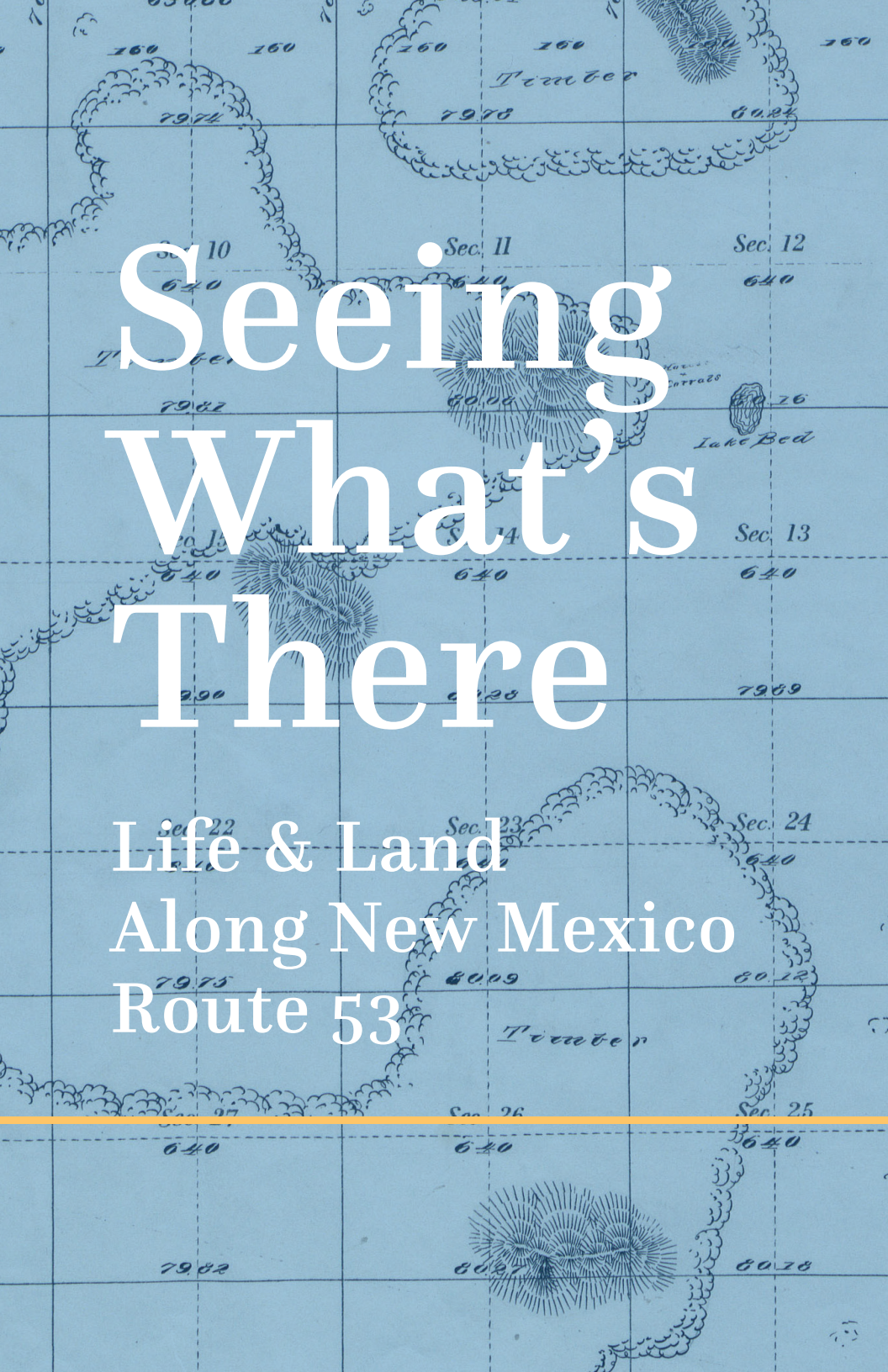


Seeing What's There

Life & Land Along New Mexico Route 53

Seeing What's There

Life & Land Along New Mexico Route 53

A storytelling exhibit about the history, culture, and geography along a six mile stretch of Route 53 in the El Morro Valley

October – December 2025

Chri Snyder, Project Director

Frank Jones' House

When I walk out the door and straight ahead, I climb up through Ponderosa, piñon, and juniper. About seven minutes later, I come — full stop — to the edge of a 300 foot drop. There is a little red house at the bottom of the drop. The house is abandoned – appearing much more so now, after my ten years of looking. There are some outbuildings down there too, remnants of a corral, and the shell of an old truck. I have felt an affinity for that house from the first time I saw it.

Last year, after many years of traveling for work, I decided to try to piece together a living here in El Morro, where I want to be. This project is one product of that effort. I trained as a cultural anthropologist, and my work has been as a social systems analyst. I know, from my endless academic studies, that this place, and New Mexico in general, has been overrun with cultural anthropologists more than once since the beginning of the 20th century. I don't want to impose my anthropologist self on anyone who doesn't want it. So, I decided to study my own back yard, beginning with the little red house at the bottom of the cliff.

It didn't take long for one of my neighbors to say, "I think that was Frank Jones' house." I had no idea, at the time, how I would confirm that. But, the thread was offered and I followed. Eventually, I called the project *Seeing What's There: Life & Land along New Mexico Route 53*. I decided that I would take that idea — of having looked at something for years, but not really knowing anything about it — and see what other landmarks might apply. I started asking questions and doing research and stories started to coalesce.

The little red house was, in fact, built and lived in by Frank Jones. Turns out, you can find any homesteading patent or deed you want to at the BLM General Land Office website. I've visited Frank Jones' house many times, twice under the light of a full moon, but knowing his name gave me a different relationship to it. Every day, hiking with the dogs, I would call out a hello when it came into view. But, as much as I want to pull his story up out of that house and land, it has shown very little willingness to accommodate.

The first piece of the story to fall into place was a photo that a friend and community member used in a presentation about historic schoolhouses in

the area. She sent me two photos from that presentation. I opened them again a few months ago and, lo and behold, there was Frank Jones, with some of his El Morro and Ramah friends. A Google search informed me that Frank G. Jones, Sr. was born December 19, 1897 (or, October 14, depending on which part of that site you consult) and died November 19, 1986. I also learned that Frank lost what may have been his only child in 1942. Someone later told me that Frank Jones Jr. survived the Bataan Death March, only to die later that year. Someone else told me that Frank Jones had another child, but I couldn't find anything to confirm that. Did a wife live with him in that house? I recently learned that Frank and Lillie Jones had two children — JR, as he was known, and Shirley. Shirley married Robert Siemens, who grew beans on the piece of land on which I now live.

The only other things I know about Frank Jones: that he grew carrots in the valley that stretches south from his house, and that he made moonshine with some El Morro pals during the Great Depression. To give the liquid a bit of an aged look, they spit tobacco juice into the jars! Both Frank and his boy were buried in the El Morro cemetery. My visit to that cemetery added another layer to our relationship somehow.

Erin Elder, Frank Jones House, 2025, field drawing

Homesteaders Life / Windell Lamance

Windell Lamance was ten months old when his parents, Riley and Laura, moved to El Morro from Holliday, Texas. Riley staked a claim on Township 8 North, Range 13 West, Section 6. I encountered a 72-page booklet written about the 16 years of Windell's early life lived here in El Morro, thanks to Susan Mayne, whose mother picked it up at a garage sale on Timberlake Rd. I've now read that book, front to back, three times. It turns out that Frank Jones wasn't alone back there behind the Monument, Bond Mesa, and my own 300' drop — that a schoolhouse and a cemetery were located back there suddenly made sense. Windell estimates that over 100 families of homesteaders, mostly from Texas, lived there, from the late 19-teens through... I don't really know, but I think around 1960. Riley Lamance, like many other farmers in the extended family who came with him, had run into trouble when the intense demand to feed Europe during the first World War turned into an enormous and unusable surplus of food when the war ended.

The Lamances were cousins to the Willcox family (who alternate between Willcox and Wilcox over the years). Hoppers, Griffiths, and Barneses were

Logging the Zuni Mountains

part of the group, as well. The Willcoxes became important assets to the growing El Morro community. Uncle Dick Willcox (given name Thomas Henry Willcox), father of Ben and Jake, was a water witch. Aunt Ida (Ida Mae Barnes Hopper Willcox, whose name shows how these families tie together) was one of two community mid-wives and delivered 88 babies in both El Morro and Ramah. Ben Willcox was deputy sheriff of Valencia County, and thus the El Morro community's sheriff. Jake and his family ran a lumber mill in the Tinaja valley. The Willcoxes were a family of musicians — Jake and Ida held dances in their home and invited everyone. Windell recalls that "the kids were put to bed on quilt pallets on the floor and the adults would dance into the night."

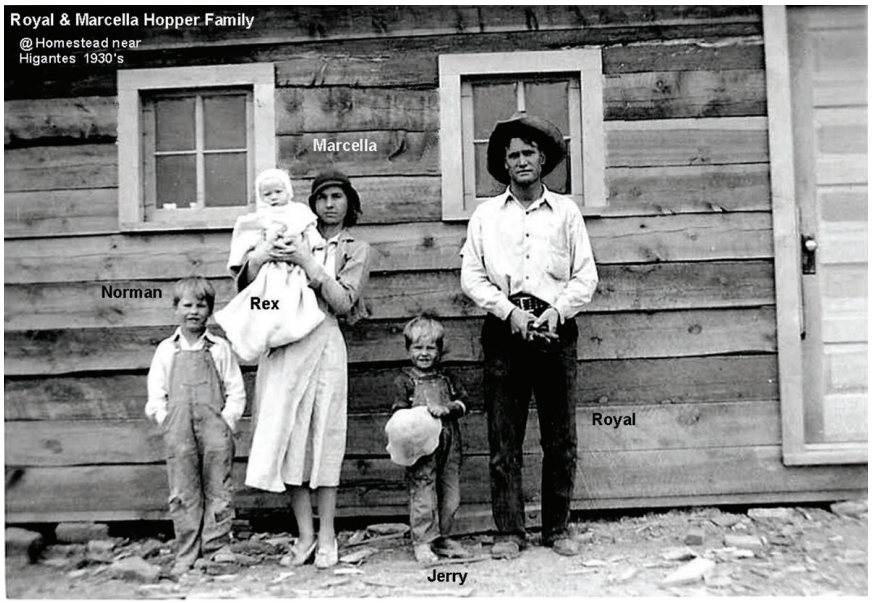
Another family that Windell's book introduced were the Duerksens. "Uncle Jim" Ferguson was a Seventh Day Adventist teacher and preacher who moved to El Morro in the 1920s. He built the first school in the community. Classes were held in an army tent the first year until a log building could be built during the summer. Uncle Jim also became the first community pastor and because he played the fiddle, he accompanied the hymns. He would load up as many of his neighbors as would fit into his Model T Ford truck to

Erin Elder, Brown Cabin, 2025, field drawing

have picnics at El Morro National Monument. Evon Z Vogt remembers that sometimes they had "non-sectarian" church services there, as well.

Windell recalls a visit from CC Duerksen and his nephew Elmer, who came from Shafter, California after hearing about the "free land" available in New Mexico. Windell remembers the men coming to his uncle's house; they were wearing suits, which was something he, as a homesteader's child, had never seen. CC was encouraged by what he saw and went immediately to Santa Fe to file on his chosen piece of land. When he returned to California and described the land in New Mexico to his brother JC, JC traveled to NM to file on a neighboring parcel. Brother George did not immediately file on a piece, but was the first Duerksen brother to move to New Mexico, in 1934, initially settling on the land of one of his brothers. CC and JC followed shortly after.

George and Mary Duerksen settled near Windell's family's homestead and Harold, their son, became his best friend. Windell's book is filled with Duerksen stories. Windell's older cousin Thomas married George and Mary's daughter Helen, tying the families together even more. The Duerksens, like the Willcoxes, supported their community in many ways. Mary Duerksen was also a midwife and served as doctor for the community. When she delivered a premature baby for Jim Hogg's wife, who lived near Quemado, she gave them instructions for how to make an incubator. There was no electricity, so they controlled the heat with hot irons. Windell says, "I saw the baby 40



Hopper family at Gigantis House

years later and she was a very healthy woman." CC had a sawmill. Both he and Jim Ferguson were carpenters. CC built a house that was "a mansion for our country and good enough for anywhere." It became the ranch house for the James Ranch. The Duerksens were in the El Morro area long enough to hear atom bomb tests over in White Sands. George and Mary were the last of the original homesteaders to leave the area, moving to Albuquerque in 1951.

A little over a mile west of Windell's house was a Navajo named Antonio and his family. At first the Navajos were suspicious of their colonial settler neighbors. Windell says they initially watched every move the Lamances made from the top of a mesa. Things began to change when Riley Lamance offered a reward for a lost mule and when Antonio found it, the reward was paid. During the Winter of the Big Snow, Antonio came to the homestead hoping to buy corn. Riley hadn't processed all of his crops before the snow came and had plenty to sell. From that time on, Riley and Antonio were friends. Antonio allowed Riley to get water from the Carrizozo Well.

Erin Elder, Corral, 2025, field drawing

Antonio's daughter Rosie married Frank Jesus Eriacho (who became the parents of Chimeco Eriacho). Everyone liked Frank. He became the family leader when Antonio was killed in a car accident in 1937. Though they couldn't speak the same language, Laura Lamance and Rosie became friends. Rosie had a son near Windell's age and they would play together. In 1968, when Windell came back to El Morro for a Homesteader reunion, he found Rosie. This started a letter-writing correspondence between Rosie and his mother that lasted for many years.

Through his book, Windell Lamance filled the mesas and valleys south of the Monument and Route 53 with people and their experiences. He brought the land, weather, economics, transportation and technology, all the dances and all the tragedies of that era to life. The other thing he did was open up Pandora's box that is US westward colonial expansion. Whenever he would bring up a neighbor, he would list the exact position of their homestead within the Public Lands Survey System of section, township, and range. This allowed me to find those positions in the Cibola County Assessor's GIS Mapping & Ownership Data tool. I learned to use the BLM/ General Land Office's federal land records site, which allowed me to find

Above: Erin Elder, Intersection, 2025, field drawing

Right: Local Musicians

actual homesteading patents, as well as the original US land survey maps and field notes of this area.

The airway beacon and the fire lookout, too, are part of this colonial system that rolled out like a heavy carpet across everything that was already here. At times, technology advanced so quickly that a nationwide system became obsolete before it had even been completed (such is the case with the airway beacons). Other times, the need to make a buck overtook common sense and led to disasters such as over-farming and over-grazing that led to the Dust Bowl. Indeed, there is a long string of aberrations, atrocities, and heartbreaks related to the development of the West. And, there are stories of unbelievable resourcefulness, engineering, and effort. Settlers exhibited determination and belief, and the willingness to pony up everything they had. One thing that is certain: while life was often hard and many mistakes were made, these people loved this land, and the community they briefly formed within it.

Pinto Beans

The primary crop grown by the El Morro homesteaders was pinto beans; the homesteaders in Fence Lake, about 40 miles southwest of El Morro, grew Pinto Beans, too. Pinto beans are native to this hemisphere and were first cultivated in Peru and Mexico 7,000 to 8,000 years ago. They are drought-

resistant, suitable for dry-farming, have a short growing season, and can be grown in high-altitudes. Pinto beans have been a dietary staple of every group of people who has lived in this place.

Until US colonial settlement, pinto beans were grown for local consumption. By the time this area was being homesteaded, however, the focus was on commercial crops. Pinto beans seemed like a perfect commercial option for New Mexico. In 1918, the Albuquerque Chamber of Commerce attempted to turn pinto beans into a high-value ABQ/New Mexico export crop using a postcard advertising project, with Aldo Leopold at the helm, that doesn't seem to have come to fruition.

No photographs of El Morro bean crops were found in time for this exhibition, but Pie Town homesteaders were also growing pinto beans in the 1930s and 40s. There are many photographs of pinto beans from Pie Town because a photographer named Russell Lee got a job in 1936 with the Farm Security Administration. This agency provided loans, resettlement assistance, and general farm management for farmers and farm-workers who were struggling to get through the Great Depression. It also became famous for its documentary photographic project (1935-1944) that employed other itinerant photographers such as Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans.

Many El Morro homesteaders were extended families who came from Holliday, Texas, which is north and a bit west of Fort Worth, beginning in the early 1920s. That Texas landscape was very different from the one they came to in New Mexico but many homesteaders did not adjust their agricultural practices to fully account for this change. Their dry-farming practices resulted in arroyo formation and wind erosion. This, together with climate and market fluctuations, and opportunities that opened elsewhere, led the El Morro homesteaders to move on."

Bill Stagg with Pinto Beans

Pinto Beans are still a significant crop in New Mexico – the state's fifth largest. In fact, chile and pinto beans are New Mexico's State Vegetables.

The Winter of the Big Snow

1931 was not an easy year for anyone. The Great Depression was in full-swing and the conditions that created the Dust Bowl were increasingly apparent. A combination of increasing temperatures and dry, intense winds exacerbated damaging conditions created by the drought period that started the year before. Due to extended heatwaves across the country, temperatures in South Dakota hit 115° F and parts of California reached 123°.

That summer, New Mexico felt the heat too. But, in this region, the piñon harvest was better than the previous three years. This was a boon for Navajos, who had suffered a Depression-induced, dramatic drop in the value of their commercial products – wool, silver, and weavings, among them. In November, the weather was still mild enough that piñon pickers decided to make one last harvest, further afield than usual. On the night of November 22nd, a snowstorm dropped 30 inches in Ramah, and 44 inches in McGaffey. Riley Lamance had yet to thresh and sell his pinto beans; thousands of Evon Zartman Vogt's sheep died where they stood; and those piñon pickers were stranded.

In this area, November usually brought some snow, but it melted quickly. This year was different. Temperatures dropped to 14 below and stayed low, and snow remained on the ground. As news spread of perhaps 1,000 stranded piñon pickers, two rescue parties were composed of people from Zuni, Ramah and the surrounding areas. Rescuers searched the Coal Mine Canyon area, the Atarque district, and around Cerro Alto. Parties of piñon pickers who made it back on their own reported up to five feet of snow. The first reported death was a Zuni man found near Coal Mine Canyon

To make matters worse, the snow began again, and continued to fall for another 48 hours. Ramah reported 4 feet by the third day. A third, smaller, rescue party set out to try to climb Cerro Alto. Mail service was discontinued; and, while there was enough wind to create deep drifts, there had not been enough wind to blow the snow off of flat roofs. Folks scrambled to keep their roofs from caving in. Someone from Zuni brought out a caterpillar to open the roads. Immediately, people – mostly piñon pickers hoping to trade their nuts for other kinds of food – began showing up in Atarque, a village composed of eleven families and one sheep ranch. Their horses worked so hard to get their riders through the snow that many of them sank to the ground upon arriving at the village. Evon Z Vogt, whose sheep ranch

was headquartered in Atarque, and who had lost thousands of sheep in the storm, killed another 100 head to feed the people. Food for the horses was much harder to come by.

Piñon pickers were streaming into Zuni for help, as well. By November 24, it became clear that Zuni would be receiving more people in need than it could easily handle. Instructions came from Ft. Defiance to organize relief supplies, but those did not arrive until Thanksgiving morning, November26. Hay, grain, and some human food continued on to Atarque. From the Gallup Independent: "Zunis, from the first, opened their homes to them and for a week have cared for 200 to 500 Navajos (a later article revised the number to over 500), once the enemy of all Pueblo Indians. In nearly every case, the Navajos were total strangers to the Zunis who fed them, nursed their sick, and sheltered their horses in corrals and barns. Zuni's hospitality to the storm sufferers has used up in nearly all cases, all the food stored away by Zunis for the winter." Navajos were able to leave Zuni and return home on November 30, eight days after the storm began.

In the end, the storm's official death toll was six or seven, depending on the source, five Navajos and that first man to be found, from Zuni. But, the

Erin Elder, Estates Tank, 2025, field drawing

Associated Press reported that "Indians themselves placed the dead at eleven." These appear to be the only reported storm-related deaths in New Mexico. Windell Lamance remembered hearing stories of two 10-year-old Navajo boys who were the focus of a large rescue effort that stretched from Ft. Wingate, through McGaffey, and on to Ramah Navajo. Their names were Eugene Eriacho and Charles Alonzo. They had tried once already to get home from the Ft. Wingate boarding school, had been captured and brought back and, the day before the storm hit, had set out again. No evidence could be located that they were ever found.

Erin Elder, Cemetary, 2025, field drawing

El Morro National Monument

With the 1848 signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, the US colonial government became interested in the inscriptions on a large outcropping of rock, known as El Morro by the Spanish, *A'ts'in'a* by the A:Shiwi people of Zuni and the surrounding areas. In 1849, the year before New Mexico became a territory, the US government made a military reconnaissance into the region. On the way from Zuni to Laguna, Lt. James H. Simpson, the group's topographical engineer, and field artist Richard Kern, were given leave to investigate reports of a rock face with "half an acre of inscriptions." The inscriptions they themselves left behind are the first conclusively made in English.

Interest in governmental protection of the inscriptions began in the 1890s. The acting Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution brought this concern to the General Land Office in 1899. In June 1901, the 160-acre parcel surrounding El Morro was closed to further sale or settlement.

Through a series of administrative and name changes, the Bureau of Forestry, housed within the General Land Office, became its own entity and settled into what we know today as the United State Forest Service. On June 8, 1906, President Theodore Roosevelt signed the Antiquities Act, giving the President authority to protect federal lands deemed to have cultural significance as National Monuments. On December 8, 1906 El Morro was proclaimed the second of the country's monuments.

For the first ten years of its existence as a National Monument, nothing announced or protected El Morro other than a sign warning of penalties for defacement. In 1916, when the National Park Service was created, Evon Zartman Vogt was hired to be El Morro's first, part-time custodian.

Evon Z. Vogt was one of several area residents who petitioned the federal government for protection of the El Morro inscriptions. He was already invested in the project, and was known to many of New Mexico's administrators and cultural advocates. Though he lived eleven miles away from the Monument down a difficult, unpaved road, he was an easy choice for the job.

For over 1,000 years, the pool at El Morro was used by agriculturists, herders and, eventually, ranchers as a dependable water source. The designation of El Morro as a National Monument irrevocably altered both landscape and land use pattern. Work to make the Monument accessible and comfortable for visitors began immediately. Footbridges and a log structure to serve as the point of contact for visitors were built in 1918. The contact station was built near the pool and served as ranger lodging until 1938. Fencing was

Erin Elder, Monument View, 2025, field drawing

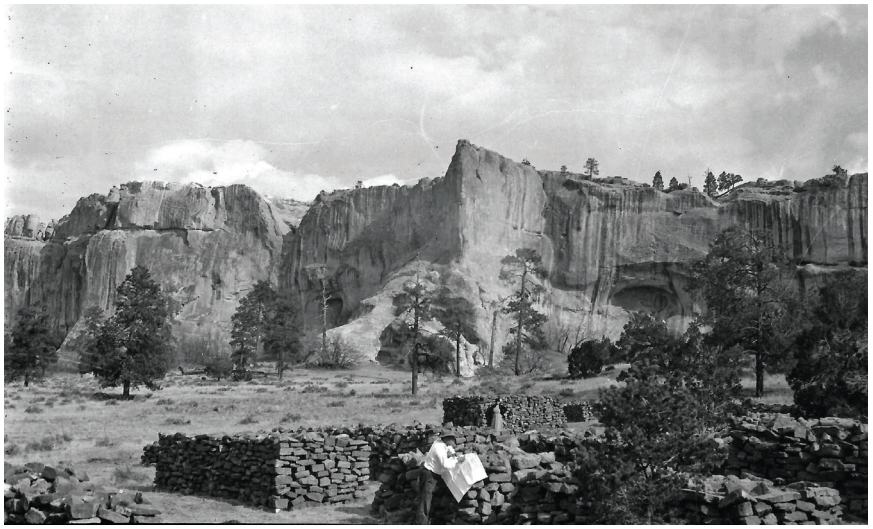
built along the rock face that held the inscriptions, and signs translating some of the more important Spanish inscriptions to English were erected.

By 1919, preservation of the inscriptions became the primary focus. Along with damage caused by wind and water erosion, monument visitors were carving their own names into the rock, and chipping off pieces of historic inscriptions. Vogt researched and experimented with various kinds of protective seals, with mixed results. If an area resident carved their name in the sandstone, Vogt would call them and request that they return to remove that carving. Many people acquiesced.

While he was custodian, and for a few years after, Evon Vogt continued to make El Morro's pool available to farmers and ranchers. It was also the main source of water for the park itself until 1961. It was believed in those early days that the pool was spring fed. Both Don Diego de Vargas and Lt. Simpson mentioned a spring in their journals. In 1921, Vogt began work to excavate as much of the sand that had been deposited into the pool from the rocks above, in hopes of finding and repairing that spring. He continued work on the pool, deepening and damming it.

Signs were built for the Monument grounds to guide visitors from the surrounding communities. Vogt tirelessly advocated for street signs and road improvements. He hired local laborers to create paths, carve steps, and construct the first administrative building. All of this work was to encourage

Chiseling steps



visitors, from the area and beyond. In 1921, more than 3,000 visitors to El Morro were recorded.

In 1921, Evon Vogt submitted the park's first management plan to the Director of the National Park Service. He asked for a publication that would serve as both an advertisement and a tourbook of the Monument. He asked for excavation and restoration of the "Indian town" atop El Morro, and a well-developed trail to that site, so that it might be an added attraction for visitors. He also proposed, and continued to advocate for, turning El Malpais into a National Park.

In 1936, the National Park Service created a full-time superintendent position at El Morro National Monument. Evon Vogt, having put his heart and profound effort into the creation and protection of the Monument — even funding various projects with his own money — was not in the running for the position because of official age restrictions. He was too old and incredibly disappointed. But thanks to his efforts, we who visit the Monument still walk up those sandstone stairs, stroll those paths looking at the inscriptions, and stand at the pool's edge gazing up at those incredible rocks.

Building the administration

Fire Tower

Humans have been on the lookout for forest fires for a very long time. In their earliest efforts, they climbed to the highest spot - a rock, a hill, or even a tree. Early forest rangers kept watch from "crow's nests," built into the top of a lookout tree, with a ladder erected up its trunk. This structure provided a stable place to stand, from which to use binoculars, map, compass, and sighting tool to estimate the location of a fire. There were a lot of downsides to this type of fire watch – lightning strike being one of the most significant.

Beginning in the early 1900s, log towers were built, offering more structural stability and better load distribution. Initially, the same kind of platforms that were used in trees were placed at the top of the tower. But, soon, room-like compartments called cabs were employed in order to protect sensitive equipment and keep lookouts safe from the elements.

Fire in Wallace, Idaho, 1910

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Erin Elder, Fire Tower, 2025, field drawing

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Meadow Butte fire tower, 1940

During the summer of 1910, in the northwestern states of Idaho, Montana, and Washington, conditions were drier than anyone could remember. By mid-August, more than 2,000 fires were burning in those forests. While lightning and humans caused some of them, a 1911 report showed that the biggest cause of catastrophic fire were the sparks blown from coal-powered locomotives. Most of the fires came under control, but on August 20, hurricane-force winds, again like no one has seen before or since, blew from the west across the region. Some trees exploded, some were pulled by the wind right out of the ground and hurtled, burning, through the air. In the end, three million acres burned, whole towns were flattened, and 86 people died – 78 of them were firefighters.

The Forest Service was only five years old when the Great Fire of 1910 took place. The fire grabbed headlines across the country, and political pressure for federal action was immediate. The Forest Service began systematically building fire lookout towers in national forests. During the Depression, the Civilian Conservation Corps built many lookout towers; thousands were built from the 1930s to 1950s.

It was not only the government that built fire fighting structures; communities also built lookout towers on their own lands. When you drive west on Route 53, you can see a community-built fire tower still standing atop the giant mesa across the road from this gallery. El Morro's fire tower is no longer actively manned.

New detection strategies and technologies began to compete with human lookouts as early as the 1960s. Today, the number of active lookout towers has dropped from approximately 8,000 across the country to just a few hundred.

Airway Beacon

Commercial aviation began in the first decade of the 20th century. The first cargo-only flight was undertaken in 1910. A race between a train and a Wright Model B carried 10 bolts of silk 65 miles from Dayton to Columbus, Ohio. The airplane won.

Planes began transporting mail in 1918, with the first regularly scheduled airmail route between New York City and Washington, DC. As new routes were developed, pilots navigated by following roads, railways and rivers; planes could only fly during the day. The US Post Office Department (yes, that's what it used to be called), which ran airmail service until its privatization in 1927, needed to find a solution that kept pilots safe and got the mail to its destination fast.

In 1921, the Post Office Department began developing a nationwide system of lighted airway beacons. The first experimental route ran between Cheyenne, Wyoming and Chicago, and opened in 1923. In 1927, the Airways Division, under the Assistant Secretary of Commerce for Aeronautics, became part of the Lighthouse Bureau. By 1929, beacon routes stretched from the Pacific to the Atlantic. Delivering a bag of mail from San Francisco to New York took 33 hours, down from 88. At the system's peak, there were over 1,500 beacons that stretched 2,629 miles.

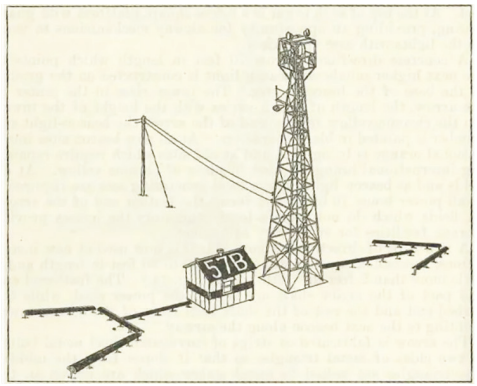
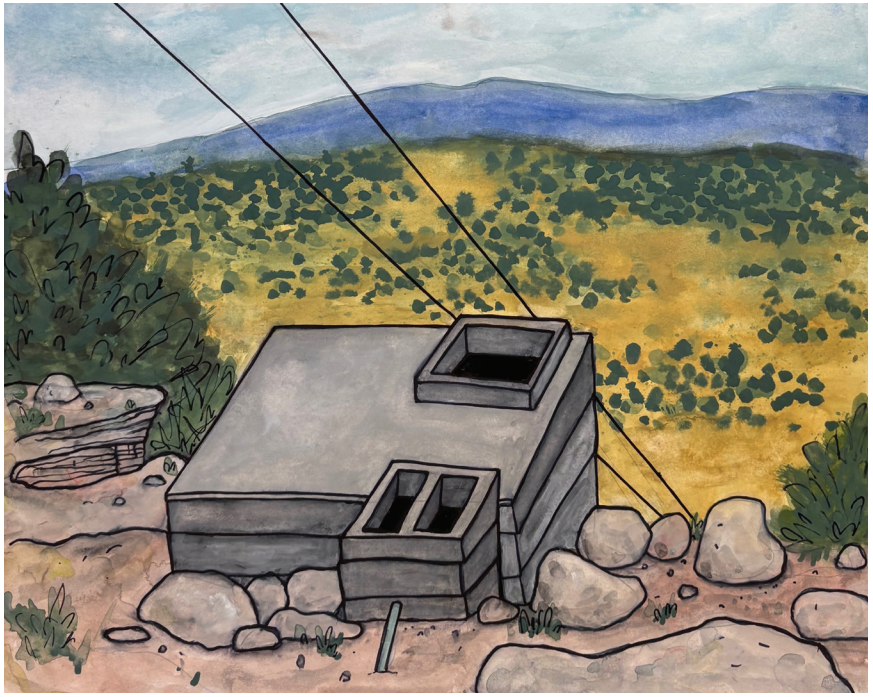


Diagram of airway beacon, metal arrow style

Beacons were placed 10-15 miles apart. Most were constructed from a pre-fab kit in three to five days. A beacon was typically 50 to 70 feet tall. On a clear night, its rotating lamp could be seen from up to 40 miles away. At the base of the tower, a large concrete arrow – again, 50 to 70 feet



Erin Elder, Airway Beacon (detail), 2025, field drawing

in length – pointed in the direction of the next beacon. These arrows helped pilots stay en route in the daytime, as well.

The airway beacon system began to decline with the advent of radio navigation in the 1930s, even before the nationwide system had been fully installed. The last use of airway beacons was in the state of Montana. The remaining beacons were finally shut down in December, 2021.

A beacon once stood atop the mesa across from the Old School Gallery. It was number 59B on Contract Air Mail Route #34, Los Angeles to New York. It's not yet clear when this beacon was taken out of service, but one local story reveals that it was still being used after the Korean War. The only thing that remains on site is the beacon's concrete base. At the bottom of the mesa is the foundation of the shed which housed the beacon's power supply. Unlike most other sites, the arrow for this beacon was made of metal. This arrow now resides at the Grants-Milan Western New Mexico Airways Heritage Museum.

Looking Back, Looking Forward

To go back to the beginning: this project began at Frank Jones' house. It started with questions and led to many conversations, ideas, and connections. Funding was secured (then unsecured, and secured again), making possible scores of hours of research: driving around, talking to people, reading books, scouring the internet. The result was an exhibit at El Morro's Old School Gallery that featured the texts in the booklet plus 56 images, including photographs, homesteading documents, maps, and 13 field drawings by Erin Elder. A group of artists from El Morro Area Arts Council participated in a plein air excursion to Frank Jones' house and in a still life session at the Gallery with objects related to the exhibit; their artworks were displayed, as well. The exhibit remained on the walls for more than two months, as EMAAC's fourth quarter exhibit. An opening reception was held, to which 75 people came — double the expectation — so many people came that it was hard to get close enough to the images and texts to really ingest the information. Many people returned to the Gallery on quieter weekends to study the exhibit at their own pace.

Frank Jones' house with mesa

Lee Lambson and younger brother at the age when he started playing music at local dances.

The opening reception included good food, talks by artist Erin Elder and geologist Bob Schafer; there was a resource table manned by historian Susan Mayne, with additional information about exhibit subjects. The event included music by local musicians Lee Lambson, Duke Davis, Colleen Garden, and Nita Davis Schafer. Perhaps the most profound aspect of the event was the presence of Lee Lambson who was three months away from turning 94 at the time of the reception. Lee first picked up a guitar when he was three or four years old. His father was also a musician and, when Lee was ten, his father told him he was ready to start playing dances. It was 1942. These were the dances that were held by both the Ramah and El Morro homesteader communities. They usually took place in the school house, sometimes in or around someone's house. 1942 is also the year that Windell Lamance's family left the El Morro area. In his book, *A Boy Growing Up on a Homestead*, Windell says that what he remembers most about that last winter/spring are the dances — the same dances where Lee began his lifelong role as a community musician. That he came back to the old school, now the Old School Gallery, to play for the opening of this exhibit was pure magic. When I introduced the band, someone yelled, "Lee! You're a legend!" That is the truth.

This project began as an effort to pull stories up out of the landscape; stories of a particular place — El Morro, New Mexico — as well as stories that tie this place to the wider processes of US colonial expansion and the materialization of American life. By starting with what can be seen within the physical environment and working with archives, books, and

living people, we embarked on a study of what can be known. Our open-ended approach to research aimed to enliven the tapestry of topography, plants, animals, and people in a way that makes those sites distinct and distinguishable, meaningful, and available for future conscious recognition. To some extent, the process shared authorship with the researchers. As with any creative process, one thing led to another and we followed along, making connections and choices about where to go next. We didn't find everything, and we didn't include everything we found. There are so many more stories that could, with more time and resources, be told. And, what about the many stories that have left behind nothing in the landscape, no trail to follow?

Learning stories of the land and discerning the unique life of specific places brings about deeper connections — it helps communities know themselves better, which can bring them closer together; it brings the landscape to life with lessons and reminders of the way things were and still are; it honors those who came before us and holds the torch for those who will come after. It's important work and it all starts with seeing what's there.

Erin Elder, Old Truck, 2025, field drawing

CHRI SNYDER is an ethnographic researcher, social systems interpreter, writer, teacher, and gatherer of stories. Trained as a cultural anthropologist at the University of Southern California and the University of New Mexico, her creative research projects intricately weave together numerous strands of historical and contemporary information to compose a broad understanding of specific places. Since moving to New Mexico in 2002, Snyder has produced projects with academic, government, nonprofit, and independent entities. Her work moves from the ground up, drawing stories from the landscape about how different cultural groups interact with, shape, and are shaped by their non-human environments. She teaches Anthropology and Linguistics at New Mexico State University in Grants, works with the El Morro Arts Council, writes creatively, and sings with local musicians. Snyder has lived in El Morro, New Mexico since 2015, and *Seeing What's There: Life & Land along New Mexico Route 53* is her first project that artistically engages with the landscapes, neighbors, and stories of her adopted home.

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New Mexico Humanities Council

Cibola County Historical Society & Museum

Western New Mexico Airways Heritage Museum

A Good Sign

Ramah Historical Museum

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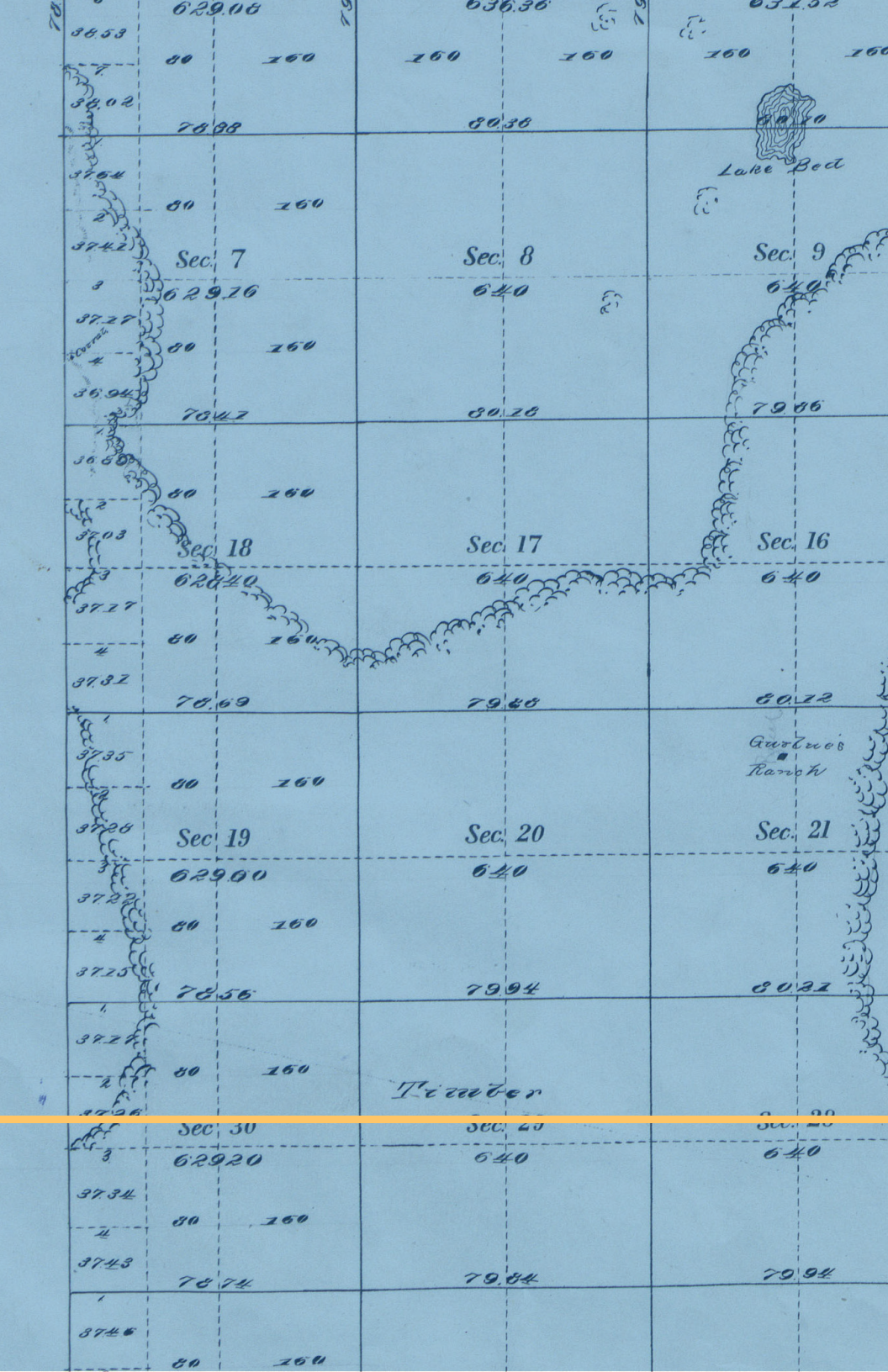
Cover: Original survey map of the El Morro homestead region, 1883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