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Historical conspectus of south-central New Mexico

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1955, pp. 55-60. https://doi.org/10.56577/FFC-6.55

in:

South-Central New Mexico, Fitzsimmons, J. P.; [ed.], New Mexico Geological Society 6th Annual Fall Field Conference Guidebook, 193 p. https://doi.org/10.56577/FFC-6

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HISTORICAL CONSPECTUS OF SOUTH-CENTRAL NEW MEXICO

By J. Paul Fitzsimmons
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THE DIM PAST

"The burden of Tyre. Howl, ye ships of Tarshish; for it is laid waste, so that there is no house, no entering in." (Isaiah 23:1)

The area of the New Mexico Geological Society's Sixth Field Conference was perhaps once cursed as was Tyre, for it was a land of waste, and there were no habitations within its borders. Indians undoubtedly crossed and recrossed its terrain from very early times, but they seemed to have no desire to settle down or make it permanent headquarters. The ancient Pueblos, in migrating away from drought-plagued Chaco Canyon and Pajarito Plateau into the Rio Grande Valley, moved down the Rio Grande to the edge of the Jornada del Muerto and there, as though overwhelmed by the desolation before them, went no farther. Remains of earlier Pueblo peoples are found to the west, to the east, to the south, and to the north, but none here. The Apache, the wandering marauder of Athepascan stock, seems to have been the only common visitor, and he did not remain long or leave much to remind late comers of his passing--until the late comers settled here.

No one can now be sure who was the first white man to view this country. Alvar Nunez Cabeza de Vaca and three companions, the sole survivors of a shipwrecked expedition, wandered for nine years, 1527 to 1536, from the coast of Texas to the Gulf of California. From records of this wandering most authorities think the party crossed the Rio Grande in the vicinity of present El Paso. A few think the crossing was farther down stream. But at least one eminent writer (Paul Horgan) asserts that the group forded the "historic river" at the south end of the Caballo Mountains.

Members of the Coronado expedition probably viewed the Jornada del Muerto from the north end sometime in 1540 or 1541 when they visited the Rio Grande Pueblos, but no details are known of this.

The first expedition known to pass through Sierra County, unlike so many of the others, came for the express purpose of converting the Indians. It was organized by a Franciscan friar, Agustin Rodriguez, who was accompanied by two other friars and a scant dozen soldiers under the leadership of Francisco Sanchez Chamuscado. In 1581 they made their way from Santa Barbara in southern Chihuahua down the Conchas to the Rio Grande and from there up that river to the "land of enchantment." The first village they encountered in what is now New Mexico was near the present (though abandoned) site of San Marcial, just north of the area of this field conference. After the normal period of curiosity, spent in exploration, the soldiers returned to Mexico; the friars remained to proselyte.

Rumors of the death of the missionaries began to reach the missions in Chihuahua. In 1592-1593 Antonio de Espejo and Bernardino Beltran led an expedition up the Rio Grande to discover the fate of the three friars, and found that Indians had killed them--presumably for their possessions.

Despite such inauspicious events, others, including settlers, began to arrive from Old Mexico. Don Juan de Onate, a wealthy mine owner of Zacatecas, outfitted a colonizing expedition in 1598, at his own expense, and led the group into the land of the Pueblos by way of the Rio Grande. Unlike his precursers, however, Onate rejected the difficult journey into and out of arroyos along the river west of the Caballo and Fra Cristobal Mountains. Instead he took his party through the long, dry, hot Jornada del Muerto. As a result of this expedition, permanent colonies were established in the land now called New Mexico, and the route Onate followed in reaching the northern outposts became established as the principal trade route and highway of travel between these colonies and the provincial government in Mexico. This highway, famed as El Camino Real (The Royal Highway), became the principal thoroughfare of traffic supplying the colonies. With the opening up of the Santa Fe trail (following the attainment of Mexican independence from Spain in 1821) the direction of supply changed greatly, but El Camino Real became more heavily travelled than before, for much of the merchandise that reached Santa Fe across the prairies from points in the United States moved on southward into Chihuahua and beyond to Mexico City. In some years over half the trade goods arriving at Santa Fe continued on the journey down El Camino Real. Thus the area of this field conference became the site of dusty caravans long before the New Mexico Geological Society or the Roswell Geological Society were founded.

Apaches, who had not lingered in the area be-

fore, at the establishment of a supply route found fertile fields for depredation and adequate rewards for their daring. Lonely travellers on El Camino Real were not likely to remain lonely for long, and most commonly they joined their ancestors instead of completing their intended journey. Armed escorts became the standard, and the necessary, adjunct of all caravans. The Jornada del Muerto--dry, dusty, barren of protection--was a favorite site for Indian ambush, and the Apache scourge produced a far greater number of dried bones along the trail than did the lack of water.

In 1680 the Pueblos revolted against the domination of Spain and drove the white man from the territory of New Mexico. Antonio Otermin, governor at that time, escaped southward with the survivors of the uprising. He paused at San Marcial to gather stragglers before beginning the trek across the Jornada del Muerto. The desolate journey across this wasteland took nine days, and it is reported that decimation proceeded at the rate of about fifty individuals a day. Some think this loss due to death from thirst. Others think many grew impatient of delay and speeded up their departure for Old Mexico. The role played by the Apaches is not known.

In 1692 under Don Diego de Vargas Zapata Lujan Ponce de Leon, the Spanish came back up El Camino Real and re-established the authority of Spain. During the many years following of Spanish rule there was no real permanent settlement in what is now Sierra County.

Zebulon Montgomery Pike was probably the first citizen of the United States to travel along El Camino Real, though he followed the Rio Grande around the Fra Cristobal and Caballo Mountains and did not go through the Jornada del Muerto. He journeyed this way in 1803, for what precise reason there is still considerable doubt. He was a lieutenant in the United States Army and had been commissioned by General James Wilkinson to search out the headwaters of the Arkansas River, parley with the Indians, and to find out whatever he could. The general was a slippery character of uncertain affections, undeniably enmeshed in the Burr conspiracy and as surely soiled by private aspirations not voluntarily communicated to his superiors. But Pike is not known to have been contaminated by this association. He followed orders, was captured near Santa Fe, and when he travelled down ancestral U. S. Highway 85 was being conducted by the higher powers of Spanish authority to Chihuahua. There he was treated with commendable courtesy, was able to observe and record a great number of facts, and was later guided to the border of Louisiana and freed.

After General Kearny took possession of New Mexico for the United States in 1846, Colonel Doniphan led forces across the Jornada del Muerto and fought a victorious battle on Christmas day (1846) a short distance south of the field trip area (Brazito, near Las Cruces). This was the only battle of the Mexican War fought on what is now New Mexico soil. In the same year the Mormon Battalion under Captain Philip St. George Cooke marched this way en route to California, establishing the path of the first transcontinental wagon road.

In 1862 a battle of the Civil War was fought near San Marcial, just north of the Fra Cristobal Mountains. The Union Army had established Fort Craig in that area. The Confederate Army, mostly Texans, marched up from the south and met the New Mexican volunteers on the fields of Valverde. Kit Carson took part in this engagement. Losses were rather heavy on both sides; The Union Army withdrew; the Confederate Army marched on to Albuquerque and Santa Fe.

At first the Apaches seemed to prefer to molest Spanish-Americans rather than the growing number of "Anglo-Americans," but the latter, pursuing their individual courses unguided by the Golden Rule, soon felt the sting of Apache disapproval. And when the United States Government showed its resentment of this disapproval by establishing Indian Reservations and attempting to force the various tribes to confine themselves to such geographic limits, the Indians, being human after all, demonstrated their vexation in a long series of bloody episodes.

The Mescalero Apaches occasionally came down into the Tularosa basin and hunted in the San Andres Mountains. But the tribe most commonly associated with the area of this field conference was of Warm Spring (Ojo Caliente) Apaches, a segment of the Gila Apaches. This Ojo Caliente (or Warm Spring, or Hot Spring) is not that of Truth or Consequences (formerly Hot Springs) but is to be found in Animas Canyon, between the San Mateo Mountains and the northern Sierra Cuchillo, just north of Monticello. A reservation was established here in 1874, was abandoned in 1877 for lack of cooperation. A number of famous names is found among the leaders or associates of this group of Indians--Victorio, Nana, and Geronimo being the most famous.

Victorio, probably next to Cochise and possibly Mangas Colorado the greatest of Apache warriors, submitted intermittently to confinement on a reservation, but made his final and dramatic break with the whites in this area. Assigned to a more distant

reservation, he escaped and with a devoted following returned to the Ojo Caliente area and prowled the San Mateo Mountains. Flushed from here he fled southward in one of the most famous, and most bloody, pursuits in the records of Indian warfare. Cornered at last, he made his final, fateful stand at Tres Castillos in Mexico.

At Victorio's death in 1880, Nana, though already old, gathered together a few surviving hostiles and continued the bloody struggle till 1882. He attacked the town of Chloride in 1881, stealing horses and cattle, and leaving behind two dead men.

Geronimo, not truly a chief but a formidable leader, was actually captured but once in his "career" (so the record reports; the other times he gave himself up by coming into the soldier's camp voluntarily). The one dramatic instance of capture occurred at Ojo Caliente, where he was captured by an Indian Agent, John P. Clum, and his San Carlos Indian police. (If you wish to learn how fine a job the white man performed, read the biography of John P. Clum. If you wish to know how dastardly a trick it was, read Geronimo's biography.)

In any case, Geronimo was spotted in the vicinity of Ojo Caliente. The Indian Commission was informed. A telegram to John P. Clum, Indian Agent at the San Carlos Reservation in Arizona ordered that individual to take his Indian police and arrest Geronimo. So he did! He asked for army help, was promised it, and got it--the day after he captured Geronimo.

RANCHING, MINING, AND FARMING

There were no permanent settlements within the area of the present field conference in the 17th or 18th centuries. The first mining claim filed in the state was filed before the captain-general, Don Domingo Jironza Petriz de Cruzate, in 1685 by Pedro de Abalos. The mine, Nuestra Senora del Pilar de Zaragoza, was located in the "Fray Cristobal" Mountains. No more details are known of this fact.

Ranching brought the first permanent settlers, though very few in the beginning. Don Pedro Armendaris petitioned for land in 1820 where he was raising horses, cattle, and sheep. His request was granted the same year. This grant, the only one in the present field-trip area, includes the Fra Cristobal Mountains and most of the north end of the Jornada del Muerto.

It was mining which brought the first surge of settlers. Chloride was started in 1879 by virtue of the silver discovery of Harry Pye. Hillsboro, a few miles to the south, had been settled a year or two earlier, after gold had been discovered in the surrounding mountains. Between 1890 and 1900 the San Andres Mountains were actively prospected, though no real production was ever obtained. The Caballo Mountains began to be exploited about 1900 and were productive till 1912, after which activity greatly declined. A vanadium and lead reduction plant for ore from the Caballo Mountains was operated in Engle during the years 1910-1912, using coal also mined in the Caballo Mountains.

The railroad, built through the Jornada del Muerto in 1880-1881, aided greatly in this early development of mining.

The first newspaper in the area, called The Black Range, was published in 1882 at Robinson, a mining town at the edge of the mountains whose name it bore (see second day's road log, mileage 41.6). The paper, a weekly, moved to Chloride the same year.

When settlers finally appeared along the lower Rio Grande Valley of New Mexico, they found the soil very fertile. Systems of irrigation ditches were dug to bring water to the thirsty, eager land. But the Rio Grande was not (and is not) the most dependable of rivers. In some years there was ample water. More commonly there was not enough water at the time it was needed. Ideas on building a storage dam were widely discussed during the latter part of the 19th century. Mexico (as has Texas many times since) considered her riparian rights violated by the expanding use of water upstream in what is now Colorado and New Mexico. The United States, while denying to Mexico any rights to the water, considered the possibility of some amicable arrangement. In 1896 the International Joint Commission recommended the building of a dam near El Paso and the prevention of any further building of dams or other interferences with the water supply. Mexico was to be granted 60,000 acre feet of water a year at the dam.

However, a private project, The Rio Grande Dam and Irrigation Company, had been organized in 1893, promoted chiefly by Nathan Boyd of Las Cruces. The company, organized with a capital stock of $5,000,000, had planned to build a dam at Elephant Butte. The application to build the dam was approved in 1895, and preliminary work was begun--surveying, building of a spur railroad, diversion flume, construction shops, and other fundamentals.

Such construction would, of course, violate any agreement made on the basis of the International Joint Commission's proposals. Furthermore, land speculators in the vicinity of El Paso and Juarez were markedly unhappy over the possible loss of revenue. Lawsuits ensued; so many that Mr. Boyd lost his

camisole. The government alleged that the dam would stop all water from reaching Mexico (and Texas) and that, being a navigable river, the Rio Grande could not be obstructed without violating the higher laws. In the meantime a bill was introduced into congress to build the government dam at El Paso. (This is something like opening one's mouth while keeping one's lips pressed tightly together.) Congressmen from New Mexico naturally voiced an objection or two to such proceedings, and the bill was defeated. By the time the Dam and Irrigation Company was bankrupt, all parties agreed that the Rio Grande is not, was not, had not been, would not be a navigable stream after all.

In 1904 John Hay, Secretary of State under Theodore Roosevelt, proposed that the Reclamation Service, which had been created in 1902, might "solve" the problem by building the dam at Elephant Butte. B. M. Hall of the Reclamation Service made a report during that same year recommending the building of such a dam. (The name Hall Lake is sometimes used for the body of water in the Elephant Butte reservoir.) The Reclamation Service Act was extended to include the El Paso Valley and a treaty was made with Mexico to supply 60,000 acre feet of water a year at the head of the Mexican canal above Juarez. The United States agreed to bear all expense and continued to deny Mexico any right to the water.

Construction on Elephant Butte dam was begun in the latter part of 1911 and was completed in 1916 at a cost of something more than $5,000,000. The lake formed by this obstruction was, at the time it first filled up, the largest artificial lake in the United States. Its capacity is somewhat in excess of 2,000,000 acre feet. It was once larger but it receives silt at the rate of better than 18,000 acre feet a year. This has the effect both of decreasing the reservoir storage and of producing aggradation upstream. The effect of this cause of aggradation is not easily evaluated, however, because other causes are also producing sedimentation in the same stretch of the river.

Eleven miles south of Truth or Consequences another dam, Caballo dam, was constructed by the Bureau of Reclamation in 1938 at a cost of $1,317,000 to provide additional irrigation and power development for the Rio Grande Valley. Its capacity is something over 300,000 acre feet.

CITIES AND TOWNS

The plural form used in the heading of this section is misleading; the first term even more so. There is but one "municipal" center in the area of the conference. That is Truth or Consequences and its appendages. Mention is made of it and of the smaller settlements in the various road logs.

Las Palomas was one of the earliest settlements in the county. Until recent years it was a bustling health resort. Indians, Spanish colonists, and cowboys stopped here long before there were any accomodations at what is now Truth or Consequences.

Engle was a larger town than now when it was the focal point of stage lines meeting the Santa Fe Railroad; and, with Cutter, it was a thriving community during the building of Elephant Butte dam. Winston, Chloride, Robinson, Brown City and other settlements of the Sierra Cuchillo area have ebbed and flowed with the fortunes of the local mining industry, though Winston has survived as a local supply center to ranchers and tourists as well as to incurable prospectors.

Hillsboro was formerly the county seat of Sierra County, when mining was a dominant industry there and Hillsboro was larger. The present site of Truth or Consequences, though the springs had long been known and visited, was not settled till about 1912, when it was known as Palomas Hot Springs. Later the name became merely Hot Springs, and still later (1950), Truth or Consequences. It became the county seat in 1941. Its present population--between 4,000 and 5,000--is augmented during all seasons of the year by health seekers and by tourists, and in season by hunters and fishermen.

FACT AND FICTION

No history of Sierra County would be complete without considerable space being devoted to the words and deeds of Eugene Manlove Rhodes.

According to popular fancy the hero of a western story is likely to be unlettered, probably unable to write, never known to read anything except cattle brands and reward posters, and certainly disdainful of what is known as culture in the older circles of human commerce. Such popular fancy would be disturbed by the sight of young Gene Rhodes, cowhand since the age of thirteen, bronc-buster without peer, jogging across the dusty flats of the Jornada del Muerto ahorseback, reading as he went. And what would he be reading? Possibly any of the plays of Shakespeare, perhaps Alice in Wonderland or Through the Looking Glass--lifelong favorites, or a volume of Browning's poetry, or some story of Robert Louis Stevenson. Nor was this a pose. He was truly reading. The tales of his absorption in reading have become almost a legend. A woman on a lonely ranch reports seeing the young man ride up to her gate, eyes glued to the page of a book. As ranch women will, she went about her chores--expecting momen-

tarily to hear Gene's knock at the door or halloo from the yard. Half an hour later, chancing to glance out the window, she saw the rider still at the gate, still on the horse, still reading. When invited to get down and come into the house, he replied casually that he guessed he would, it was what he had come for. On another occasion three horsemen were riding slowly, one deeply absorbed in a book. Whether a diamond-back rattled, a bee stung, or the horse merely deveped irrational thoughts, there was a sudden lurch, a sideward bound, and both horse and rider tumbled end for end into an arroyo. When the two companions reached the bloody pair and asked the man--no one but Gene Rhodes--if he was hurt, he replied, "No, but dammit, I lost my place in the story."

This complete absorption in a book to the almost total exclusion of one's surroundings is hardly the attitude of mind a geologist should cultivate. Yet it displays a devotion to learning that is admirable and that was not the customary behavior of the ordinary cowpoke or line rider in early western America.

Gene Rhodes was not entirely oblivious to the world about him, however. On the contrary he was one of its keenest observers, between stories, and he began to write about the country he knew and about its inhabitants. Bernard de Voto has declared that this writing, of all writing about the early west and "cow country," alone rises to the level where an intelligent man can call it art.

There is a freshness, a difference, a winsomeness to the stories of this man that entices the reader to seek for more. His characters sprinkle their conversations with literary allusions, and yet they speak with a naturalness that is in keeping with their unpretentious habitat. Most of the stories of this writer appeared long ago in the Saturday Evening Post, but recently pocket editions of some of his stories have begun to appear. The subtitle of one story--The Little Eohippus--should bring a sparkle to the eye of any paleontologist. Though the tale itself has nothing to do with the evolutionary development of the horse, it has something to do with a horse--and there is no scarcity of developments.

The New Mexican world of Eugene Manlove Rhodes was the temporary world of the present field conference--especially the San Andres Mountains, where he owned his ranch, and the basins on either side, the Tularosa basin and the Jornada del Muerto. In his youth he worked at the Bar Cross Ranch at Engle. Tularosa and Alamogordo knew him well. His stories twinkle with names--either unchanged or but slightly disguised--of places that lie on or near the route of the field trips. The first day's trip will be in the canyon and the pass that bear his name, where he lived, and where he now lies buried.

Genes Rhodes, though the most literary and prolific, was not the only spinner of yarns in this area. For those with an avid interest in lost mines and in folklore, there is the tale (told by Henry James in "Curse of the San Andres"--Pageant Press) of the Lost Padre Mine, sometimes called the Soledad Mine. It is said to have been opened up by Father La Rue near the end of the 18th century when he led a flock from Chihuahua on the word of an old peon friend. He was directed by various landmarks to a mountain range and a basin containing a spring. This is reputed to be the Hembrillo basin in the San Andres Mountains. It is claimed he found the basin and the ore the old peon told him about, and that he began mining. Reports also state that he was pursued by soldiers of the Church, and that he was killed by the pursuing soldiers in the basin, but not before sealing up the entrance to the mine before it could be discovered.

Doc Noss claimed he found the lost mine--containing bullion, documents, and some trinkets--and that he took out several bars of gold, some trinkets and documents. To make descent into the mine easier he blasted an overhang, caused a cave-in of rock which completely blocked the entrance. He spent money trying to reopen the mine, was jailed for attempting to dispose of some bullion, and was shot by a "friend" who had gone into partnership with him to search for the treasure.

And there the thesaurus lies, unclaimed. Mrs. Noss and her son are still alive, living in Truth or Consequences. But the army has all rights to Hembrillo basin.

THE ATOMIC AGE

Ten years ago this summer the first atomic bomb was exploded. The site of this historic event is in the Jornada del Muerto, near the north end of the San Andres Mountains. It has been called Trinity site for an uninhabited switching point on the railroad, the nearest approach to the steel tower on which the bomb was detonated. (Sand fused by this blast has been called trinitite, more commonly atomsite.) The explosion formed a shallow saucer-shaped radioactive crust about the tower.

Much of Tularosa basin, most of the San Andres Mountains, and parts of the Jornada del Muerto are set apart for continued experimentation by the government on various kinds of atomic devices. The study of guided (and unguided) missiles is one of the important programs of investigation in this area, and the unwary who slink inside the base limits

unannounced and uninvited may be titillated by the whoosh-kerplunk of a rocket casing rejoining mother earth. The area is large and man is no great target from the air, but life insurance companies would increase rates for such behavior--if they knew.

ON THE ORIGIN OF A FEW NAMES

ALAMOSA CREEK: Cottonwoods everywhere.

CABALLO MOUNTAINS: Spanish for horse. Called Horse Mountain by Zebulon Pike. Spaniards introduced horses into the country, many of which escaped or were left masterless after skirmishes with the Indians. Gone wild, the horses gathered in herds and were known to frequent and hide in mountain canyons.

CHLORIDE: Started in 1879 by Harry Pye who hauled freight for the army, chanced upon some ore float, had it assayed, and returned to establish a silver mine. The Apaches separated him from his wealth and his health before he had further chance to enjoy either. The ore contained silver chloride; hence the name of the town.

CUCHILLO: Name of mountains, creek, and a town. Spanish for knife, or knife-edge. Apparently given to the southern Cuchillos for their sharp, serrated crest.

CUTTER: Named for a railroad construction official who worked on the section when the town built up.

ENGLE: Make a ninety degree turn as you go through town! Named for R. L. Engle, one of the engineers who supervised the construction of the Santa Fe Railroad through the Jornada del Muerto.

FRA CRISTOBAL MOUNTAINS: Named for Fray Cristobal, a priest with Onate, probably a cousin of the leader. He died near here in 1599 on his way back to Mexico seeking reinforcements.

JORNADA DEL MUERTO: Means, perhaps, journey of death, trail of death, one day's march of a dead man, and possibly something others have suggested. The origin is not clear, nor the first usage. Whether the doom envisaged refers to the lack of water and life or to the Apache scourge is not indicated, though the former is generally thought to be the more likely. The term was not used by the early Spaniards, even after El Camino Real had been used for many years.

LAS PALOMAS: Across from the Caballo reservoir, one of the earliest settlements in the area and until recently a bustling health resort. Named for the thousands of doves (palomas) that lived in the cottonwoods along the river and near the springs.

MCRAE: A captain in the Union Army, killed at the battle of Valverde. Fort McRae was founded in 1864 about four miles northeast of Elephant Butte. The ruins of the fort now lie beneath, or partially beneath, the waters of Elephant Butte reservoir (when there is water).

MEMBRILLO: Same as hembrillo, which is Spanish for little female of the male sex!

MUD SPRINGS MOUNTAINS: Well?

RHODES PASS AND RHODES CANYON: Gene Rhodes lived here. He now lies buried at the pass where even in death he is the sentinal of all who pass this way.

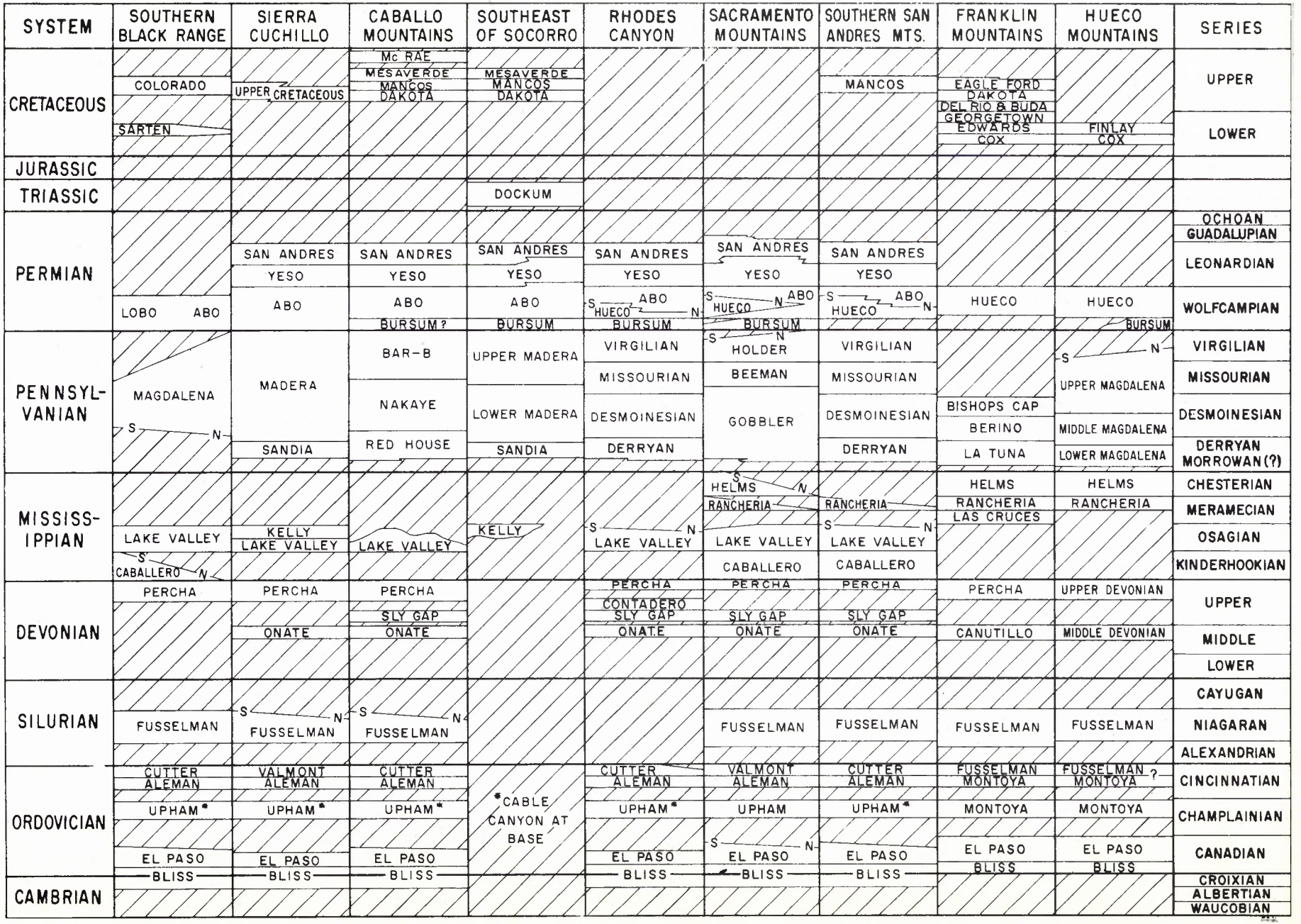
RIO GRANDE, RIO BRAVO, RIO DEL NORTE: All names of the same geographic object which is sometimes called by names not so suitable as these for print.

SAN ANDRES: The apostle St. Andrew, a favorite saint among many of the early Spanish settlers.

TRUTH OR CONSEQUENCES: Formerly called Hot Springs, an obvious choice. In 1950, with mixed emotions, the people of this formerly normal community voted to change the name to that by which it is now legally known. At the first radio show--of the same name--after this pebeian pebiscite, a doubting contestant was convinced of something, it is not known of what, by discovering an honest-to goodness pachyderm of appropriate name cavorting in the neighborhood of the dam of the same name. (It is reputed the beast was the sire!)

UPHAM: Named for one of the men associated with building the railroad through the Jornada del Muerto.

WINSTON: Formerly Fairview. Named for Honorable Frank H. Winston, once a member of the State Legislature, and a pioneer in cattle raising and mining in southwestern New Mexico. Obviously a man of influence.



Paleozoic and Mesozoic Correlation Chart – South Central New Mexico