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James Jenkinson Karl Kernberger

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Closed Forever . . .

a portfolio of New Mexico ghost towns

TEXT BY JAMES JENKINSON

PHOTOGRAPHS BY KARL KERNBERGER

IN THE CANYONS and on the flats of New Mexico's mountain ranges, many abandoned mining camps decay quietly in the ceaseless cycle of sun, stars, rain, and snow. On the rolling rangelands pewless churches and weathering adobe buildings mark deserted agricultural towns.

Not manicured ghost towns like Tombstone or Virginia City, with fresh paint jobs, nickelodeons, sawdust-floor saloons, and prospectors on payroll—but the undusted bones of what once were brawling silver and gold camps and sleepy Spanish villages. Here, the clues are more subtle than a guidebook and bronze plaques; the story is told in the chalked sign on a general store, **CLOSED FOREVER**, on yellowed newspapers covering a cabin wall, in the sun-purpled sheen of unfamiliar bottles, in a rusty safe, and, on a low tombstone marked simply, **KILLED BY INDIANS**.

As early as the seventeenth century, Spaniards dug for silver near Santa Fe, leaving as evidence shallow pits and spiked candle holders. It was not until the late 1860's, however, that mining fever broke over the state. Between 1860 and 1900 fortune seekers tore out over seventeen million dollars worth of gold from the Black Range, the Mogollons, the Sangre de Cristos, and lesser ranges. Mining camps sprang up like prairie grass after summer rain. Some, such as Silver City and Pinos Altos, became strongly rooted and substantial, and today are thriving commercial centers. Others kicked through a virile infancy only to die with the closing of the mines: towns that today are only ruins in obscure canyons, historical references, and the memories of old men. Cooney, Georgetown, and Old Hachita are among these. Still others, like Elizabethtown,

which in 1868 boasted a population of 7,000, have dwindled to a mere handful of residents.

Several of the strikes were made in strange ways. The Snake Mine near Hillsboro, producer of three and one-half million in gold bullion, was discovered when a prospector hurled a dun-colored rock at a coiled rattlesnake. The rock shattered, exposing a center laced with gold. The Opportunity Mine, opener of the Kingston District, which produced seven million dollars in silver, was staked when a tired miner pillowed his head on a rock which assayed almost pure horn silver. The original strike at White Oaks, so the story goes, was made by a desperado fleeing a Texas posse. He hurriedly sold out his right to the claim for forty dollars, a pony, and a bottle of whiskey. The claim later yielded over half a million.

The prospectors hopefully christened their mines with imagination equaled only in the naming of racehorses. The Peacock, Humbug, Hardscrabble, Last Chance, Walking John, Hoosier Boy, Bull of the Woods and Wall Street were among the many mines which justified their owners' dreams.

Indians were a constant menace to the isolated diggings and to the towns themselves. Apache bands under Victorio, Nane, and Loco roamed the Mogollons and the Black Range, picking off unwary settlers and plundering cabins. In 1879 the Cooney mines were attacked, their namesake and several other miners killed, and the buildings burned. In a rhetorical flight of frontier journalism, Chloride's *Black Range News* in 1890 reported two miners had fallen victims of a "ruthless murder by the Government's devilish marauding wards . . . hellish work done by the Red Fiends of Hell," which "came unexpected as a thunderbolt from the cloudless heavens." In 1893, Hillsboro was thrown into a lather of excitement and gun-oiling by rumors of a pending Indian attack and a small boy's description of a dead man on the hill above town. The assault never materialized and the hillside corpse proved to be a gentleman highly intoxicated and snoring gently.

Fire was another peril to be reckoned with. Mogollon was virtually burned to the ground twice, and each time the energetic citizens began to rebuild before the ashes were cold. Kingston boasted a fire bell suspended beneath a log frame, and a hand drawn cart with canvas water buckets. As one oldtimer recalls, "it never did any good though. Might as well have poured coal-oil on."

While some of the communities kept a firm grip upon law and order, others were violent and often lawless. Elizabethtown set a record of sorts in that it is recorded that eight men died of gunshot wounds there in a single day. Upper berths in Kingston's tent bunkhouses were distinctly unpopular in the early days, as one never knew when a stray bullet from some drunken brawl might come plowing through the canvas. Billy the Kid toddled the dirt streets of Georgetown as a child, and later strode the dirt streets of White Oaks as the killer of twenty-one men. The Saturday night dances at Chloride must have been rather tumultuous, for every Sunday morning court would be held to untangle legally the night's activities.

As families filtered into the raw male camps, and brick, wood, and glass replaced canvas, the mining settlements took on gentler aspects. In Kingston the hat was passed for a church, and miners threw in nuggets, the gamblers sharked money and stickpins, the red light girls diamond rings and silvered garters. On warm afternoons the Black Range Brass Band performed for the populace, and by night the gaslit theater offered such attractions as Lillian Russell and her troupe. If we are to judge by the newspaper coverage, it was not Indian attacks or six-gun showdowns which fermented Kingston in 1893, but a spelling bee staged between townspeople and students. Although such leading minds as the banker and the hardware merchant surreptitiously scanned dictionaries for hard words, the students sounded to victory.

Some of the towns were strung along impossible canyons, and freighting hazards pushed prices to dizzy heights. Eggs sometimes went for a dollar a piece, flour fifty dollars a barrel, and whiskey fifty cents a shot. Only fresh meat was plentiful and cheap. Bear meat and wild turkey lay side by side with beef in the butcher shops—shops where steaks once sold for less than five cents a pound.

Most of the mining camp lives have been buried by the soft deposits of time, leaving only yellowed letters in attics across the country, tombstones on hills above empty towns, and such colorful monikers as Dog-faced Connelly and Big Annie. Some, however, eventually moved on to fame or notoriety, becoming fodder for biographers. Among them were Sheba Hurst, Mark Twain's wit in *Roughing It*; Albert Fall and Ed Doheny, principals in the Harding administration oil scandals; Ernest Craig, member of Britain's Parliament; Conrad Hilton, hotel magnate; Butch Cassidy, outlaw extraordinary;

and Thomas Edison. All these and more lived and worked in the towns which now stand silent and in ruins on the mountains of New Mexico.

Not all New Mexico's ghost towns are onetime mining camps. Many, like Cabezón and Trementina, were Spanish towns, where the people grew beans, pumpkins, and corn in the bottomlands, built their homes of adobe bricks fashioned by their own hands, and blew off steam with guitar music, dances and horse-races. Lack of water drove out many of the settlers. Others, lured by high wages and the glitter of city life, left the adobes to crumble in the sun and the land to be swallowed by the big cattle ranches. Today, greasewood and creosote tangle the bottomlands and birds nest in the intimate crannies of cantina and church alike.

In Mogollon and in White Oaks cattle wander the streets and garden remnants. In Lake Valley the hot winds of summer tear at rusted tin roofs which bang fitfully. In Hillsboro an old miner points out the cemetery on a hill above town. "More up there than down here now," he says slowly.

Here, in the canceled towns in the mountains and on the rangelands of New Mexico the clues to the past are subtle: the sun-purpled sheen of unfamiliar bottles, a rusty safe, a low tombstone, and a chalked scrawl, CLOSED FOREVER. . . .

PHOTOGRAPHS
BY KARL KERNBERGER



1. Sightless, hearing only the wind



2. *A store without customers*



3. *Bones of a vanished era . . .*



4. *Small, curious feet where Concord coaches once swayed*



5. *Sun-sucked timbers in a forgotten canyon*



6. *These are the stones and dreams of an era . . .*



7. *A house with the ribs of an English manor*



8. Motion slashed by wind and snow

216



9. *This is the skull of an era's song . . .*



10. A quiet town in an autumn doze



11. Bricks supporting sky and memory



12. *The shapes of an era . . .*



13. *Grass into weeds*



14. *Shadows fall on dry boards . . .*



15. *The sun sinks hands into stone*



16. *Only an era now, and the wind . . .*

PHOTOGRAPHS BY KARL KERNBERGER

1. This gasoline pump once served the ranching community of Alma. In the early days this town was the headquarters for "The Wild Bunch," a gang under the leadership of Butch Cassidy that successfully robbed trains from Montana to New Mexico.
2. A store in the deserted business section of Mogollon, which once boasted seven restaurants, five stores, two hotels, a sawmill, a newspaper and fourteen saloons. The Mogollon Mining District produced twenty million dollars worth of gold, silver and copper.
3. Fire-scarred false front of the Pioneer Store, Chloride. Harry Pye, a muleskinner hauling a wagonload of supplies to a military outpost in 1879, picked up rich silver float near the site of Chloride. He returned with friends, a silver rush started, and the canyon was soon filled with tents and wooden buildings.
4. Today only a handful of residents live in once thriving Chloride.
5. Bunkhouse at the Silver Monument mine, ten miles above Chloride in the Black Range.
6. Broken blocks of a fallen building in White Oaks. Famous figures once walked the dirt streets of this mining camp: Billy the Kid, Sheriff Pat Garrett, and author Emerson Hough.
7. An ornate White Oaks mansion, "Hoyle's Folly," was built for a woman who never set foot inside it. The two-story turreted building is now deserted, the rooms of antique furniture unused, the attic a roost for bats.
8. Relic of the past near Old Hachita, a mining camp in the Little Hachet Mountains of southwestern New Mexico.
9. The American Mine, Old Hachita, until recently a rich producer of silver and lead.
10. Hillsboro, a gold camp on Percha Creek in the foothills of the Black Range.
11. The Sierra County Courthouse, Hillsboro. Site of the famous Oliver Lee trial, the structure was demolished when the county seat was moved to Hot Springs (Truth or Consequences) in 1932.
12. Foundations of razed mine buildings at Terrero on the upper Pecos River.
13. Front row of the baseball stadium at Madrid, a modern day ghost town. Here houses, school, stores, a hotel and a garage were abandoned in recent years when the coal mines closed down.

14. Lake Valley, in the foothills of the Mimbres Range, was at one time the richest silver producer in the Southwest. At Lake Valley was the Bridal Chamber, a silver-walled vault which yielded over three million dollars.
15. The Herman Mutz Hotel, rendezvous for prospectors and miners in the Elizabethtown area of northern New Mexico. In attempting to work the rich placers and find a mother lode, the Elizabethtown miners were inspired to imaginative measures. To augment dwindling water supplies, a forty-two mile ditch was constructed leading from the mountains. A five-mile tunnel was punched through Baldy Mountain and "Elinor," a gravel sucking dredge, was installed near town.
16. Headboard in cemetery at Elizabethtown, a brawling mining camp where it is recorded that eight men died of gunshot wounds in a single day.
17. Rough tomb of two men killed while working their mine near Chloride, New Mexico, in 1890. (*Back cover*)