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Origins of the Name “Alamogordo”

WILLIAM N. MCPHEE AND HARRY R. PARSONS

The term “Alamogordo” does not occur in Spanish dictionaries either as a word or a name, although its separate word stems are commonplace. “Alamo” means, of course, a poplar tree (or generally tree, in New Mexico), and “gordo” means fat, stout, or large. Together they describe the big cottonwood trees of the American Southwest. That species apparently does not occur in Spain and has no common name in Spanish beyond just “alamo.” So how did the New Mexico name get started?

One answer appears in the papers of John Arthur Eddy, the person who named the town. As general manager for the Eddy brothers, John Arthur established their New Mexico railroad route and the sites of its towns, while the brother historians credit for these developments, Charles B. Eddy, was actually the enterprise’s promoter in El Paso and New York.¹ John Arthur directed the Colorado end of the Eddy brothers’ enterprises, notably their cattle drives in the 1880s from the lower Pecos in New Mexico to the mountains of Colorado, where the Eddys began.² As the Colorado manager, John Arthur was the absentee partner in the founding of New Mexico’s Eddy County and the town of Carlsbad, although he lived in New Mexico during the 1890s while general manager of the railroad venture that founded Otero County and Alamogordo.³

The only remnants of his papers that have survived consist of a journal from 1879–80 that details the building of the Eddy brothers’ first ranch in Colorado, and a scrapbook of news clippings and memorabilia from the 1890s that illustrates the building of their New Mexico railroad and the founding of Alamogordo.⁴ The scrapbook, now in the Museum

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of New Mexico History Library, includes a signed carbon copy of an article Eddy submitted to the 1923 twenty-fifth anniversary celebration of Alamogordo's founding. Although the article has a number of interesting passages, perhaps the most pertinent reads:

[I]t may often be wondered how the town got its name. It devolved on me to name the stations on the [rail]road and in doing so, I sought to apply those of local characteristics or landmarks. It would have been natural therefore, to use the word "Alamo", but it was objectionable because of its being so common and so many Alamos. In my cowboy days, one of my favorite camping places between Las Vegas and Seven Rivers, was on a little stream running into the east side of the Pecos, called "Alamo Gordo". I had learned its meaning to be, a big or "Rotund" cottonwood, and upon seeing such a tree, at the mouth of the Alamo Canon, the name came back impressively to me. And that is how Alamogordo got its name. I think you must have numerous "Alamo Gordos" along your streets, by this time.⁵

The document, typed under Eddy's supervision, has its carbon copy corrected and signed in his own hand. The article's text makes it unmistakable that he used separate words, "Alamo" and "Gordo," for the name of the stream and in his description of this type of tree. Another point becomes clear, however, that by the time of its twenty-fifth anniversary the town's name had somehow metamorphized to become "Alamogordo." How had that happened?

A first suspicion is that it was done by some bureaucracy. For example, during the late 1800s the United States Postal Service collapsed the names of unincorporated places in Colorado such as "Allen's Park" into the "Allenspark" post office. A transformation such as this seems to have happened to the stream in New Mexico that Eddy mentions, since a creek with the Spanish name "Alamo Gordo" appears on an 1851 United States Army map and was still present with this spelling on a Postal Service map as late as 1907. After 1907, however, it appears misspelled in various maps until it becomes a single word, "Alamogorda" (sic), on the state Highway Commission's 1918 map.⁶ With only the spelling corrected, it has remained one word in all subsequent mentions—even in the United States Department of Agriculture's "Alamogordo Creek Experimental Watershed," a flood control project.

The Department of Agriculture initiated this project to correct the watershed's main problem for farmers: flooding after heavy rains. But flooding, as botanists tell us, helps to propagate the big cottonwoods.⁷ Today, in contrast to the earlier unchecked flooding, the project dams located upstream remove the surface water that once replenished the

shallow, but wide, aquifer. Only scattered specimens remain in the once bountiful "natural cottonwood farm." An additional hazard today that threatens the remaining trees is the northeastern inlet of Sumner Lake, a reservoir created by a dam on the Pecos River and located off federal Highway 84 midway between Santa Rosa and Ft. Sumner.⁸

One of the authors of this article, Harry Parsons, has undertaken an extensive study of the area and offers further insight on the origins of the name Alamogordo. Parsons discovered that Jesse (Joseph) Sutton, an idealistic trader and one-time business partner of Josiah Gregg, proposed building a model community based on sheep raising and wool manufacturing, not unlike a modern-day cooperative near Tierra Amarilla, New Mexico.⁹ In 1838, Sutton received a land grant centered on a spring located just down the Pecos River from the mouth of Alamo Gordo Creek.¹⁰ The name "Alamo Gordo" (often modifying arroyo) existed by then and reappears on an 1851 United States Army map. Reports written in the 1860s originating from Ft. Sumner confirm this usage.¹¹ Unfortunately, despite telephone checks with three archives, we found that maps in Spanish prior to 1850 do not provide enough detail to list minor Pecos River tributaries.¹² Sutton's effort to form a model sheep-raising community never got past the planning stage due to fears of Comanche attacks and an inability to get American authorities to confirm his Mexican land grant. A second effort to build a sheep-raising empire did succeed, however, under the direction of a former sea captain, John B. Clancy, who drove large flocks of the most desirable breeds from California to New Mexico in the still perilous 1870s.¹³

Cattle driving also began during this period on the well-known Goodnight-Loving Trail. And cattle driving is what brought the Eddy brothers, especially John Arthur, to Alamo Gordo Creek. The Eddys first came to New Mexico in 1880-81 to drive cattle to their new ranch located between Salida and South Park, Colorado. Thereafter, they supplied cattle to Colorado mountain ranches and mining towns, and by 1885, for railroad shipping to outside markets.¹⁴ John ran these enterprises from Colorado, but often traveled to New Mexico on partnership business. From repeated use of route maps, he must have known perfectly well how to spell "Alamo Gordo" Creek.

Nevertheless, we have found in the Eddy scrapbook clippings of display advertisements dated 26 May 1898 that ran in the newspapers of El Paso, Santa Fe, and other towns. The advertisements announced lots for sale in a new town named "Alamogordo." At the bottom of each advertisement appeared in the same spelling: "The Alamogordo Improvement Company, J. A. Eddy, President."¹⁵

The combining of words in the original name Alamogordo suggests that an explanation lies in what may be called "proper-name license." As in poetic license, a person can take liberties in spelling and grammar when naming things. For example, while we would never combine an adjective like "yellow" with a noun such as "stone" into one word, we do not blanch at the proper name "Yellowstone." In any event, the running together of the separate words "Alamo" and "Gordo" into the hybrid appellation "Alamogordo" was a deliberate action by John Arthur Eddy. The mangled Spanish that resulted was not due to mindless evolution over the years, but intended as a name right from the start.

NOTES

1. Worthwhile sources concerning the Eddy brothers include a scrapbook they compiled, Museum of New Mexico History Library, Santa Fe, New Mexico, (hereafter Eddy scrapbook); and William A. Keleher, *The Fabulous Frontier: Twelve New Mexico Items* (Santa Fe, New Mexico: Rydal Press, 1945). Keleher's biography of Charles B. Eddy fails to mention that the Eddys were actually partners with interlocking roles in joint enterprises across the two states of New Mexico and Colorado. See *ibid.*, 240-58.

2. Various mentions of the Eddys' ranching and investing activities in Colorado can be found in George C. Everett, *Under the Angel of Shavano* (Denver, Colorado: Golden Bell Press, 1963) and *Cattle Cavalcade in Central Colorado* (Denver, Colorado: Golden Bell Press, 1966); Virginia McConnell, *Bayou Salado: The Story of South Park* (Denver, Colorado: Sage Books, 1966); W.W. Little, *Roundup* (booklet, n.p., n.d.). A photo of the Eddys' original VVN ranch appears in Paul Huntley, *Black Mountain Cowboys: A Collection of Stories* (Cañon City, Colorado: Master Printers, 1976), 167.

3. The Eddys' scrapbook contains a typed manuscript of an article headlined: "The Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of the Founding of Alamogordo," 28 May 1923 (hereafter Eddy Alamogordo manuscript). The manuscript describes how John Arthur Eddy laid out the railroad route and the townsite during the time his brother, Charles B. Eddy, was in New York.

4. This journal by the "Eddy Boys," then in their twenties, details the construction of their Colorado ranch which occurred in 1879. The journal ends in early 1880 when they left Colorado to seek cattle for ranch stock—at first heading for Dodge City, but eventually travelling to New Mexico. Eddy Brothers Journal, Western History Collection, Denver Public Library, Denver, Colorado; Eddy scrapbook.

5. Eddy Alamogordo manuscript, 8.

6. Parke and Kern Map of New Mexico Territory, 1851, Eastern New Mexico University, Special Collections, Portales, New Mexico; and Map Showing Condition of State Roads, 1918, Harry R. Parsons private collection.

7. For example, botanist Robert Sivinski of the New Mexico State Forestry Division advised us that the original flood plain conditions we described would have been ideal for big cottonwoods.

8. The watershed project, begun in the late 1940s, has not only reduced flooding and surface moisture—conditions needed for huge cottonwoods—but has also produced a narrow streambed full of weeds and salt cedar thickets.

9. Unpublished manuscript in possession of Harry R. Parsons, coauthor.

10. The grant was authorized by Governor Manuel Armijo. A spring at the center of the grant then named "Ojo de Anil" (Blue Spring) is today called "Carretas" (Carts or Wagons) spring. The spring is on Anil creek, just southeast of Alamo Gordo creek.

11. An 1863 diary of a Civil War soldier at Ft. Sumner relates how one of the regular patrol camps was at "Paraje Viejo del Alamo Gordo" (old place by the Alamo Gordo). James C. Cremony of San Francisco, commander of Company B of the First California Volunteers, camped often on the Alamo Gordo. Henry P. Walker, "Soldier in the California Column: The Diary of John W. Teal," *Arizona and the West* 13 (Spring 1971), 33-82.

12. We directed queries concerning the Mexican-Spanish period maps toward Orlando Romero of the Museum of New Mexico, Robert Torrez of the New Mexico State Records Center and Archives, and Naomi Heiser of the University of New Mexico's Map and Geographic Information Center. Torrez also informed us that no indication of the word combination "alamo" and "gordo" appears indexed in the state's Spanish-language archival holdings.

13. Clancy's sheep empire eventually made him wealthy, and he and his wife (a resident of Puerto de Luna) built a mansion just upstream from where the present Highway 84 crosses Alamo Gordo Creek. The building no longer exists.

14. For materials on the Eddy trail drives, see Everett, *Cattle Cavalcade*; Little, *Roundup*; and Huntley, *Black Mountain Cowboys*.

15. Eddy scrapbook.

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