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P. M. Baldwin

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A SHORT HISTORY OF THE MESILLA VALLEY

By P. M. BALDWIN

HISTORY is too often thought of as being played only on a big stage, with nationally known characters for the actors. But human achievements have been, in the main, the work of many individuals of humble rank. Fully to understand the processes of history we must study the flow of life in the small communities, which are the cells of the national organism. Hence, no apology is needed for a brief article on the local history of Mesilla Valley and vicinity. The region included will be that part of the valley of the Rio Grande lying between Elephant Butte dam and the city of Juárez, Chih., Mexico. It forms portions of Sierra and Doña Ana counties in New Mexico, and El Paso county in Texas.

We know exceedingly little of the earliest inhabitants of this valley, yet the remains of Indian villages over by the San Andrés Mountains, northeast of Las Cruces, prove that people were settled here hundreds of years before the coming of the Spaniards. They were, perhaps, similar in culture to the pueblo Indians in the northern part of the state today. Why they left we can only conjecture; perhaps because of a change of climate, perhaps owing to incursions of more warlike, non-agricultural tribes.

The first white men who entered the Mesilla Valley were probably the party of Friar Augustín Rodríguez in 1581. The earlier explorers had crossed what is now Arizona and New Mexico from the west. The route opened up by Rodríguez, namely, down the Conchas to the Rio Grande and then up the valley of the latter river, was more direct than the older way and was afterwards trod by the feet of most of the explorers, soldiers, missionaries, traders, and settlers who came to New Mexico from New Spain.

In the early days, however, nobody tarried in the Mesilla Valley but merely passed through on the way to the settlements farther north, which were isolated from the frontier mining towns of New Biscay by six hundred miles of uninhabited wilderness.

The first step towards filling up this long gap came with the founding, in 1659, of the mission of Guadalupe del Paso, in what is now Juárez. The corner stone of the church was laid in 1662. In 1680, the El Paso district received an influx of settlers from the north. These were refugees from Santa Fé, Isleta, and other places, who had survived the Pueblo rebellion and the wholesale massacre of white settlers with which it began. For over a decade El Paso was the most northerly outpost of Spanish civilization. In 1693, however, Santa Fé was recaptured by De Vargas and the seat of the provincial government re-established there.

The route between El Paso and the northern capital was a hazardous one. Indians made the trail unsafe for any but well-armed and vigilant caravans. In 1770, a presidio was established at Robledo (near modern Fort Selden) for protection against the Indian marauders. North of that point lay a waterless stretch of ninety miles, grimly called the Jornada del Muerto, or "journey of death." No attempt at agricultural settlement in the Mesilla Valley was made as yet, probably because of the Indian menace. About once a year a slow caravan passed through on its way to Santa Fé, and, after two or three months in the north, returned. Between its coming and its going, the valley was as deserted as the Jornada itself.

The first recorded attempt at settlement came in 1805 by Don Antonio García, of El Paso. He proposed to work a silver mine in the Organ Mountains and to keep the Apaches at peace by growing crops for them over by the river. Nothing appears to have been done until about 1819 when the mine was worked for a short time in a crudely primitive way and the ore was conveyed by burros to a wasteful smelter situated near the later site of Fort Fillmore. However, the

Apaches took the crops without asking, attacked the mine, and soon compelled the abandonment of the settlement. In later times the García grant was purchased by Hugh Stephenson, of El Paso, and the mine was re-opened. It is now known as the Bennett-Stephenson mine.

In 1822, a Missourian named John Heath obtained a grant of the Brazito tract from the emperor, Iturbide. Had this grant been confirmed by the emperor's successors, John Heath might well have become the Moses Austin of New Mexico. He organized a colony of artisans and farmers, purchased a quantity of implements and supplies, but was refused permission to proceed to his grant. After the American occupation, his son endeavored to obtain possession of the Brazito tract, but his claim was disallowed.

It was not until 1843 that a successful and permanent settlement was planted in the Mesilla Valley. This was the Doña Ana Bend colony organized by Don José María Costales, who, in 1839, had obtained from the governor of the state of Chihuahua a grant of land about twelve miles long on the east side of the river. The colony consisted of 107 men, 59 women, 48 boys, and 47 girls. Each head of a family was to be granted a plat of rather more than one hundred acres and single men half as much. The hardships were great and the Apaches were so troublesome that in 1844 many of the settlers left. A few remained, however; some returned, and the colony stuck. In 1846, during the Mexican war, when Doniphan's Missouri volunteers came through, after a terrible three days' crossing of the Jornada, they found at Doña Ana "plenty" of grain, and other forage for their animals, running streams of water, and an abundance of dried fruit, cornmeal, and sheep and cattle."

Having found provision for his troops at Doña Ana, Doniphan continued his way southward to cooperate with General Wool in the conquest of Chihuahua. At about 3 p. m. on Christmas Day, 1846, while Doniphan's forces were engaged in pitching camp near the Brazito, a "little arm" of the Rio Grande now dry and partly obliterated,

situated not far from the present village of Mesquite, an unusual cloud of dust was observed approaching from El Paso. Presently the plumes and banners of a body of Mexican dragoons were plainly visible. The American soldiers, dashing down loads of wood and buckets of water, came rushing to answer the assembly call. The Mexican cavalry, dressed in blue pantaloons and green coats trimmed with scarlet, with swords and lances glittering in the sun, doubtless made a more imposing military display than the buckskin-clad Missouri volunteers opposed to them. Before the battle began, a Mexican horseman, bearing a black flag, rode up and summoned the American commander to appear before the Mexican general. Receiving a derisive reply, he warned the Americans to prepare for a charge and galloped back. The Mexican charge was repulsed by the accuracy of the American fire. An infantry attack was likewise broken by the steadiness of the men under Doniphan's immediate command, who reserved their fire till the enemy advanced within sixty paces. The volley that then rang out wrought such fearful execution that the attack crumpled and the Mexicans were soon in confused flight towards El Paso. The Americans had only eight men wounded, none killed. The Mexican loss was 43 killed, 150 wounded, and five taken prisoner. There was a large booty and the victors regaled themselves with bread and wine captured from the enemy. On the following day, the American forces proceeded to El Paso, which was entered on the 27th of December without opposition.

After the signing of the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which ended the Mexican War, some of the inhabitants of New Mexico, who did not wish to become American citizens, moved across the Rio Grande. A colony of these people established the town of Mesilla, then on the west side of the river, and which was thought to be within Mexican jurisdiction. But it was not long before a controversy arose over this point. According to the treaty, the international boundary, from the Rio Grande westward, was to be the southern

boundary of New Mexico, as shown in a "Map of the United Mexican States," published in New York in 1847, by J. Disturnell. But when the surveyors attempted to determine the line on the ground, it was found that the map was very inaccurate. It placed El Paso 30' too far to the northward and both the city and the river were over two degrees to the east of their actual position. However, the commissioners, Bartlett and Condé, agreed on the parallel of 32° and 22' for the boundary, which would have left Mesilla clearly in Mexico. Partisan activities in Washington wrecked this settlement and Bartlett was dismissed; in fact, a number of changes in the personnel of the boundary commission were made and at one time congress left it without funds to carry on its work. In the meantime, William Carr Lane, governor of New Mexico, issued a proclamation claiming jurisdiction in the disputed region. Angel Trias, governor of the state of Chihuahua, prepared to resist Lane's claim by force of arms. It looked as if the United States and Mexico might be again drawn into war, and the little town of Mesilla, the bone of contention, became familiar to newspaper readers in both countries. However, Lane was recalled and James Gadsden was sent to Mexico to negotiate a new boundary and one that would give an advantageous route for a transcontinental railway entirely on United States territory. Gadsden was successful in negotiating the treaty which bears his name, and which was signed at Mexico City on December 30, 1853.

The new territory acquired under it was added to Doña Ana county, which was one of nine counties organized by the first territorial legislature. It was large enough to be a state, as it stretched from the present eastern boundary of New Mexico clear across to the Colorado river at Yuma.

Although the main object of the Gadsden purchase had been to obtain a desirable route for a railroad to the Pacific, it was to be a generation before this aim was realized. An overland stage, however, began to operate in 1857, carrying mail each way twice a month from San Antonio to San

Diego. In September the following year the Butterfield stage from St. Louis to San Francisco made its initial trip. The service at first was twice weekly, later daily. The long ride of 2,760 miles was covered in twenty-five days and the schedule was nearly always maintained. Mesilla was an important post on both these stage routes. The traffic through the valley, which flowed north and south in Spanish and Mexican times, was now diverted mainly to an east and west direction.

It was during the fifties that Forts Selden and Fillmore were established to protect settlers in the valley from the Apaches and Comanches. The latter fort was named after Millard Fillmore who was president of the United States when New Mexico became a territory. When the Civil War broke out, a force of Union soldiers was stationed here, under the command of Major Lynde. When Colonel Baylor, of the Confederate Army, invaded New Mexico, Lynde evacuated Fort Fillmore and started for Fort Stanton, in the Pecos Valley. He was overtaken by Baylor near the Organ Pass and there surrendered. Baylor had already occupied Mesilla and now, on August 1, 1861, issued a proclamation setting up a territory of Arizona, to be attached to the Confederate States. Mesilla was to be the capital of this territory. Southern New Mexico remained in the hands of the Confederates until May of 1862.

The Civil War affected the Mesilla Valley in a number of ways, most of them unfortunate. After the war, political passions naturally ran high, and in 1871 an election riot occurred in Mesilla, in which nine men were killed and between forty and fifty wounded. In those "wild and woolly" days, the judge decided it would be dangerous to do any investigating and nobody was ever punished for the disturbance. But both sides had had enough and there was no further bloodshed.

It may seem strange to blame the war for the disastrous floods of 1862 and 1865, which resulted in the Rio Grande changing its course and putting the town of Mesilla on the

east side of the river. Yet, it was probably more than a chance coincidence that this occurred during the war period. During the spring freshets, the river had often threatened to break through at the intake of a big irrigation ditch on the west side. It had been kept back by vigilant labor on the part of the settlers. But now when war reduced the manpower and money available for peaceful objects, the river seized its opportunity and in 1865 made a mad rush through the weakened ditch-head and cut itself a new and shorter channel down the valley.

Another and more terrible enemy likewise found an opportunity in the Civil War. The pre-occupation of the white men with their own quarrel left the garrisons that had restrained the Indians unmanned. They soon took the war-path and, even after the Union had re-established its authority, were a terror to the settlers for many years. Not until 1886 were the last of the hostiles overcome.

The Civil War also delayed the entry of a railroad into this region. Even the stage lines were interrupted, not only by the War itself, but by the Indian troubles that followed it. In the seventies, freight was brought in by wagon train from Trinidad, Colorado, then the terminus of the railroad. But the best and easiest of the transcontinental routes could not remain neglected. In 1881, the last spike of the main line of the Southern Pacific was driven at Deming and at about the same time a branch line of the Santa Fe down the Rio Grande Valley from the north reached El Paso. As this line avoided old Mesilla, Las Cruces presently became the chief business center and the county seat of Doña Ana county.

Perhaps the most curious episode in local history was the establishment of the Shalam colony. It originated in the fertile brain of Dr. John B. Newbrough, of Boston, a tall, handsome, well educated man of magnetic personality. This man had written a new bible entitled Oahspe.* It is an

*Copies are in the library of the New Mexico Historical Society and in the library of the New Mexico College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts.

extraordinary tale of celestial politics, which could have been conceived only in a Yankee mind. In it was told the story of how Kriste, having defeated his two rivals, Brahma and Buddha, called a convention which adopted a code (the Bible), and then proceeded to the election of a god. After the balloting had continued one year and five months, five candidates were still in the running. A deadlock of seven weeks then ensued, when the matter was referred to the angels, who chose Kriste, the leader of the angelic army.

Newbrough had great influence over a wealthy Boston merchant, named Howland. He persuaded Howland that God had revealed to him that he was the chosen instrument for the founding of a new colony where brotherly love should reign. Newbrough led Howland out to New Mexico, got off the train at Las Cruces, and located a tract of nine hundred acres, on which a colony was in fact founded. It was incorporated December 30, 1885, as the "First Church of the Tae." The sect was known as the "Faithists." The society was communistic, agrarian, humanitarian, and vegetarian. Howland sank his fortune into excellent buildings and stock. A coöperative store was established. A pump irrigation plant was erected. The most notable achievement was a model infants' home. Financial failure wrecked the colony, however, and it broke up in 1901, when the disciples lost a suit to recover money they had paid.

Since the advent of the railroad, the story of the Mesilla Valley has been mainly one of peaceful economic and cultural development. The removal of the soldiers from the forts as the Indian troubles vanished deprived the farmers of a valuable local market but, on the other hand, the railroad relieved them from dependence on a market entirely local. With a fertile soil and a good climate, the chief difficulty was the control of the unruly Rio Grande, which alternated between flood conditions and its almost complete drying up in time of drought. The only remedy was the construction of a big dam that should hold its waters in check. In the '90s Dr. Nathan Boyd, of Las Cruces, got

some English capitalists interested in building a dam at Elephant Butte and Col. W. J. Engledue, for many years identified with irrigation works in India, came out and reported very favorably on the project. A company was incorporated and work started. After \$250,000 had been spent upon it, a suit instigated by a coterie of real estate speculators in El Paso and Juárez, was brought by the United States government to enjoin the company from proceeding with the work, on the absurd ground that the Rio Grande was a navigable stream. Another objection urged was that the rights of Mexico in the water would be prejudicially affected. This suit held up development for many years. Finally, the project was taken up again by the Reclamation Service of the Department of the Interior. It was completed in 1916, at a cost of \$5,246,000. It created the largest artificial lake in the United States and gave to a wide area of fertile land in New Mexico, Texas, and Chihuahua, security from drought and, in a large degree, from flood. Recently, a secondary storage dam has been constructed at Caballo. This will make possible the development of hydro-electric power at Elephant Butte, the sale of which will be used to liquidate the construction charges on the original dam.

Educational progress has kept pace with the economic development. Doña Ana county has a fine system of public schools and three high schools at Las Cruces, Anthony, and Hatch. The New Mexico State College, which grew out of the Las Cruces College founded in 1888 by Hiram Hadley, has grown to a flourishing institution giving excellent courses in agriculture, engineering, arts and sciences, business administration and home economics. It is accredited as a four-year college by the North Central Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools. In connection with it are an extension service that serves the farmers and homemakers of the entire state, and an agricultural experiment station that performs valuable research for farmers and stockmen.

From this brief article many interesting events have necessarily been omitted. Its purpose has been served if it has convinced readers that local history is worth preserving. History becomes more real when we see it as the achievements of our neighbors and ourselves, and of our immediate forebears, people whom we have known or whose friends and relatives and descendants we know, whose influence touches our life intimately, whose motives and strivings we readily understand and appreciate. The history of a small community such as that in the Mesilla Valley is a record of the struggle of obscure, industrious, brave, and patient men and women against harsh frontier conditions and their gradual subduing to the uses of civilization. Thus, it is a stanza in the national epics of the American people.

For students who may wish to pursue the subject further I append the following bibliography:

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