

Boom-Town Living Ghost

W NORTH OF TULAROSA is White Oaks, once a gold mining boom area, in this "Land of Enchantment," now only a ghost town; the dead in its well-known cemetery far outnumber the living. Not over a dozen people live in White Oaks—while several hundred rest in its peaceful graveyard.

David L. Jackson, 91, who has lived in White Oaks for 64 years is the self-appointed caretaker who keeps the burial ground neat. "So many of my friends are here that I took it upon myself to maintain the cemetery," Jackson says.

On the tombstones are many names famous in New Mexico history: William C. McDonald, pioneer merchant and rancher, who later became the first governor after New Mexico reached statehood; Susan McSween Barber, once known as the "New Mexico Cattle Queen"; Judge John Y. Hewett, a forceful early day member of the bar, and close friend of writer Emerson Hough during Hough's three year sojourn in White Oaks.

Jackson came to White Oaks in 1897 and knows the history of the town and its once fabulous riches, its heart-breaking wait for a railroad that never came, and the exodus which made it a ghost town.

The original discovery of gold in the White Oaks district was made by John J. Baxter, a Missouri prospector who had arrived in Lincoln County in 1878 with a couple of mules, a miner's pick and shovel, and a bit of acid for assaying. The mountain on which his find was made became known as Baxter's Mountain but the camp soon became "White Oaks."

Baxter was satisfied with a return of a few hundred dollars in gold, left the country and drifted to Silver City, where he was shot and injured in an Indian raid on the Gila River country in 1885. He returned to White Oaks in the late 1880's to find it a rip-roaring gold-mining camp, and the claim he had once abandoned now important property.

There are conflicting stories about the gold strike at White

Oaks. One more or less accepted version is that Tom Wilson, a stranger, and reportedly a fugitive from Texas law, wandered into Baxter's camp in late 1879. In search of a feasible route for his next day's journey Wilson started up Baxter's Mountain about sundown and jokingly remarking that he might find a gold mine. Toward the top Wilson sat down to rest, lazily pecking at an exposed ledge and dropping a few of the rock slivers into his pocket.

On his return to camp he dropped the samples into Baxter's hand, and Baxter let out a whoop. Gold! This was it! The richest ore in New Mexico! Though it was pitch dark, Baxter insisted upon staking the claim that night.

With coal-oil lantern they started back up the mountain to the rich outcropping. Accompanying the pair was one Jack Winters, an opportunist according to the old timers, who proceeded to count himself in. While they were staking the claim, fugitive Wilson said he wanted no part of it for himself, declaring that he had no use for gold and wanted to be on his way.

Though this was incredible to Baxter and Winters they granted his wish but insisted that, as a token for his services, he take nine dollars in cash, which was all they had on hand, and a good pistol. It was small reward for the discovery which developed into the "North" and the "South" Homestakes Mines, two of the producers in the White Oaks district.

Tradition has it that when the "Homestakes" was struck, Winters bought a wagon-load of whiskey, passed around tin-cups and invited the town to have a drink.

Close on the heels of Wilson's strike came discovery of the fabulous "Old Abe" mine which was slated to yield more than \$3 million in its day; and with that the stampede to White Oaks gold was on the way.

Not only was the gold rush marked by the usual excitement—free and easy money, frontier exuberance, hard characters common to all boom camps—but also by political upheaval and geographical immensity.

One of the strike's first effects—with ore running thousands of dollars to the ton—was a wild speculation in real estate



DAVE JACKSON

—
*Typical old buildings
including ornate house
and typical
Western store front*
—

WHITE OAKS CEMETERY

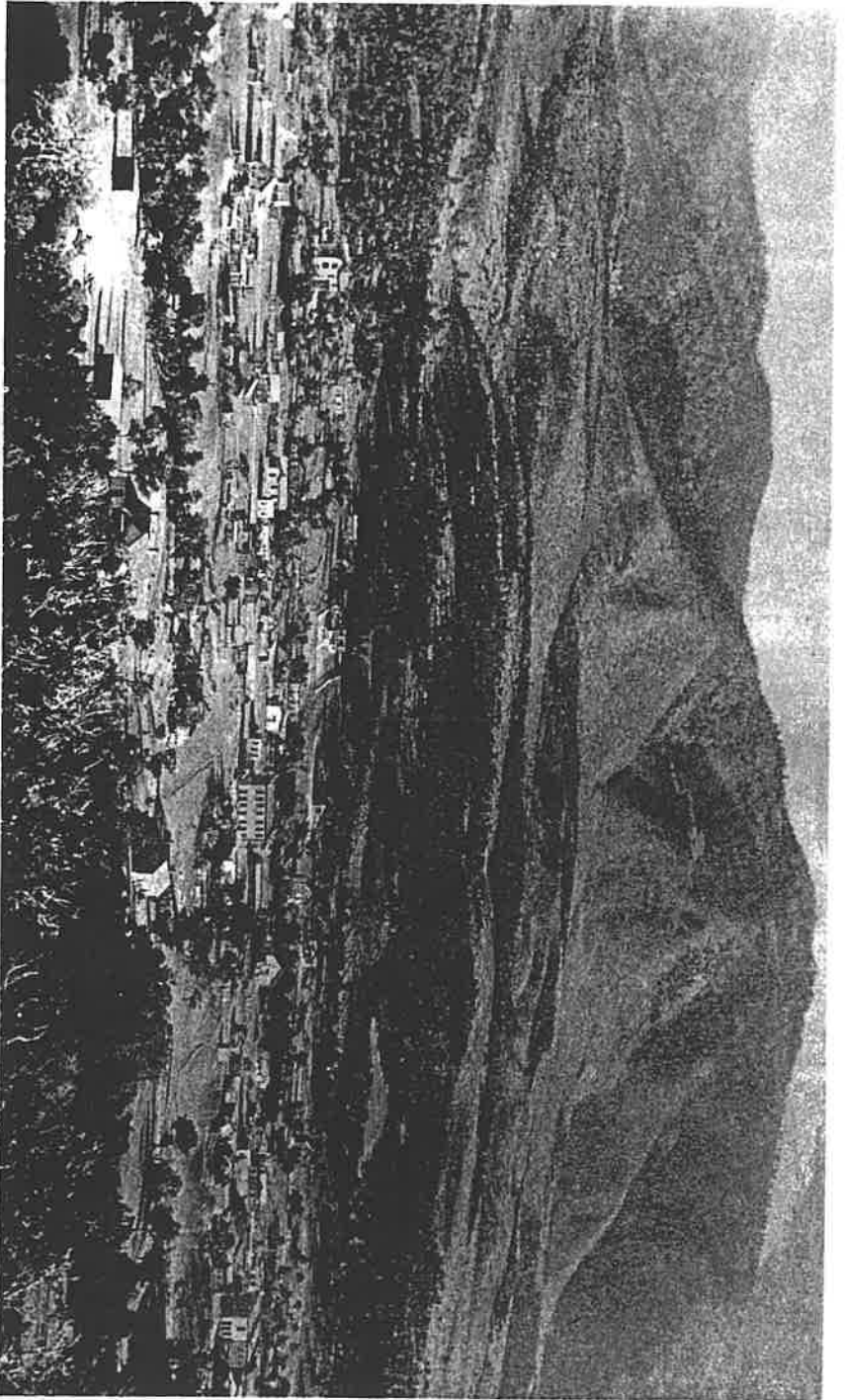


Elaborate Hoyle House



False Front





White Oaks in the Boom-days of 1880

Fantastic prices were paid for building lots in the newly surveyed townsite.

In those days the county probably covered 25,000 square miles, and with an almost total lack of transportation, communication facilities, roads and law enforcement officers, it became a sanctuary for gunmen fleeing the bullets of officers along the Texas and Mexican borders. So, many desperados came to the White Oaks area.

Daily mail service between White Oaks and Socorro was inaugurated in October of 1880. That year the newspaper *The Golden Era* was started and Starr's fabulous opera house completed. Among the well-known business men were Bill McDonald and Emerson Hough.

Besides gold, coal deposits were also found at White Oaks, but because of the town's inaccessibility every shipment of a pound of ore or a lump of coal meant the prohibitive expense of wagon-freighting 140 miles south to El Paso, or 100 miles west across the Malpais to the Santa Fe railroad at Socorro. Hundreds of tons of supplies and building materials almost without end were freighted from Las Vegas 150 miles away.

Hopes boomed in 1881 that the Santa Fe railroad would build an extension from San Antonio (New Mexico) to White Oaks but those hopes faded; then there was rumor of a White Oaks-Kansas City railroad; and of the Clayton, White Oaks and Pacific; and of a half dozen more.

Morris Locke and his associates had begun actual construction of a railroad from El Paso to White Oaks in 1889, but after putting \$170,000 into the venture, laying nine miles of track and grading another ten, they went into receivership. Then Jay Gould, the greatest railroad financier of his day, bought the assets of the defunct company for \$50,000 and White Oaks rejoiced—only to be doomed to disappointment again. After investigation Gould declared the road not practical and wrote off his loss as a sad mistake.

Then came Charles B. Eddy with Eastern capital and a dream of a railroad from El Paso. He founded the town of Alamogordo to harvest the rich timbered areas of the Sacramento mountains, and he had a vision of extending the rail-

road to the gold mines of White Oaks and the coal fields of that area. By the summer of 1899 the El Paso and North-eastern had been completed to White Oaks Junction—only an hour's travel by team and wagon from the mining camp up the canyon. The city fathers were preparing for a triumphant arrival with bands and oratory.

Work slacked however, and the town became uneasy. Rumor had it that Eddy might veer his railroad off to Capitan where he was heavily interested in the Salado coal field. Hoping to forestall any such action, two thousand citizens banded together and offered to give forty acres of land for a terminal, and an outright cash subsidy of \$50,000. But Eddy had abandoned his plan to go to White Oaks and the line went to Capitan instead.

With the railroad snatched from its grasp, White Oaks became panicky. Why had Eddy deserted White Oaks? Could it be that the camp was through, and Eddy knew it? And then the exodus began. Mines closed, merchants sold their shops and stores, buildings fell into disrepair. In recent years the great ones have been razed or moved away. Of the people only a few old stalwarts like Dave Jackson remain. He believes the time will come when the mines will be worked again. "There's still gold in them thar hills," he says.

An outstanding reminder of the once elegant life in White Oaks is the Watt Hoyle house, which Jackson recalls was built by Hoyle under contract with Gumm brothers. "Hoyle let the contract for \$40,000. Then he sent to St. Louis for rock masons who dressed stone for the building for a year before they commenced to build."

Hoyle was building the house for his fiancée but something happened to the romance and Hoyle never married. He soon returned to New York and later his brother and family came from Ohio and occupied the place. Hoyle built the house with huge windows so that each room would have a mountain view and, as if this was not enough, added to the top of the two-story structure an observation platform with a metal railing. Though the house has been unoccupied until recently, the woodwork of California redwood has held up

fairly well, and mirrors still grace the mantles of the living and dining rooms.

Beautiful as it must have been during its well kept days, the house brought only disappointment to the man who built it. His brother's wife, who had come West for her health, died there and his brother died from a fall into a prospector's hole.

One of the few buildings still standing in White Oaks is the old Exchange Bank Building. Three young lawyers who were to leave their marks on the history of the state once held forth here: H. B. Ferguson, later a Democratic leader and member of Congress who pushed through the Ferguson Act, giving millions of acres of public domain to New Mexico for school purposes; John Y. Hewett, an influential figure in territorial days; and W. C. McDonald, New Mexico's first governor after statehood in 1912. The remains of an old brick building, once the home of a big mercantile company, stands across the street from the old bank, and further over toward the mountains are the ruins of the fabulous "Homestakes" and "Old Abe" mines which made old White Oaks famous.

Dave Jackson and his memories are about the only things that remain unchanged.



August 6, 1961 was the 12th annual "Dave Jackson Day"—on which his former neighbors gather from all over the Southwest to pay tribute to his concern for others. They meet at the White Oaks schoolhouse for a day of feasting and visiting in Dave's honor. His friends of today gather in appreciation of his unselfish care of the cemetery where lie his friends of yesterday.

"Thunderation," he declared, "those folks were my personal friends—someone has to take care of them."