

# Polvadera y Chamisal

**Two of Socorro County's historic villages and the San Lorenzo Land Grant**

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For *El Defensor Chieftain*

*Last month's Relatos del Pasado (Stories of the Past) presented some of the history of Lemitar and her church. This month, it seems only fair to look at her sister villages to the north: Polvadera and Chamisal.*

One early mention of Polvadera occurred shortly after the Americans entered Santa Fe, in 1846. Surveyor Lt. William Emory wrote in his diary: "Arrived at the town of Pulvidera, which we found, as its name implies, covered with dust."

Lt. Emory was correct. Polvadera is a rendition of the Spanish word polvoriento or pulverero meaning "dusty" or "pulverized dirt." It is believed the name Polvadera may also be based on the name of an old Piro Indian pueblo in the area of a similar-sounding name.

The actual name and spelling of the town has changed over the years. When resettled in the early 1800s, it was called "Plaza de Pulvidera." In the 1845 Mexican census, after the San Lorenzo Land Grant had been approved, the name changed to "San Lorenzo de Pulvidero." For the first U.S. census in 1850, it was listed as "Pulvidera," "La Polvedera de San Lorenzo" in 1860, and then "Pulvedero" by the 1870 census. When the railroad arrived in 1881, they spelled it "Polvadera," the form used today.

However, Polvadera is much older than 1846.

## Early Pulvidero

It appears Spanish colonists in the early 1600s had ventured north of Socorro. Some had settled about four leagues (about 12 miles) north of Socorro, where land along the west bank of the river was found to be fertile. It is not known if these 1600s colonists settled with the Piro Indians

at the pueblo near present day Polvadera, or established their own haciendas nearby. It is known the pueblo was destroyed by the Navajo in 1629. It was subsequently rebuilt, perhaps with the help of their Spanish neighbors.

Little else is known about this early Pulvidero. The fact that these settlers, and the Piro pueblo, were recorded in early church records suggest they lived together in peace for many years. This is what leads some historians to believe Pulvidero may be a corruption of the Piro name of the pueblo.



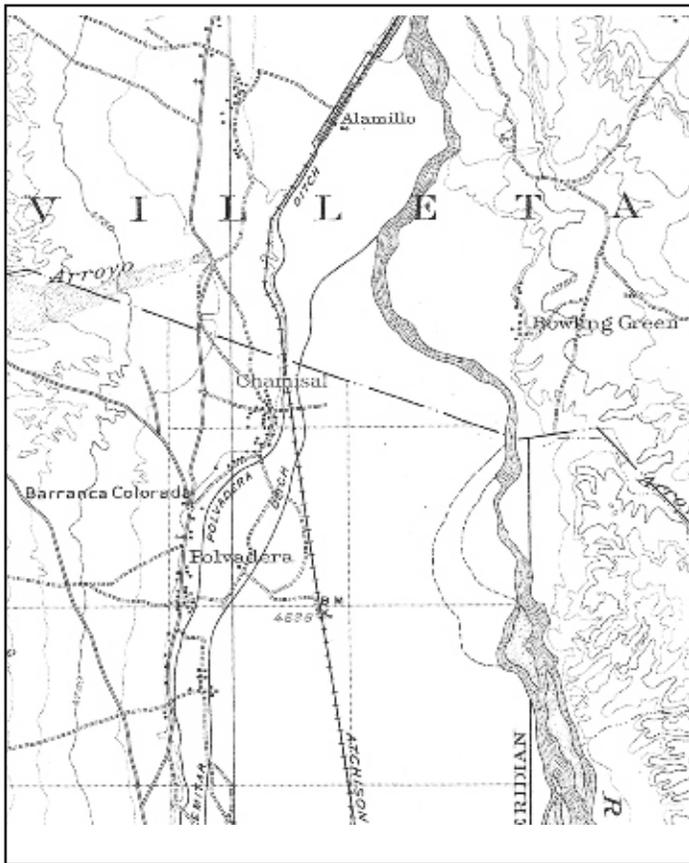
Photo by Paul Harden

**The picturesque San Lorenzo canyon was once part of Antonio Chavez' San Lorenzo Land Grant, and later the Padilla ranch.**

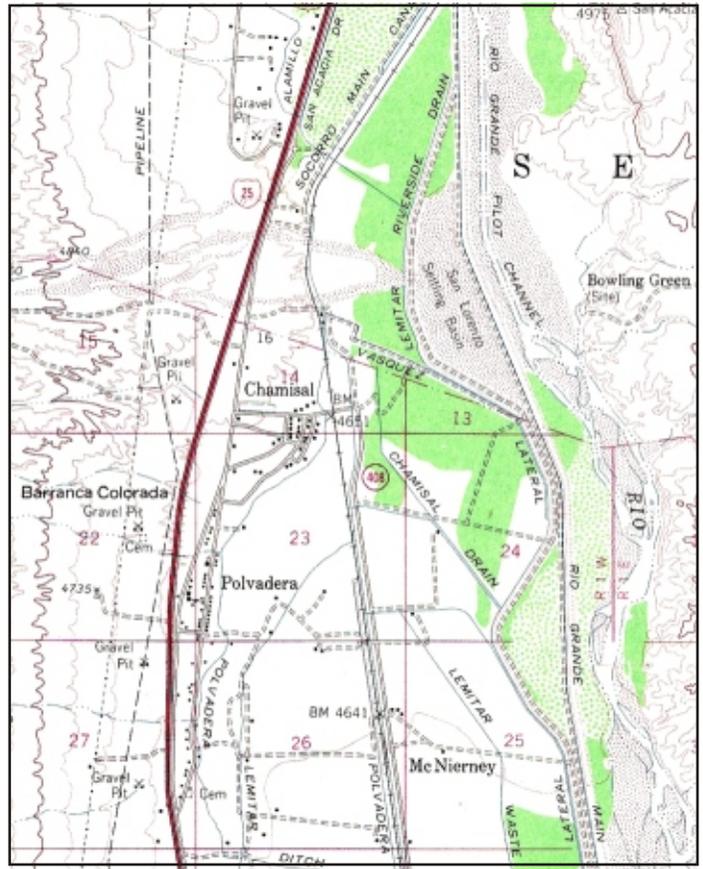
A similar situation arose south of Socorro in forming the "Hacienda de Luis Lopez." This estancia was named after Don Luis Lopez, the alcalde mayor of nearby Senecu pueblo and mission in the 1660s.

Thus, Socorro, Luis Lopez, and Pulvidero are the oldest documented "New World" settlements in Socorro County.

In 1680, all of the people in the Socorro region, both Spaniards and the Piro, abandoned their homes and pueblos and fled to El Paso during the Pueblo Revolt. The Piro never returned.



Author's Collection  
**This 1906 topo map shows much of the San Lorenzo Land Grant, Polvadera, Chamisal and Bowling Green.**



Author's Collection  
**The same area as shown on a 1959 topo map, while I-25 was still under construction, bypassing Polvadera.**

### Early 1800s Pulvidero

Following the Spanish reconquest of New Mexico after 1692, the land south of Belen was declared “off limits” by the Spanish governors in Santa Fe. The Spanish Royal Guard did not have enough soldiers to protect settlers in this area against the Apaches. As a result, Socorro, Luis Lopez and Pulvidero remained abandoned and unoccupied for more than 100 years.

Resettlement of the area was allowed around 1800. Families from Belen and Tomé were the first pioneers to venture back into the region.

Some of the early families to resettle Pulvidero were Aragon, Chavez, De Baca, Luna, Padilla, Sarracino, Torrez and Zamora. Many of today’s Polvadera families are descendants of these early pioneer families.

The earliest family I found in genealogical sources was Santiago Torrez, born in Santa

Fe, in 1773. He married Maria Ortiz, in 1792. They were one of the first documented settlers in Polvadera, evidenced by their fourth child, son Jose, having been “born in Pulvidera in 1803.” They had five additional children born before 1820.

The Sarracino family was very influential in Polvadera. They built stores, houses, a community center and a school. Sarracino Hall is a registered

historic landmark.

The Padillas settled on the land called “Barranca Colorada,” west of present day I-25, and herded huge numbers of sheep.

Another early settler was Demetrio De Baca. He homesteaded at a spring in the Lemitar Mountains he called Chupadera Springs. Son Jose Baca built a ranch in Polvadera, which was destroyed in the 1936 flood. Sons Demetrio and Miguel Baca still reside in Polvadera.



Photo by Paul Harden  
**One of the first families to settle Polvadera was the DeBaca family. Descendants Demetrio (left) and Miguel Baca are the oldest and youngest of 11 children.**

These are just a few examples of the families that make up today's Polvadera.

### San Lorenzo Land Grant

In February 1825, Antonio Chavez made petition for a land grant to New Mexico Gov. Bartolome Baca as follows: "I, Antonio Chavez ... apply to the superior wisdom of your excellency, that you may assign to me the tract called the Arroyo de San Lorenzo whose description and boundaries are: on the south the ranche of Pablo Garcia (near Polvadera); on the north the little table mesita of Alamillo (San Acacia Butte); on the west the Jara Spring (head of San Lorenzo canyon); and on the east the river known as the Rio del Norte (Rio Grande)."

Gov. Baca noted that all the land along the west side of the Rio Grande in this region was contained in either the Socorro or Sevilleta land grants. He modified Chavez' application to limit the land grant to within 1 mile of the river except for a small tract of land along the San Lorenzo arroyo. This would grant Chavez some access to the river and for building an acequia. Chavez agreed to the modification and the "Arroyo de San Lorenzo" land grant was awarded in late 1825, and consisted of 130,138 acres.

Antonio Chavez and his family worked their land "about 10 miles north of Socorro." After Antonio died, his wife and children continued living on the land until they sold it around 1850 to Ramon Luna, Rafael Luna and Anastacio Garcia, all pioneer families in Polvadera.

Rafael Luna died around 1870. In 1874, the two



Photo by Paul Harden

**James and Cecillia McCord have masterfully restored several of Polvadera's old adobe territorial buildings. This used to be the Clemente Chaves store.**

remaining land owners petitioned the U.S. Surveyor General for legal rights to the land grant under the Treaty of Hidalgo. This turned into 25 years of legal bickering.

Land grants require a continuous succession of family ownership. Since the Chavez' no longer owned the land, the squabble went all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court. In 1898, they rejected the validity of the grant.

The San Lorenzo Land Grant, upon which Polvadera and Chamisal are built, came to an end in 1898. Upon 1912 Statehood, the private land ownership of the residences was honored; the rest of the grant became state land. Years later, ownership of San Lorenzo Canyon, owned by the Padilla family, was transferred to the Bureau of Land Management and land along the river given to the Middle Rio Grande Conservancy District.

To this day, many of the pioneer families in Polvadera believe some of their land was stolen from them. And, they might be right. It was later determined that Surveyor General Julius had misinterpreted the Mexican land grant laws, on which rejection of the San Lorenzo and other grants were based. But, it was too late.

This complicated ordeal does explain why the name San Lorenzo is so common to the Polvadera area and the famous canyon to the west.

### Early Look at Polvadera

Very little is known about life in the numerous villages along the Rio Grande in the early 1800s. This is due to almost no written record.

That changed when Gen. Stephen Watts Kearny



Photo by Paul Harden

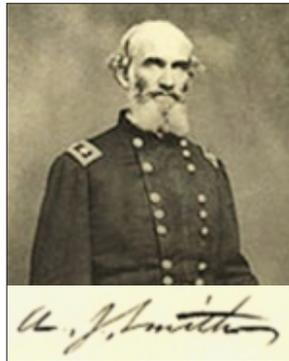
**The first Polvadera church was destroyed by flood in 1898, located about where the First Assembly of God church stands today. Only a portion of the nearby old cemetery remains.**

entered Santa Fe and raised the American flag in 1846. With him were several hundred Mormon soldiers, known as the Mormon Battalion.

On their march to California, they crossed to the west side of the Rio Grande at La Joya. With great difficulty, they hauled their wagons over the sand dunes by the Rio Salado. That day, Oct. 25, 1846, they learned the village ahead of them, Pulvidera, had just been attacked by Indians. The next day, they arrived and camped at the village before they continued on to Socorro.

Many of these Mormon men kept diaries. Many were young and still learning to read and write in English. Some of their diary entries, describing their travels through Polvadera, follows — exactly as recorded in their journals.

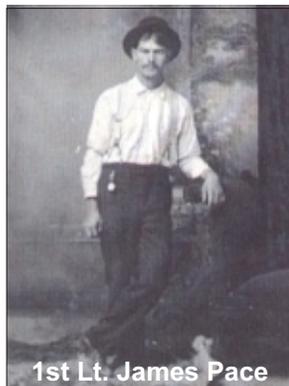
**Pvt. Azariah Smith** wrote: “Monday Oct. the 26th. Today we passed a village (Polvadera) where they sayed the Indians the day before had drove off all their sheep and goats. The Spaniards have their houses nearly all covered with red peppers; they also have large droves of Goats and a good many sheep, and some hogs & chickens. Their houses are built of mud and flat roofs covered with the same.”



**Pvt. Orson Brown** added: “Their land is all watered by ditches, and their cattle consists chiefly of herds of stock. There are some parts where grapes are abundant, out of which they make some wine and brandy.”

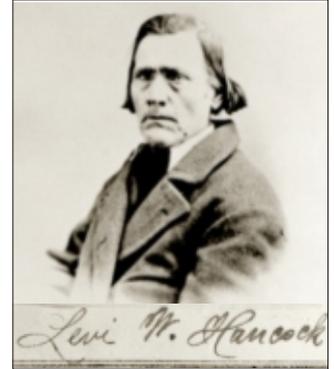


**1st Lt. James Pace** also recorded the difficult march into Polvadera: “Crost a sand ridge whare we had hard drawing and double teemeing ... whare we Encamt the Town was cald Pulvararo. The inhabitanes at this Town are Spaniards but seam to be sum briter than most. This Town had in it a Griss Mill the first I had saw in the cuntry.”



**Pvt. David Pettigrew** also wrote about the Polvadera grist mill: “Here was a gristmill worked by water power. This night our camp was full of Indians and Spaniards trading apples, grapes, melons, bread, flour, corn and whiskey.”

**Pvt. Levi Hancock** seemed particularly intrigued by the Catholic people he encountered as evidenced by his colorful description: “But here all have one religion. ... In every vilage of any considerable size may be seen the stout rugged



cathilick with its two large steples and three bells. And inside of those Catherdals Cathilolickism is displayed in its wildest notions for as some might called it ‘most refined,’ by images and paintings which is rather kept behind curtains.”

Upon leaving Polvadera, Lt. Hancock continued: “... marched 12 miles past through Souckramorus a town nearly as large as Santafe.”

And, Pvt. John Tippetts concluded: “Past through a plase caled Vloapus. This is the last town we past the country. The people keep large flocks and herds and live in towns and in mud houses one story and ruffs nearly flat.”

Of course, “Souckramorus” is Socorro, and “Vloapus” is Luis Lopez.

These Mormon diaries are among the first known written record of what life was like around Polvadera and a real insight into life around Socorro County.

### Polvadera Wine

Many historical references cite that grapes and wine became a popular industry from Lemitar to Polvadera in the 1880s. As the Mormon diaries reveal, the region was known for grapes and wine from before 1846.

What did change was the coming of the Santa Fe Railroad in 1881. Now Polvadera farmers could ship their grapes, wines and brandy to distant markets for top dollar. And, many did.

In 1883, some of the Polvadera families formed a ditch company, which brought 3,000 more acres of land into agricultural use. Along with other crops, 100,000 new grapevines were planted. This was big business in Polvadera, as evidenced by this 1885 ad in the Socorro Bullion newspaper:



Photo by Paul Harden

**This old building was the Sarracino Mercantile Co. and Dry Goods, operated by the Miguel Sarracino family. It served Polvadera for many years in addition to being a broker for many of the local vineyards and wineries.**



Photo by Paul Harden

**Sarracino Hall, a registered historic landmark, served Polvadera and Chamisal as the community center and dance hall for many years.**

“For Sale. A fine ranch of 45 acres at Polvadera with 7,000 bearing grape vines, a fine orchard ... wine cellar, wine vats and press and all the apparatus for making wine.”

However, constant floods down the Rio Grande periodically destroyed thousands of acres of good farmland and vineyards, from San Acacia to San Marcial. The Lemitar and Polvadera areas were always hard hit since so much of the farmland was only a few feet above the river level. During flood stages, the Rio Grande waters would become two miles wide.

Although the people of Polvadera seemed to always bounce back with their wines following a flood, it was Prohibition in 1919 that brought a centuries old industry in the area to an end. After Prohibition, a few vineyards were again started in Polvadera. However, these, too, were destroyed by a flood in 1943.



Photo by Paul Harden

**Long before postal zip codes, this old store building served as Polvadera's first post office, opened in 1881.**

## Chamisal

To most people, Polvadera is the small town a few miles north of Lemitar. However, there are really two distinct historic villages: Polvadera and Chamisal. Chamisal is the village about a mile north of Polvadera.

Many early settlers moved south of La Joya and formed the village of La Joyita. It was located on fertile land about a mile up river and on the east side from today's San Acacia. The 1850 census counted 186 persons at “El Jollital,” growing to 460 persons in “La Joyita” by the 1880 census, a fairly large village on the Camino Real at the time.

In 1884, a massive flood down the Rio Grande decimated La Joyita. The townspeople fled to the nearby high cliffs to witness their adobe homes crumble into the raging river. When the flood waters receded, 2 feet of silt covered their fertile fields and their homes were gone.

Not to be discouraged by a little bad luck, these hardy people moved across the river to establish the town of San Acacio, which is misspelled today as “San Acacia.” Others relocated to the south and established a village opposite the San Lorenzo arroyo. They named their new town “Bolon-guin,” roughly meaning “rocky hill.” The Anglos distorted the name to “Bowling Green,” the name that appears on maps to this day.

The people toiled hard to rebuild their farms and ranches at their new homes. By 1885, an interim census counted 145 people at “Bowling Green” and 350 at San Acacio. The following year, another flood submerged the farmlands along the Rio Grande and heavily damaged Bolon-guin — even the houses built atop the rocky hill.



Photo by Paul Harden  
**One of the first houses built in Chamisal. It was built by a father and son, Jose and Rafael Tafoya, in 1888. Later, it was the home of Diego Tafoya.**

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After the flood, the people at Bolon-guin crossed the river to the west in search of higher land. Once again, they started to rebuild their lives just south of the San Lorenzo arroyo — and north of Polvadera. They called their small village “Chamisal” after the thick chaparral of chamisa shrubs in the area.

Some of the people that crossed the river to establish Chamisal were the Apodaca, Giron, Tafoya, Montoya, Hidalgo and Vega families.

One of those was Juan Tafoya. One of his sons, Ramon, married Isabelita Padilla, of Polvadera, in 1888. Ramon built an adobe home in Chamisal that still stands today. They had two children, son



Photo by Paul Harden  
**Three generations of the Apodaca family are descendants of Chamisal’s first settlers – the Apodaca, Padilla, and Chavez families. Shown are (l-r) Juanita and Gary with mother Lilly, and children Garee-Celine and Lola. All still live on their ancestors land in Chamisal.**

Juan and daughter Francisca. Juan Jr. married Isabelita Montoya, of Polvadera, in 1912. They had seven children, born in Chamisal, although birth records cite Polvadera.

One of their sons was Diego Tafoya, an enterprising man in the area. He owned much of the land west of Chamisal and raised sheep. In the early 1930s, he got into a legal dispute with the State of New Mexico when they built U.S. Highway 85 through Polvadera on his property.

Tafoya felt they undervalued his land. As a result, he would occasionally close the highway, allowing only cars and trucks to pass through his land after paying a toll.

Diego Tafoya also built the El Morroco Bar that still stands on the Frontage Road in Polvadera. Little is known about this mysterious bar. Local old-timers recall that when Diego built the bar, it only operated for about a year or two before it was closed. The white adobe building has remained abandoned ever since and the name, “El Morocco Bar” painted on the facade is quickly fading into obscurity.



Photo by Paul Harden  
**Diego Tafoya’s short-lived El Morocco Bar is still seen on the Polvadera Frontage Road -- old U.S. 85.**

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One well-known resident of Chamisal was Mary Giron, one of the pioneer families in the area. The Polvadera Post Office was established, in 1881, in a store near Sarracino Hall. It was moved to Chamisal after World War II. Mary served as the postmaster from 1958-1990. Her postal career spanned 31 years, and she became the longest serving postmaster in New Mexico. Mary Giron died earlier this year, at 94 years of age.

Although her beloved post office says “Polvadera, NM,” it is actually located in Chamisal. Today, Debra Abeyta is the Polvadera postmaster.



Photo by Paul Harden

**Debra Abeyta has served as Polvadera Postmaster and Officer In Charge since 1990. The previous Postmaster, Mary Giron, served a record 31 years. The Polvadera Post Office is legally located in Chamisal.**

### 1900s Polvadera

The Albuquerque-El Paso highway was built in the 1920s, and passed through Polvadera and Socorro. Later rebuilt as U.S. Highway 85, Polvadera was the first major stop along the road south of Belen. As a result, several gas stations and stores were built for the new wave of motorists. Some of the old abandoned adobe structures along today's East Frontage Road through Polvadera are reminders of this era.

In 1929, floodwaters roared down the Rio Grande. Much of Polvadera and the eastern portion of Chamisal were damaged. Thousands of acres of farmland were destroyed and covered in silt. Much of Polvadera's "old town" was

destroyed. People rebuilt their homes and farms farther away from the river, nearer to U.S. 85. The San Acacia dam was built to ensure such devastating flooding would not occur again.

However, in 1936, another major flood inundated San Acacia, Polvadera, and down river to San Marcial. When the flood waters receded, once again, thousands of acres of farmland lay in ruin.

Demetrio "Dean" Baca remembers this flood very well, although he was a child at the time. He remembers the flood waters in all the stores and homes along Polvadera's "Main Street," the lake that formed across from his father's house, and the number of people that were left with no homes, no farms and no jobs.

After all, 1936 was in the middle of the Great Depression. Life was hard enough without another flood. The flood also washed out U.S. 85 and the bridge across the Rio Salado, which left Polvadera, Lemitar and Socorro virtually cut off from the rest of the world.

The lake that appeared from Polvadera to Escondida eventually drained. Today's Escondida Lake is a remnant of that lake.

The 1936 flood did get the government's attention. Almost overnight, WPA and CCC projects sprang up around the county. Dean Baca's father got a job with the WPA building the new Polvadera School. Others got jobs with the CCC, at a wage of \$12 a month, building the new road from Escondida to La Joya, to bypass ruined U.S. 85, as well as additional flood control channels. In spite of these efforts, the farmlands around Polvadera were visited again by flood waters in 1943 and 1948.



Photos by Paul Harden

**The old Polvadera school house (left) was believed to have been built in the early 1890s and heavily damaged in the 1929 flood (since restored). The new 1936 WPA built school (right) served the Polvadera area until closed in 1956.**



Photo by Paul Harden

This beautifully restored home was once the Connie Sarracino grocery store and gas station serving travelers down old U.S. 85 prior to the building of I-25.

In the early 1960s, Interstate 25 was built, and closely followed old U.S. 85. When completed and opened, almost overnight, Polvadera changed from a busy little town on the highway to one seldom visited. While the population of Polvadera and Chamisal has changed little over the years, the businesses are now gone. Only the old store fronts remain as a reminder of much better days. Many of these old buildings have been converted to private homes.

### San Lorenzo Church

As the Mormon soldiers observed, every Mexican village had “a cathilick church.” Polvadera was no exception.

The first church was built on the southern end of Polvadera and dedicated to San Lorenzo. It was located where the Assembly of God church is today. The old cemetery is just to the north.

This church was destroyed by flood waters in 1898. One of Polvadera’s pioneer families, Luciano Luna, donated land on higher ground on the north side of town. A new church was built and dedicated in 1902. The first mass was held by Father Filiberto Martín from San Miguel parish. The first mayordomo was Frutoso Barreras. This church was also dedicated to San Lorenzo and is the Polvadera mission church in use today.

The old families of Polvadera tell of angels appearing to early parishioners, telling them to dedicate their church to San Lorenzo. After they did, several miracles were reported to have occurred.

No date is associated with these miracles. However, it is curious that Antonio Chavez named his land grant “San Lorenzo,” suggesting these early miracles, and perhaps building the first



A 1910 photo from the Socorro County Historical Society shows the appearance of the new San Lorenzo mission shortly after being built and dedicated in 1909 (above). Note the luminarias along the roof line.



Photo by Paul Harden

The pitched roof and other improvements have been added over the years, giving the San Lorenzo mission the appearance it has today.

church, occurred prior to his 1825 land grant.

Today’s San Lorenzo church in Polvadera is a typical Mexican-era styled mission church. The people of Polvadera have kept the church in excellent and pristine condition. The San Lorenzo mission, and the old villages of Polvadera and Chamisal, adds to that special charm of Socorro County along the Rio Abajo.

**Some of the references used in this article:** *Office of the State Historian; records of the Socorro County Clerk; “The Annals of the Mormon Battalion,” compiled by Carl Larson; interviews with Juanita and Gary Apodaca, Cecilia McCord, Miguel and Dean Baca; and field work by the author.*

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