

AN HISTORIC LANDMARK — THE COCHISE HOTEL

by Enid C. Howard

A signed, now paved, road, off Highway 666 on the road to Douglas, Arizona, along with two small signs proclaiming The Cochise Hotel and The Cochise General Store, directs the traveler to Cochise, Arizona.

There are no promotional Chamber of Commerce signs extolling the attractions of Cochise because the small settlement, which was named after the great Apache Indian Chief Cochise, is a quiet community, somnolent in the solitude of its isolation from neon lights and the noise of traffic, except, of course, for the trains.

A small gem of still-functioning Arizona Historical Landmarks, the old adobe hotel, originally a rooming house, was built probably in 1881 or 1880. Guests who adventure off Highway 666 either with a sense of curiosity or of weariness, are pleasantly surprised to find a nostalgic bit of Arizona history along with comfortable and clean accommodations. The Cochise Hotel has been on the National Register of Historic Places since October 22, 1976.

It was built at the junction of the Southern Pacific and old Arizona Eastern Railways. Located at the front of the long hotel hallway, the Well's Fargo freight office serviced the SP Railroad Station across the street, and handled the ore shipments from the mines of Johnson and Pearce in their heyday. The office still exists, complete with the old Greene Cattle Company safe, as sturdy and grim as the day its paint was new.

The moment you cross the threshold of The Cochise Hotel, you are transported into turn-of-the century Arizona. Standing in the parlor, you are surrounded by authentic furnishings of the 1800s: a wind-up phonograph, heavy walnut tables and chairs, rocking chairs, a carved wooden sofa upholstered in tan colored velvet (reputed to have belonged to Jenny Lind), a huge wardrobe with mirrored doors, another sofa and several old chairs arranged in stiff formality around an oriental carpet, all softly illumined by a painted china and brass chandelier with dropping crystal pendants.

Guest rooms have been restored to retain their authentic flavor, with modern baths and heating installed in each room as inconspicuously as possible to provide visitors maximum comfort.

Delicious meals are served family style where guests are seated around a huge antique dining table. The hotel can accommodate 10 to 12 guests and has registered travelers from every state plus some from foreign lands.

A country road is the front yard of the hotel just as it was in the 1880s. Its high square front stands proud and white above a "sitting and visiting" covered veranda that runs along the north and west walls. An enclosed rear yard is a cool retreat under high old china-berries where a weathered wood structure of bygone days supported a large water tank.

The Cochise Hotel's beginnings were rooted in the needs of cattlemen, miners, and yes, a motley group of outlaws who roamed this last outpost of that hardened breed of men and women who were determined to tame and settle Arizona Territory.

Cochise, Arizona is situated about midway between Willcox and Benson along what was originally the route of the Butterfield Stages to California. The Southern Pacific Railroad more or less followed the same general route when two ribbons of steel were laid out across the desert to provide shipping facilities for sprawling Sulphur Springs Valley.

In 1873, Texas cattlemen had driven thousands of head of Texas longhorns into Arizona Territory and found Sulphur Springs Valley to be a vast undulating sea of virgin grass belly-high to horses and cattle, in the southeastern corner of Arizona. A paradise for cattle operations on open range.

Willcox, Cochise and Benson became the staging depots for loading and shipping cattle to market. At one time in 1896, it was reported that 209,836 head of cattle were shipped east out of the area.

The town of Cochise was situated in the center of an untamed desert land that was without law and order or tranquility. Cattle, mining and space was the catalyst that blended cowboys, miners, outlaws, and hard-working homesteaders into one big conglomerate of trouble. So many stage, train robberies and killings took place regularly that they drew little attention or comment from ranchers as long as the outlaws let them alone.

One train robbery that popped a hornets' nest took place on September 9, 1899, when \$10,000 was heisted from a Southern Pacific passenger train near Cochise Station. Several masked bandits uncoupled the express and baggage cars and let them roll some distance away, where they dynamited the safe. They were after the \$75,000 Commonwealth Mine payroll, for Pearce, Arizona, which was usually shipped to Pearce, twelve miles from Cochise on the old Arizona Eastern Railroad. But the payroll had been taken off the train at Willcox and was enroute across country by wagon. The unsuccessful train hold-up loosed a hornets' nest because two local officers of the law were involved in the plot and were recognized. So much for frontier honesty!

A few months after the robbery, a cowboy known as Jess Dunlap was fatally wounded while involved in a hold-up on the Benson-Nogales train. He gave officers the information that the Cochise robbery had been planned by Burt Alvord, who was then constable of Willcox and his deputy, a well-known rancher, William Downing. The men who actually did the robbery were Matt Burts, a local cowboy, and W.N. Stiles, deputy constable of Pearce.

Once the deeds of these men became public knowledge, the Alvord Stiles gun-happy gang terrorized the area almost without restraint. Alvord was reported last seen in Panama. Stiles was killed in 1908 in Nevada. William Downing was killed by an Arizona Ranger in 1908; and after his death it became known that he was a member of the notorious Sam Bass gang in Texas.

To outwit those bandits who wanted to get their hands on the Pearce gold shipments, the mine owners melted the gold into bullion and sent it to the Cochise train station by wagon for shipment east. The bars were too heavy for the outlaws to carry on horseback and it would be too slow for wagons or burros to pack it out where they could dispose of it.

As so often happens where land was exploited beyond its capacity to produce, Sulphur Springs Valley was heavily overgrazed and this eventually hit hard at the baronial cattle empires; the gold production empires proved to be just another bubble that burst when the gold veins were worked out.

A stable economy was established by ranchers who settled and remained in Sulphur Springs Valley; and eventually the lawlessness was tamed when Arizona Territory was declared the State of Arizona on February 14, 1912.

The Cochise Hotel and the Country Store have survived the changes of the years. True, they are off the beaten path, but they stand serene along roads that have known the footsteps of Arizona history.

This article was written by Enid C. Howard, P.O. Box 505, Pearce, AZ 85625. Mrs. Thomas B. (Elizabeth) Husband, owner of The Cochise Hotel, added some material about the hotel at the suggestion of Winifred Meskus, Editor of this Volume of **The Cochise Quarterly**.





Cochise Hotel and Cochise Country Store as they were in 1976. The only changes from the year 1887 are the utility poles and the cars. (Photo by Enid C. Howard)