

The Whitehill Ranch

Unknown Author

Submitted by: Linda S. *Turner* Stailey

The so-called Whitehill Ranch dates back many years in the history of the Southwest. Indications, established by numerous artifacts and abandoned living sites, are that American Indians used and appreciated the area for centuries before Europeans reach the fertile, subterranean irrigated valley.

First records in American annals were introduced by General St. George Cooke whose wagon trains passed through the Mimbres Valley area enroute to California shortly after the Mexican War. A nearby mountain peak, and southern New Mexico landmark, is named for him: [Cookes Peak](#).

The area now known as New Mexico had only recently been won from the Mexican government under the [Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo](#) which ended the Mexican War in 1848. General Cooke called the future ranch site Camp Mimbres because of Indian stories regarding the pueblo Indians who had lived in that district in the 800-1200 A.D. era.

The Cooke expedition was skirting the Mexican border when it stopped there. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo had designated the Gila River, some forty miles to the north, as the boundary between the two countries. However, the Gadsden Purchase, which added about 30,000 square miles to the United States territory in 1853, settled a number of jurisdictional conflicts between the two countries.

Because of the favorable location for water, Camp Mimbres was chosen as a stop on the [Butterfield Trail](#), leading from Texas to California, in 1857. John Butterfield and his stages carried passengers and mail on its runs to California, but had a relatively short life span.

To protect the ever-growing emigration to the Golden State, the United States Army established a military settlement at the site. Located there was a battalion headquarters with other units spread from Mesilla to Tucson. With the start of the American Civil War, changes were made. Butterfield abandoned his stage route. A military commander, Major Sylvester Mowry, a West Point graduate, was placed in command, and stationed at Camp Mimbres. However, as is often the case, personnel visiting headquarters referred to “going to Mowry”, and soon the name of the area became “[Mowry](#).”

When the fighting began in the Civil War, Major Mowry resigned his commission to join the Confederate forces. He was assigned to the forces of General H. H. Sibley who led his forces – usually called Texas Volunteers – into a conquest effort to capture New Mexico territory. The effort was thwarted at Glorietta Pass, and little was heard from Mowry during the remainder of the war. It did, however, seemingly ruin his life, and records show his almost continual drift downward.

Following Lee's surrender, Mowry, like other Confederate Army officers was asked to renew his allegiance to the United States. Mowry refused, and chose exile to England. There he set himself busy on a land development scheme and at first achieved considerable success in selling the Camp Mimbres area to British investors. The U. S. Department of State, however, stepped in, Mowry's scheme was bared, and he was jailed. Soon released, he moved to France and renewed his development efforts among the French and other continentals. Again, the U. S. government moved in, Mowry was jailed a second time. It took all of his resources and several years to obtain his release. By then, the years had taken their price. Mowry stayed in France to die alone and in poverty.

The community of Mowry continued to exist, and with comparatively great success. The population has been estimated to exceed one thousand. There was a hotel, various retail stores, saloons, blacksmith shops, and in particular, a strong adobe-walled corral where horses and oxen could be protected from marauding Indians. Mary Eugenia (Stevens) Hudson, a member of the Stevens-Whitehill families, often told of spending the first night of her honeymoon there with the former Major Richard Hudson who came to New Mexico during the Civil War as an officer of the California Column attempting to cut-off the Sibley retreat into Texas.

(Ed. Note - Mowry City in 1871 is described by S. M. Ashenfelter in one of his reminiscences contributed to the *Silver City Independent*:

"At Mowry City, on the Mimbres (now Whitehill's ranch), there was a considerable population. R. V. Newsham and M. St. John had large stocks of general merchandise. A. Voorhces ran a hotel, which afterwards came into the hands of "Old Man" Porter, father of Frank and Harry Porter, well known in later years. Kimberlan & Company had a flouring mill, and Dick Mawson and "Hairtrigger John" Gibson did the blacksmithing for the countryside. The main mail line west from Mesilla to Tucson passed through Mowry City. It was run by J. F. Bennett & Co., the company being Henry Lesinsky and Con Cosgrove. It was the old

Southern Overland route, coming up by the way of Rough and Ready, Slocum's ranch, Fort Cummins and Cook's Canyon; and it crossed the Mimbres at Mowry City. In the spring of 1871 the branch line to Fort Bayard, Silver City and Pinos Altos was run by W. H. Wiley & Company. Slocum's was as famous in its day as Fort Cummins, and John D. Slocum was a man of recognized eminence on this frontier."*)

However, Mowry was abandoned in 1882 when the railroad came to Deming and across southern New Mexico. The properties, apparently with no ownership records on file, fell in disrepair and decay.

James Porter, and his son Harry, gained possession of the area a few years later under the homestead laws of the United States. Apparently there was enough rummage left to sustain them through the "proving period", but they lacked the funds to purchase cattle. They moved on after 1885, when Sheriff Harvey H. Whitehill of Grant County purchased 160 acres from them. He bought 500 head of cattle and 25 horses as breeding stock. To keep his investment under control, he installed his three sons – Harry, Wayne, and Cornelius – to look after the ranch. Almost immediately he filed for an additional 160 acres, boosting his full land area to a sizeable ranch establishment.

Whitehill moved his family from Silver City to the ranch in 1887. Four years later he was re-elected sheriff, and the family moved back to the city. In the meantime, a fine four bedroom adobe house had been built about a half mile east of the old rock Butterfield station which had fallen to ruin.

Following the marriage of Harry to Cora Fanny Derbyshire, the bride was taken to reside at the ranch. Wayne and Cornelius had shown little liking for the cattle business and moved back to Silver City... Wayne to specialize in mining, and Cornelius to take up real estate and insurance. Harry and his father worked out a partnership situation that proved profitable to both for several years. The name Whitehill Ranch became a successor to Mowry. But even it did not persist. Old timers in the area took up the name "Old Town" and time has not been able to shake off this designation in spite of numerous subsequent owners.

During the periods reported above, the [Mimbres River](#) was a clear-water stream, running year-round and harboring trout in its rapids. The bosque – tree growth – was thick with huge cottonwood trees, ash, and box elder growth. Wild currant and grapes grew profusely and their fruit crop was often made into delicious jams and jellies. The pasture area was irrigated by an under-ground stream that in some

places established pools and ponds when the water level was high during rainy seasons.

It became obvious to Harry Whitehill that a better situation was needed. His father was no longer sheriff and had brought a step-mother home for the family. To bolster his holdings, he moved his family some five miles to the east and filed for homestead rights. This move left room for his sister, Josie Bishop, and her husband, to move onto Whitehill Ranch as operators. From that point, there is considerable confusion in various stories. It is evident, though, that Harvey Whitehill died in 1906. His will, for some reason, left the ranch to the Bishops – in the name of Josie. Not really content with ranch life, Josie sold the ranch to her sister and husband, Olive and Robert Bell. They kept the ranch until the mid-1930's (1950's?) and became well-known in cattle circles as raisers of purebred Hereford stock.

There has been a parade of owners since that time. As drought set in, the water level dropped. The Mimbres River became an intermittent stream; the pasture grass dried up; and the former oasis-type spot turned into a liability. The Bells, though, had rebuilt the fine old rock stage station into a comfortable ranch style home. When sale time came, the Fletcher Tigners, cattle people from El Paso, Texas, purchased the ranch. Five years later, they sold to a couple named Beasley, who sold to a writer, Bill McGaw, who sold to Colonel and Mrs. George R. Wells. Mrs. Wells was the former Faye KcKeyes, a pioneer family in Luna County, NM.

Harry Whitehill and his family, living out on the “flats” as they called it, moved into Deming in 1914 to provide better educational opportunities for their children. There were four daughters and a son (another son expected) when the move was made. After commuting for a couple of years, Harry obtained employment in the United States Customs Service and sold his homestead to the Hyatt ranching interests.

The author of this piece is unknown.

*George B. Anderson, [History of New Mexico: its resources and people](#), Volume 2, Pacific States Publishing Co., 1907, pp.730-731