

Socorro County Historical Society

Post Office Box 921
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MEMBERSHIP NEWS • SEPTEMBER 2013

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OCTOBERFEST

October 5, 2013

Good Food, Drink, Music and Friends
at the Hammel Museum

Mark your calendars for the first Saturday in October for Socorro's annual Oktoberfest. Sponsored by the Socorro County Historical Society, this typically German festival is held in Socorro to honor the legacy of the Hammel family and their once famous Bavarian

beers as once brewed at the Hammel Brewery.

Our lunch meal will again be freshly grilled cooked – to include those



tasty hamburgers with all the fixings, or the long time honored favorite – sizzlin' brats. Wash it down with

water, iced tea or a selection of soft drinks – or if you wish, good ole Killian's Irish Red on tap. A suitable desert might be found at the Bake Sale, with the usual diverse selection of music, model trains and other entertainment.

There is no admission charge for Oktoberfest and the public is invited.

Doors open at 10 a.m., lunch served from about 11:30 a.m.–3 p.m. Meals are for a donation of \$5 per plate; soft drinks and adult beverages extra. You can also renew your SCHS membership, \$20 per person per year.



CAPT. ALEXANDER McRAE MONUMENT DEDICATED

Killed During Battle of Valverde
February 21, 1862

SCHS Honored For Assistance In Fayetteville, North Carolina

Several months ago, the Sons of the Union Veterans of the Civil War (SUVCW) contacted the Socorro County Historical Society for assistance with a most unusual request. The SUVCW desired to erect a monument in Fayetteville, North Carolina to hometown hero Captain Alexander McRae. The monument would be part of several activities planned throughout North Carolina for the 150th anniversary of the Civil War. To erect the monument, they needed the help of the SCHS or some other local entity. Their request was a doozie (read on).

Paul Harden agreed to work on the project and was put in contact with Doug Elwell of the SUVCW. It was explained that placing a monument in Fayetteville to Capt. McRae was 150 years in the making and seemingly plagued with a host of difficulties and roadblocks.



The McRae monument dedication in Fayetteville, NC. The monument rock came from Socorro County. Doug Elwell on far right.

Continued next page 

Alexander McRae

Alexander McRae was an Army officer serving in New Mexico with the Mounted Rifles, later the 3rd Cavalry. He came from a prominent family in Fayetteville, North Carolina. At the onset of the Civil War, his four brothers had joined the rebel army. In spite of letters from his influential father for a guaranteed commission in the Confederate Army, Alexander chose to remain loyal to the Union.

The Confederates, Sibley's Brigade of Texas Mounted Volunteers, arrived at El Paso and New Mexico in late 1861. At this same time, Capt. Alexander McRae was placed in command of the artillery at Santa Fe, and in November 1861, brought the guns to Fort Craig. Thereafter, the artillery unit was called "McRae's Battery," consisting of six mountain Howitzer canons.

On February 21, 1861, McRae's Battery was one of the artillery units engaged in the Battle at Valverde south of Socorro. His battery was located on the east side of the Rio Grande, just north of Black Mesa (Mesa de Contadero). His guns blazed away to keep the Texans from advancing onto the battlefield.

In mid-afternoon, the rebels made a sudden charge at the Union forces on the field. Both armies were now fully engaged in the battle. It was during this rain of gunfire and hand-to-hand combat that most of the battle casualties were sustained – including Capt. McRae, whose arm was shattered by a miniball. Still, he continued his constant fire of shells and cannisters at the enemy. Another rebel charge overwhelmed his men. Then, with a rebel bullet to the head – Capt. McRae fell dead – next to the Union guns he gave his life to save.

The Confederates captured McRae's Battery and turned the guns around to fire on Union forces. This was instrumental in forcing the Union retreat. Capturing McRae's canons was a major prize for the Texans – used by the rebels for the rest of the war.

After the Battle

Capt. McRae was buried at the Ft. Craig cemetery. Following the Civil War, those interred were offered to be returned to the families. McRae's family refused Alexander's body, presumably due to his choice to remain loyal to the Union. Gen. Sherman's march also leveled Fayetteville at the end of the war, leaving ill feelings towards the Union for years to come.

In 1867, McRae's body was exhumed and reinterred, with full honors, at the National Cemetery at West Point.

Herein lies one of the problems. For years, it has been desired to honor Alexander as one of Fayetteville's fallen soldiers, and a son of one of the town's pioneer families. However, city fathers have

refused for a soldier to be honored that wore a Union uniform. To some, the Civil War has never ended.

Today, the McRae's remain a prominent family of doctors and attorneys in Fayetteville. For the 150th anniversary of the Civil War, the SUVCW again proposed to the Cumberland County Commission to erect a monument to Alexander McRae.

SCHS Involvement

This is where SCHS became involved. Paul Harden was interviewed by several local officials, and a newspaper reporter, who were absolutely amazed to learn Capt. McRae was not a forgotten figure, but fairly well known in New Mexico for his involvement, and death, during the Battle of Valverde. They were also amazed to learn Ft. McRae, near Elephant Butte, was named in his honor, and one of his canons was on display at the Eastwood High School in El Paso – incidentally, located on McRae Boulevard.

On behalf of SCHS, Paul provided historical information plus photos of the canon, the battlefield, Black Mesa, and where Capt. McRae fell.



The canon on display at Eastwood High School in El Paso, TX. It was buried in the Rio Grande after breaking the axle and assumed to be one of McRae's canons.

Doug Elwell called Paul that the County Commission was so impressed to learn their native son has remained a hero in New Mexico, after 150 years, they finally approved the monument. It was to be erected at the old county courthouse – built on land donated years ago by the McRae family.

Now for the Doozie

They were so impressed with the photos sent to them of the battlefield, they decided they wanted to build the monument *from a lava rock from Black Mesa where Alexander fell.*

The Armendaris Ranch approved removing a lava rock from Black Mesa for this purpose. However, the logistics of accessing the lava mesa on the east side of the river and moving a half-ton chunk of rock became problematic.

Paul discussed the problem with SCHS President Robert Eveleth, who proposed obtaining the rock from the lava mesa near the Dicaperl mine. SCHS was granted permission by Dicaperl to remove a lava rock from their property for this purpose, and Doug Elwell approved the substitution.

In March, Doug sent Paul the dimensions of the brass plaque for the monument; Paul selected several

suitably sized rocks and sent photos to Doug, who selected one of the choices.

In April, Paul began making arrangements to lift the lava rock and get it shipped to Fayetteville. The Dicaperl mine eagerly offered to help in anyway they could. What a life saver! They lifted the 800-pound lava rock out of the ground with a front-end loader. The Very Large Array donated a shipping skid for the



Lifting the lava rock out of the ground near Socorro's Dicaperl plant.

A triangular shaped rock was requested for the monument.



Lava rock and shipping crate being loaded on the truck (now weighing 910 pounds).

Next stop: Fayetteville, North Carolina.

rock. It was then learned the rock had to be completely enclosed in a wooden crate. Paul purchased the wood and supplies and with the help of some Dicaperl employees, constructed the shipping crate. The lava rock was shipped to Albuquerque via RAC Transport, and to Fayetteville via Old Dominion Truck Lines.

SUVCW paid for all shipping fees; the crated lava rock weighed 910 pounds. The original estimate was about \$950; however, the local freight line agent in Albuquerque, intrigued by the project, got a special rate of about \$400 based on the lava rock being a "cemetery memorial stone."

The Alexander McRae monument was erected in



Lava rock from Socorro arrives in Fayetteville, NC. A local mortuary attached the brass plaque to the rock.

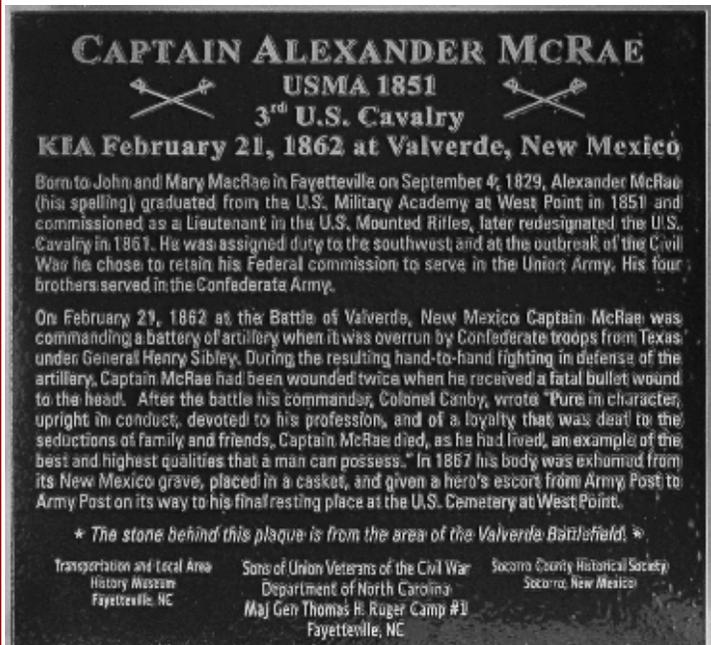


Three generations of the McRae family at the dedication of the monument. The McRae's came from Scotland and settled in the Fayetteville area around 1748.

front of the old Fayetteville courthouse in May with a special dedication with the family in attendance, and another SUVCW veterans dedication in June by representing both Union and Confederate soldiers. SCHS was honored during the dedication for the assistance with the monument.

Few fallen soldiers are honored by both armies of a conflict. With the help of SUVCW and SCHS, Capt. Alexander McRae became one of them.

This SCHS project will be submitted to El Defensor-Chieftain for a possible community interest article, and hopefully some good public awareness of "what we do."



A closer view of the brass plate, which states in part, "The stone behind this plaque is from the area of the Valverde Battlefield." Socorro County Historical Society is credited in the lower right corner.

A Mysterious Check

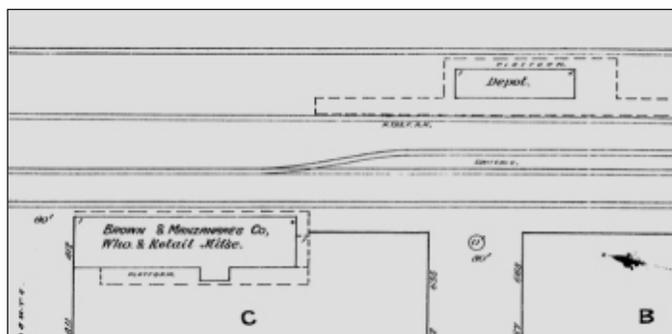
Paul Harden is often finding strange historical things to research and Bob Eveleth has a knack of finding even stranger things on Ebay. Not long ago, Bob found an offering of the check shown to the right on Ebay. Interesting enough for the two gents to try and figure out the mysterious check.



Bob and Paul concluded the check “just doesn’t make sense.” Dated 5/12/1897, it is a dividend check for \$22.72 from Browne & Manzanares Co. in Socorro written to themselves. Even stranger, the notation states it is a 2% dividend payment to Sperling Brothers, another area merchant at the time.

Even more mysterious is the check is signed by “H. M. Dougherty,” a Socorro attorney (and later a Socorro County prosecuting attorney) with no known connection to Browne & Manzanares. So why is he signing the check? To themselves, no less? And a dividend check to the Sperling brothers?

Browne & Manzanares and Sperling Brothers were two major mercantile businesses in Socorro. They offered groceries to hardware and ranch supplies to women clothing. They were the “Walmart” of the time. You can find ads for both businesses in the *Socorro Chieftain* and listed in business directories. Yet, little is known about these two business or why they closed their doors, seeming so suddenly. The mystery check was a good excuse to conduct a little research on these two Socorro County businesses.



The 1893 Sanborn Insurance map shows the location of Browne & Manzanares Co. just yards from the Socorro depot. It was located on the west switch track where the sewage plant is today.

Browne & Manzanares Co.

Lawrence P. Browne (note the “e”) and Francisco A. Manzanares were merchants that followed the AT&SF Railroad as it advanced across Kansas and Colorado. In 1879, when the railroad reached Las Vegas, NM, the two formed the partnership of Browne & Manzanares and built a huge retail merchandise store. Constantly stocked by railroad freight, there wasn’t anything the residents of northeast New Mexico couldn’t get at the enterprise. And, the two partners made a lot of money.

By 1881, they had built similar stores along the AT&SF tracks at Trinidad, CO, Lamy Junction, NM and Socorro. For years, it was the dominant merchandising business in Socorro – and the second largest in the territory.

Historian Ralph Emerson Twitchell described the enterprise as “the greatest of the frontier trading and overland freighting concerns of the Southwest.”

L. P. Browne died in Kansas City in 1893. Thereafter, the company’s history gets a little murky. The Socorro branch was closed in 1899. Nothing has been found in the *Socorro Chieftain* at the time describing why the lucrative enterprise suddenly closed its doors in Socorro and relocated to El Paso, TX. Their store in Las Vegas continued to operate for many more years, even after the death of the remaining partner, F. A. Manzanares in 1904.

Still, the mystery check was issued in 1897, two years before Browne & Manzanares in Socorro was closed. Was the business in receivership with attorney D. H. Dougherty perhaps acting as the receiver?



An engraving of Browne & Manzanares in Socorro in the 1880s. While Socorro was a major commerce center at this time, it is doubtful it was as "busy" as the illustration shows.

Sperling Brothers

The history of the two Sperling brothers is also quite murky, if not outright confusing. Little is found in the old Chieftains until Sept. 27, 1895 with the simple announcement: "Sperling Bros. closed their doors on Wednesday last, having made a general assignment for the benefit of their creditors."

A legal notice appeared the following month. *"In order to close the assigned estate of Charles H. Sperling (Sperling Bros.) it is necessary that steps be taken at once to collect all amounts due the said firm. All persons indebted to said estate will please promptly call and settle with the undersigned assignees and save costs. H.M. Dougherty, Assignees Charles H. Sperling, Socorro, NM Oct. 25, 1895."*

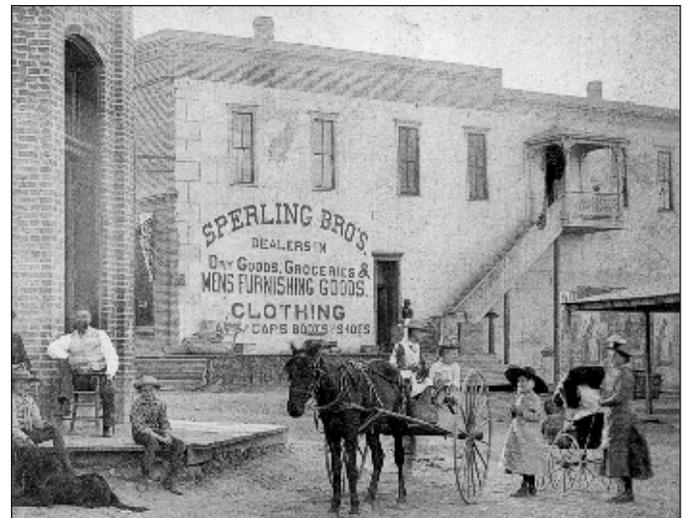
This suggests Charles Sperling must have died in 1895. Remember that year.

However, a detailed obituary is found in the Sept. 24, 1910 Chieftain, five years later:

"Grief was caused in this city Thursday morning by the report that Charles Sperling was dead. Mr. Sperling had been well known and highly respected in Socorro for nearly thirty years and it was the older residents of the city there, who were especially shocked at the report of his death, the more because the end came almost without warning. Charles and Frank Sperling, brothers, came to Socorro from Texas in 1881. They went into the general merchandise business in the building which was later converted into the Sickles Hotel, now the Depot Hotel. A little later the business was transferred to the two story building bought two years adjacent to the Gem Theater. In about

1887, Sperling Brothers established a branch house Magdalena and it was at that place of business that the younger brother, Frank, was foully murdered in 1889. Charles Sperling continued the business in Socorro until almost seven years ago (1903-04) when finance reverses compelled him to go out of business on his own account."

Aren't those old obituaries great for details? Regardless, if Charles Sperling died in 1910, then why were they settling his "estate" in 1895, six years after brother Frank was killed? Yet, the obituary clearly states the business operated until 1903 or 1904.



Sperling Brothers store in Socorro on Manzanares Street, where Los Torres Gambles is today. They also had a store in Magdalena.

Attorney Dougherty was the assignee of the Sperling estate in 1895; two years later in 1897 he's also signing checks for B. & M. Co. Shouldn't the 1897 dividend check have gone to the Sperling estate? Isn't representing both businesses a conflict of interest? Maybe a little embezzling or equally mysterious transaction? And where did the guy on ebay get this check anyway?

Bob and Paul are pretty sure there's a story here, but as of yet, we haven't figured it out. Can you?

So if it's still a mystery with a confusing time line and no answers, why write this article?

We just didn't want all this research to go to waste!

The “Caterpillar Express”

Double-headers on the Cumbres & Toltec Railroad

A little something for our Train Gang friends
– or for that matter – any train buff

A “double-header” is when a train is drawn by two locomotives to provide extra motive power – such as for long trains or climbing steep grades. Double headers are expensive to the railroad as each engine has its own crew and fuel expense – and thus are relatively rare. When the Durango & Silverton or Cumbres & Toltec Scenic Railroad (CTSRR) periodically runs a special double-header train, it is usually sold out due to the novelty for train buffs and the photographic opportunities.

In June of this year, CTSRR was *forced* to run double-headers out of Chama for about two weeks due to an invasion of tent caterpillars. That’s right, those little squirmy things no longer than your thumb.

Each year in late spring, these caterpillars feed on the aspen trees. Once in a while an unusual number of them seem to invade the mountains, stripping entire aspen groves of their leaves. This year, the number of caterpillars was so enormous, they actually halted the railroad! There were so many caterpillars crawling along the rails, the 188,000 pound engines (K-36s) lost traction from the mush of crushed caterpillars on the tracks and the trains stalled. It is known this occurred in historic times when the D&RGW operated the Antonito to Chama line.

As a result, CTSRR began running double-headers for the extra power needed to keep the train moving through the caterpillars. Most of the problems were



Caterpillars by the thousands along the tracks of the CTSRR between Chama and Cumbres Pass.



A special double-header approaching Cresco tank, where engines were stalled by the thousands of caterpillars.

seen on the 4½% grade between the Cresco water tank and the 10,000 ft. summit at Cumbres.

The word of the unplanned double-headers spread quickly and railfans from across the country arrived in Chama to photograph – or ride – the special trains.

After about two weeks, with no relief from the caterpillars, CTSRR mechanics modified engine 488 with special air nozzles to blow the pesty creatures off the rails just ahead of the forward trucks (wheels).

There’s the proverbial question, “How do you stop a train?” Now you know.

A video of a double-header slipping on the mushy rails is found here (wheels slip at 1:15 and 1:50):

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qN6O0J1rLpY>



Special nozzles were designed and installed at the Chama shops to “blow” the caterpillars off the tracks. Engine brake air from the compressor was reduced to 2 psi for the nozzles.