

Las Cruces

The First Las Cruces

Millions of years before the dinosaurs, Las Cruces teemed with reptiles and amphibians, whose stories are told in the endless scattering of fossils in nearby mountains and deserts. In the late 1980s, a local paleontologist discovered what the Smithsonian Institute has called, "the world's best-fossilized footprints from the Permian Period." According to geologists, southern New Mexico was covered by a great inland sea 600 million years- ago. When the sea retreated, many fossils were left behind.



Early Explorers

The Gadsden Purchase and the Treaty of Guadalupe are not the only important events in the history of Las Cruces. Four hundred years ago, Don Juan de Oñate made his historic trek into what is now New Mexico in search of gold.

In 1598, working on behalf of the King of Spain, Oñate and his entourage made their way through the great Pass of the North (modern-day El Paso) and then north to what would become Santa Fe. The route became known as the Camino Real. The company moved along the Rio Grande to ensure that they would have water as they passed through the desolate land. But eventually, land barriers forced the expedition away from the river and into the deadliest portion of the Camino Real now known as the Jornada del Muerto, or Journey of the Dead. Many men died of thirst along this stretch, both during Oñate's trek and on those that followed. Oñate's expedition marked the first major European colonization of the North American continent, years before Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock.

But before Oñate, this area was inhabited by the ancient culture of the Mogollon Indians until roughly 1450. Little is known about their existence, but expressions of life in that long-ago era are depicted in the many petroglyphs (rock drawings) that remain scattered throughout the area.

Birth of Las Cruces

More than 150 years ago, United States Army Lt. Delos Bennett Sackett, using rawhide rope and stakes, plotted out 84 city blocks to form what is known today as Las Cruces, NM. Sackett came to the Mesilla Valley from Fort Gibson, Okla.

During the summer of 1848, with the First Dragoon of Company H., his mission, along with the 87 other soldiers, was to protect small communities from Apache raids. These communities included El Paso (or Paso del Norte) and Doña Ana, a small village headed by alcalde Don Pablo Melendres.

By 1848, the Mexican War with the United States had ended with the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo.



That treaty, among other things, converted Doña Ana from Mexican to United States territory. Many settlers headed for the area, trying to claim rights to the undeded land just acquired by the treaty. In an attempt to maintain order in Doña Ana, Don Pablo Melendres sought relief from the US Army to help in surveying and platting out a new town site. Using rugged equipment, Las Cruces, at least in concept, was born.

A block of land was designated for the plaza and church and 84 city blocks were laid out, each containing four lots of land. Once the town site was completed, the 120 people living on the platted land drew numbers from a hat for their new home sites.

After home sites were identified and people began building, it became clear that despite his best laid plans, Sackett had platted a town with crooked streets and houses that crowded against each other. Furthermore, since mud was the primary building material, people began digging holes in the streets to make adobe blocks for their houses. It became such a problem that Judge Richard Campbell ordered the townspeople to stop making adobes on Main Street and to fill in the holes.

How We Got Our Name

There are multiple theories as to how Las Cruces got its name. One theory suggests that sometime during the 18th Century, a bishop, a priest, a Mexican Army colonel, a captain, four trappers and four choir boys were attacked near the Rio Grande and only one - a boy - survived. Crosses were erected in their honor, and the name, El Pueblo del Jardin de Las Cruces, (the City of the Garden of Crosses,) evolved.

Other stories say multiple crosses were erected in the area to mark the grave sites of the many victims of Apache raids. Still another story is that a group of 40 travelers from Taos, NM were killed just as they reached Las Cruces. But some people feel that the name is simply the Spanish translation for "crossing" or "crossroads."

The Story of Mesilla

While the creation of Las Cruces may have eased the pressure for a rapidly growing Doña Ana, it didn't ease the anti-United States sentiments harbored by some Doña Ana residents who preferred Mexican rule to that of the United States. These sentiments eventually led to the formation of another village. In 1850, 60 families packed up their belongings and moved west of the Rio Grande, which was still Mexican territory. They settled on a mesita or hill, and formed the village of Mesilla. Unfortunately for the settlers, they soon became US residents again when the Gadsden Purchase, finalized in 1854, turned over a 30,000 square mile strip of land from Mexico to the US for \$10 million. Although residents of Mesilla were no longer citizens of Mexico, they continued to live out their lives as though they were.

Billy the Kid

Las Cruces has been the haunt of many notable figures, such as Geronimo, Victorio, Albert Fall and the discoverer of Pluto, the late Clyde Tombaugh. But none have garnered more attention than the most infamous outlaw in the West, William H. Bonney, a.k.a., Billy the Kid. In 1880, Billy the Kid stood trial in a Mesilla, NM courtroom for the murder of Andrew "Buckshot" Roberts. He was found guilty and sentenced to hang by Judge Warren Bristol. During his sentencing, Judge Bristol told Billy he was to be hung "until you are dead, dead, dead!" Legend has it that Billy shouted back, "And you can go to hell, hell, hell!" He was taken to Lincoln, NM where he escaped while awaiting execution. He was later shot and killed by Lincoln County Sheriff Pat Garrett in 1881. The building in Mesilla that housed the jail and courtroom are still standing and the iron jail cell that held him is on display across the street in the Gadsden Museum. Another historical landmark still standing in Mesilla is the old Butterfield Stage Depot. Today it is home to La Posta, a restaurant with a worldwide reputation for its Mexican food.

