

The Last Frontier Series by Jim Harris. Originally published in the Hobbs News Sun, Hobbs, New Mexico on Sept. 30, 2013

Knowles: A Road and a Western Town in Transitional Times

Last weekend I took a 28-mile bicycle ride north out of Hobbs on Knowles Road to see if the recent growth in Hobbs had moved out that direction from the city.



Knowles road September 2013

Knowles is one of the oldest of roads out of Hobbs because it was once the route to a prosperous little town, a town created when Hobbs was not much more than a store operated by members of the James Isaac Hobbs family, a store near their dug out home located just east of the present-day intersection of Marland and Dal Paso.

The Hobbs family settled in the location in 1907 when they claimed 160 acres where they just happened to stop their wagon to visit with strangers, another pioneer family that they accidentally encountered on the wide open plains.

The town of Knowles had formed four years earlier in 1903 with the opening of a post office and store, located one-half mile north of where the center of the thriving little community finally came to be located.

Lea historian Gil Hinshaw writes that Knowles was Lea's second city, after Monument, and at one point it was the

largest: "At the peak of its growth in 1909-1912, Knowles reached a population estimated at 500."

With Hobbs having a little less than 50,000 residents today, 500 may not sound like very many people, but for the homesteaders and ranchers on the plains of Southeast New Mexico a century ago, Knowles must have seemed like a metropolis since it had a saloon, bank, general store, blacksmith shop, hotel, newspaper, and more.

One of my favorite photos of early Lea was taken in 1907 on a dirt street in Knowles. It shows two cowboys, the brothers Charlie and George Weir sitting on their horses with their ropes ready to lasso any wild critter that might be coming down the town's main thoroughfare.



Knowles a century ago, the Weir cowboys Charlie and George Weir in 1907

Another photo, taken in 1911, shows a more modern and refined Knowles with a horse and buggy stationed in front of a Ford Model T Passenger Touring Car, both the buggy and car parked in front of the

Knowles Hotel, a good-looking two-story frame building with a covered front porch and a balcony fenced with decorative railings above the porch.



The Knowles Hotel in 1911

The Knowles Hotel looks like a building for which modern day tourists would pay inflated prices to stay in a place that would take them back to another era during America's settlement of the West.

But this photo is such that it suggests the buggy and automobile just might be parked as they are to take hotel guests to church or to the opera, although if Knowles had anything close to an opera house it would have been one of those rowdy music and dance halls that were part of certain saloons in the wild West of the late 19th century.

I like the suggestion in the photo that it was taken during a transitional time when the horse drawn buggy and the gasoline powered automobile were two compatible vehicles for transportation.

If you think back to the popular portrayals of the West in fiction and film, you may remember that many of the most

popular wild West narratives in novels and movies were set in that time when the Indians had been stationed on reservations and modern vehicles appeared to be taking the place of older forms of transportation. The themes in many of those works of art focused on the hardships of transitional eras.

My favorite of the motion pictures with that theme is Sam Peckinpaw's "The Wild Bunch," which was set in Mexico during the time the town of Knowles had begun its decline. The protagonists in "The Wild Bunch" were men who were emotionally stuck in an earlier era and were not able to make the adjustments to modern America. That was the reason they rode south into Mexico where life was much closer to the wild West the men had known.

I am not suggesting that anything ever happened in Knowles similar to the shootouts seen in "The Wild Bunch," but the Weir brothers seen in the Lea County photo are dressed like the characters seen in the movie that ends in one of the bloodiest scenes ever depicted in a movie.

The town of Knowles, just a few miles north of where Hobbs is today, existed at a time in which the land of Lea still had a frontier look, from the men on horseback on the range, to the frame businesses located in town.

Last weekend riding on my bicycle so I could be closer to the land and experience more intimately the sounds and smells of the region, I found no signs of the town's existence, but I did see a few reminders of earlier times.

For instance, on Knowles Road just a mile or two north of where the town was, a visitor can walk through the Teague Cemetery



Teague Cemetery September 2013

where the headstones are placed above the remains of men and women born just after the Civil War in the 1860s.

And with farm fields and dairy farms, the land along the road still has an out-in-the-country feel to it, which is a good thing to offer Lea residents living in bustling city neighborhoods.

Going north out of Hobbs, Knowles Road does not take a traveler very far or to the little town that once was there.

The land along the highway has changed with the economic diversification of the county, a large dairy farm now across from where the town once was.

However, the rural Knowles Road still has the ghosts of its past standing just off the pavement, and if you listen closely they will talk to you about the Teague, Thorp, Norris, and other families once there.