

## Roadrunner Cowbelle's Trail Plaque

Cemented into the floor, at the northwest corner of Palace Ave and Washington Avenue, is a bronze plaque that reads, "Roadrunner Cowbelle's dedicate this hitching post at the end of the trail to American gentleman and their horses for their glorious role in winning the west."

Francisco Vázquez de Coronado first introduced livestock, which included sheep, cattle, and horses to New Mexico in 1540. These animals accompanied his expedition into central Kansas and back to winter quarters on the Rio Grande in 1541. Juan de Oñate also brought livestock in 1598, which was necessary to establish a permanent Spanish colony. Oñate's stock included 1,000 cattle, 1,000 goats, 150 mares with colts, and 4,000 sheep.

Large ranches, or *estancias*, were established adjacent by Spanish settlers along the Rio Grande, which effectively started New Mexico's livestock industry. The sheep that the Spanish brought were "churros" that had thick, shaggy under-fur, which was hand processed to make wool for weaving textiles. Churro sheep from this period became the basis for the modern Navajo-churro breeding that continues today.

In 1610, Governor Pedro de Peralta reportedly held 1,350 head of sheep and goats as stock inventory for the colonists collectively. During the 1620s and 30s, Franciscan friars established pueblo missions; each friar in New Mexico was allotted 10 heifers, 10 sheep and 48 hens, which became large herds and flocks. By 1650, each friar in New Mexico had a herd of several thousand sheep, and thirty or forty horses. From 1620-1670, Pueblo Indians under the rule of Franciscan friars, produced woolen cloth and livestock that were sent south to Mexico as trade goods, and also traded as far north as Colorado along the Camino Real.

During the Pueblo Revolt of 1680, indigenous occupants drove Spanish colonists out of New Mexico and intentionally burned churches along with items that the Spanish brought, however not all livestock or crops were destroyed. After the Revolt of 1680, sheep outnumbered cattle. Individuals who owned cattle utilized their animals for pulling plows and carts, while wealthy ranchers developed their herd of cattle for "beef" food consumption.

During the 1700s, the system of *partido*, or capital in the form of sheep, was lent to landowners. The owner of the sheep turns over a flock to a *partidario*, who pays for them with part of the natural increase of sheep and keeps part of the herd, thereby establishing his own flock. Over time, the sheep accrued interest, and became a source of economic return in the form of increased flock was sold or traded; this practice became a widespread policy in New Mexico.

During the 1810s -1820s, rangeland west of and along the Rio Grande was deemed inadequate for livestock grazing due to the area being prone to attacks by various Indian tribes. Ranchers began to move out, relocating in the eastern plains of New Mexico. In 1860, Mescalero Apaches reportedly stole livestock from settlers located along the Rio Hondo below Fort Stanton. This event may have resulted in the military's punitive action of incarcerating the Mescalero Apache band at Bosque Redondo in 1863.

In November 1862, Congress passed the Homestead Act, which enabled settlers to acquire 160 acres of public domain by occupying the land for 5 years, making improvements to it, and paying a filing fee. This Act fueled more settlers on the eastern plains of New Mexico, and by late 1866, the first homesteaders arrived in southeastern New Mexico. Extended droughts over the next few decades caused significant

soil loss and wind erosion, which affected grazing lands causing haboobs during the Dust Bowl of 1934-37.

After many decades of cattle hoof compaction on the land's surface, the soil microbial ecology and native vegetation became severely degraded. Loss of anchoring vegetation caused gullying and erosion along stream banks, and removed riparian and natural habitats for other wildlife species. Once-lush streams and riparian forests were reduced to rocky, dry wastelands. Topsoil has been turned to dust in many places, waterways became contaminated with fecal waste from livestock. Soil erosion also contaminated many streams, thereby eliminating some aquatic habitats. The combination of overgrazing, reduction of native grasses, and fire suppression created overly dense forests, prone to severe wildfires.

Keystone predators like the grizzly bear and Mexican gray wolf were driven to the brink of extinction in southwestern ecosystems by "predator control" programs designed to protect the livestock industry. Ranchers remain the leading opponent to the Mexican gray wolf recovery program, which faces pressure from the livestock industry who blames predators for livestock loss and promotes coyote and prairie dog killing contests.

Since livestock operations began in New Mexico, coyotes have been considered a threat and nuisance to these land owners. Although coyote killing contests are legal in New Mexico, they are unregulated. In 2014, wildlife advocates counted 20 contests; a number thought to be low and not representative of all the contests within the state, especially those that are not publicized.

Executive Director, Kevin Bixby, of the Southwest Environmental Center in Las Cruces, says, "The animals are not being eaten or used in any way; they are just being killed and they are being killed for sport. This kind of predator killing disrupts natural ecosystems and undermines the ability of coyotes to provide their ecological role in maintaining healthy systems, in regulating populations of prey animals like rodents and rabbits."

According to the Center for Biological Diversity, in the arid West, livestock grazing is the most widespread cause of species endangerment, irreparably harming the ecosystems they depend on. Despite the ecological costs, livestock grazing continues on state and federal lands across the West. The cattle industry is not only promoted and protected; it is also subsidized by federal agencies on about 270 million public acres in 11 western states.

Range and forest lands constitute a significant portion of New Mexico's 78 million-acre land base. Federal agencies control approximately 34 percent of the landmass of New Mexico. State trust and private land intermingle with federal land, resulting in a mosaic of ownership that complicates rangeland management. A single ranch often contains private, state trust, and federal land — each with its own set of requirements, leases, permits, and administrators. Public rangeland laws and regulations, as well as executive and judicial orders and decisions on rangelands, affect the livestock industry.

A report from the 2019 environmental publication *Sustainability* said, "The cattle industry's role in the state economy is "substantial." Data that was gathered from 2012, revealed 44 percent of revenue from the state's agricultural industry is derived from cattle. According to a 2021 report from the New Mexico State University Department of Animal and Range Sciences, drought is having a significant impact on the

state's cattle ranching industry, which includes decrease in animal growth, diminished forage for livestock, increase in the cost of production, and decrease in calf prices.

Republican lawmaker, State Senator Pat Woods, who is a longtime rancher of a community about 30 miles north of Clovis, saw a lot of cows culled from a herd and sent to the slaughterhouse, because their owners couldn't afford to feed them anymore. Selling off livestock or sending them to the slaughterhouse is "economically devastating" for cattle ranchers, and costs state and local counties in lost tax revenue from ranchers that will not be required to pay taxes on every head of livestock.

"Cattle are the No. 1 agricultural source of greenhouse gases worldwide. Each year, a single cow will belch about 220 pounds of methane. Methane from cattle is shorter lived than carbon dioxide but 28 times more potent in warming the atmosphere", said Mitloehner, a professor and air quality specialist in the Department of Animal Science at UC Davis. Livestock are responsible for 14.5 percent of global greenhouse gases. Given the climate crisis at hand, many environmental advocates are urging the public to eat less beef, arguing that it is an unsustainable diet in a world with a population expected to reach nearly 10 billion by 2050.

### Wild Horses

Wild horses were also brought by Spanish colonists and still roam freely over parts of New Mexico. Many wild horses reside throughout the Jemez, Sandia, and Manzano mountains and within the Galisteo Basin. These horses often get onto the roadways and trespass upon land areas where they eat the grasses which cause erosion in the delicate desertifying ecosystem that has already been hit hard by drought, cattle overgrazing and erosion from lack of anchoring vegetation. Some horses have fallen ill due to drought and other conditions while freely roaming the countryside. Sanctuaries or protected reserves have been created to provide water and resources to help keep wild horses safe.

The town of Placitas has an estimated population of 5,000 wild horses. In partnership, the Placitas WILD organization, Wild Horses Observers Association, and San Felipe Pueblo established a 400-acre sanctuary on San Felipe Pueblo land. From 2013 to 2016, herds of wild horses, rounded up by the US Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and the New Mexico Livestock Board (NMLB), were kept in their natural habitat between the San Felipe Pueblo and Placitas. Although San Felipe Pueblo regards the horses as wildlife, the animals became increasingly reliant on humans and domesticated, so the Pueblo decided that the horses needed permanent homes and long-term caretakers.

The relocation of horses from San Felipe spurred a debate among residents of Placitas about how to manage free roaming horses. The BLM considers wild horses "feral" or "free-roaming" rather than wildlife, which means roundups and seizures on federal land could result in horses being euthanized or sold for slaughter. Although illegal, some wild horses have been sold at auction in the past, by both the BLM and the NMLB, and many horses have ended up in slaughterhouses in Mexico and Canada.

In 2007, Judy Barnes born in Newport Beach, California and a former resident of Taos, started a nonprofit organization north of Costilla, NM, "Spirit of the Wild Horse," to preserve and protect wild horses. Within the preservation area, Barnes investigated the horses' bloodlines through DNA testing and found that most had a high percentage, in the 90s, of Spanish blood or descendants of the Spanish horses that came to New Mexico with the conquistadors.

Spanish horses were later bred by the U.S. military with quarter horses and thoroughbreds, resulting in what are commonly known as mustangs. Barnes stated to the Santa Fe Newmexican, that she's even seen traits of Przewalski's horses, the only "wild" breed of horse, which live on the steppes in central Asia. Other horses on her land are feral, meaning they came from once-domesticated animals.

In 1971 President Richard Nixon signed the Wild and Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act to set limits on horse populations in the U.S. The Act stated, "the number of wild horses and burros that can thrive in balance with other public land resources and uses." The limit is called the Appropriate Management Level, and as of 2021, that number for New Mexico is 26,785.

Barnes has reached out to her elected representatives to try and get the region declared a wildlife preserve. Her nonprofit organization has purchased and released feral horses back into the wild, and also led native grass restoration projects. She says the horses are part of our history and should be protected, "They deserve to live free and wild."

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