

SOCORRO Had It All!

Among other fascinating Socorro personalities we must count Buckskin Sue, who beat a murder rap with the help of the great Col. Albert J. Fountain... but its great man is hotel-magnate Conrad Hilton, who sponsors the unusual "Elfego Baca Shoot" as part of the annual golf tournament



View of Socorro, in heyday of '80s & '90s in Rio Grande Valley, in shadow of towering Socorro Peak.

SOCORRO HAD IT ALL! Among other fascinating Socorro personalities we must count

by Marjorie White

NO JOHNNIE-COME-LATELY is Socorro, a popular tourist stop at the intersection of Interstate 25 and US 60 in central New Mexico. Visitors enter a modern western town of 6000 population, with scant physical evidence of its ancient and exciting past.

Today, Socorro is a college town, home of the New Mexico Institute of Mining and Technology; seat of sprawling Socorro County (6634 square miles); and a trading center and shipping point for the products of the vast cattle ranches and fertile Rio Grande Valley cropland that surround it.

West of the urban center, you can find a tree-shaded plaza, the time-mellowed mission church of San Miguel, and some thick-walled adobe houses that attest to Socorro's Spanish heritage. Scattered 19th century style structures echo its mining heyday of the 70's-90's when Socorro was the largest (estimated peak population, 23,000) town in the New Mexico Territory-and probably the roughest and toughest.

The Spanish name of Socorro means "succor" or "help" and its use goes back nearly 400 years to 1598 and the entrada of Don Juan de Onate, the Spanish colonizer of New Mexico. At that time the Piro Indian Pueblo of Pilabo was located on the site of Socorro on the western side of the Rio Grande, and Teypana, another Piro Pueblo, was on the eastern bank of the river. The friendly Indians of Teypana met Onate with gifts of food and he, in gratitude, re-christened the pueblo "Socorro."



Author's Photos.

SUN office (ctr photo); murder of Editor Conklin stimulated vigilante action.



Socorro citizens near Socorro Plaza; parasols protected fair complexions.

A few years later, the nomadic Apaches destroyed the peaceful Teypana Pueblo and the survivors moved across the river to Pilabo. In 1626, two Franciscan friars came to stay among and Christianize the Indians of Pilabo, and they dedicated the mission church to Nuestra Senora de Perpetuo Socorro (Our Lady of Perpetual Help) in 1629. Nearly 200 years later the San Miguel de Socorro Spanish land grant, on which the present city is located, insured the perpetuation of the name, Socorro, for the site of prehistoric Pilabo.

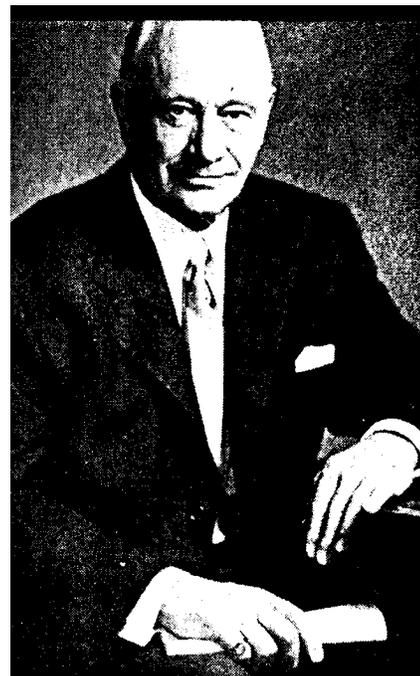
When the Pueblo Indians of northern New Mexico revolted against their Spanish conquerors in 1680, Governor Antonio Otermin fled south with the Spanish colonists and loyal Indian followers. He stopped at Socorro, ordered the pueblo destroyed so that it could not be occupied by the enemy, and took the inhabitants with him to the safety of missions further south, near modern El Paso, Texas.

On his way to Santa Fe to re-conquer New Mexico for Spain in 1692, Don Diego De Vargas and his company took shelter overnight behind the remaining walls of the mission at Socorro. The Indians of Pilabo (Socorro) did not return to New Mexico with him, but stayed on in a new pueblo which they founded east of El Paso and named "Socorro del Sur," the Socorro of the South, the site of modern Socorro, Texas.

For nearly 100 years after the re-conquest, Spanish colonies were concentrated in the north, near Santa Fe and Albuquerque. Toward the end of the 18th century, around 1780, some settlers began moving into the valley around Socorro. The ancestors of some of Socorro's present-day families came at that time. A grant of 17,000 acres

was confirmed to them by King Ferdinand VII of Spain in 1817.

They established large haciendas, where they raised sheep and cattle, maintained orchards and vineyards, and grew vegetables and field crops. They also rebuilt the abandoned mission of Socorro and rededicated it to San Miguel, the name which it bears today. And thereby hangs a legend. During an Apache raid, the settlers took refuge in the church. Suddenly there was a lull in the attack.



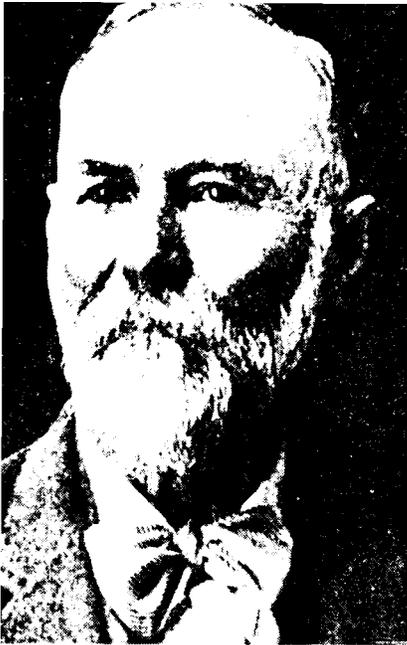
Hotel magnate Conrad Hilton in 1958.

"A giant in shining armor, with a gleaming sword came miraculously among us," said the terrified Apache leader. The Spaniards recognized the description of St. Michael, the warrior saint, in the apparition which had stopped the Indians.

Socorro was still a small Spanish community in 1846, at the beginning of the War with Mexico, when American soldiers occupied the New Mexico Territory. It became a regular stop for soldiers and travelers along the Rio Grande—a place where fresh produce for humans and fodder for animals could be

obtained and horses and mules traded. It offered a real treat—good water from the nearby hot springs instead of muddy river water.

The accommodations were far from luxurious, since the adobe houses had dirt floors which were covered with blankets for sleeping places. But hospitality made up for the discomforts. When visitors came to Socorro, there was always a fandango, with pretty señoritas for dancing partners and lots of native wine and brandy.



Col. Eaton organized Committee.

When New Mexico became a territory of the United States in 1848, at the close of the Mexican War, Socorro was the seat of a county that stretched from the present state line on the east to California, nearly one-third of the area that now comprises the states of New Mexico and Arizona. This was the beginning of change and growth that reached its climax in the 1880's.

Socorro was in land claimed by Texas after the Mexican War, a claim that was finally settled in 1850 by a cash payment of

\$10,000,000. Texans had already filtered into the area to stay and they were not too welcome. Neither the Texans nor the Mexicans could forget the Alamo. An English visitor to Socorro in 1846, George Ruxton, mentioned that one of the chief excitements for the natives was the “massacre of a stray Texan now and then.”

Any settlement that had livestock, fields, and gardens to be raided was fair prey for the nomadic Indians, and Socorro was no exception. The Navajos swooped down from the north, and the Apaches came from all directions. In the American period Fort Conrad was established, but quickly abandoned in favor of new Fort Craig (1851) built in a more strategic location 30 mi. se of Socorro, on the edge of the Jornada Del Muerto (Dead Man's Journey), a main travel route since Onate blazed it in 1598.

At the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861, Fort Craig was the largest and one [the most important posts in New Mexico. It was manned by 1200 regulars and 2600 New Mexico Volunteers in April, 1862, when General Henry S. Sibley led a force of 4000 Confederates up from Texas to seize it as a base of operations for the conquest of the New Mexico Territory. The strong fortifications and manpower at Craig changed Sibley's mind, and he met the Union forces in a bloody battle at Valverde, a few miles away, along the Rio Grande.

The Confederates had the better of the fight, and moved on to Socorro, where they billeted soldiers in the town and set up a hospital for the wounded, before moving on to Santa Fe. Socorro, which was accustomed to hosting Union soldiers-on-leave from Fort Craig, was dominated for the next year by soldiers in gray, until Union reinforcements from California arrived to force the Confederate retreat.

So long as Fort Craig was active, until the post influenced the social life and character of Socorro, and indirectly economic future. Many early travelers d looked at the mountains around Socorro with eyes on the probable mineral wealth they contained. But it was the soldiers and the Army camp freighters who did the prospecting that led to the discovery of silver in 1867.



General Manuel Armijo.

Other strikes followed on the heels of the first. On horseback and by wagon, prospectors followed the old cart roads into Socorro and ranged out into the hills to stake claims. The railroad, after 1880, brought them by the thousands. Socorro had a big smelter, and ores from Kelley and Magdalena to the west and the Black Range camps to the southwest moved by branch line and ox teams to swell the output.

At the same time, the lush, virgin ranges around Socorro were filling with cattle, which meant cowboys and rustlers to join the gamblers, prostitutes, and drifters that floated from mining camp to mining camp. Sometimes, they say, the migrant population

of Socorro equaled its permanent population.

Business was brisk, and so was crime. Socorro had 30 saloons, numerous gambling houses and brothels—but also two banks, numerous newspapers, several good hotels, and churches for those of both Catholic and Protestant faiths.



Author's Photos.

Year-round golf course on campus of New Mexico Inst. of Mining & Technology hosts Annual Tournament.



Hilton place ruins (10 mi. south of Socorro); home was converted into lodging house in 1907, after recession.

The murder of a newspaper editor, A.M. Conklin of the *Socorro Sun*, outside the

Methodist church on Christmas Eve, 1880, triggered the organization of the Committee of Safety, Socorro's version of the vigilantes. Despite some rash acts, they eventually made Socorro an unhealthy place for law-violators.

Some international ramifications and wide press coverage of the Conklin murder centered much attention on the general lawlessness in the New Mexico Territory at that time, and it all started with an incident at a community Christmas party for children, at which Editor Conklin was an usher. Three young men from a prominent Spanish-American family—Antonio, Albran, and Onofre Baca—persisted in annoying a young lady by putting their feet on her chair. Conklin, whose attention had been directed to the situation by the young lady, asked them to desist and when they didn't, he shoved the feet.



Soldiers on leave from Fort Craig (1852-'85) were welcome in Socorro. Ruins of old post lie 30-mi. from town.

Insulted, the three youths left, but met Conklin outside the church door after the service. There was an exchange of words and punches, and suddenly a couple of shots. Conklin fell, a bullet in his heart, and the three youths were seen galloping off on horseback.

When the sheriff, Juan Garcia, took no action to find the killers, Colonel Eathan W. Eaton, rancher, mine-owner, veteran of Indian and Civil Wars and a born leader, took the initiative. On January 1, 1881, the vigi-

lantes were organized formally and gave notice that the law would be enforced. They made Sheriff Garcia lead the way to the Baca home, where they gallantly permitted the women to leave the house before they searched it.



Manzanares, main street of Socorro, looking west toward the plaza.

“What's that? A pant leg under a skirt?” whispered one of the vigilantes. It was Antonio Baca in female disguise.

To avoid any possibility of lynching, the arrested Antonio Baca was lodged under guard in the Park Hotel, rather than the jail. But somehow a gun was smuggled in to him. In a showdown with his guard, who was wounded, Antonio was killed.

That left two Bacas still wanted. A reward poster with pictures of Abran and Onofre came into the hands of Sergeant James Gillett of the Texas Rangers, stationed at Ysleta, east of El Paso, Texas. He collected a \$500 reward for the arrest of Abran at a relative's home in Ysleta, and kept on looking for Onofre.

Gillett spotted Onofre several months later working in a Zaragosa, Mexico, dry goods store, across the Rio Grande from Ysleta. In violation of international law, he arrested the youth and took him into the United States. Before the train on which Gillett escorted

the prisoner reached Socorro, he was given a telegram instructing him to deliver Onofre to the Territorial Prison in Santa Fe for safe-keeping.

But he had no chance, for a mob of vigilantes and miners removed Onofre at Socorro, and Gillett compromised by insisting that the sheriff take charge and place the prisoner in the Socorro jail.

During that night, Onofre Baca was removed from the jail “by persons unknown,” and next morning, April 1, 1881, his body was found hanging from a gate frame in the courthouse yard.

Abran was acquitted of murder in a trial in November, 1881, and escaped out of the territory on a waiting horse. In typical wild-west fashion the mob turned on the prosecuting attorney, who was run out of town on a freight train.

That was not the end of the matter, however. The influential Baca family took the matter to the State Department and the Texas Rangers had some trouble explaining the extradition of an American citizen without the approval of the Mexican government.

There is some question about which Socorro resident was entitled to more notches on his gun—Joel Fowler, probably its most notorious outlaw, or the legendary Elfego Baca, law officer and lawyer, whose adventurous career has attracted several books and a Walt Disney movie, “The Nine Lives of Elfego Baca” (1960).

Indiana-born Joel Fowler was a former rancher who, after killing one man in vengeance, apparently developed a taste for blood, especially when drinking, which he did to excess. He is credited with killing at least 10

men, mostly rustlers and no-accounts, but a killing in 1883 sealed his doom.

While he was being carted off to jail for the unprovoked killing of a Socorro bartender, Fowler suddenly jerked away from his captors and shot a bystander. The victim, a young Vermonter who had just moved to Socorro, was killed for no reason and the murder aroused the wrath of the townsfolk. Fowler was sentenced to death after the district court trial, but when the defense attorney appealed the decision to the Territorial Supreme Court, mob action resulted. On January 21, 1884, Joel Fowler was removed from jail and hanged to a tree about 200 yards away.



San Miguel Mission church, (1629), destroyed, (1680), rebuilt 1700s.

Elfego Baca was a killer by accident. He was a native of Socorro who spent his early years, to age 15, in Kansas, where he learned to speak English without an accent and became knowledgeable about gringo ways. Back in Socorro again, he re-learned Spanish, got interested in politics, and became a leader among his own people.

Elfego Baca was 20 years in 1884, when he went electioneering at Frisco, (now Reserve), the seat of Catron County, but then a

little Spanish-American adobe village in western Socorro County. When he saw a drunken cowboy riding down the street, shooting off a gun indiscriminately, Baca tried to get the justice of the peace to make an arrest. The judge refused on the grounds that a horde of avenging cowboys would descend on him. So Baca put on a fake badge and made the arrest of the cowboy—not a bad man, just full of bottled spirits.

As the Frisco justice of peace had predicted, the cowboy's friends rode to the rescue.

“You can’t have him,” said Baca. “I’ll count to three and if you don’t get out; I’ll shoot.”

They didn’t, and Baca shot, hitting one cowboy in the knee and the horse of a ranch foreman, who was thrown to his death by the wounded animal. The next day, Baca took his prisoner before the Justice of the Peace, who fined him \$5 for disturbing the peace. Elfego, however, suspected there would be retaliation by the cowboy faction.

So he found a hiding place in a “jacal,” a kind of structure made of posts, with mud-plastered cracks between. When the cowboys found Baca's whereabouts, they demanded that he come out. The answer was a volley of shots which killed one man and creased the hats of a few others. Additional requests got the same response, and attempts to set fire and dynamite the jacal were foiled by Baca's defense. After a concentrated barrage of bullets were fired around nightfall, the cowboys were sure they must have killed Baca and went back home.

The next day, the Socorro County sheriff arrived to investigate and found him very much alive and ready to sue him. There were literally thousands of bullet holes in the walls of the [] door had 100, and the handle of [] standing in a corner, had nine!

[] Baca survive this fusillade of [] harmed? The Mexicans said [] “santo,” a wooden image of St. [] behind by the owners of the p[] saved him. The Texans decide[] must have a charmed life. But [] was simply that the floor of the [] below ground level, and when the shots were coming, Baca [] the floor. The cracks in the wall [] jacal were like portholes, giving [] good range for his shots.

Baca, of course, stood trial for [] and was acquitted on grounds of self-defense. But the incident aroused interest in criminal law and started [] colorful career as an attorney [] enforcement officer. He served [] County as sheriff and district [] winning respect and affection for successful, though unique, method of interpreting the law and handling [] As sheriff, for example, he sent [] suspected criminals, suggesting [] surrender. “Otherwise,” he wrote [] be my painful duty to shoot you [] The Frisco fight was already a legend and the very name of Elfego Baca was [] to insure cooperation.

A move to Socorro was the usual [] the notorious Bronco (or Buck [] variously known by the surname []son, Raper, Stone, and Yonker []ing to her man of the moment. [] a career outside the law at an [] in Nevada, as a cattle rustler [] thief, and got her picturesque [] from her skill in riding and her [] style of mounting a horse.

Sue arrived in Socorro early in [] Colorado and several other New Mexico mining and cattle towns. She [] boarding house where Robert [] saloon keeper, also resided. Sue [] bar for Black and dealt cards in [] no. This amicable arrangement [] sudden end on August 24, 1884, [] put a couple of bullets into Black [] coroner’s inquest she explained [] self-defense, and complained he [] to kill her with an ax. So the verdict [] until it was learned—somewhat [] that Sue had ac-

quired control [] ranching properties in another [] pocketed the money from the skipped out of town with a new [].

So the weekly Socorro *Chi*, [] unearthed the lurid details of Sue [] including the dubious disposal of a [] spouse, and in April, 1886, B[] was indicted for the murder [] Black. Sentiment was so strong [] the “harlotrous fiend,” as she was [] by the Territorial press, that he [] secured a change of venue [] County. In the trial at Silver City

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December, 1886, Sue’s acquittal (with the stipulation that she leave New Mexico forever) was a great triumph for Colonel Albert J. Fountain, famous frontier lawyer whose murder in 1896 is still one of the West’s great unsolved mysteries.

As its most famous citizen, Socorro claims international hotel magnate Conrad Hilton, who was born in the village of San Antonio, 10 miles south. Hilton was baptized at the San Miguel mission church on January 21, 1888, and attended school and college in Socorro. The annual golf tournament on the campus of the New Mexico Institute of Mining and Technology is named in his honor, which he acknowledged by personal visits for many years. A part of the Conrad Hilton Tournament each year is the unusual “Elfego Baca Shoot,” when contestants drive balls off the top of “M” Mountain (so-branded for the College of Mining) onto the greens, recalling the extraordinary feats of the colorful sheriff.

San Miguel church is Socorro's oldest landmark and is said to be the oldest structure in religious use in the continental United

States. It incorporates the walls of a hut used by friars on the Onate expedition in 1598, when they celebrated the first mass at Pilabo Pueblo. It contains some rare sacred art, and an underground crypt which is the burial place of General Manuel Armijo, the last Mexican governor of New Mexico Territory, who surrendered to the Americans in 1846. He spent the last years of his life.

The days of the Longhorns and six-shooters were already fading into memory in the mid-90's when the-depletion of ores and the decline in mineral markets slowed the once-booming industry. Socorro County still contributes a couple of million dollars annually in mineral wealth, but it was the railroad shipping business, and agriculture, that bridged the economic gap.

Although Socorro lost considerable population before the turn of the century, it was never threatened with ghost-town status. The transition to a modern stable city was rather easy. The same men who led the vigilantes promoted Socorro as the site for New Mexico’s College of Mining, and encouraged the development of community resources.

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