and ranching area.

The San Miguel Church was completed in 1821 and the rest of the community grew around it. The original buildings were constructed in the style of the Spanish with thick walls and mud floors. Socorro, as all early communities along the Rio Grande River endured attacks by the Apache and Navajo Indians.

By the 1880s mining was active in the Magdalena Mountains, the San Mateos and the Black Range where Hillsboro and Kingston were booming. The Billings Smelter was the principal smelter in New Mexico Territory and also processed more ore and silver in the central and southern portions of the territory. In the 1890s the Billings Smelter changed owners and became the Rio Grande Smelter Works a branch of a St. Louis Company. The smelter eventually closed in 1896 causing a decline in Socorro’s population and economy.

Before the turn of the 20th Century, the Park, Grand Central and Windsor were three prominent hotels in town. The Grand Central was located east of the plaza and vacated in 1898. The Windsor Hotel received most of the tourist trade at the time. After the hotel burned to the ground, it was replaced with the Val Verde in 1919 and rebuilt near the same location.

The Park Hotel was one of the older hotels in town and boarded politicians and other distinguished visitors traveling the territory during this era. New Mexico Governor Lew Wallace the author of Ben Hur stayed at the hotel. In the 1960s the front lobby and main rooms making up the hotel were torn down and replaced by a Safeway-Ben Franklin Building.

For many years the Val Verde Hotel was the social center for Socorro County and much of New Mexico. The hotel held receptions, meetings, benefit bridge parties plus dances and college proms. It boasted a barber shop and beauty parlor and was a good location for fashion shows. The hotel contained sixty guest rooms, a dining room, large lobby and reading rooms.

Socorro began to boom in the 1880s when the population of the quiet ranching and farming community reached a thousand residents when gold and silver were officially discovered in the nearby mountains. When the AT&SF arrived, the population of the town exploded. During a six month period in 1881 there were three thousand mining claims filed at the Socorro County Courthouse.

The completion of the railroad lines throughout the American frontier put stagecoaches out of business. Socorro was connected by stage to White Oaks to the east, a gold mining center reached by traveling through San Antonio to the south in 1879. Established towns vied for the trade at White Oaks and during the 1880s Socorro competed with Las Vegas for this trade.

The stage ran regularly between Socorro and Magdalena. If riding all the way to the silver mining town of Kelly the trip cost $2.75 in 1883. The stage left Socorro on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays at 8:00 in the morning and returned to Socorro on alternate days at four in the afternoon.

Socorro had reached a population over three thousand before the turn of the 20th Century and during these years over thirty drinking institutions were established. The most famous of these was the Capitol Bar residing on the plaza in the center of the community. The Capitol was built in 1896 by two Italian brothers.

During the prohibition years there was a trap door behind the bar leading to the basement and an escape route from the police. At the end of prohibition the bar became the first legalized bar in Socorro. The Capitol Bar is the oldest bar in Socorro, and the only one to survive the turbulent years of Socorro’s early history when there was literally a bar on every corner.

The New Mexico Institute of Mining & Technology is located in Socorro and was first established as the New Mexico School of Mines in 1889. The college offers over thirty bachelor degrees specializing in mining and petroleum programs. Students from all over the United States attend school in Socorro receiving a first-rate education.

The 2010 census lists Socorro’s population as seventeen thousand residents. The community has long been the county seat of Socorro County, the second largest county in New Mexico and at one time included both Socorro and Catron Counties, the state’s largest county. The community remains a supply center and college town.

This has been Archaeology and History in Your Back Yard, a series that will take you through our area’s history in future episodes.

The Torrance County Archaeological Society meets at 7 PM the first Tuesday of every month from March through November. We meet at the East Torrance Soil and Water Education Building at 700 S. 10th Street in Estancia. Please come and join us.

You can listen to Archaeology and History in Your Own Back Yard Monday at 1 PM, Tuesday at 7 PM, Friday at 10 AM and Saturday at 4 PM. Thanks for listening!

KXNM Archives are all locally produced as MP3 Audio Files. So, you can listen to all of the Archaeology and History shows whenever you choose. Just visit our web site at KXNM.org. Talk to you later!