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The Crumbling Adobes of Chamberino

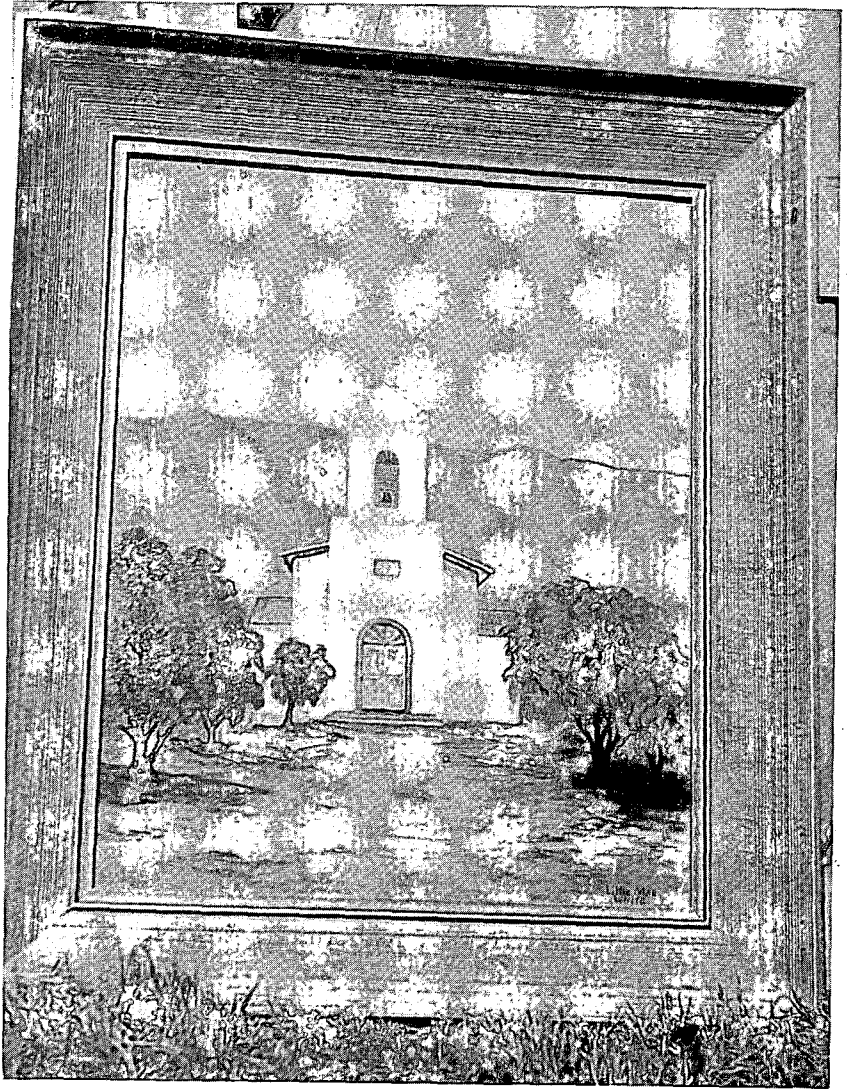
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San Luis, Rey de Francia, Chamberino
By Lillie Mae White

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THE CRUMBLING ADOBES OF CHAMBERINO

By MARGUERITE TAYLOR WANT*

Our valley is lush and green with many beautiful homes, productive farms, and busy communities on both sides of the Rio Grande. The history of this area is a fascinating story with many gay and carefree times of joy and excitement, romantic gala fiestas, times of fear and anxiety, and grave tragedies.

After the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo of 1848, the fertile Chamberino valley attracted a number of New Mexicans who preferred to maintain their old allegiance and emigrate to areas still under the jurisdiction of Mexico. The Mexican government encouraged this by establishing colonies of immigrants from New Mexico and granting lands to them. In 1851-1852, Ramón Ortiz, a priest at El Paso, was acting by appointment of the supreme authorities of Mexico as Commissioner General empowered to found such colonies in the State of Chihuahua.

The "civil colony of Refugio" was on the west bank of the Rio Grande, "about five or six leagues north of the town of

*Anthony, New Mexico. Because I have lived in the Chamberino community since I was a tiny child this area has been near and dear to me. Hence, the desire to collect material and to write of my community inspired me to write this paper.

Special acknowledgment is due to Mrs. P. H. Bailey, Mary Garcia, Simon Hernández, Alice Jackman Nelson, Estanislado Saucedo, Mrs. Marcos Saucedo, Hilario Saucedo and his daughters, Anita and Francisca Saucedo, and Warder Wallace. Special gratitude is shown to those who are now deceased: José Barrio, Chon Díaz, Tránsito Garcia, Mrs. W. H. Haas, and to Mrs. Teresa E. Stevenson.

El Paso." More than fifty heads of families had already received possession of farmlands and house lots, when, on February 20, 1852, Ortiz proceeded to make the usual grant of *ejidos* (commons) to the new settlement, "this colony being already established and greatly increased and also the distribution of *suertes* of lands and residence lots among its settlers having been effected after the designation of localities for town houses [i.e. town hall], churches, etc., and the granting of eight *suertes* of land for corporation funds." According to Spanish colonial and later Mexican Law, the common lands were to be uncultivated areas lying on the outskirts of cities, towns, or villages.

I therefore designate to the aforesaid Colony of Refugio, one league and a quarter for its commons the measurement of which being that prescribed by the twenty third article of the State law of December twenty third one thousand eight hundred and fifty one for the benefit of settlements containing over one thousand souls, was then commenced and assigned from the exterior of the outer limits of the property or possessions already distributed observing the character and the quadrilateral configuration of the lands distributed in as much as it could not be made into a perfect square, it must be borne in mind that the arable land of the said Colony of Refugio has in length six thousand nine hundred varas from North to South and two thousand four hundred and seventy five varas from East to West and consequently, an area of seventeen millions eighty seven thousand five hundred square varas. The figure and limits of the tract being known and taking into consideration that towards the river side there is not sufficient public land to mark out the common on that side, the three thousand one hundred and twenty five varas that ought to have been measured on that side are added to a like number on the northern side, that is to say, measuring six thousand two hundred and fifty varas from the lands of Jose de la Luz Jaques, or more plainly from the point corresponding on a direct line of this land running from east to west, thence following the side of the river will make the six thousand two hundred and fifty varas—at which final point the proper landmarks will be raised—after which from the limits of the land of Jose Marques which is situated

at the edge of the hills towards the west there will be measured three thousand one hundred and twenty five varas, and as many more on the south side, from the limits of the land of Jose Maria Garcia where the said landmarks will also be raised. Lastly for woodland and common pasturage . . . I designate the entire Bosque and strips of land lying between the arable land and the river from the commencement and end of the arable land embracing its whole length. I also designate for public lawn and grounds the adjacent brows and slopes of the hills situated on the west in a longitudinal extension, following the course of the summit equal to the common pasture ground designated on the side of the river. The right of pasture and other concessions which I hereby stipulate in favor of this new settlement in the name of the Federal Government and of the State of Chihuahua is perpetual and imprescriptible founded upon the consent of the supreme authorities and on the letter of ancient and modern legislation. In view of all which from this day forward the aforesaid settlement of Refugio remains in the most ample possession of the tract to which it is entitled by law—under the restriction that it cannot alienate the same in any manner, to any church, monastery, ecclesiastical person community or into any other mortmain so called, as this is prohibited by law.

Less than two years later El Refugio passed to the jurisdiction of the United States of America and the refugees to Old Mexico found themselves New Mexicans again in Doña Ana County, New Mexico, under the terms of the Gadsden Purchase Treaty, December 30, 1853.¹

Families had brought the most necessary household articles, the needed farming equipment and precious seeds in ox carts, on mule packs, and on burro's backs. They had found a wide and level area near the river to build their temporary homes. The land was cleared of bosque growth; small plots of garden were cultivated. Chili, frijoles, squash, pumpkins, sweet potatoes, and corn were planted. Fields of

1. Information and quotations on El Refugio colony grant from University of New Mexico microfilm copies of papers in Docket of Private Land Claims (Surveyor General) "housed in the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, Santa Fe." See Albert James Diaz, *A Guide to the Microfilm of Papers relating to New Mexico Land Grants* (Albuquerque, 1960), pp. 3, 47. EBA.

wheat and patches of punche (a native tobacco) were planted the following season. Vineyards of mission grapes and peach, quince, and other fruit trees were set out.

An intricate irrigation system was established with a diversion dam across the Rio Grande near the present town of San Miguel, constructed of poles of cottonwood driven into the river bottom and a woven face of green willow and tamarisk limbs to back up the water. This diverted the water into a hand-constructed canal known as the "acequia madre". The long canal was patrolled by a canal "alcalde del agua" and maintained by all the farmers with shovels and crude scrapers. The surplus canal water emptied back into the river south of the town. The irrigation system created a constant repair job. The diversion dams had to be rebuilt nearly every summer, and often several times each season, because every flood that came along would either wash them out or partly wreck them. They had to be built higher and higher, because silt and sand washed down by the flood waters slowly raised the level of the riverbed. Until engineers worked out a better plan, early settlers kept on using the system upon which Indians and Spanish colonists had relied for hundreds of years.

Livestock was used as a source of power and food supply; oxen were used both in the fields and to turn the millstones of the "molinos". Longhorn cattle and goats were the source of milk. Sheep furnished skin mats to sleep on, warm wool for clothing, and mutton to eat. They were items for barter. The new American market for wool benefited the sheep raisers and later thousands of sheep were raised and marketed in the valley.

The settlers lived in a closely knit settlement for the purpose of safety and for convenience. Permanent adobe buildings were later constructed around the pre-planned town plaza located in the east area behind the present Chamberino store off New Mexico Highway 28. A small mission church at the north end was dedicated to San Luis Rey de Fran-

cia, a devout Catholic king of France who responded to the call of the Pope to defend the Holy Land during the Crusades. He was an admired saint of the Spanish explorers going to foreign lands. The Mexican settlers had great veneration for him, and held him as their model. The church was built by all able-bodied men and boys. Adobes, hard labor, and many hours of each day went into the San Luis church.

A Jesuit missionary rode from Paso del Norte on horseback, or went in a buggy to the town about once each month to administer the sacraments and celebrate Mass for the faithful. The old timers recalled with fond memories conversations with Father Pinto and Father Esteban. Father Lafon came later to the Chamberino and Berino missions and the small mission of Nombre de Dios, located north and east of the present Gadsden High School. Later, this village was completely washed away.

The good padres encouraged the mothers and young ladies to instruct the children in "doctrina cristiana", and from this instruction came the teaching of "las letras". Instruction was held in the homes of Ygnacio Orrantia and José Morales, in the open court yards, and in the plaza. José la Luz Pino was an early strict professor who was paid for his service. He was recalled by Tránsito Garcia and José Barrio as one who required the most of each student.

In 1870 the population of Chamberino was about 500. The children were expected to attend school. If money was a scarce item, the teacher was paid with grain, meat, chickens and eggs, vegetables, lodging, or firewood. Most any practical item was acceptable.

The corner fireplace did not always afford enough heat in the classroom, so the coals of burning mesquite root in the center of the hard packed dirt floor added to the children's comfort. The placid happy community knew the hardships of bitter cold and heavy snow in some winters; therefore classes were dismissed during the cold months.

There was no regular time for school terms and the session of each school in the territory depended upon available teachers, amount of school funds appropriated, and the meeting of the school commissioners. In the school room were children ranging in age from five to twenty years of age. During the harvesting and planting seasons classes were recessed.

The colony of Mesilla had grown in population and published weekly newspapers. In the *Mesilla Valley Independent* of 1877 to 1879 (taken from microfilm copies in New Mexico State University Library) there was an advertisement on the front page that showed Chamberino to be a busy thriving pueblo. It read:

YGNACIO ORRANTIA
Comerciante de Efectos y
ABARROTES
en el plaza del
CHAMBERINO

Ygnacio Orrantia was a prosperous merchant and a very influential person with the important office of Secretary of the Colonia de Chamberino.

~~A newcomer to the area saw prospects for competition with Ygnacio Orrantia in the general mercantile business. He purchased bricks from the brick kiln located on the river in the vicinity of the present town of Vinton, Texas, and constructed an imposing tall store building. Mr. Baggs, or Boggés, as the villagers referred to him, was a bachelor of means from Montana. He stocked his store with the latest sewing machines, farming implements, seeds, fancy calico and dress goods, shoes and boots, local wine and whiskey (which was sold by the cup chained to the barrel).~~

His large store house had ample space for the wheat he bought or traded for. There he stored sacks of ground flour from Harts Mill located in El Paso. When the storeroom was near empty the space was used for all night dances.

Mr. Baggs had acquired a large farm of several hundred acres with rich pasture lands. He built a large two story red brick home which was a show place of the valley. He operated a stock farm of race horses and maintained his own track. He sold horses from his farm and livery stable in El Paso. He owned greyhound dogs and sponsored dog races. On Sundays cock fights with his highly bred game cocks were wagered on.

Baggs store and race tracks soon became the trading spot for traders, travelers, farmers, and loafers.

Each spring as the snow melted in the Rockies, the rushing torrents of water came down the Rio Grande. On May 3rd of each year the crest of the flood waters was awaited with fear and anxiety. In 1884 and 1885, the river went on a rampage. Many of the adobe houses were surrounded by flood water. Some collapsed into mud heaps, and others were unsafe for occupancy. A few of the discouraged and frightened home owners built new homes on higher ground away from the village. Others repaired their damaged homes and built dykes around the town. Other discouraged settlers moved back to Chihuahua. The farsighted Ramon Barrio, Manuel Díaz, Francisco López, and Jacinto Perea built on hills on the west side of the Chamberino canal. The Barrio and Díaz homes are still occupied near the present Chamberino School.

In 1886, a more devastating flood inundated the entire valley from the foot hills of the east to those on the west. The railroad had been completed east of the river several years before, and the tracks were all washed out and covered with water, mud, and debris.

The men controlled the canal (mentioned earlier) to prevent breaks and to try to strengthen the weakened spots in the banks. Many farmers exchanged bitter words because those patrolling would not let them cut the banks to allow the water to spread to the western farmland and the pasture areas. The patrolling was futile because the banks gave way

in weakened spots. The boiling, rushing, whirling water had no mercy on lives or property.

Flood water covered the entire low area. Only the homes on high ground escaped the crumbling of adobes into the furious water. People fought desperately to save household furnishings, clothing, animals, the sacred vessels from the altar of the church, "santos" from family shrines, and any item that could be carried. Many of the people lost all their possessions. Some of the more fortunate had loads tied on hastily to burros' or horses' backs, or tied to makeshift rafts. A few citizens anchored items to trees to be salvaged later. The older children had rushed on ahead with the few animals they could herd toward the mesa. Many of the aged and small children, as well as able-bodied adults, lost their lives. The graves in the sandy area south of the village were covered with water and washed away. For years pieces of human skeletons were picked up over the valley and plowed up in the fields.

Makeshift log rafts and canoes were assembled and hurried into rescue action. The workers pulled chickens out of the tops of trees, pigs and goats were taken off hill tops, and floating furniture and containers were salvaged from the muddy waters for weeks after the raging torrent slowed to a leisurely moving stream in a new channel. The valley had the appearance of a wide lake with green cottonwood and willow tree tops standing above the mud and debris.

The devastation was terrible, and the stench of dead animals, stagnant water, molesting mosquitoes, swarming vultures, and slinking coyotes added to the misery of all.

The farm lands in many areas were too swamped to plant, so men had to clear new areas to plant their gardens. Wild game, remaining desert mesquite beans, tornillo beans, cacti, and fleshy plant roots were added to stretch the food supplies. Garambullo, tomateo, and quelites were gathered, and supplies not eaten were dried and stored.

Crudely built "jacals" of sticks and mud, roofed with

tules and twigs and more mud were erected on the sand hills. Drinking water had to be dipped out of the pools and lakes that had formed at the base of the mesa. Barrels and ollas, clay lined baskets and containers made of animal hides, were used to carry the water up the hill. They were often tied to poles and carried over shoulders, or loaded on crudely fashioned wooden-wheeled carts. The long lake formed at the base of the mesa was referred to as the "laguna" for years. As soon as possible, wells were dug for a more sanitary and convenient water supply by cooperative groups of residents.

These people knew hunger and suffering, but providence was on their side—the weather was kind and warm to them. They had their lives to be thankful for; so they gathered together to say the rosary, and ask the grace of God. They needed a central place to house the sacred vessels and erect a temporary altar. The home of Jacinto Perea, one of the few homes spared by the flood, was given the honor. Tránsito García and José Barrio were young men at the time, and they related these events to me. Saved from the flood were the "santo", an old, hand-carved figure that had been brought with the first settlers, and a wooden crucifix crowned with real thorns. They were dear to all of the Chamberino citizens. Soon Jacinto Perea built a small room at the side of his home and Father Lafon blessed it, and dedicated it as a temporary chapel. Father Lafon took lodging and meals in the hospitable home of Mr. Perea.

These people looked forward to better homes, and in their spare time adobes were made near the "laguna". One man helped the next, and soon the hurriedly constructed village changed appearance. Many one and two-roomed warm, comfortable, adobe houses lined the one street known as the Camino Real, and overlooked the once fruitful valley.

Since a larger and more centrally located church was needed, the citizens picked a high spot on the hill west of the Camino Real. Adobes twenty-four inches wide were

made, and left in the hot sun to dry. They were later stacked into rows to be hauled up the hill on crudely fashioned wheelbarrows to be laid into the sturdy walls of the new church. The vigas were cut down in the valley, and only the straightest and tallest cottonwood trees were to be used for these rafters. Smaller branches and sticks were used to hold the mud which formed the roof. This was a hard, gruelling job that had to be done when the men could spare the work and time. It took eight years of hard labor to complete the construction. Today it stands proudly on the hill like a dedicated sentinel overlooking the valley farms.

Esteven Sever, an Austrian, gave the bell. Inscribed on the bell was the following—

HY STUCKSTEDE B. F. CO.
ST. LOUIE MO. 1901

CHRISTO REDEMPTORIS—
SEVER POPULUSQUE CHAMBERINUS A E S
ITUD SACRUM DEDICANT AS MCM I

The church had no belfry, so the bell was hung on forked cottonwood poles outside. An iron rod was used to strike the bell calling the faithful to worship. It tolled mournfully to announce a death. It also rang to alarm the people of danger, or to call them to meetings.

Frank Oliver gave the big statue of San Luis which was placed high over the main altar. The precious old statue of San Luis was given a prominent spot to the right of the altar, but it always took a special place in processions. Today it still holds this special honor.

Frank Oliver also built the large square "molino" on the reconstructed Chamberino ditch with the water wheel to turn the mill stones. Before the mill was built, all grain had to be hauled by wagons to Harts Mill in El Paso to be ground.

New people were coming into the valley to farm, and to

make their homes. Dr. Cyrus Bailey moved his family into the Chamberino area. Almost all the people were suffering from chills and fever so the old doctor was kept very busy. Dr. Bailey set out a vast vineyard, and he imported fruit trees and many ornamental shrubs. He and Mr. Baggs rivaled one another as horticulturalists. They were proud of the many kinds and varieties of fruit and nuts they produced. A Persian mulberry is one of the prized old trees still bearing fruit on the old Baggs home site. The stately black walnut trees were chopped up for firewood. The trees bearing delicious peaches, pears, figs and other fruits have all died out.

At the turn of the century many Dutch farmers, refugees of the Boer War in South Africa, entered the valley. They were ambitious and industrious workers, and the local community made many progressive changes in general living and in education.

The townspeople of Chamberino realized their need for a solid community. A group of men were organized as the "comissionarios" on June 4, 1906. Francisco López was the elected president; Vicente López, Jr., secretary; and board members were Jacinto Perea and Luis Candelario.

A new plot of land was designated for the first public school site. Funds obtained from the territorial government and labor of the local citizens, with José Alvillar as architect, made the one-room school a reality. A formal opening was held in April of 1908, with a "Gran Baile". Music was furnished by Medina's string band for an all-night celebration.

Wedding dances, coming-out parties, annual fiestas, and political rallies were held in the school, which was the finest public meeting place in Chamberino.

Time showed the school to be much too small and not centrally located for the valley farm children. The people on the hill wanted the new school to be built on the hill, while the valley residents wanted a more centrally located build-

ing. After many heated arguments and numerous circulated petitions, a yellow brick school building with three rooms, two wash rooms, and a long hallway from the front door to the back door was constructed in 1913. It was located down in the valley. Miss Chloe Hampson (Mrs. S. A. Donaldson) and Miss Phildelia Sears opened school late in September for children attending the first eight grades. The little children attended school in the old school house with Miss Abbie Kilgore as their kind and devoted teacher.

After Elephant Butte Dam was completed, and irrigation made cotton farming profitable, many people moved into the valley. The cotton crop presented new labor problems. Many negro laborers were brought in to harvest the crops. Laborers from Mexico found steady work and better living conditions. The valley population then began to grow rapidly.

The Mesilla Valley has become a most beautiful productive area. This has been possible through hard work, foresight, heartache, and success and failure that always accompany progress and productivity. Large scale farms have absorbed the small farmplots. Many of the younger people moved down into the valley, and others moved away to find gainful employment. Many of the old homes on the hill were deserted; windows were soon broken, roofs leaked and collapsed, and walls showed the ravages of time and weather. Today as one passes through the old community he sees "the crumbling adobes of Chamberino".