

The Kokopelli Journals

Chapter 5: The Turquoise Trail



“Logic will get you from A to B. Imagination will take you everywhere.” – Albert Einstein

(This is a segment of Chapter 5, along with some of our photographs of Madrid, New Mexico, along the winding ‘High Road’ to Santa Fe. Obviously we are now on the road; travel at this time is about ten days after September 11th, 2001.) Photos coming soon!

“Legend has it that in these brutal Southwest deserts, turquoise was formed by the tears of Indians grateful for rain falling from Father Sky to mingle with Mother Earth. It is said that these tears became “the stone of the sky and water.”

...Last year, in our “Family Circle” version of touring the Southwest, we took I-25 north, straight up from Albuquerque to Santa Fe. We had never heard of the Turquoise Trail at this point and wish we had, because it is so much more interesting a way to that destination. I picked up a brochure somewhere towards the end of that trip, and so suggested to Pete that we give it a go to begin this one. It is a little difficult to find – look for NM 14, off of I-40 – the Sandia Crest National Scenic Byway, they call it (NM 536) – on the east side of the Sandia Mountains. If one has the time, it is worth the effort. One starts through Cedar Crest, where Pete and I took a little jaunt up the mountain to Sandia Crest, (elevation 10,678 feet) in the Cibola National Forest. Sandia Peak Ski Area offers a year ‘round recreational resort and the world’s longest aerial tramway. Here, we witnessed a group preparing for an early fall wedding with breathtaking mountain scenery as their backdrop. Because of the intimacy of the occasion we did not linger. Instead we drove leisurely back down from whence we had come, savoring the shimmering golden aspen leaves flirting with the breezes

and the deep green evergreens and listening to Clapton’s version of Swing Low, Sweet Chariot, with his gorgeous gospel backup. We reminisced about our own wedding, back in September of ‘76, in that horse pasture under our ‘hanging tree,’ surrounded by family and friends, on a perfect fall day, much like this one.

There is nothing spectacular about the Turquoise Trail, unless you are awed by incredible views of backcountry New Mexico, and love funky little towns, or ghost towns that were quite something in their mining hey-day, but need a bit of imagination today to bring that reality back. A bumper sticker I appreciate reads: “REALITY IS FOR PEOPLE WHO LACK IMAGINATION.” If you don’t lack that, and do enjoy exploration, then discover this winding route to Santa Fe. Some of these old mining towns barely exist at all, anymore. I couldn’t even find San Pedro on the map, but it used to be one of the most lively and is/was located barely a mile past NM 10, outside of Golden, at the base of the San Pedro Mountains. In 1832, however, this almost non-existent ghost town was cause of quite the commotion, when here the Spanish found copper

and gold. This was ‘placer gold’ – nuggets and dust found in sand and streambeds – the type of gold that started the gold rush of 1849.

‘Golden, New Mexico’ is what I remember. We were there, and then we weren’t. What I saw of it was the remains of an ancient Spanish church atop a hill, which we stopped to photograph. *“This was built in the 1830s, and later restored by Fray Angelico Chavez, the noted poet-priest. It’s hard to believe, but in the early 1900’s some 3,000 people lived here. The town had a newspaper, a bank and even a stock exchange...”*

*“Golden has a lonely aspect, the town is almost lost in the overwhelming vastness of the New Mexico landscape. Far off to the northwest broods the long, blue ridge of the Jemez range. Almost lost in the haze in the distant west is the round dome of Cabezón Peak. To the southwest is the towering bulk of the Sandia Mountains. Ten miles north of Golden the road tops at the head of a long draw. Far away lie the majestic Sangre de Cristos. The view is tremendous. Soon you see evidence of old mining. Tunnels area visible among the piñons to the east...”**

I remember entering Madrid, New Mexico. I just loved this crazy, funky, artsy little town – so very different from magnificent, continental Madrid, Spain. Pete and I found a shady place to park and walked hand-in-hand along the main area that also happens to be the highway through town. Houses, shops, boutiques, restaurants, and the old Santa Fe locomotive No. 874, are all within a stone’s throw. It’s considered a ghost town, and I suppose it certainly is for ore once mined here, but it has certainly come to life in color and crafts and quilts! Pete and I found a place for pizza, right out of the ‘60s, including bottled “Rt. 66” root beer out of an ice box. The pizza was cooked to order in an old brick oven and

was delicious. We ate inside, where the day was cooled by lazy ceiling fans and dark hardwood floors. We were warned not to drink the water – which Madrid barely has, and what it does have has the rotten egg smell of hydrogen sulfide, not at all appealing. There was a delightful patio outside, as well, very tempting – but the inside was so camp, we couldn’t resist. Pete and I are both old hippies; we felt right at home.

We didn’t go in, but one can also check out the “Old Coal Miner’s Museum,” offering mining and railroad history, artifacts and lore, as well as actually see below-ground coal seams. This museum even shoots the old-time photographs – that beautiful sepia-toned imagery – to give the model that Wild West look.

Between the water from a well drilled in 1984, and the current drought in the Southwest, I’m betting that water might be on Madrid’s ‘wish-list’ more now than gold or copper, itself. But *“coal, not gold, was Madrid’s bonanza. This is one of the few places where bituminous (soft) and anthracite (hard) coal are both found. The hard coal deposits are believed to be the only ones west of the Mississippi River. Legend has it that General Stephen Watts Kearny supplied his army from the coal seams here. And at one time, it is said, ox teams hauled hard coal from here to St. Louis.*

“In the 1880s, a Santa Fe railway subsidiary opened mines in Madrid. By 1899, when Colorado Fuel and Iron Company leased the mines, 3,000 persons lived here. The property was later sold to Albuquerque and Cerrillos Coal Company. The late Oscar Huber, who went to work for the company in 1910, later acquired control. The town is now owned by his heirs.

“In its early years, Madrid shipped a million tons of coal annually. But coal demand slackened

in the '30s and production slackened. Many miners moved away. In 1934, the population dipped to 1,300. World War II brought a temporary end to the decline. The town shipped 20,000 tons of coal to Las Alamos, where the first A-bombs were built.

*“War’s end and the rapid conversion of industry and railroads to other fuels spelled Madrid’s doom. Production dwindled... Gone like the rest of Madrid’s glory are its famed Christmas decorations. The lightened displays drew nation-wide notice, and its streets were choked with traffic from all over the state. Turned on in Madrid for the last time in 1941, they have now been bought by the Gallup Jaycees, and will be displayed there.”**

They’ve since returned! I read in our Turquoise Trail brochure that *“in December, the spirit of yesteryear lives on with Holiday Open House and the lighting of the town.”*

Yeah, well, for being a defunct ghost town, Pete and I thought Madrid to be full of the living and the doing. It’s an artsy little offshoot of Santa Fe... We drove along this offbeat winding route, listening to Clapton’s “Let it Grow,” laughing and enjoying ourselves immensely. One of those perfect moments lived in the here and now.

Continuing north on the Turquoise Trail, one drives through Cerrillos, which means “Little Hills,” in Spanish. *“The town exudes a pleasant feeling of a quiet Hispanic village. In fact, if there’s one thing that separates Cerrillos from Madrid, it’s the continuity of a long history of Hispanic families who still live in the small enclave. That, and the fact that Cerrillos has water.*

“Before the prospectors of the late 1800s, there was turquoise, discovered more than 2,000 years ago in a mountain the Indians called Chalchibuitl. When the Spanish

invaded, they used the Indians as slave labor to help excavate the blue stone at the Mina del Tiro, or the Mine of the Shaft. It was during a major excavation of Chalchibuitl that the entire west face of the mountain caved in, entombing the Indian laborers.

“There are still stories of restless death and the men who were never recovered. Others talk of the undiscovered riches still in the earth. The old Indian lodes were rediscovered in 1879, setting off a boom that enticed miners from throughout the country. Gold was discovered in nearby hills. The Mina del Tiro yielded silver ore. The Cash Entry Mine produced silver, copper and gold.... But it wasn’t the romance of gold or silver that gave the area its real worth. It was the gritty reality of coal first discovered in nearby Waldo, about three miles west of Cerrillos. The railroad set up a spur from Waldo to Madrid in 1891, touching off another succession of boom years.

*“Although Cerrillos had water, it didn’t have the highway and that made all the difference. The Turquoise Trail bypasses the town of about 200, which probably accounts for its ability to retain a sense of quiet...”***

So there you have it, some of the history of these quaint old Ghost Towns that so haunt the Old West. The yesterday and the today. Continuing on NM 14, the drive continues to be scenic backcountry New Mexico, dense thickets of chaparral open to passing vistas looking over distant mountains, and then more cozy enclosed scrub-pine areas, entrances to ranches, and eventually – before reaching Santa Fe – one is warned not to pick up hitchhikers, as the New Mexico State Penitentiary sits here, ominously. Surrounded by rolls of razor wire and lookouts for escapees, it gives one Stephen King kind of

chills down their spine. Not far in the future, as fate would have it, I would pass this prison again, feeling altogether differently about its inmates and how they might have 'gotten there.' I would come to realize it might be easier than one might think...

**This information is based on New Mexico Magazine – Ghost Town Issue – from the Feb. 1998 issue, and an article on Madrid entitled “A Highway Haunted by History,” written by Ralph Looney.*

***This information is from the same issue, in an article called “Jewels of the Turquoise Trail, Madrid and Cerrillos Experience Shining Resurrection,” written by Denise Kusel, reprinted with permission.*

