

The other Las Vegas

In New Mexico, history's the lure

By J. Eric Eckard

Cox News Service

LAS VEGAS, N.M.—About 125 years ago, this northern New Mexico town received far more visitors than its now more famous namesake in Nevada.

It was on the Santa Fe Trail, one of the first and most traveled routes to burgeoning western outposts.

Billy the Kid spent the night in jail here. Pat Garrett averted a lynching at the train depot. Doc Holliday operated a bar.

Later on, Theodore Roosevelt recruited many of his Rough Riders here.

The 1900 U.S. Census showed that Las Vegas was the largest city in New Mexico at the time.

But Albuquerque became a railroad hub and gambling was legalized in Nevada, and the popularity of Las Vegas, N.M., declined.

But while Las Vegas, Nev., is famous for its glitzy casinos, top-shelf performers and wedding chapels on just about every corner, Las Vegas, N.M., and the surrounding area boast more than 900 buildings on the National Register of Historic Places, ruins of a 900-year-old Pueblo village, a wildlife refuge and a wilderness area within a national park.

Marcus Gottschalk is a renovation painter who has helped with restoration projects in some of the more well-known historical buildings in Las Ve-



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gas. He's also an author and historian who can tell you all about the Wild West days and all things historical in this city of about 19,000.

"Las Vegas, from about 1850 to 1887, was the most important town commercially in the Southwest—and culturally," Gottschalk said.

Today, it's not the booming metropolis that it was in the 1800s, but community leaders have embraced the region's culture and history.

Las Vegas is basically divided into three sections—Old Town, New Town and a modern district, with some of the newer retail and service outlets.

Las Vegas, Spanish for "The Meadows," was established in 1835, and the first adobe and log buildings were built around a plaza.

Two buildings from that first settlement still stand today in the town square.

"The Santa Fe Trail went through the town square," Gott-

schalk said. "Then after the railroad came, New Town Las Vegas was added on."

A drive through both sections of town reveal interesting and unique examples of Southwestern architecture.

The Plaza Hotel in Old Town was built in 1882, and was the site of Roosevelt's first Rough Riders reunion in 1899.

Restored in 1982, the Plaza Hotel offers overnight guests an old-timey feel with modern amenities.

Some say there's even a ghost there.

Guests and employees alike have recounted stories of eerie visitors in the middle of the night, and Byron T.'s Saloon workers still hear footsteps and smell cigar smoke after-hours in the empty bar.

There are plenty of ghost stories circulating in Las Vegas.

The El Fidel Hotel, which still boasts the original lobby from the 1920s, hosts a ghost that lurks in the inn's halls and rooms.

Adele Ilfeld is said to haunt an auditorium at New Mexico Highlands University in Las Vegas that bears her name and was built between 1914 and 1921.

A ghost dubbed Alley haunts the Las Vegas Railroad Depot, which opened in 1879.

And students walking through the century-old Montezuma Castle at nearby United World College often have heard an opera singer performing an aria late at night.

But visits to these sites don't always generate a haunting.

You can take a tour at the United World College campus



Photo by Dan Monaghan/New Mexico Tourism

OLD HAUNTS: Montezuma Castle now is student and visitor housing at United World College.

and see true diversity in action. About 200 students from 88 countries live and learn at the two-year preparatory school. Founded by business tycoon Armand Hammer, the New Mexico campus is the only United World College in the United States.

Throughout Las Vegas, Southwestern architecture is pretty common. But there are a few variations, including the Carnegie Library, which was modeled after Monticello, Thomas Jefferson's home.

If you venture outside Las Vegas—even past the United World College—you'll find Pecos National Historical Park

and Ft. Union National Monument, both part of the National Park System.

Pecos was the site of a Pueblo village, which later was overtaken by the Spanish, who built a mission there. Ft. Union is an abandoned military outpost that was built on the Santa Fe Trail.

Las Vegas and the surrounding communities offer visitors a snapshot into the lives of the early settlers in the area—from the early Pueblo villagers in 1100 to the Santa Fe Trail blazers to the community leaders in the 1900s, who worked together to restore the area to the prominence it once held.

In 2001, Las Vegas was named one of a dozen distinctive destinations for travelers by the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

Obviously, Las Vegas, N.M., probably will never pass Las Vegas, Nev., in tourism.

But visitors to Las Vegas, N.M., can experience Southwestern culture and history in a much more relaxed setting.

And the best part is that what happens in Las Vegas, N.M., doesn't have to stay there.

For general information about Las Vegas, N.M., visit www.lasvegasm.org.