

SAN MARCIAL: RAILROAD TOWN

by Paul Harden

There were two San Marcials. The first took hold shortly after the Civil War, a small village near Mesa del Contadero. Taking advantage of the fertile farm land in the area, other farming villages were soon founded, such as Geronimo, La Mesa and Valverde. In 1880, the railroad arrived. At first, modest rail facilities and a small town were built on the banks of the Rio Grande. This San Marcial was often called "New Town" with the original town, called La Plaza Viejo or "Old Town," less than a mile away. New Town was destroyed in the 1929 flood; Plaza Viejo was destroyed in the 1937 flood. Though hardly a thing is to be seen today, the cluster of towns was once a bustling area and the second largest city in Socorro County.

• THE SANTA FE RAILROAD •

The Atcheson, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad (AT&SF), often called the Santa Fe¹, was formed to build a second transcontinental overland rail route to compete with the Union Pacific railroad (UP). Seeing the difficulties and extreme costs of keeping the UP line open during the winter months, they decided to bypass the mountains and heavy winter snow regions at all costs. Their route went across the Great Plains into Colorado, then south into New Mexico, more or less following the Rio Grande to Hatch, then to Deming for the last leg into California. This became known as the "Southern Route." The only mountainous terrain to tackle along this entire route was Raton Pass on the Colorado–New Mexico border.

Construction began at Topeka, Kansas in 1870, reaching Trinidad, Colorado, Raton Pass and Las Vegas, New Mexico during 1879. Crews extended the rails into Socorro and San Marcial in 1880, with freight and passenger service soon following. The rails reached the Southern Pacific railroad at Deming on March 8, 1881 to complete the line into California. Some 550 miles of track from Trinidad, CO, over Raton Pass, and into Deming were completed in only two years. By 1882, the AT&SF Chicago-to-Los Angeles Southern Route became the nation's second transcontinental railroad².



Photo: Kansas City Historical Society

The standard engine in AT&SF service on the transcontinental route through San Marcial from 1880–1910 was this 4-4-0 type engine.

• WHY SAN MARCIAL? •

The distance from Topeka, KS to Los Angeles, CA was right at 2,000 miles. The Santa Fe railroad decided they needed a major maintenance facility at the half way point. That was San Marcial, NM, located at milepost 1005 on the Santa Fe line. Upon their arrival in June 1880, not much happened at first. Once the line reached Deming the following year, crews were sent to San Marcial to begin building their facilities near the small Hispanic farming town of San Marcial. This included the depot, shops and a roundhouse for maintenance and rebuilding the locomotive engines, a turntable for turning trains around, the headquarters offices for the New Mexico Division of the AT&SF, plus housing for the engine crews, the section crews, and other employees. A major rail facility.

• THE SAN MARCIAL SHOPS •

The extensive maintenance shops is what put San Marcial on the map. Steam locomotives require frequent maintenance. The Federal Railroad Administration requires a complete engine overhaul every 1,472 days of engine use – based on the number of days the engine is under steam pressure, not calendar days – a rule still in effect today. This requires a complete rebuild of the boiler, flue pipes and other engine components every 12–18 months of service to

¹ Now BNSF railroad. Burlington Northern and AT&SF railroads merged in 1994.

² Today, BNSF has 32,500 miles of trackage and three transcontinental routes, much of it the former AT&SF.



Photo: SCHS, Ralph Lane Collection

San Marcial shops and roundhouse, ca. 1919



Photo: NMSU Photo Archives

Inside the San Marcial machine shop performing an engine boiler rebuild, ca. 1918

ensure the steam engine is operating properly and safely. Those engines, pulling freight and passengers across the country, is what made AT&SF their money.

The San Marcial shops were extensive with the best lathes, milling machines, forges, and other machinery of the time. These machines fabricated engine components, casted metal parts, remachined axles, bearings and drive wheels, boiler work, plus tool and die making, all to support the maintenance needs of the railroad. Often, the shops were manned 24-hours a day to keep up with the maintenance demands.

San Marcial remained the main maintenance facility for the AT&SF in New Mexico until 1910. It was then that the Belen cutoff through Abo Pass was completed to relieve the bottle-neck traffic over Raton Pass. AT&SF also opened its second transcontinental route from Belen to California through Kingman, AZ. The large maintenance shops in Albuquerque were built 1912-1920 to meet the growing maintenance demands due to the increased rail traffic through New Mexico.

From 1910 until its 1929 demise, San Marcial remained a busy place servicing the numerous daily freight and passenger trains still using the Southern Route, and along with it, a growing small city.

• A TOWN IS BORN •

The railroad became a godsend for some towns and the kiss of death for others. When the railroad arrived, that town flourished; towns that were bypassed generally died. We see this in Socorro County where the railroad passes through Polvadera, Lemitar, Socorro and San Antonio, for example, viable towns today. The towns bypassed by the AT&SF rails, such as La Joya, Las Canas, Bosquecito, San Pedro, Paraje and others have died or nearly so as people and commerce flocked to the railroad towns.

San Marcial was a unique case. The railroad arrived and built their facilities along the river where there was no town. A town needed to be built – from scratch. It didn't take long before enterprising people and investors arrived to build housing, stores, restaurants, and let us not forget saloons. Starting in 1881, a town was born.

As the town began to grow, about 250 men worked at the San Marcial shops, depot, section crews, and the AT&SF Division offices. These men, and their families, needed a place to live. The railroad built housing for the Division staff, train crews, and other staff. Still, many of the workers and their families, at first, lived in tents awaiting housing to be built.

San Marcial had gone from about nothing to a decent sized town in about two years. By 1883, it had a growing business district and housing with plans to build a school and a Protestant church³. The rail yards and shops were in full operation.

Then the first dose of bad luck struck New Town. An early morning fire destroyed several businesses and the depot. AT&SF quickly rebuilt the depot, the new one a large structure to also contain the Division offices on the second floor. This also inspired the town to form a volunteer fire department and a pump house for a small fire hydrant system.

³ The Catholic church for San Marcial was located in nearby La Plaza Viejo on the Camino Real, served by a priest from the Socorro Parish. In 1887, San Marcial became a Parish church to serve the growing population in the area.



Photo: SCHS, Ralph Lane Collection

The new San Marcial Depot and District offices, after the first depot burned to the ground in 1883.

After the depot, AT&SF built the “Railroad Hotel,” a luxurious 2-story hotel and restaurant. Once completed, San Marcial became the dinner and rest stop for the Southern Route passenger trains. This hotel became the Harvey House in 1885.

The second spell of bad luck came in May 1884 as the Rio Grande swelled from a heavy spring runoff and sent 2–3 feet of water down the town’s streets and washed out about two miles of track north of town, isolating the town and halting rail traffic for several days. An omen of things to come? If so, nobody seemed to notice.

While San Marcial was intended primarily as a maintenance hub, its sudden popularity with nearby interests surprised the railroad. Demands from the nearby Diamond A Ranch and other ranchers as a cattle shipping point forced the railroad to build a large stockyard south of the roundhouse in 1885. Loading shoots were also built for shipping ores to the smelters in El Paso from the Rosedale mines. It just seemed the popularity, growth and prosperity in San Marcial had no end.

The following year, August 1886, the Socorro Chieftain reports a major flood along the Rio Grande, causing severe flooding and damage. In Socorro, the depot was damaged with water on Manzanares Avenue all the way to the plaza. San Marcial suffered about the same. Once again, track crews kept busy repairing the washed out tracks and bridges to get the Southern Route open again to rail traffic.

By 1890, the railroad employed over 400 men with a \$20,000 monthly payroll⁴. San Marcial was clearly a major railroad town. The population was now about 1,200 persons and growing, making it the 2nd largest community in Socorro County, only a few hundred people behind Socorro. Socorro’s “boom days” were coming to an end as the area mines and smelters began to close, driving hundreds of people to look for work elsewhere. In late 1891, AT&SF removed the rails to the now abandoned Billings Smelter in Park City.

With Socorro’s population on the decline, talk arose to make San Marcial the County Seat. The problem: the prominent businessmen in town preferred to keep San Marcial as an unincorporated community and thus not bound to Territorial municipal control.

In 1891, another flood strikes San Marcial, washing out more tracks and causing an engine to tip over in the mud, though quickly repaired and placed back into service.

Then in 1920, the largest flood so far inundates the area, flooding several thousand acres of farm land near San Marcial, La Mesa and Valverde, including widespread damage to the railroad shops and roundhouse. The economic loss to the area farmers was devastating. This was the tipping point for San Marcial. The railroad and residents realized the Rio Grande needed to be tamed. Silt from recent floods had raised the river bottom to an elevation equal that of Valverde and San Marcial. Residents built levies and a flood control ditch from Valverde to San Marcial while the railroad built substantial levies to protect the city and their facilities.

Articles in the Socorro Chieftain indicate the Santa Fe railroad was, for the first time, considering relocating their shops to either higher ground or elsewhere. In either case, this would be a huge expense to the railroad moving the numerous shop buildings, roundhouse, turntable and all operations to another location. But, where?

⁴ \$20,000 in 1890 is equivalent to about a \$558,000 monthly payroll in 2018. A 20% reduction in shop staffing occurred around 1910, reducing the monthly payroll to about \$12,000, though still significant for a town of 1,500 people

• THE 1929 FLOOD •

The infamous 1929 flood was actually two floods.

First flood caused massive damage in San Marcial on August 13 when the levies were breached and flooded the town with 3-4 feet of water and silt. The town was unlivable and came to a standstill – including the railroad. The levies intended to save the town now prevented the flood waters from draining, converting San Marcial into a giant bathtub. The town remained submerged for a month. Finally, residents and railroad workers made a break in the levy on the south side of town, near the roundhouse, to allow the waters to drain from the townsite into the river. This worked! The flood waters finally began to recede from the town.



Photo: SCHS Archives

The downtown area following the first flood

Second flood struck September 23 after three days of heavy rains that caused the swollen Rio Grande to exceed flood stage once again. While the levies held, the flood waters gushed through the break made in the levy to flood the town. The torrent of water from the levy break was so great, several of the shop buildings collapsed – even the rock walls of the roundhouse.

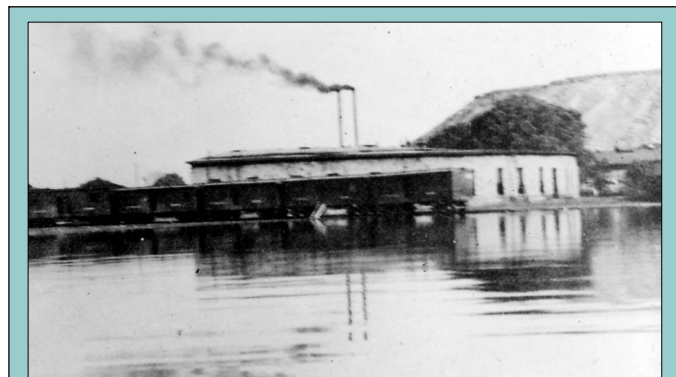


Photo: SCHS, Powell Collection

AT&SF roundhouse being swamped before its collapse by the levy break during the second flood.

San Marcial sat in a lake for months as Elephant Butte filled to capacity. Adobe walls began to melt; houses collapsed under the weight of their roofs; the town slowly disappearing into the muck.

The following was reported in the Nov. 2, 1929 Socorro Chieftain newspaper:

AT&SF has made the decision to abandon San Marcial. This means the stock yards, maintenance shops and the round house will be abandoned and not be rebuilt. All of the workers are being assigned to either Belen or El Paso, a payroll loss to Socorro County of \$12,000 monthly.

This was the kiss of death for San Marcial. Without the Santa Fe railroad, there was no incentive to rebuild. San Marcial was a railroad town. Without the railroad, there was no San Marcial.

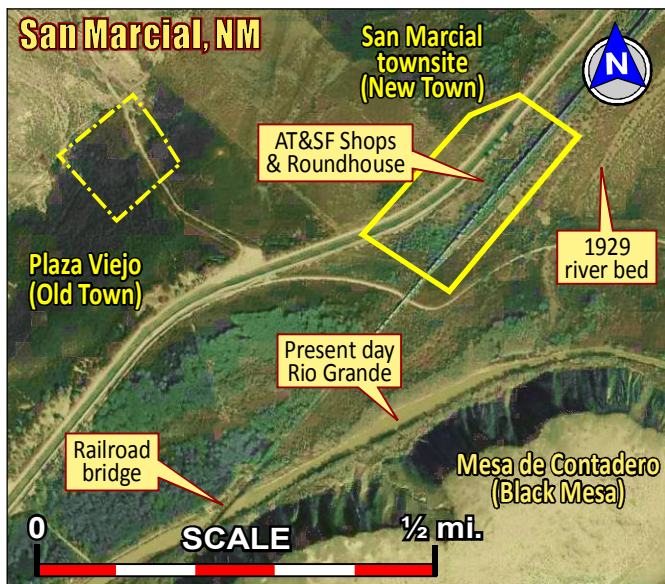
• SAN MARCIAL TODAY •

Many people have visited San Marcial and came home without seeing a thing. There are a few things left to see, if you know where to look. In general, the town is completely gone. The conveyance channel runs through what was once the downtown. A portion of the roundhouse still stands. Map and photos on the next page.



Photo: Paul Harden

San Marcial today



• THE SAN MARCIAL ROUNDHOUSE – FLOOD REMNANTS •

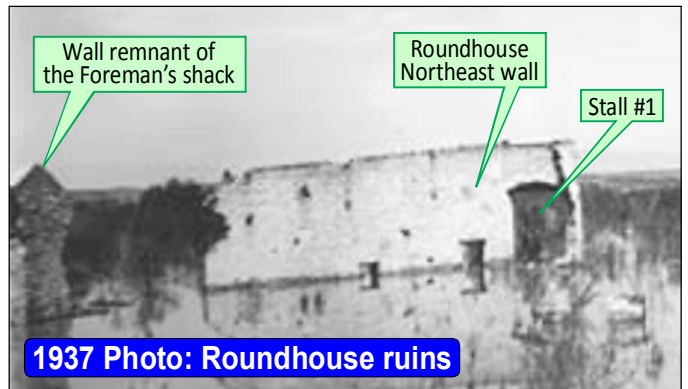
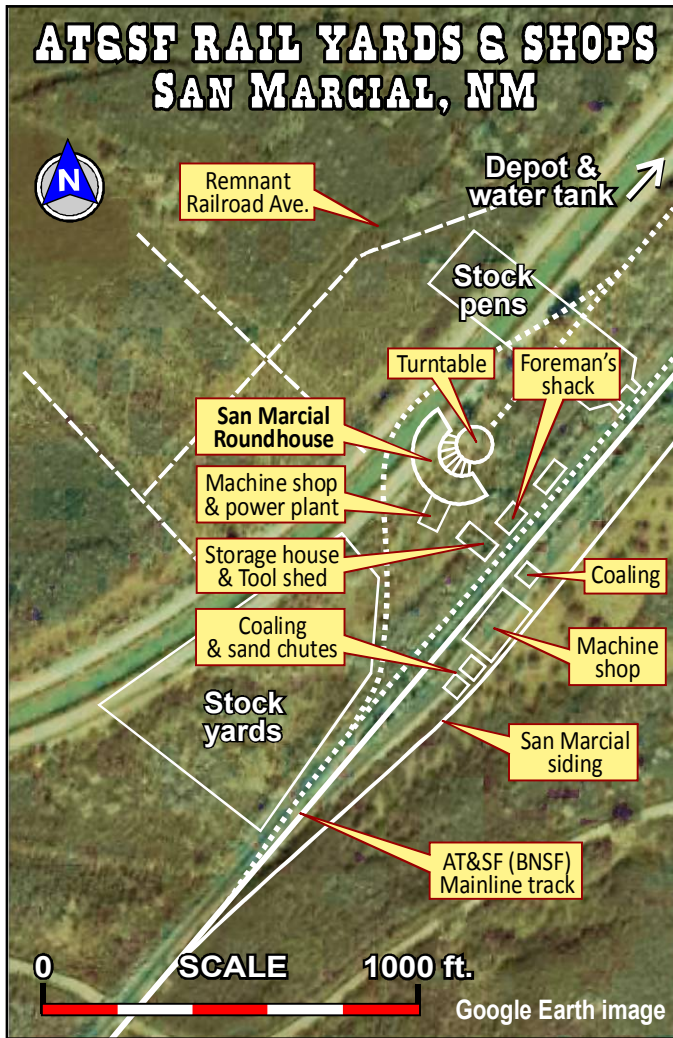


Photo: NMSU/Herbert Yeo Collection [image #00940131]
Roundhouse was destroyed in the 2nd 1929 flood. Appearance of ruins in 1937, looking south.

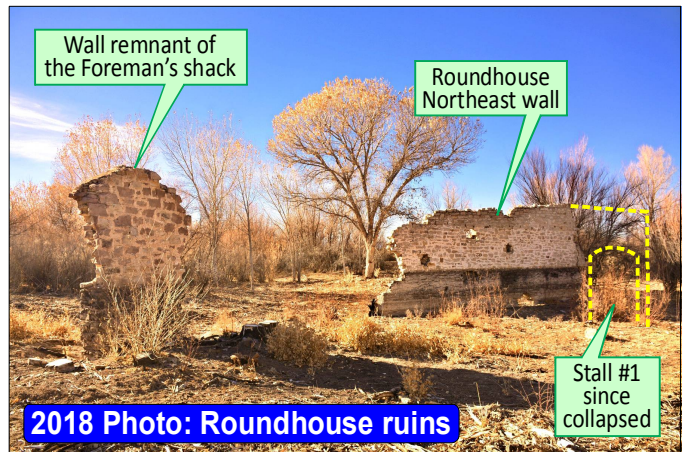


Photo: Paul Harden
Photo of roundhouse and foreman's shack ruins today in January 2018, the area exposed during the 2017 San Marcial bosque fire.



Photo: Paul Harden
SCHS members investigating the roundhouse wall on a recent mapping and survey trip to the site. Note water stain on wall showing the 1929 flood depth.

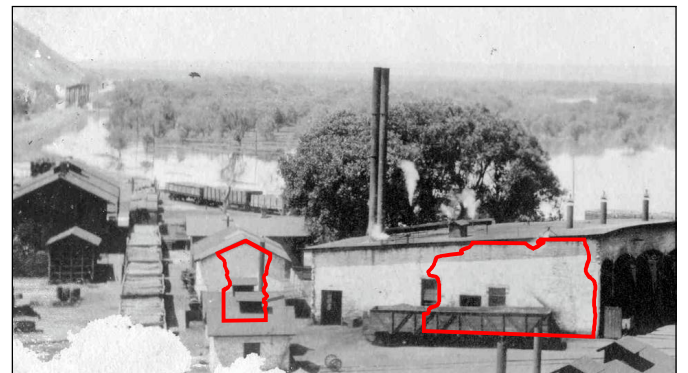


Photo: SCHS Archives
Red lines show origin of existing remnants

For More Information . . .

The SCHS website on San Marcial history and photos here:

<http://socorro-history.org/HISTORY/smarcial/pg.html>

More detailed report on San Marcial rail operations & photos here:

http://socorro-history.org/HISTORY/smarcial/sanmarcial_railroad.pdf