

The Last Frontier Series by Jim Harris. Originally published in the Hobbs News Sun, Hobbs, New Mexico on Sept. 15, 2013

Geography and History: Turning Points and Critical Junctures in Lea History

Southeast New Mexico, Territory, Summer, 1882.

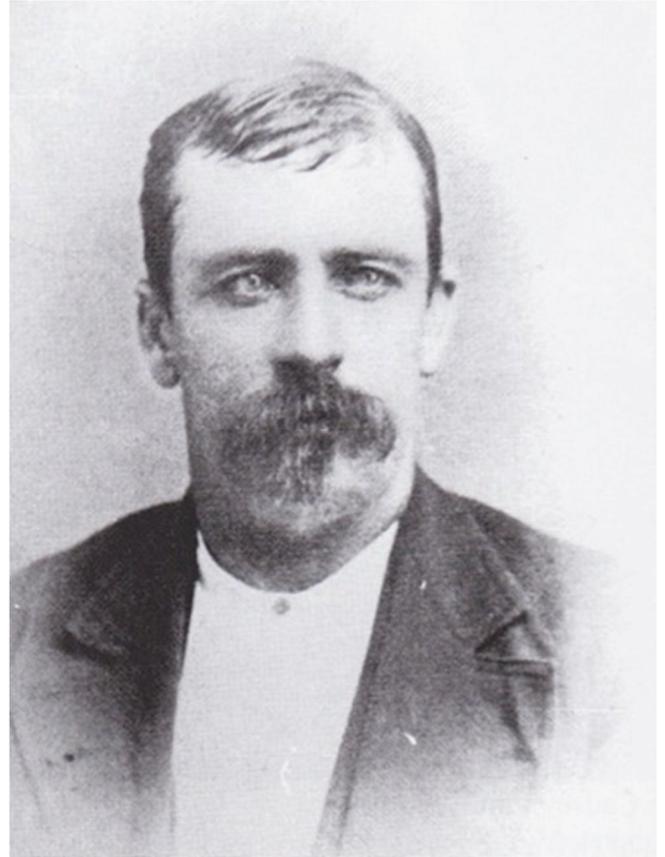
On a cloudy afternoon with rain threatening, George Causey trailed at the back of his herd of fifty cattle and over 100 mustangs when he and the few remaining members of his hunting crew drove his half-wild beeves and horses into New Mexico Territory.

The buffalo were all gone. There'd be no more killing of the thick-skinned, ornery beasts that once appeared to be as numerous as the stars. At what he thought must be the border, Causey stopped his horse and looked back over his shoulder at the West Texas that was no more. Then he looked ahead into New Mexico.

This was the way it had always been for him, looking ahead since he was a child mostly-grown at the age of ten. More than once, he had scouted this corner of the territory where the grass was as high as the belly of his horse and the land was free for the taking. The new life wouldn't have the excitement of buffalo hunting, but all you had to do to make the land yours, he thought, was stay put in one place awhile and build something, a rock corral, a rock barn, or a rock house.

The best part of it, he said to himself, was the openness of the place, not another man to smell clear to the Pecos River, and in between here and there the prairie looked big enough to get lost in.

In the afternoon light, the land looked to him like a golden sea of grass.



George Causey

Robert Utley is the celebrated author of books that tell the stories of such famous individuals of the American West as Billy the Kid and George Armstrong Custer, and he has a unique approach to narrating history.

According to Utley, he "combines research in both indoor and outdoor archives to enable the reader to visualize a drama unfolding on a stage."

He writes that "the West still retains enough undamaged landscape to offer a stage for historic events..." and he believes

“if you know the history, you can visualize the action that swept over the landscape.”

It seems to me that Utley's approach to historical writings--using facts and a specific geography--is a good way of seeing the brief history of Lea County. In other words, having a good grasp of the geography of the county is especially helpful in visualizing and understanding the events that took place here in this corner of New Mexico.

Here are four important facts about geographic Lea. First, this county is part of the Southern High Plains of North America. Second, much of Lea is also located on the Llano Escacado, a semiarid, mesa-like table that disoriented early travelers with its apparent flatness and featureless terrain.

Third, to grasp the history of the county, one needs to also know that the land is not as flat or as featureless as it first appears. It was difficult for early travelers to know it, but all it takes for a modern resident to realize this is to get out of the automobile and walk across the land's surface of sandhills, playas, rolling meadows, and rocky flats, stopping to pause at day's end at the edge of its rugged western escarpment, the caprock.

Fourth, it takes very little effort to realize that geographic Lea County can be a hauntingly beautiful setting, a prairie land that can enchant and mesmerize residents today just as it did to the early nomadic travelers and first permanent settlers of the region. As is the potential for any place on mother earth, the broad land and even broader sky can combine to transform the setting into a high aesthetic and spiritual experience.

It is my feeling that each of the major events and critical junctures in the

history of Lea needs to be seen in the context of the county's geographic settings.

For those readers new to Lea County, here are a few important dates that outline critical events in the region's history.

In 1871, Colonel William Shafter and his Buffalo Soldiers stationed in Ft. Davis, Texas, first mapped the southeast corner of New Mexico Territory.

In 1882, the ex-buffalo hunter George Causey moved a herd of horses and some cattle from West Texas into Southeast New Mexico building the first ranch house in future Lea County. Causey went on to do many firsts, including drilling the first water wells and erecting the first windmills.

In 1900, the town of Monument was established two miles to the east of Monument Spring, the most important source of water in the region and the spot where natives had camped for hundreds or perhaps even thousands of years.

In 1912, New Mexico became a state, and the people of this corner of the land of enchantment began a campaign to acquire a portion of Eddy and Chavez counties and establish their own county.

In 1917, Lea became a county with Lovington, the largest town in the region, as the county seat.

In 1926, oil was discovered outside the little community of Maljamar on Lea's western edge.

In the 1930s, Lea residents suffered through a drought and through the Great Depression that economically transformed the entire nation.

In each of these critical events and sweeping movements, Lea's geography was the stage on which county history played out.