

FINDING OUR ROOTS



SHARI V. HILL / SUN-NEWS

JASON ESSLINGER, manager of Jason Esslinger Elevator, front, Randy Valenzuela and Abraham Cruz use sledgehammers Friday to loosen grain in a railcar next to the train depot in Mesilla Park. The depot, which was completed in 1925 and is no longer used by passengers, is now used as a railroad maintenance-of-way.

Community seeks to promote heritage

By Christopher Schurtz
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LAS CRUCES — The train came to a slow stop three miles south of Las Cruces on a flat plain of ranchland dotted with a few houses and cottonwood trees.

On board were some of the most prominent leaders in the New Mexico Territory, including its governor, Bradford Prince, who had come for an elaborate cornerstone laying ceremony for the first building of the new agricultural college.

Greeting the large procession that day in September 1890 was a sign advertising lots for sale in the area that people were already calling "Mesilla Park."

In the early years of what is now New Mexico State University, the tree-lined streets of Mesilla Park would appeal to the college's professors and admin-



CHRISTOPHER SCHURTZ / COURTESY PHOTO

MESILLA PARK RAILROAD DEPOT, built in a "Pueblo-Deco" style in 1925, still serves as an office for the Burlington Northern and Santa Fe Railway.

istrators, especially those coming to the arid Southwest from the East.

It was from its depot that new arrivals came up College Drive, past the Seed House and along the irriga-

tion ditch to the campus.

For a time, some believed Mesilla Park would become a town rivaling Las Cruces.

And while that never happened, Mesilla Park can boast its own modest histo-

ry.

A new effort, led in part by Las Cruces City Councilor Gregory Smith, is currently seeking to make the most of that heritage.

Neighborhood committees are developing "branding" that exemplifies Mesilla Park, and residents like NMSU history department head Jon Hunner are looking into its history, Smith said.

Smith said he hopes to make the most of entities like the university, New Mexico Main Street, and lessons learned from the ongoing revitalization of downtown Las Cruces.

"I think this could be an excellent time and opportunity to make the most of these connections to do something for Mesilla Park like we've done for downtown Las Cruces," Smith said.

Mesilla

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First boosters

Mesilla Park is an unincorporated area generally to the west of South Main Street just past University Avenue, with its center the Mesilla Park depot. Different parts are within and outside the city limits of Las Cruces and Mesilla.

It is a place that's always benefited from the presence of the university.

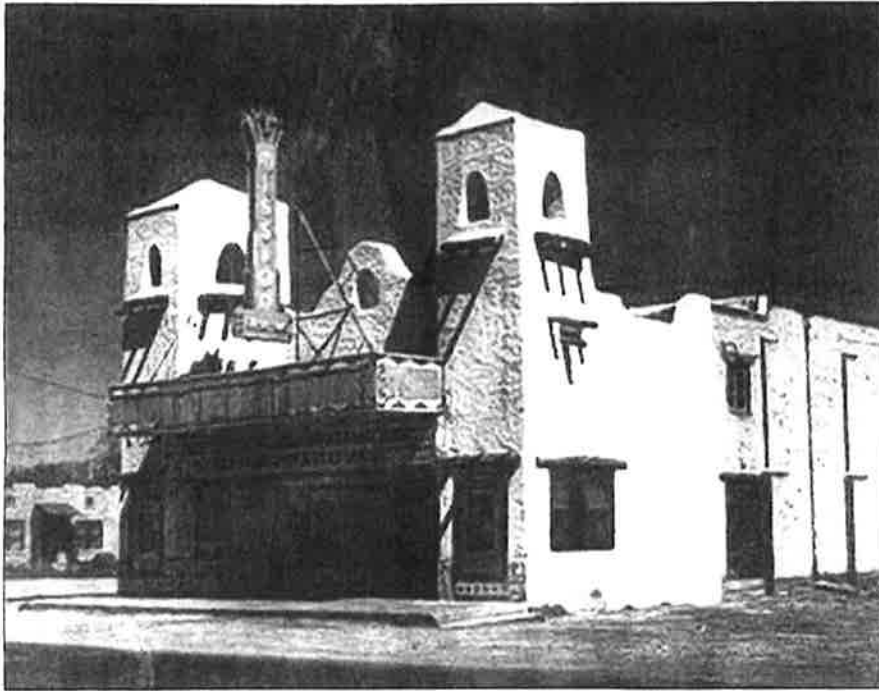
In later years, Mesilla Park became home for numerous "famous folks" from the university, including Tony Award-winning playwright Mark Medoff and historian, botanist, and linguist Adlai Feather, the first Rhodes Scholar from New Mexico, whose old heavily landscaped home stands at Conway and Bowman.

But in some ways, it is the university that owes its existence, at least its location, to Mesilla Park.

A group of local Republican businessmen and landowners, including George Bowman, got the legislature to establish the new agricultural college in the Mesilla Valley in 1890.

Bowman, who formed the Bowman Bank and served on the first board of regents, as well as other college founders, offered up irrigated land that they owned three miles south of Las Cruces for the new campus.

Some of them were investors in the Rio Grande Land Company, which had the exclusive arrangement with the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad to develop residential areas near the depots in Las Cruces and Mesilla Park.



COURTESY PHOTO

THE MISSION THEATER, shown in this 1959 photo by Markus Freitag, once stood across from the Mesilla Park depot.

The company said it was planting "thousands of forest trees" in the new area, where "tasteful and modern cottages," usually pre-cut wood-frame and brick houses shipped by rail from Chicago, were available to rent or own.

Some houses from this period, including Bowman's brick home at the southwest corner of Conway and Bowman as well as R.N. Hager's frame house on Union Avenue, still stand.

Some faculty members proved crucial to Mesilla Park's early history.

Fabian Garcia's contributions to the college were many, but one of them, the college's first experimental station farm on Bowman and the botanical gardens on University Avenue, still bear his name.

Garcia deeded 23 acres of land to the college in 1906 for the experimental station. He later became the first director of the State Agricultural Experimental Station, where he developed chile varieties still in use today.

Lester was the first adviser of the college newspaper, among many other duties, and he farmed and ranched in the area.

He and his wife often hosted parties on the lawn of their Mesilla Park home, and for many years he ran a company selling what he claimed was one of the largest collections of "genuine Indian and Mexican handicraft" in the Southwest.

Historic structures

Lester also secured the lot for St. James Church to erect

its first structure in 1904.

The following year, the Rev. Hunter Lewis arrived and would spend the next four decades serving churches around southern New Mexico, with Mesilla Park where he and his wife Edith would raise their large family.

Lewis laid the cornerstone of a new St. James Church in October 1911 across the street from the first church (both structures still stand). It soon became a social center for the college's students and faculty.

By the turn of the century, Mesilla Park had its own public school, a sturdy brick schoolhouse at 304 Bell Avenue.

It was added onto several times, and served as a school until 1976, after which it be-

came a community center. It was recently dedicated and renamed the Frank O'Brien Papen Community Center in honor of Las Cruces banker, developer and state legislator who lived down the road on Conway.

Another school, the private Madonna High School, once served Mesilla Park.

In 1928, the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity and the Good Shepherd bought a parcel off Conway Avenue that was once owned by college president Winfred Garrison, and established a convent, orphanage and the Madonna private school for girls.

It closed in 1967, and in the mid-'70s, developer Lewis Emerick developed condos and houses on the property, including the Mesilla Park Manor area, but made sure to maintain a grotto and other artifacts from the convent period.

Perhaps the most distinctive structure in Mesilla Park is its railroad depot, built in a Pueblo Revival-meets Art Deco style in 1925.

While the Mesilla Park stop did fuel a small industrial center that included the Tashiro family's packaging plant, passenger service there slowed to a trickle by the 1950s. The brick building remains in its original condition, and is used by the Burlington Northern-Santa Fe Railroad.

Across Main Street from the depot once stood the Mission Theater, built in a somewhat over-the-top Mission style in 1937. The theater, long since torn down, showed movies until at least the late 1950s.

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