

The Last Frontier Series by Jim Harris. Originally published in the Hobbs News Sun, Hobbs, New Mexico on Sept. 22, 2013

New Mexico's Lea and Colfax Counties: Historic Similarities and Striking Differences

Last week I drove through several small towns in Colfax County, New Mexico, located in the northeastern part of the state along the Colorado border.

Colfax's towns include Springer, Raton, Cimarron, Miami, and Maxwell.

Roughly a five hour drive north of Lea, Colfax County has some of the most spectacular geographic sights in the state, filled as it is with majestic mountain peaks and stunning open plains. The county Chambers of Commerce often describe the region as the place where the mountains meet the plains.

It is, in fact, a postcard pretty county, with dozens of small lakes and streams nestled on mountain peaks and hidden canyons.

Along the state's highways, it may be only 300 miles from Lea County, but geographically Colfax and Lea are strikingly different places.

However, if you examine the history of the two counties, there are many similarities between the two.

First, Colfax and Lea were formed by taking a portion of other counties. Colfax was first a part of the huge Taos County formed in 1852 following the United States invasion of what was northern Mexico and its annexation as a territory of the US. Colfax was formed in 1869 from the northern portion of Mora County, which had earlier been carved from Taos.

Similarly, Lea was created in 1917 from Eddy and Chavez counties, which had been part of the much larger Lincoln County.

A second similarity between Colfax and Lea is that in historic times most of the land was initially used for ranching, with both counties still home today to quite a few well-known and smaller ranches. For instance, following the Civil War Kit Carson owned a ranch outside of Cimarron, while today Ted Turner owns the nearby Vermejo Park Ranch.

Several of Lea County's ranches that were started in the 19th century continue to operate today, including the Four Lakes, High Lonesome, San Simon, Hat, and Pitchfork ranches.

A third similarity in the histories of the two counties has to do with the early permanent settlers to the regions. Last Week's "Last Frontier" column mentioned the former buffalo hunter George Causey who in 1882 moved into the future Lea County when he stopped hunting buffalo in West Texas and built a ranch house at Ranger Lake north of the future town of Tatum.



Similarly, a former buffalo hunter and frontiersman, Lucien Bonapart Maxwell, was the owner of a ranch on what became at the time the largest piece of privately owned land in America with over one million acres. The area became known as the Maxwell Land Grant, land that had been deeded by Spanish and Mexican governments.

Thus, ranching has not only been a major part of the historical narratives of the two counties, but it has also been part of the folklore and folklife of the two. When I ate lunch in the 1872 St. James Hotel in Cimarron last week, I sat in a room filled with photographs, paintings, and bronze sculptures of famous cowboys, cowmen, and their guns, horses, saddles, and spurs.

To conclude, much of the economy of Colfax County depends of bringing tourists to the region, tourists who want to be learn about and be in the historic region where cattle ranchers were kings.

There are, of course, many characteristics that illustrate just how different Colfax and Lea County histories are.

One of the biggest differences has to do with something that also brings tourists today to Cimarron and other Colfax towns. Cimarron was on the Santa Fe Trail, one of the most famous settlement routes in the American West. Down the Santa Fe Trail from towns like St. Louis, Missouri, came thousands and thousands of settlers who wanted to create new lives, or simply sell goods, in the West.

Although there were pathways through Lea County in prehistoric and historic times, trails used by Native Americans, the extreme southeast corner of New Mexico was never a major throughfare between points to the east and west.

Today, Lea has thousands of miles of concrete trails crisscrossing the region, and never has the county seen the traffic that it is experiencing in 2013. In fact, I think it would be safe to say that Lea easily now has more automobiles than Colfax County.

The number of residents in Lea today is probably four or five times that of Colfax, the 2010 US census showing the northern county with less than 15,000.

Driving through the geographic regions making up Colfax and Lea County, a visitor probably would not guess that the two would have similar histories, but the two counties do share much.

Colfax is a thriving tourist destination. We'd like for that to be the case in Lea, but it isn't...yet.

