

Ghost Towns

and nearly forgotten towns of Socorro County

Part 1

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Socorro County once had numerous towns that are no more, or nearly forgotten. Unlike the hearty towns along El Camino Real and the Rio Grande, these were towns that came and went with the whims of mining and the railroads.

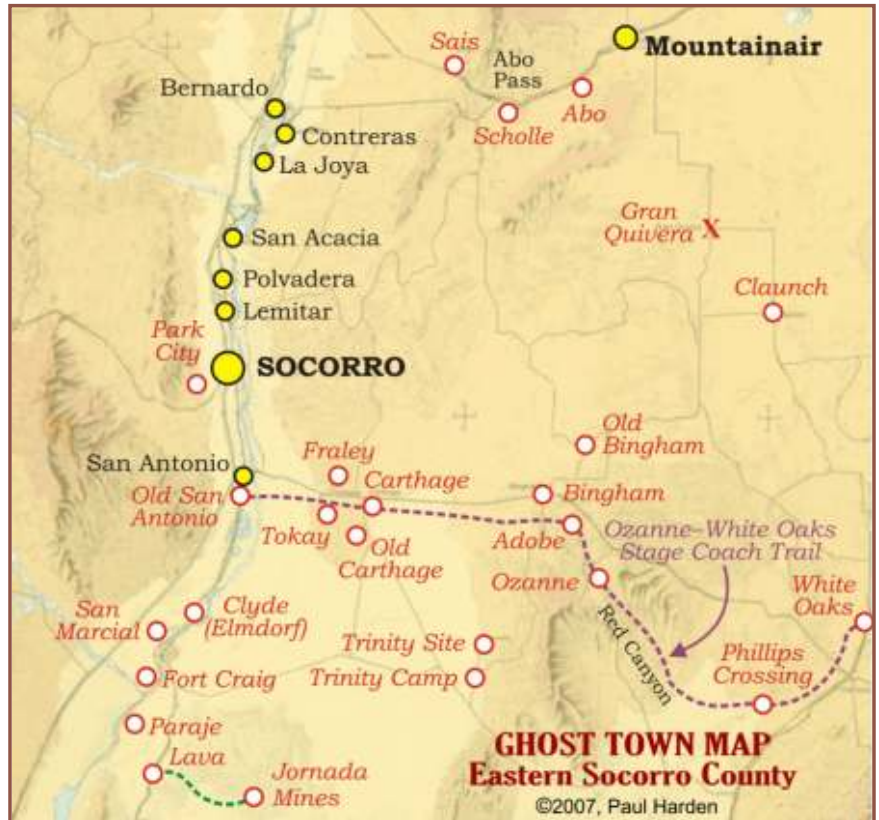
Part 1 looks at a few of these forgotten towns on the East side of the Rio Grande.

Sais, Scholle, and Abo

There are two towns in northern Socorro County, Sais and Scholle, plus nearby Abo in Torrance County, that were once bustling railroad towns. Believe it or not, these towns were formed by another New Mexico town 200 miles away – Raton.

By 1890, the Atcheson, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad line extended from Chicago to Los Angeles, passing over Raton and Glorietta Passes to transverse the mountains. These two passes were the most difficult, and costly, for the railroad. Additional locomotives, called helper engines, were needed to pull the freight trains through the mountains – engines that could not be used elsewhere on the line. Averaging less than 10 miles per hour, it took nearly three hours for a train to travel the 20 miles between Trinidad, Colorado and Raton, New Mexico. With only a single track through the pass, trains waiting their turn stacked up in Trinidad and Raton.

Glorietta and Raton were constant bottlenecks, limiting the number of daily trains, and consequently the profit,



over the AT&SF transcontinental route.

By 1906, AT&SF was desperate to find an alternative route. Abo Pass, in northern Socorro County, was chosen. Called the Belen cut-off, the route went eastward from Belen, over Abo Pass to Amarillo, Texas, and rejoined the transcontinental tracks at Newton, Kansas. Though this route was longer, it would also be much faster.

Construction of the railroad track through the canyon began in 1908. The railroad built two towns for the workers, Sais on the western approach, and Scholle on the eastern. To the east of Scholle was an old village called Abo, near the pueblo of the same name. It was basically a trading post for early travelers over Abo Pass and used by the railroad for offices and storage during construction.



Photo courtesy of Jim Vicars/Railfan.net

This 1957 photo shows a steam locomotive “helper engine” pulling a freight train and two diesel engines up Abo Pass.



Photo courtesy of www.Railfan.net

All that is left today of the village of Scholle is a sign at the railroad siding.

Along the Belen cut-off, AT&SF built another small town near the Texas border to change engines, house the crews, and built a large yard for the waiting freight trains. This small town quickly grew and is today's Clovis, thanks to a construction project through Abo Pass.

Completed in 1911, Abo Pass was six miles long with a steep two percent grade. However, the short distance allowed getting trains over the mountain in a fraction of the time compared to Raton and Glorietta Pass.

Once construction of the railroad through the canyon was completed, numerous people stayed on. The double track from Belen went to single track at Sais through the canyon, and back to double track at Scholle. Railroad workers were used at the sidings and yards at Sais and Scholle, coordinating the traffic through the single track through the canyon. Both remained fair sized towns.

In the 1930s, highway 60 was built over Abo Pass. Sais, Scholle and Abo became popular stops for the gas stations and restaurants.

Following World War II, AT&SF began to modernize the Belen cut-off with diesel engines, automatic signalling, and radios to coordinate the trains through the canyon. The yard workers, station masters, and telegraphers were left without a job.

Modern cars made the trip to Mountainair uneventful, bypassing the gas stations and restaurants along the pass. Abo, Scholle and Sais went into quick decline.

Today, nearly nothing is left of these three towns except a few old rock buildings. Instead of small towns with families, gas stations, stores and a post office, they are now just sidings on the railroad.

According to the BNSF railroad (formerly AT&SF) district office in Belen, about 45 freight trains a day still climb the steep grade through Abo Pass, making it one of the busiest sections of AT&SF track.

Steam locomotives were used as helper engines until 1957, making Abo Pass the last stretch of AT&SF track still using steam. Today, four or five diesel engines spewing exhaust pull a freight train through the narrow canyon about every half hour. The picturesque scenes of the massive engines climbing the windy grade up Abo Pass attracts railroad buffs from around the country.

While the famous stretch of track through Abo Pass is still going strong, the towns that once built and supported the railroad – Sais, Scholle, and Abo - are now long gone except for a few nearby ranchers.

Tokay, Fraley and Carthage

In the 1860s, a coal field east of San Antonio was occasionally mined by soldiers to heat and fire the blacksmith ovens at nearby Fort Craig and other surrounding forts. It was initially called the Government Mine.

In 1883, the railroad built a bridge across the Rio Grande at San Antonio, running track the 20 miles to



Photo courtesy Socorro County Historical Society
The Carthage mines produced coal for 100 years, from 1860–1960.



Photo courtesy Socorro County Historical Society
The boarding house at Carthage. School was taught in a small room on the second floor.

the coal fields. The Santa Fe Railroad built a town, called Carthage, near the mines. It was a true company town, with every building, store and home owned by the railroad. The majority of the coal was used to fuel the steam locomotives of the AT&SF lines throughout New Mexico.

Following a land dispute, for which the railroad was denied exclusive grant to the land, AT&SF deactivated the Carthage mines. They moved the town, every building, store and home, to the coal mines at Madrid. Much of today's town of Madrid is the former Socorro County town of Carthage. Not only did Carthage become a ghost town overnight, it also completely vanished just as fast. AT&SF gave the abandoned railroad bed, and the San Antonio bridge, to Socorro County.

Local people from San Antonio continued to work the mines on a smaller scale. However, with the railroad gone, the coal had to be laboriously shipped to San Antonio by wagon. In the meantime, a J. B. Frailey started a limestone quarry north of the old Carthage townsite, shipping the lime by wagon to San Antonio.

In 1903, the New Mexico Midland Railroad relaid the tracks, making the coal at the Carthage mines again easily accessible. A new town of Carthage was built about a half mile north of the old town site. By 1910, the population had swelled to about 1000. Six to eight carloads of coal were being sold daily to AT&SF at San Antonio to fuel their locomotives. Most of the Carthage coal was sold commercially for home heating and conversion to coke. In fact, there were dozens of coke kilns along the tracks in San Antonio during this time.

Mr. Frailey expanded his quarry by building kilns for coking coal. The town was named after the owner, though somehow misspelled “Fraley.” A half-mile long spur line was laid from the Carthage line to Fraley. Much of the coke from Fraley was used to fire the Kinney Brick Company kilns in Albuquerque. A few workers built living quarters at Fraley, along with a company store, but it never developed into much more than an extensive quarry and coke operation.

In 1907, a coal dust explosion in the Carthage mine killed nine miners, the second worst coal mining accident in New Mexico to this day. The worst accident was the 1920 explosion in the coal mine at Dawson, New Mexico—killing a staggering 268 miners.

The old truss railroad bridge at San Antonio collapsed in 1917, dumping several coal cars into the river. The bridge was rebuilt with concrete piers, allowing the coal trains from Carthage and Fraley to continue their daily runs.

The newly formed San Antonio Coal Company established mines about a mile east of Carthage in 1918. A town developed along the train tracks for the workers of the new mine and their families named Tokay. By 1920, it had a population of about 500 people.

The bridge across the Rio Grande, and much of San Antonio, was destroyed by the great flood of 1929. The railroad bridge was never rebuilt. The New Mexico Midland Railroad pulled the tracks to Carthage. Afterwards, coal was shipped to the railroad yards at San Antonio by truck.

During the 1930s, the demand for coal began to decline and the San Antonio Coal Company closed their mines. The Post Office at Tokay was closed in 1932, and much after that, the town was fully abandoned. As the Great Depression wore on, some of the buildings were moved to Socorro for housing, while others were dismantled for fire wood. Another ghost town simply vanished.

Carthage struggled through the depression years, receiving a temporary boost in the 1940s mining coal for the war effort. Following World War II, the demand for coal drastically dropped. Home heating by coal was quickly being replaced by the cleaner gas and electric furnaces. By the 1950s, the coal hungry steam trains all but disappeared along the AT&SF tracks.

The Carthage Fuel and Coal Company closed the mines in 1950, maintaining only a minor operation. By 1951, the Post Office closed and only a handful of families remained. With spurts of activities over the following years, Carthage became a true ghost town by the 1960s.

Today, nothing is left of Tokay except some mine tailings and slag heaps. Extensive ruins of the kilns at Farley, and the old railroad bed, are still visible north of US 380 near the Fite Ranch Road.

Carthage remained one of New Mexico's ghost towns for many years. However, it was destroyed in 1999 by the New Mexico Energy, Minerals and Natural Resources Department for a desert restoration project. What remained of the town was leveled and the mine tailing have been bulldozed and covered with soil. Virtually nothing remains of the town today.

Adobe and Ozanne

One would think the railroad replaced the stage coach. Not in Socorro County.

With the growth in Lincoln County, Fort Stanton, and the booming mining town of White Oaks, there was a sudden need for speedy transportation from these areas to the railroad line along the Rio Grande. As a result, a few years after the arrival of the railroad, a stage coach company was started between San Antonio and White Oaks, northeast of present day Carrizozo. At first it was called the San Antonio-White Oaks Stage Coach Company. In 1886, it was purchased by the Ozanne family, who owned and operated the large Ozanne Hotel in White Oaks. Consequently, the name changed to the Ozanne-White Oaks Stage Company.

They began daily mail and passenger service from



Photo courtesy State of New Mexico

The Carthage mines and townsite today, after the area was leveled for the desert restoration project.

Socorro to White Oaks, with local coach service to Tularosa, Fort Stanton and Lincoln.

The road from San Antonio to White Oaks was a rough one, an old cattle trail across the waterless Jornada del Muerto and the Malpais lava flow. A small trading post and boardinghouse, called Adobe, served these early travelers. However, the lack of water along this route was unsuitable for a stage line.

The Ozanne Company built a stage stop at the foot of the Oscura Mountains at the site of a spring. They called the stage stop, oddly enough, Ozanne. Tired horses were unhitched to graze while a fresh team was exchanged to finish the trip. Bunk houses were built for the staff and the drivers. Later, meals and boarding was added for the passengers. The Ozanne stage stop grew into a small village.

From Ozanne, the stage trail went southeast through Red Canyon, arriving at another old settlement called Phillips Crossing. This was a toll road over the narrowest section of the lava flow, only about a half-mile wide. From Phillips Crossing, the stage turned north towards White Oaks. Though this road was longer than the original trail, the better road and water stops allowed the trip between San Antonio and White Oaks to be made in record time.

One interesting event occurred in July 1890 as two four-horse rigs rumbled into Ozanne from Albuquerque, escorted by several horsemen yielding rifles. It was a special express bound for Roswell with obviously a special cargo. The nervous men took turns eating a meal and guarding the wagons.

The following day, the special express pulled into Roswell. Shortly thereafter, the Bank of Roswell opened their doors for their first day of business – with \$36,000 in cash in their new safe – delivered by stage coach. In 1890, that was a lot of money.

In 1899, the El Paso and Southwestern Railroad was built through the Tularosa basin on its way to El Paso. Bypassing White Oaks, they chose instead an open area to build a town to service the rails. This became the town of Carrizozo.

There was no longer any need for the San Antonio to White Oaks stage line and the settlement of Ozanne was sold, being purchased by Socorro County Sheriff Holm O. Bursum. Now used as a ranch, it also served as a town of sorts, serving nearby ranchers with a small store and a Post Office from 1906 through 1909.

The old town of Ozanne remained the Bursum Ranch until 1947, when the land was confiscated by the U.S. Army for the creation of White Sands Missile Proving Grounds. It is not known if any of the Bursum Ranch or Ozanne structures remain.

Claunch and Gran Quivera

In the 1890s, Frank DuBois and family opened the first store and Post Office at the small settlement of Corona. A few years later, they moved farther to the west to establish a ranch and farm. Drilling a well, it became a water stop for those who ventured across the flats between Corona and Mountainair. They called their small settlement DuBois Flats.

They were soon joined by Lawrence Claunch, building the headquarters for his Claunch Cattle Company nearby. As other farmers moved in, the settlement began to grow, adopting the name Claunch.

Crops proved to be difficult due to the lack of water – except for pinto beans. For some reason, pinto beans grew well in the dry soil and the occasional rain storm. Within a few years, hundreds of acres of pinto beans were being grown in Claunch, expanding to thousands of acres providing beans for the troops fighting in World War I. Claunch became known as the pinto bean capital of the world and production continued to grow well after the war.

Tons of pinto beans were trucked to the rails at Claunch or Mountainair, giving the trains the nickname “the Pinto Express.” During the 1930s, demand for the Claunch beans grew as the government bought all they could grow for the Depression era public food



Photo courtesy Daniel Woodrum

The boarded-up dry goods store at Claunch is a hint to better times.

programs. In 1932, the Post Office was established to serve the nearly 400 people now living in and around Claunch.

The pinto bean fields stretched far to the north, with several hundred people settling in the growing town of Gran Quivera, named after the nearby pueblo of the same name.

Demand increased again in 1941 as the Claunch beans were needed for the war in Europe. The Claunch-Pinto Soil and Water Conservation District was organized to manage the bean fields, now stretching from Claunch to Corona and northward to Abo. Over one million acres of farm land was in this area, mostly growing pinto beans, and without any irrigating water – a unique agricultural district indeed.

The only problem seemed to be the Claunch pinto beans, being grown on dry land, cooked slightly different than those grown on irrigated land. They would come out tough, mushy or nearly black, depending on whose recipe you followed. As a result, during World War II, each bag of beans that left Claunch contained a recipe card. One such card read as follows:

“Remove shriveled beans or those with loose skins. Soak overnight to reduce cooking time. Place 1-1/2 pounds dry Claunch pinto beans into large pot adding 2-1/2 quarts hot water – not cold. As beans start to simmer, add a ham bone or ¼ pound salt pork or bacon. Add more water as needed, always hot or boiling, never cold. When skins are as tender as the inside of the beans, they're done. Add one teaspoon salt and allow to stand before serving.”

During the 1940s, Claunch had a population of 400, had five churches, a school, post office, two stores, two bean elevators, and other businesses. Baseball teams, playing surrounding communities, became almost a weekly event, along with dances and other social events. It was quite a town, a hard working town, and a friendly town.

In July 1945, an early morning flash to the southwest changed the world forever. It was the first atomic blast at the Trinity Site. Many of the people living in Claunch claimed it changed the town forever as well. Nearby cattle turned white or went blind. Over the next few years, the pinto beans failed to grow. Many of the Claunch farmers blamed the atomic test, the radioactive cloud drifting over the area and settling onto the fields. Indeed, looking at a map, the southwest prevailing winds would carry the cloud from the Trinity site directly over Claunch. The government denies any effects from radioactive fallout, blaming the Claunch crop failures on the drought of the early 1950s.

Regardless of the reason, crops have never returned to the Claunch area. It is hard to believe the empty fields were once filled with pinto beans.

It would be a stretch to call Claunch a ghost town, as several ranching families still live in the area. The Claunch Post Office, zip code 87011, still serves the local people.

Searching Socorro County records, there are 35 registered voters in Precinct 12, covering Claunch and Gran Quivera. In the 2006 elections, 21 of them voted. For the Governors race, two voted for Richardson and 19 ballots were cast for Dendhahl. It is safe to say no recount was necessary and Claunch appears, at the present, firmly Republican. If Claunch were a true ghost town, the vote count would probably have been much higher!

Claunch, Scholle, Carthage and Tokay – a few of Socorro County's towns that are no more, or far from the prominence they once had. Think of the heartache it must be to abandon your home and your town of many years. Many Socorroans know that feeling well, for they were once the residents of these nearly forgotten towns.

Next month: the Socorro County ghost towns west of the Rio Grande.