



# FORGOTTEN FRONTIER

THE  
STORY OF  
SOUTHEASTERN  
NEW MEXICO

CAROLE LARSON

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# *Forgotten Frontier*

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THE STORY OF  
SOUTHEASTERN  
NEW MEXICO

*Carole Larson*

*Published in cooperation with  
the Historical Society of New Mexico*

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## *For Bob*

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# Foreword

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*Forgotten Frontier: The Story of Southeastern New Mexico* is a history of that section of the state as well as a general history of New Mexico. This book is another in the continuing co-publication series between the Historical Society of New Mexico and the University of New Mexico Press. The Society is proud to co-sponsor such well-researched and well-written studies as this one.

Carole Larson's scholarship is superior. Her work is just the kind to appeal to the general and serious reader of New Mexico history. This book also may prove useful to the public schools as a textbook. It will be especially attractive for use in junior and senior high schools.

Larson has concentrated on the southeast part of the state, the area encompassing the lower Pecos valley and the people and events there. There are other books of a general nature on the history of New Mexico, but none address the southeast side of the state in any detail.

The Historical Society of New Mexico is delighted to co-sponsor the work. The current members of the board of directors of the Society are: Robert R. White, president; John W. Grassham, first vice president; Darlis A. Miller, second vice president; Andres J. Segura, secretary; Spencer Wilson, treasurer. The other members are: John Baxter, Susan Berry, Maurice M. Bloom, Jr., Thomas E. Chavez, John P. Conron, Richard N. Ellis, Elvis E. Fleming, Austin Hoover,

FOREWORD

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and John P. Wilson.

SPENCER WILSON, Chairman  
Publications Committee  
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# *Preface*

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**S**OUTHEASTERN NEW MEXICO, ENCOMPASSING FIFTY THOUSAND square miles, remains one of the least-known areas of the state despite its stunning and varied landscape and its rich and exciting history. The purpose of this book is to provide an overview of the region's historical evolution, from the time of Paleo-Indian pottery makers to Plains Indian buffalo hunters, from early Spanish explorers to American pioneers, with particular emphasis on the period of frontier settlement from the 1850s until the turn of the century.

The first four chapters of the book provide a narrative account highlighting a number of important historical events. The next five chapters are devoted to profiles of people whose actions significantly affected events in the region; interwoven in their stories are accounts of events in which they participated. An attempt to give equal weight to narrative and to particular individuals seemed appropriate in a context where the impact of personality and character was heightened by a frontier environment in which pioneering figures were often taking the first steps toward permanent settlement of a new land. And as it happened, southeastern New Mexico attracted a wide range of character types, including extreme opposites in terms of greed and selflessness and in terms of attitude toward the use of violence. A final brief chapter summarizes major themes and highlights the important effects that both national trends and individual efforts had on the history of southeastern New Mexico.

A number of eminent historians, including William Keleher, Maurice G. Fulton, Eve Ball, Marc Simmons, Robert W. Larson, Robert

Utley, and John P. Wilson, have done groundbreaking research and written compelling books and monographs dealing with various phases and aspects of southeastern New Mexico history, particularly the fascinatingly complex episode known as the Lincoln County War (1878–81). This book draws upon the work of these and other historians to present in a single volume a synthesis of an extended period of time, with the aim of relating parts to the whole and identifying themes that bind together the history of the area.

While making no claim to have made use of every available published source, and still less claim to have based this work on primary research, the author nonetheless hopes that the reader will come away from reading this book with a deep feeling for the land, for its ancient lineage as a place of pre-European human habitation, and for the truly breathtaking rapidity with which American settlement came to the region that had long been known as ‘the empty quarter.’ And it is the author’s hope that this book will enable the reader to place the region within the broader contexts of New Mexico and American history.

After moving to Roswell in 1978, I discovered a very different New Mexico than the one I had encountered while living at various times in Albuquerque, Santa Fe, and Taos; different in tone, feel of land, culture, accent, historical traditions. And I discovered that the uniquely American experience of the ‘Old West’ was a reality, not a myth. As a staff writer for the *Roswell Daily Record*, I had a rich variety of opportunities to talk with, interview, and write about people from all walks of life who are part of the dynamic social interaction of contemporary southeastern New Mexico. Among them were ranchers and farmers, oilmen and roustabouts, politicians and judges, teachers, oldtimers, young people, business people, leaders of the Hispanic community.

A number of people had a profound influence upon me as a result of their personal links with the region’s history, their commitment to their community, and their individual integrity. This book might be said to have grown from seeds planted by some of these special people. Walt Wiggins, part of a pioneering family and the author of numerous art books in addition to his other accomplishments as photojournalist, publisher, and gallery owner, was a generous mentor who shared his knowledge and library, encouraging me as I moved in new directions in my research and writing, away from my previous studies in the field of African history. Art McQuiddy, retired senior executive of a multinational corporation, is married to Alene Hinkle, granddaughter of New Mexico governor James F. Hinkle (1923–24). A man of broad interests,

McQuiddy is deeply in tune with the region's history and its potential. From him I gained insight into a tradition of responsible leadership that has been one strand of southeastern New Mexico development. I especially value a copy of Hinkle's "Early Days of a Cowboy on the Pecos," given to me by McQuiddy.

I also wish to acknowledge some of those who extended their help to me during the writing of this book. Elvis Fleming, professor of history at Eastern New Mexico University—Roswell, guided me to research materials at the Chaves County Historical Museum Archives, of which he is director. Raymond Burrola, historian and teacher, formerly a research fellow at the Hispanic Studies Research Institute at the University of New Mexico, provided me with several sources and gave me the confirmation I sought for several of my assessments concerning Hispanic settlers in southeastern New Mexico.

Tom Hall, Roswell publisher, and Frank O. Papen, Las Cruces banker, each guided me to a valuable published source. David Orr, director of the Chaves County Historical Museum, and Lillian McDonald, the former director, were unfailingly kind in extending the facilities of the museum and its archives. J. P. White III, president of White Industries of Roswell, gave me hours of his time and shared with me some of his knowledge of his grandfather, pioneer cattleman J. Phelps White, and his general knowledge of regional history. Clarence Corn, the last living of pioneer Martin Van Buren Corn's nineteen children, granted me an interview at his home, lent me valuable documents, and provided insights into the life of his father.

My work was made easier by the cooperation of the staff of the Roswell Public Library, which has an outstanding Southwest collection. I am particularly grateful to reference librarians Loretta Clark, Rosemarie Klopfer, and Barbara Harris. Lee Dixon, a friend and fellow writer with a master's degree in language, stood by with the comforting assurance that I could call upon her for advice in matters of language use.

And finally, I especially wish to acknowledge the moral support given to me by my former husband, Robert W. Larson, retired professor of history at the University of Northern Colorado in Greeley and author of books and monographs on New Mexico history and western populism.

CAROLE LARSON  
Roswell, New Mexico



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# Contents

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*Illustrations*   vii

*Foreword*   ix

*Preface*   xi

## PART I   THE TIDE OF EVENTS

- 1   *The Timeless Land*   3
- 2   *The Imprint of Conquest*   17
- 3   *Native People and the Land*   37
- 4   *Power and Populism*   67

## PART II   THE IMPACT OF INDIVIDUALS

- 5   *John Chisum, L. G. Murphy, James Dolan, John Riley*   101
- 6   *Alexander McSween and John Tunstall*   131
- 7   *Billy the Kid and Pat Garrett*   153
- 8   *Joseph C. Lea, Martin Corn, John Poe*   195
- 9   *J. P. White and J. J. Hagerman*   231
- 10   *The Land Endures*   279

CONTENTS

*Notes* 289

*Bibliography* 303

*Index* 309

## *Illustrations*

### MAP

Southeastern New Mexico (c. 1900).	2
------------------------------------	---

### FIGURES

1. Quanah Parker, last great Comanche chief.	91
2. Kit Carson in his Army Colonel's uniform during the Civil War.	92
3. Cattleman John Simpson Chisum as a young man in Texas.	93
4. John Chisum in New Mexico in the early 1870s.	93
5. James J. Dolan and Lawrence G. Murphy in 1873.	94
6. Patrick F. Garrett in his twenties, c. 1875.	94
7. Billy the Kid in Fort Sumner in 1879.	95
8. Sallie Chisum Robert, niece of John Chisum, c. 1880s.	96
9. Captain Joseph C. Lea in the early 1890s.	96
10. Lea family and friends in front of the Lea house in 1879.	97
11. Lea family portrait in the early 1890s.	98
12. Mescalero Apache schoolchildren with their teacher in 1892.	187
13. John and Sophie Poe on their wedding day, May 5, 1883.	188
14. John W. Poe in the early 1900s.	189
15. A roundup crew around the campfire on the Pecos range, 1892.	190
16. Cowboy chuckwagon and crew at roundup time, Eddy County 1893.	190
17. James J. Hagerman on the grounds of the South Spring Ranch, 1905.	191
18. Ella Lea in 1899.	191
19. Captain Joseph C. Lea and a new artesian well in Roswell, 1893.	192
20. J. Phelps White, c. mid-1920s.	193
21. The first train to enter Roswell, 1894.	193
22. Main Street in frontier Artesia.	194

PART I

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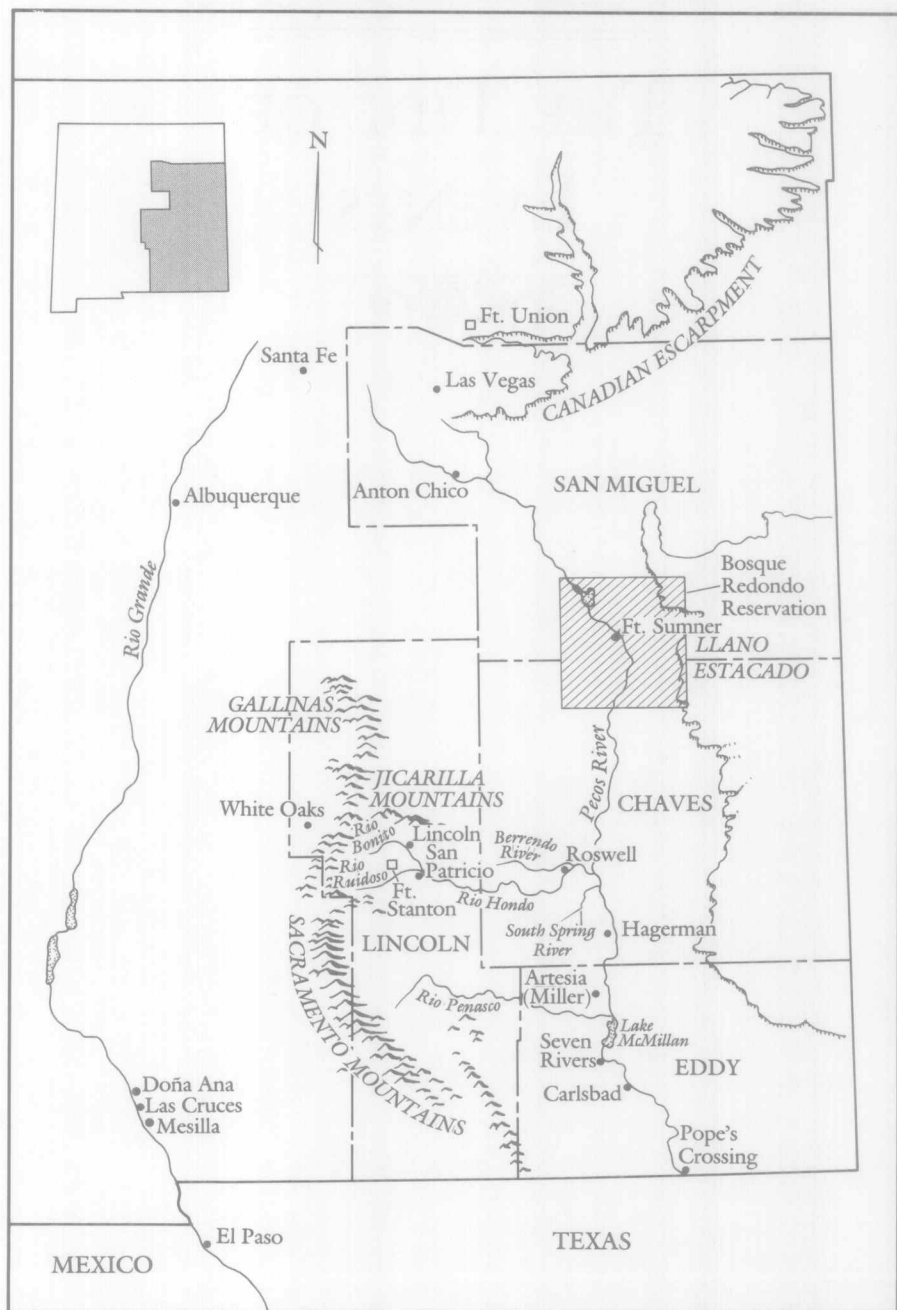
THE TIDE OF  
EVENTS

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# SOUTHEASTERN NEW MEXICO (c. 1900)



# I

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## *The Timeless Land*

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NEW EXICO SEEMS ALMOST A COUNTRY UNTO ITSELF SO UNIQUE among the states is its historical experience as cradle of Indian cultures, outpost of imperial Spain, province of Mexico, and American territory from 1850 until 1912, when statehood was granted. It is separate, too, as a result of its complex variety of land features: mountain chains, river valleys, plains, and deserts, woven into a landscape of universality as though by a creator who willed upon one large canvas a masterwork. And as in any place notable for its distinctive formative history and encompassing a range of ecological environments, this land has its identifiable regions, each with different nuances of custom, language, and thought pattern.

Southeastern New Mexico, a compelling blend of pure frontier West and the dynamic cultural eclecticism characteristic of the state as a whole, is the region settled latest and yet the one whose name became synonymous with the dangers and opportunities to be found 'west of the Pecos.'

The area comprises some 50,000 square miles of the state's total of 121,666 square miles. Dauntingly vast and sparsely populated, southeastern New Mexico is bordered on the east and south by Texas, on the north by the Canadian Escarpment in northeastern New Mexico, and on the west by a southern offshoot of the Rocky Mountains, which divides the eastern part of the state from the western part. Its dominant land features are the Llano Estacado, a high plain of extreme flatness extending from West Texas into the eastern third of southeastern New Mexico; the Pecos River, which runs the length of the region through its central portion; and the series of mountains including the Guada-

lupe, White, Capitan, and Sacramento ranges, which rise to snow-capped summits all along the region's western section.

From a vantage point anywhere along the broad Pecos Valley, the eye encompasses an undulating flow of subtly shifting colors and delicately delineated landforms, moving from the pale greens of rangeland in the near distance, to the darker blue-greens of low hills in the middle distance, and finally to deeply colored lavender-toned mountains hugging the western horizon and topped by a crystalline blue sky. It is a vista of hundreds of miles and yet one in which distant objects appear closer than they actually are, due to the clarity of the air, the intensity of the light. The land abounds with white-blossomed yucca, yellowish mesquite, russet-tinged salt cedar, and purple sage, all of which flourish in the semiarid environment. Southeastern New Mexico is, in fact, one of the driest regions in the entire United States; rainfall averages less than twelve inches a year, and the Pecos River is the only perennial source of surface water in an area of sixty thousand square miles stretching from the Sacramento Mountains in the west to Lubbock, Texas, in the east.

Southeastern New Mexico as it exists today began to take shape about ten thousand years ago, when the last of four successive Ice Ages affecting most of North America ended. The ice sheet that covered much of New Mexico during the Pleistocene epoch, from sixty-five thousand years ago until ten thousand years ago, began to melt and recede. In succeeding periods, vast amounts of sedimentary material were washed eastward from the mountains by rainfall in amounts up to four hundred inches per year. As the mountains wore down under this torrent of water, the annual rainfall gradually decreased, because air masses were no longer forced high into the cooler levels of the upper atmosphere, where rainclouds form easily. The sediment distributed over eastern New Mexico solidified into the dry plains known today, a plateau region crisscrossed by the remains of ancient riverbeds that once channeled rainwater rushing from the mountains. Even so the mountains continue to be a life source. It is from the ranges lying east of the Tularosa Basin—the Gallinas, the Jicarilla, the Capitan, the White and the Sacramento—that the only tributary sources of the Pecos River flow, including the Rio Hondo, the Rio Feliz, and the Rio Peñasco.

Worn down over eons by the action of rain and wind, the plains of southeastern New Mexico are not only remarkably flat but are also different in elevation from the remainder of New Mexico. While 85 percent of New Mexico lies at an elevation of over four thousand feet,

southeastern New Mexico is about three thousand feet above sea level, rising gradually toward the western portion, where the mountains break the flatness with heights ranging from eight thousand feet to over twelve thousand feet.

The headwaters of the legendary Pecos River are found in other, yet higher, mountains. It is at levels of thirteen thousand feet and more in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains northeast of Santa Fe that streams cascading down from snowy peaks come together to form the river that winds in a south-southeasterly direction for 755 miles to its meeting place with the Rio Grande in south Texas. The Pecos River valley varies in width from twenty to forty miles and is at its widest in the stretch from just north of Roswell to just south of Artesia. A singular feature of the broad river valley is the line of craggy gypsum bluffs lying along the east side of the river for many hundreds of miles.

From plateau plain to river valley to mountain foothills, the contours of the land are writ large against the dome of sky. The land-space of southeastern New Mexico is whole and integrated, meant to be felt in its entirety, a truth driven home by the relentless, seamless roof of sky bright with sun fire that covers it in splendid unity. One is given all of the land, never part; the ochres, browns, silvery greens, and sages, the purples, burnt umbers, and golds are interwoven ceaselessly across the landscape from one end of the land to its farthest horizon. And just as it integrates space and claims wholeness, so too does this land demand recognition that time is eternal and circular, not to be conceived in the short gulps of human breath in the marked-off centuries.

It is not an easily accessible land, not a land immediately assimilated into human emotions. It overwhelms; it is subtle, vast, even savage in its stark forms and endless horizons. Its very largeness can conceal forever the intricate beauties of the small-scale natural phenomena found within it. It presents the individual with a continual choice between watching its larger outlines or pausing to absorb the valley places, canyon places, mesa or desert places within it. It will not be tamed. It will be windswept, self-determining, dynamic under a sun that seems to hold the land as laboratory to test its own powers of intensity. The air itself takes on visible shimmerings under the sun's relentless penetration.

It is a landscape one either grasps and feels imprinted on one's soul or else finds vaguely unsettling, taunting, even repugnant and antithetical to the civilizing ways of people. There are on the wide stretches of the plateau plain no deep green grass carpets, no lush forests, no shaded tumbling streams, no craggy peaks over misted valleys. There are, in



short, no places to hide, to be caressed by nature, no places to believe in abstract beauty; there is no surcease from reality, no real smallness within which to shield oneself from the largeness, no aids from nature encouraging belief in one's uniqueness or protected status. And yet, ultimately, there is something in the landscape that enfolds, uplifts, strengthens, and places people firmly in a tapestry being woven into geological, anthropological, cultural history.

The people of southeastern New Mexico are, in fact, bound together as much by their history as by the feel of the land they occupy. For what the entire Llano Estacado and the trans-Pecos region have in common is that it was their destiny to be among the last frontiers of the American West to be tamed and permanently settled. In the year 1876, when the United States was celebrating its first centennial with all the hoopla and optimistic faith in the new machine age displayed at the Philadelphia Exhibition, the entire area from the Texas Panhandle through eastern and southeastern New Mexico was caught up in another kind of fervor—not one of celebrating past accomplishments but of clearing the plains of Indians, stocking the public domain with cattle, homesteading, establishing mail routes, building new towns, and creating county governments and courts of law.

But if Americans of European ancestry, whether Spanish, English, Irish, French or German, discovered southeastern New Mexico in a serious way only in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, Native Americans knew the entire area from plain to mountain as an ancestral homeland going back as far as the tail end of that last Pleistocene-era Ice Age some ten thousand years ago.

The story of the prehistoric peopling of New Mexico is one of evolutionary, ages-long progression from Paleo-Indian hunter group to nineteenth-century Indian of plain and pueblo. It begins with the nomadic bands of big-game hunters who roamed New Mexico during the last centuries of the last Ice Age. These clan-based groups were part of a broadly similar ancient Native American culture that prevailed over much of the North American continent for thousands of years after people first began crossing a fifty-mile land bridge that existed between Siberia and Alaska for tens of thousands of years. Well before the low-lying Bering Straits land bridge disappeared back into the depths of a rising ocean about ten thousand years ago, an untold number of migrations had brought human settlement to all parts of North and South America. Anthropologists now believe that the Indians of the Southwest, including those of New Mexico, stem from a major migration