



## Cultural History of the Tularosa Basin

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At the end of the ice age, 20,000 years ago, Asiatic hunters and gatherers crossed the Bering Land Bridge into Alaska. These early cultures pursued dwindling herds of Pleistocene mammoth, camel, horse, bison and other now-extinct species into most of North and South America.

Fossil footprints left by these huge animals can still be found on the alkali flats along the edges of Lake Lucero.

By 10,000 years ago, early peoples reached the margins of Lake Lucero, then a permanent salt lake. For 1,000 years, these ancient hunters stalked bison throughout the basin grasslands. Chipped stone lance points and other traces of “Folsom” technology are found on the shorelines of ancient lakes and throughout the lowlands of the Tularosa Basin.

Lush grasslands and lakes gradually disappeared as the climate became more and more arid. “Scottsbluff-Eden” tools date to 7,000 to 8,000 years ago, and suggest a more generalized life-style relying on smaller game. Scottsbluff-Eden camps and hunting sites are often found near the more reliable springs on the lower basin floor.

Aridity continued to increase; ancient lakes dried up, except during the summer monsoon season. Interior basins and river valleys were less affected, and hosted slow population growth, resulting in the “Archaic”



Historic Fence at the Lake Lucero ranch site

traditions that spread throughout the west and lasted for the next 4,000 to 5,000 years.

Beginning 6,000 to 7,000 years ago, the generalized hunting and gathering lifestyle of the “Archaic” relied on a variety of “life zones”, throughout the Basin and Range. By 5,000 years ago, this adaptation focused on the systematic use of productive ecological zones on a seasonal basis. Indian ricegrass, the first edible plant to mature in the region, was harvested along the edges of the White Sands by Archaic and subsequent populations, leaving burned gypsum hearths scattered throughout the dunes. Approximately 4,000 years ago the accelerating drought began to stabilize. The earliest appearance of maize agriculture in the region dates to this period.

Evidence preserved in Late Archaic rock shelters and caves shows that wild foods continued to dominate the prehistoric diet. Domesticated maize and beans played only a minor role. During this time, human populations remained more concerned with exploiting wild native resources,

like deer, mesquite, agave, and yucca.

Preserved deposits at Fresno Shelter in the Sacramento Mountains suggest a slow, gradual increase in the use of agricultural products. Domesticated species became a major contributor to the prehistoric diet at least 2,000 years ago.

Dry conditions returned 1,900 years ago (A.D. 100) and lasted 400 to 600 years (A.D. 500-700). Local cultures became dependent upon domesticated crops. Great numbers of people gathered at locations of higher agricultural potential, forming semisedentary villages. By A.D. 400, small, “Hueco Phase” pithouse villages occupied some of these areas.

About A.D. 700, wetter conditions returned. Small, pottery-producing pithouse villages, identified as the “Mesilla Phase” of the Jornada Mogollon, were established at the mouths of canyons and on the alluvial terraces along the margins of the basin, where both dryland or floodland agriculture were possible. By A.D. 1000, most of the diet consumed by early villagers came from agriculture.

By A.D. 1100, populations concentrated at larger villages near major permanent water sources. New technologies improved agricultural production. Solar calendars, irrigation, and new religious practices helped to strengthen and focus community efforts. Two of the largest villages built during this period, the Lake Lucero and Huntington sites, lie along the margins of Lake Lucero, on the western boundary of White Sands National Monument.

A major drought, from A.D. 1276 to 1299, occurred throughout the Southwest. For a short period, villages concentrated at more reliable water sources. Within the next 100 years, for reasons as yet unknown, all major village locations in the basin area were abandoned. By about A.D. 1350, the Tularosa Basin was empty after an occupation which had lasted nearly 10,000 years.

Little is known about the 250 years between the abandonment of these large agricultural villages and the Spanish Entrada. Jornada Mogollon peoples may have remained in the area, altering their life style and relying on wild native products.

These populations may have been seen by the Spanish in the region of El Paso. Spanish chroniclers tell of small groups of hunters and gatherers farming on a limited basis in the vicinity of small villages of grass or thatched houses.

Mescalero Apaches are the only Native Americans who occupy the basin today. No evidence indicates that hostile Athabascan groups (ancestral to the modern Apache) were present to force the abandonment of agricultural villages before A.D.

1400. However, by the time of Spanish colonization in the mid-seventeenth century, nomadic groups of Athabascan speakers were well established in the local mountains.

Until the nineteenth century, frequent raiding on Spanish settlements in northern Mexico and the Territory of New Mexico was credited to the Apache. European colonization in the Tularosa Basin was delayed by Apache resistance until the mid-1800s, although salt expeditions to the Lake Lucero alkali flats occasionally ventured north from El Paso del Norte during the late 18th and early 19th century, leaving broken “caretta” parts scattered along the trail.

During the 1860s, hispanic New Mexicans succeeded in founding settlements at the mouths of La Luz and Tularosa Canyons on the eastern edge of the basin floor. After the Mescalero Reservation was established in 1873, the rapidly expanding Western Frontier brought populations from the eastern U.S. and western Texas to the area.

Long abandoned agricultural lands were reseeded, and sheep, angora goat, and cattle ranching were introduced. Homesteads were established to control permanent water sources and agricultural and grazing lands. Livestock was free to range as far and wide as the owners could maintain control. Several families in the basin owned literally thousands of sheep, goats, cattle, and horses.

The two Lucero brothers, Jose R. and Filipe, who alternated as sheriffs of Doña Ana county, built neighboring ranches on the west side of the old salt lake, giving it its modern name. Many other notable historic figures homesteaded and ranched this newly opened

Tularosa country, including Pat Garrett, cowboy poet Eugene Rhodes, and Oliver M. Lee, whose Circle Cross Ranch became the largest in New Mexico.

This “open range” disappeared shortly after the turn of the twentieth century with the new public land laws. The leasing of specific tracts of public lands to individuals brought an end to free grazing lands and was the first major step in a shift to a cash-based economy. The development of mining and timber industries, and construction of railroads and other communication and transportation systems, followed rapidly.

The ancient salt deposits of Lake Lucero once again attracted attention, and dozens of claims were staked, in hopes of a new gypsum industry, which never materialized. Only one house was ever built with “White Sands Block” in nearby Alamogordo.

The Great Depression and droughts of the 1930s brought the frontier era to a close. In the late 1930s, the U.S. Government set aside tracts of land in the central and western portions of the basin, and White Sands National Monument was established in 1933. By the end of the 1940s, vast areas were designated for defense systems testing as part of present-day White Sands Missile Range.



This caretta, part of a horse drawn wagon, was found in the dunes in 1973.