

HISPANIC HERITAGE MONTH

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Pioneering Spirits

El Camino Real and the origin of Las Cruces

From the National Park Service



Besides its original adobe homes, the Mesquite district is known for colorful, Territorial-style storefronts and commercial buildings decked with art, like this building on Mesquite Street, seen on Oct. 8, 2024.

(Las Cruces Bulletin photos by Algernon D'Ammassa)

The Mesquite District is a centuries-old neighborhood at the cultural core of one of southern New Mexico's oldest communities. As a drive or walk through the district reveals, the area's eclectic collection of homes and small businesses reflect the pioneering spirits of those who set down roots along the southerly path of El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro, then known as the Chihuahua Trail, after the Mexican-American War.

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The original town site for modern-day Las Cruces, and a once-bustling section of El Camino Real, the Mesquite Historic District today stretches across Campo, San Pedro, Tornillo and Mesquite streets between Chestnut and Colorado avenues. From its block-long cemetery and grassy Klein Park to its whimsical gardens, mom-and-pop cafes and the home of the renowned Border Book Festival, the district is a colorful but unassuming counterpoint to the urban sprawl of greater Las Cruces, New Mexico's second largest city. Its charming, homegrown hodgepodge of adobe architecture and vernacular styles offers a unique drive-by lesson on the social and cultural development of 19th- and 20th-century Las Cruces and southern New Mexico.

Las Cruces was established in the wake of the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, when residents from the village of Doña Ana ventured six miles south along El Camino Real to settle a share of arable land in the central Mesilla Valley. As laid out by the U.S. Army in a plat signed by Doña Ana County Sheriff Samuel Bean, brother of the legendary Judge Roy Bean, the new town spanned approximately 76 blocks

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PIONEERING SPIRITS*continued from page 1*

above the floodplain on the valley's east side. The town was bordered on the west by the Acequia Madre irrigation ditch and on the east by El Camino Real.

The Army's offer of free land drew a mix of Mexican-Americans, Pueblo Indian descendants and Eastern-Americans to the tract overlooking the river valley where, prior to the Spanish incursion in New Mexico, the Manso Indians had lived. Although documents from the 17th and 18th centuries refer to the site as La Ranchería, a Camino Real paraje (rest stop), town leaders called the new community Las Cruces (The Crosses).

One hundred and twelve set-

tlers risked the danger to move to Las Cruces. After picking numbers from a hat to vie for the best home sites, they built a traditional, mostly adobe, community of small, low-slung houses with simple floor plans, and flat or low gable roofs. The earliest homes were in a cluster close together, their facades forming walls of protection along the street edge with courtyards stretching to the rear. The 1851 creation of nearby Fort Fillmore led to less defense-oriented structures that reflected the growing Anglo influences in the region as American settlers and trade items moved in greater numbers along El Camino Real. Taller gables and a wide variety of parapets, as well as Territorial brick coping, pedimented lintels, chamfered columns and spindle

friezes brought vitality and variety to the town site's traditional architecture.

Las Cruces developed slowly, supported mainly by trading, freighting, farming and some mining in the Organ Mountains. As Chihuahua Trail traders, American freighters and others took up residence, the town site expanded to the east and north. In addition to general stores and rooming houses, bars and brothels be-



Today, Klein Park in the Mesquite Historic District sits on land where, in 1849, families drew lots for shares of land in the new community of Las Cruces. Oct. 8, 2024.

(Las Cruces Bulletin photos by Algernon D'Amassa)

came part of the mix. Las Cruces became a playground for area cowboys, miners and soldiers from Fort Fillmore and Fort Selden, earning a reputation as a rowdy and dangerous town.

Despite its prime El Camino Real location, Las Cruces gained only modest

growth and commercial success compared to neighboring El Paso and La Mesilla. With the arrival of the railroad in the 1880s, city leaders donated land on the town's west end for a train depot and track.

The railway brought new market opportunities to Las Cruces, but it effectively killed El Camino Real. It also fueled a building boom that further developed the town site's architectural flavor, with highly adorned adobe and brick buildings and residences embellishing the turn-of-the-century streetscape. The growth and modification of established homes had an impact on the area's traditional ambience, but the changes reflected the personality and originality of residents who, rather than moving elsewhere, invested further

in their neighborhood.

Today, as home to some 713 historic homes and buildings, the district is only half its original size. In the 1960s, the razing of the entire western part of the district to make room for parking lots and nontraditional architecture was the result of a shortsighted urban renewal project. Other community projects have further altered aspects of the district's original traditional character. Many of the changes contributed to the economic stagnation of the city's old downtown. But recent efforts to boost awareness of El Camino Real and its history in the old neighborhood are heightening local pride in the trail, fueling architectural preservation initiatives and drawing new residents to the area's traditional treasures.

View of East Las Cruces, New Mexico, c. 1890-1900

(New Mexico History Museum photo)



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Mesquite Historic District

Las Esperanzas marks 25 years

ALGERNON D'AMMASSA
Las Cruces Bulletin

Las Esperanzas, Inc., a local nonprofit promoting the historical inheritance of Las Cruces' original town site and Mesquite Historic District, will celebrate its 25th anniversary later this month.

Founded in 1999 by Consuelo Lerma to address deteriorating conditions in Las Cruces' eldest neighborhood, the organization and its volunteer staff advocate for preserving the district's historical structures, including hundreds of 19th-century adobe homes, and promote awareness and pride of the district's history.

"When we talk about the neighborhood, I think we also talk about Las Cruces as a whole, because this is where the city started," Las Esperanzas' president, Martha Rodriguez, said in an interview. "If you drive through the neighborhood, you'll see the effects of what Las Esperanzas has done."

Their work includes collaborating with the city, state lawmakers and other agencies to develop and fund parks commemorating the neighborhood's history; build distinctive gateways adorned with tile panels and trim; establish the community garden, Jardín de Esperanza; erect lamp posts and

markers for the historic Camino Real de Tierra Adentro; and advocate for the South Mesquite Overlay Zone which, since 2005, has permitted small businesses in certain residential areas.

Las Esperanzas' resident historian, and a business owner in the district, Corrina Miramontes, said the zone preserves some of the flavor she remembers from childhood.



Martha Rodriguez, Antonio Luján and Corrina Miramontes pose in front of a 19th-century adobe home on San Pedro Street in Las Cruces' Mesquite Historic District. (Las Cruces Bulletin photo by Algernon D'Ammassa)

"Growing up in the neighborhood, you could knock on someone's door. There was the tiendita, and you could ask for a soda and a candy, and they would go grab it for you, and you would pay them at the door," she said.

The association is also gathering oral histories of the neighborhood in partnership with New Mexico State University with funding support from El Paso Electric.

The group also looks

ahead as it works on a proposal to redesign Lohman and Amador avenues – major thoroughfares that carve straight through the neighborhood with fast-moving crosstown traffic and frequent accidents.

Las Esperanzas draws on the expertise of former state Rep. Antonio Luján, who served in the New Mexico Legislature for 10 years representing House District 35 and served on the House Appropriations Committee. He also draws on experience in community organizing from his time directing social ministry at the Catholic Diocese of Las Cruces.

"I also ran a business from

here, lived here in the neighborhood," Luján said, recounting how Las Esperanzas approached him for his professional services (he served them pro bono) and recruited him as a member.

The celebration takes place 1-5 p.m. on Saturday, Oct. 26, at Klein Park, 155 N. Mesquite Street, with mariachi and ballet folklorico performances planned and free food for children. More information about the organization is available at Las-Esperanzas.com.



A varied mural distinguishes a commercial structure at Mesquite and Lohman in Las Cruces. The busy thoroughfares of Lohman and Amador avenues cut straight through Las Cruces' oldest neighborhood and historic district. Oct. 8, 2024. (Las Cruces Bulletin photo by Algernon D'Ammassa)

KEEP



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NM SENATE 38

Making community better

Sylvia Ulloa joins NM CAFé

SYLVIA QUINTANILLA
For the Bulletin

Sylvia Ulloa has deep roots in New Mexico. As a former journalist in Las Cruces, she first encountered the work of NM Comunidades en Acción y de Fe (CAFé) in 2013 when she was the editor of the Las Cruces Sun-News. At the time, the organization came to their office to state their case and gain their endorsement on increasing minimum wage in Las Cruces. Throughout her career, Ulloa and NM CAFé continued to cross paths.

“I became a reporter for New Mexico In Depth. I had my background in journalism and I was covering the work that NM CAFé were doing for the immigrant community,” Ulloa began. “Just recently, I was a field representative for Sen. Martin Heinrich’s office here in Las Cruces and I was working with them on immigration issues. I’ve had a lot of interactions and I really admire the work of CAFé over the years.”

In September, Ulloa became the new Executive Director of NM CAFé. The opening seemed

fated to Ulloa.

NM CAFé is the only community-organizing group in southern New Mexico. Primarily, the organization assists Doña Ana County, but they are branching out to Otero and Luna counties, too. The organization helps the community in leadership development, youth initiative, immigration, economic development, justice for working families and more.

“We’re not doing the work for them. We’re giving them the tools so they can advocate to make their own lives and their communities better. What we do is give them the tools to go, ‘what is our plan and what do we want to ask of our elected officials?’,” Ulloa explained.

Ulloa gave the example that many colonias lack paved roads



or do not have streetlights. Without them, the roads become unsafe for older residents and children going to school in the morning.

Another issue NM CAFé is working on is school safety in Chaparral, an unincorporated colonia near El Paso. Ulloa said parents are getting guidance on what is the

best strategy to talk to the school superintendent.

NM CAFé employs organizers who connect with community members for the betterment of all.

“They’re full of great ideas and it’s like harnessing those ideas and helping really build on this legacy that NM CAFé has had. I have this really young and energetic staff. I feel like we are all learning together,” she said.

Ulloa’s family has been a part

of southern New Mexico for generations. When she moved here in 2011, she noted it felt like home right away, but she also knew Las Cruces could be better.

“I feel like everybody has a role to play in making our community better,” she reflected. “I’ve done work in a lot of different arenas. My family has been here for generations and we have seen in many ways, generation after generation, sort of stuck in place. I think the answer all along has been the people who are here, who know and understand this place. Having somebody who’s from here, who understands New Mexico in all its beauty and all its faults or imperfections, that to me gives you insight into how we can make things better.”

More information on NM CAFé is available online at organizenm.org or by following them on social media.



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