

## **Eat Drink and Be Merry: The Restaurants of Hillsboro**

By Joe Britton



Main Street in Hillsboro, 1982, looking east.  
The General Store and Blanche's Cafe are visible on the right,  
and the Percha Villa Cafe and S Bar X Saloon on the left.

### **Part One: The Percha Villa and General Store Cafes**

For a small town, Hillsboro has had *a lot* of restaurants—more than you would expect. And behind each of them has stood a proprietor or two whose idiosyncratic personality gave the eateries their unique atmosphere and flavor. More than just serving food, the restaurants have functioned as points of social connection and shapers of the town's community identity. As the proprietors have come and gone, sometimes in quick succession, so has the character of the restaurants themselves changed.

From the very earliest days, restaurants have peppered the streets of town, not to mention its many saloons that often doubled as eateries. As early as 1885, the Hillsboro Restaurant was open, and its proprietors, "Mead & Kneer," laid claim not only to being "the only restaurant at the County Seat of Sierra County," but also "First Class in Every Respect" (*Sierra County Advocate* [SCA], September 1, 1885). Celebrating what has characteristically been the centrality of eateries to Hillsboro's identity, the *Sierra County Advocate* editorialized in November of that year:

**Eat Drink and Be Merry:** All this can be done to your heart's satisfaction, and the improvement of your health by patronizing the Hillsboro Restaurant. Too much cannot be said by the way of encouragement to the proprietors for the manner in which they have built up a reputation for our town. It is with much satisfaction, and a knowledge of the fact that Hillsboro has a place where the stranger who passes through, or he who comes to stay, can enjoy a good dinner. Messrs. Mead & Kneer have put forth every effort to make their new enterprise a success, and it's now an established fact known to all who have eaten at their table. That game, fish and meats in season, can be found up the table cooked to the Queen's taste. Clean china, and pure white napkins, together with prompt attention does much toward giving an appetite. The stranger will receive as much attention and be made more at home, and receive for his money a better meal at the Hillsboro Restaurant than any place in town. To convince yourself of the truth of the above statement, give the boys a call.

By 1887, ownership of the establishment had passed to a certain Mrs. Christ. Martin, who still claimed to be "setting the best table in the city" (*SCA*, September 24, 1887). In June of 1889, for instance, the restaurant featured fried catfish, caught fresh in the Rio Grande and brought to town by Mr. Murray on two loaded burros.

In 1893 C. L. Larson's City Restaurant and Bakery in the Lannon Building (which in 1887 was listed under the ownership of Mrs. Laughlin), passed into the hands the Misses Ruie and Mary Campbell, who promised "to strive to give the public a first-class eating house" (*SCA*, April 23, 1897.) The Advocate editor observed, "They are very industrious and worthy young ladies and should prosper."

*The City Restaurant and Bakery,*

**C. L. LARSON, Proprietor.**

MAIN STREET, \_\_\_\_\_ OPPOSITE THE POSTOFFICE,

**HILLSBOROUGH, N. M.**

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MEALS AT ALL HOURS FROM 6 A. M. TO 8 P. M.

Table furnished with the best of everything in the market. Fresh Ranch Butter, Milk and Eggs always supplied when procurable.

Ad for the City Restaurant and Bakery, *Sierra County Advocate*, February 20, 1891.



The California Restaurant, Hillsboro, c. 1893, also known as the "Chinaman's Cafe," being operated by Hop Hing. Photo Black Range Museum.

The town's hotels also had "tables," such as the Union Hotel which advertised in 1893 a "Good table, supplied with the best Meats, and earliest and choicest Vegetables and Fruits the market affords." The California Restaurant was also operating in 1893, under the ownership of Hop Hing & Co. (anticipating Tom Ying's own much later restaurant), but it was damaged by the floods that year. By 1895 its proprietor was L. H. Kie, and then by 1896 Charley Fong and Louis Slow ran the restaurant in the Old Advocate Building, offering "Good tables and courteous waiters ... and a good square meal" (*SCA*, April 23, 1897). Fong sold out to Slow in 1897, after which it went in and out of business, only to reappear in 1908 under the ownership of Mr. and Mrs. John Kelly, "with a good business." Then the Richardson Restaurant opened under the direction of Mrs. J. B. Richardson in the Hall Building in March 1909, but she soon moved it to her private residence in July, where she announced her intention "to furnish meals to the public as heretofore" (*SCA*, July 16, 1909). In 1911, George Bok was running a new

Short Order Restaurant next door to the Gem Saloon, advertising "meals at all hours" as well "bread, pies, cakes, etc. for sale" (*SCA*, August 4, 1911).

This historical sampling is certainly not comprehensive, but it is illustrative of the variety of eating establishments in Hillsboro, and sets the context for the portraits of more recent restaurants which make up the rest of this series on the Restaurants of Hillsboro. With the recent closure of the Black Range Vineyards Wine Bar, and the fact that the General Store Cafe is for sale, Hillsborians and visitors alike can take stock of the central role that businesses such as these have played in the town's life.

## Percha Villa Cafe Barbara Wilken



The Percha Villa Cafe on Main Street in Hillsboro, c. 1990. Photo Black Range Museum.

Previous issues of the *GZP* have already featured excerpts of Barbara Wilken's lively memoir of growing up in Kingston and living in Hillsboro.<sup>1</sup> Here we come to what she is perhaps most remembered for: the Percha Villa Cafe.

In a 1998 article in *Southern New Mexico Magazine*, Renée Despres wrote that while some restaurateurs follow their momma's advice, "Barbara Wilken is momma, at least to the hundreds of contented diners she has fed over the years. The owner, manager, hostess, cook, waitress, and everything else at the Percha Villa Cafe, Wilken has been serving food to Hillsboro residents for almost 20 years."

Barbara attributed a lot of her skill as a cook and manager to Ann Richardson, who was the central operator for the telephone switchboard in the back of the Hillsboro Drug Store (now the General Store Cafe). Ann was also a cook for the school, and in the late 1950s she and Barbara cooked together for the nearly 50 children in attendance. Barbara writes:

I learned a lot from Ann. She knew from experience how to stretch a dollar and make our limited budget feed them all. She made hot rolls every day and she'd never let the kids have seconds unless they cleaned their plates first. One of her specialties was peach cobbler and everybody always wanted more. We got some commodities from the government but we had to supplement this with money the "Mother's Club" would give us from dances and suppers they'd have. Kids lunches were .30¢ and adults .40. Ann and I got \$5.00 apiece a day. I did the book work and used my car to go to Truth or Consequences once a week for groceries in exchange for my kid's lunches. ... Let me tell you Ann really kept the pots and pans shining. ... I'm telling you all this because I doubt if anybody else will put it down for history to know what a wonderful person she was, besides me. I have a picture of her I painted myself, hanging on the wall in my cafe kitchen. It looks just like her and if something comes up that's somewhat of a problem, I just look at that picture and say to myself, I wonder what Ann would do. She didn't have much schoolin' but she could sure tell you real quick-like, in no uncertain words, how the cow ate the cabbage and why she did it.<sup>2</sup>



Ann Richardson. Photo Barbara Wilken's memoir.

Indeed, Barbara and Ann shared in common a no-nonsense approach to life. Perhaps nothing demonstrates Barbara's penchant for straight talking more than the fact that she branded her cattle with the letters, "COW."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Barbara Wilken, "History of Hillsboro," Part I: The Beginning, *GZP* 14/2 (May 2021), and Part II: Dad's Work, *GZP* 15/4 (November 2022).

<sup>2</sup> "How the cow ate the cabbage" is a folk saying of the southern US, most often heard in Texas and Arkansas, and probably dates back to at least the 1940s. It comes from the punchline to a joke that would, in that period, have been considered at least slightly "off-color." Here goes: "A circus had arrived in a small town, and one morning one of the elephants managed to escape. The fugitive pachyderm made its way to the backyard garden of an elderly (and very near-sighted) woman, where it began hungrily uprooting her cabbages with its trunk and eating them. Alarmed by the apparition in her garden, the woman called the police, saying, 'Sheriff, there's a big cow in my garden pulling up my cabbages with its tail!' 'What's the cow doing with them?' he asked, to which the woman replied, 'You wouldn't believe me if I told you!'" <http://www.word-detective.com/2010/01/how-the-cow-ate-the-cabbage/>

<sup>3</sup> "Cattle Brands: A Bit of History in the Flesh," *Albuquerque Journal*, April 18, 1982, p. 56.



Left to right: Foster Brown in his barber shop, photo by Karl Kernberger; Barbara Wilken at the stove of the Pecha Villa Cafe, and Lefty Wilken in the dining room, c. 1990. Photos Black Range Museum.

Barbara opened the Percha Villa Cafe in the old barber shop in downtown Hillsboro around 1978, having purchased it from the retiring barber. She describes the transaction in her memoir: “Lefty and our three boys always patronized the barber, Foster Brown. Many of the locals thought they were too good to go to him and took their business elsewhere.” As a result, Brown specifically wanted to sell the property to the Wilkens: “One day this old fellow came walking up the road to our place and said, ‘Lefty, I’ve come to sell you my shop.’” Lefty said there was no way they could afford it, but in the end they bought it anyway. Barbara recalled, “It took us a while but we finally got it paid off.” The sign in front of the new cafe featured a stylized Mexican man wearing a serape, which became its emblem. Twelve years later she sold the building to Calvin West Broom, who was planning to open a restaurant as well, to move her cafe to the west side of town to be nearer her aging mother. Barbara told Broom she would more than likely open another cafe alongside the highway further west, but she would give him plenty of time to get established first. Barbara had a strong sense of fairness and what is right.



Barbara Wilken in front of her cafe. Written on the photo: “This ain’t Burger King. You get it my way or you don’t get it!!”, and on a similar photo, “Hamburg, pickle on top — makes your heart go flippity flop.” Photo Black Range Museum.

Strangely, Barbara doesn’t say much about the cafe in her memoir, though other sources provide insight into the reasons for its popularity. In her 1998 article, Renée Despres gave this description of the new west side site: “There’s nothing fancy about the Percha Villa. The menu offers basic Mexican and American fare. The portions are filling but finish-able. Wilken is likely to hand you a fly swatter with your food if you’re eating outside in the summertime. But the food: there has to be a secret to it. Because it makes you feel like mom just called you in for lunch.” She was, as one local remembered, an authentic “cowboy cook.”

Echoing the same sentiment, Sunny Conley (restaurant critic for the Las Cruces *Sun-News*), in her book *Cafe Hopping in the Southwest*, writes about the cafe: “I seek out ma and pa restaurants, like the Percha Villa Cafe. A full-size teepee out front announces the intimate cafe. Once an army barracks, the building is now owned by 69-year old ‘Sweet Barbara’ Wilken. Inside, paintings (deftly painted by Barbara herself) dress the walls. Four gingham-topped tables are squeezed into the tiny area. One large table is reserved for locals or anyone who’d like to hear the latest town gossip. This table is *always* full. I highly recommend Barbara’s enchiladas, Navajo tacos, and baked fresh apple pie.”<sup>4</sup>

Former Hillsboro resident Phyllis Glines commented, “She made the best enchilada around, and I used to take time to take a friend (a special needs tenant behind the motel) up for enchiladas, and we both enjoyed visiting with Barbara.” Yet Barbara also liked to keep control of her dining room. Hillsboro resident David Farrell remembers being there one day just at closing time, when yet another customer pulled up in a car. “Quick, everyone under the tables!” ordered Barbara, “So they’ll think we’re closed!”

<sup>4</sup> Sunny Conley, *Cafe Hopping in the Southwest* (Las Cruces: Arroyo Press, 1996), p. 60.

If Barbara's food was so good as to have a secret to it, she was not willing to share what it was. In January 1993, *Gourmet Magazine* asked for her red chili recipe. Her response was that the key to her special dish wasn't going anywhere except onto the plates of her customers. Despres concludes, "Wilken's customers may not know what the secret is, but they know there is one. They prove it by coming back, over and over, and sending their empty plates back to the kitchen virtually wiped clean."



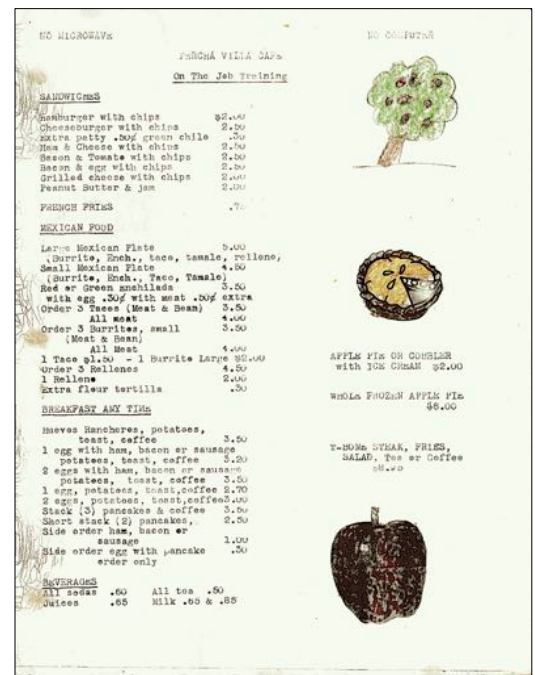
The former Percha Villa Cafe on the west side of Hillsboro, as it appears today. At right is the entrance door on the porch with the old "CAFE" sign lying on a table. Photos Joe Britton.



A poster for Indian bread, "Fresh & Hot," that still hangs in the old cafe. The bread was baked daily in the kiva ovens pictured at right. Photos Joe Britton.

Perhaps no one captures the allure of Barbara Wilken's restaurant better than former Kingston resident Liz Hayes, in her poem "The Percha Villa Cafe":<sup>5</sup>

Barbara's been making the best enchiladas  
anyone's ever tasted,  
At her little cafe in Hillsboro,  
For about 21 years now.  
The other day she said, "I don't pamper myself."  
(Understatement of the year, I thought.)  
She bakes her apple pies in the morning  
before the cafe opens for lunch.  
Grows her own apples in the orchard  
you see out the kitchen window.  
The meat she serves is all beef.  
She and Lefty raise their own cattle,  
butcher for barbeque, hamburgers, tacos.  
If the wind isn't up, she'll bake Indian bread  
in the kiva oven.  
She closes early, about 4:00, because it's time  
to feed Mother her supper (ninety-two this year).



A menu from the Percha Villa Cafe. At the top are the words: "No Microwave. No Computer. On the Job Training." Image Black Range Museum.

<sup>5</sup> Liz Hayes, *'Twas Only Love*, 2002, privately published.

The food is good—reliably good.  
 But that's not all we come for.  
 These little ghost towns, Hillsboro and Kingston,  
     only have a few of us,  
 Seeking the quiet, the peace,  
 Willing to put up with  
     the isolation it brings.  
 So, eating at Barbara's, sitting maybe for hours,  
     sharing the local gossip,  
 Is the main source of social life here.  
 Tourists come and tell us their stories,  
     Barbara keeps a guest register and remembers.  
 Food's not all she dispenses, however.  
 If you're lonely, need to talk, she'll listen.  
 There's a deck of cards, a cribbage board  
     at hand on a back table.  
 Her eyes sparkle when one of the card players  
     comes for a meal and a game.  
 The Community Center is being restored;  
     should be ready in a few months,  
 But the Percha Villa cafe is the community  
     center par excellence.  
 There's only one Barbara.



A spatula in the glass case at the General Store Cafe, with Barbara Wilkin's [sic] dates and the designation, "Native Cook." Photo Joe Britton.

## General Store Cafe

### A Conversation with Ben and Doreen Lewis



The General Store Cafe, spring 2023. Photo Joe Britton.

One might say that Ben and Doreen Lewis' General Store Cafe inherited the mantle of the Percha Villa's significance in the community. A spatula rests in the glass case of the cafe, as if to be a sign of the passing of that lineage, with the inscription "Barbara Wilkin [sic] October 1926 – February 2008 Native Cook."

On January 11, 2023, I sat down with Ben and Doreen in the General Store for an interview, which they have operated for almost 30 years. Our conversation began with the story of how they came to New Mexico from Winnipeg, where Ben was the Regional Director of Family Services for the Province of Manitoba, and Doreen was a banker. Although Doreen is Canadian by birth, Ben is a Texan, and in the early 1990s they began wanting to move closer to his parents who lived in Houston.

In the summer of 1992, they planned a trip to St. Joseph, Missouri to visit Ben's brother Terry and his wife Dodi. Using a pencil with a string tied to it, they marked on a map a radius of 500 miles to determine where else they might go, and discovered that it included New Mexico. Ben had been there before as a child, but Doreen never had, so they decided to head west. Together they scoured guidebooks from the local public library, and noticed in *Off the Beaten Path, New Mexico* an article about Hillsboro, including the

General Store. On the trip, after eating at San Antonio’s famous Owl Cafe, they spent a night in Socorro and then headed to Silver City via Highway 152. Based on what they had read in the guidebook, they made a point of stopping to eat at the General Store, where they met the owners, Chad and Carleen Murray. “We enjoyed the food and visit,” Ben remembered, “but then drove on, not thinking too much about it.”

Then in 1994, they made a second trip to New Mexico, first visiting Big Bend with Terry and Dodi, and then driving north to attend the Hatch Chili Festival. By this time, their desire to leave their current jobs and strike out in a new direction had intensified. Ben was frustrated with not being able to hire the staff he needed, and was ready to move on. Their mutual agreement, however, was that they would do so only when Ben had an equivalent job lined up. “I solemnly pledged to do that,” Ben said sheepishly, “but had no real intention of doing so.” On their way south from Winnipeg, as they drove across North Dakota, Doreen asked Ben if he had set up any contacts. The answer was no, but then on a whim he suggested, “Maybe we should buy the General Store in Hillsboro. That would really change our lives.” As Ben remembers, “It just popped out.” Doreen came back sharply with, “It’s not for sale, cowboy!”

But then fate intervened. Spending the night in Las Cruces on their way to Hatch, Ben bought a local newspaper to read the classified ads—something he likes to do to get an idea of what’s going on in a town. And right there in print, was an ad for the General Store. “See, it is for sale!” he pointed out to Doreen. The next day, the Monday of Labor Day weekend (and so during the Apple Festival), they drove to Hillsboro to “check it out.” They talked with Chad and Carleen, and then for the rest of the trip discussed the possibility of buying the store, calling the Murrays along the way to ask more questions.

That fall, they decided to take the plunge. Both Ben and Doreen had some relevant experience, having worked in restaurants when they were young. And they had done some catering in Winnipeg, using a smoker that they had purchased. As Ben explained, “We knew little enough, that we would do it. We at least knew we could do better than what was happening, which was pretty low-key.” So they packed up their truck to move to New Mexico—but were stopped at the border because the truck didn’t meet US emissions standards. So they had to go back to Winnipeg, downsize to what would fit into a Mazda and the smoker trailer, and headed south again. They arrived in Hillsboro with just what was in the car and trailer, without even a chair to sit on. “Helen Evans was a huge help in getting us settled,” they recall.

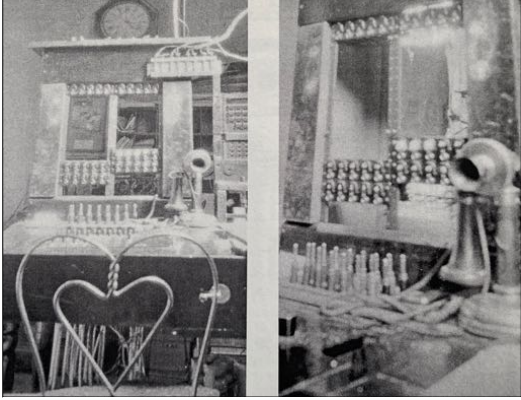
At the time, Hillsboro had five eating establishments: Blanche’s Cafe, the Percha Villa Cafe, Rick Longworth’s Sweetwood Barbeque, the S Bar X, and the General Store. What ensued after Ben and Doreen’s arrival they describe as the “cafe wars,” a friendly though real competition between the five businesses. Barbara Wilken, for instance, advertised her credentials as a “native cook,” as opposed to someone from “somewhere far away” (hence the designation on the spatula now in the General Store). Helen Evans helped Ben and Doreen figure out what living and working in a small town is all about; they had after all just come from living in a big city, where they hardly knew anyone. One piece of “gentle guidance” she gave them involved the menu. She came into the store one morning and ordered enchiladas for breakfast. “Helen,” Ben explained, “we don’t have enchiladas on the menu.” But Helen retorted, “When people in New Mexico go out to eat, they either want enchiladas or steak. You need to have both on every menu.” So that’s why to this day there are both breakfast enchiladas and steak and eggs on the breakfast menu!



*Left to right:* The interior of James Dalglish’s Mercantile, George and Ninette Miller’s Drug Store, and Ninette’s tiger painting, which still hangs in the General Store. Photos Black Range Museum.

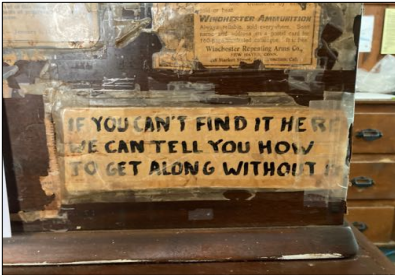
The history of the General Store is itself an interesting story. It began in 1879 as James Dalglish’s Mercantile. After Dalglish left for Chloride, the business became a variety of other things, including the post office and then eventually a drugstore under George and Ninette Miller. Moving to Hillsboro from

Minnesota, Miller first opened his business in a brick building down the street, but after the 1914 flood destroyed it, he moved into the former Dalglish Mercantile. Miller ran the business primarily as a drugstore with his wife, Ninette, and then after his death she continued to operate it on her own. (She also was an amateur painter, who loved tigers, and her tiger painting still hangs on the wall in the store.) During the Depression, the local relief operation was run out of the General Store, where people could pick up basic foodstuffs such as 20-pound sacks of flour or 5-pound bags of sugar.



The telephone switchboard in the Miller Drug Store. Photo Geronimo Springs Museum.

The Millers' son, George Jr., was a brilliant but problematic child. He created the first telephone system in town, and the switchboard was in the back of the store in what is now the kitchen. The store had a phone that people could come in to use, since no one had a phone at home. But when Ninette realized she was passing, she entrusted the store to the Carrie Tingley Foundation, and George Jr. went to become an engineer with the Highway Department in the late '40s or early '50s. After he left, the Foundation leased out the store to a variety of operators, and then eventually decided to sell it. The building was full of "incredible historical objects," which Ben says mostly went to the dump. What was left is still in the store. The Foundation sold it to Jim and Sarah Alexander, who were also from Minnesota. As Ben observed, "It seems like everyone who buys and operates the General Store comes from somewhere north."



Jim Alexander's motto, still posted on the cash register. Photo Joe Britton.

The Alexanders ran the business as a real general store, selling hardware, groceries, and ranching and mining supplies. Jim's motto was "If you can't find it here we can tell you how to get along without it" (a notice that is still posted on the cash register). Jim was Chad Murray's stepfather, and after Jim died, Sarah sold the store to Chad and Carleen, who were the first proprietors to begin running it as a cafe in addition to being a general store—sometimes known as "Chad's Place."

When Ben and Doreen bought the store in 1994, they made the switch to making it entirely a restaurant, gradually building it into what it is today. They are guided by what they describe as their purpose statement:

"To be the kind of place you hope to find when you venture off the beaten path." Their clientele includes locals who eat there regularly, such as a group that has coffee together every morning it's open. (The table at the front is reserved for them.) A church group breakfasts together after Sunday services, and at one time the store hosted an Easter Breakfast with people lined up outside the door. Bikers and cyclists frequently make a stop at the store part of their tours. In fact, Hillsboro was placed on the "Southern Tier Bicycle Route" from San Diego, CA to St. Augustine, FL, which brings hundreds of cyclists through town, and of course many of



The General Store in 1974. The various signs read, "Grocery. Hardware. Clothing," and there are two telephone booths outside. Jack Diven Photography, Black Range Museum.

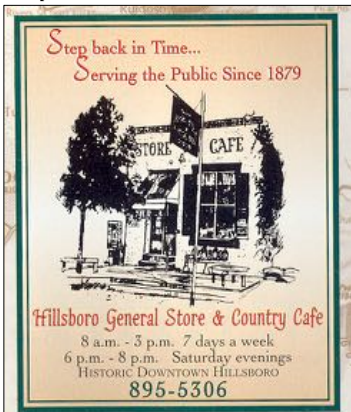
them stop to eat. Because of a European video on southwestern New Mexico that included footage of the store, many visitors from Europe also come, especially Germans—though there are fewer since the pandemic. And the store has a steady stream of guests from El Paso, all over New Mexico, and the whole United States—some who come because of what Ben describes as a "genetic memory" passed down from parents or grandparents who ate there. "We know people we don't know we know, but they know us," he observed. Ben and Doreen have even kept a guest book to record their many visitors. One often hears the



Sirius XM radio station Willie’s Roadhouse playing in the background—a nod toward Ben and Doreen’s Canadian roots—but as they also note, Willie Nelson is “just consistent with the vibe of the place.”



An invitation in the Sierra County Chaparral Guide, December 1995.



An ad when the Cafe was open seven days a week, including Saturday evening, *Southern New Mexico Magazine*, Winter 1998. Photo Black Range Museum.

that helps hold the community together. “There is stuff we do as a matter of course for people, just because they need it.” One thinks, for example, of seeing a runner from the store delivering meals to someone shut in at home, or of the way that some townspeople made the cafe their steady hangout. Among those was old-timer Embree Hale, who could be seen in the cafe almost every day. Doreen observed, “Embree, especially, helped us hold it all together. His perspective and stories about being in a small town were very helpful. He was a good friend.”

Asked what has been best about the experience of running a restaurant, Doreen said, “Getting to know people, and yet, by now we’ve buried so many.” Ben added, “Just being able to be me, within certain restraints.” (Ben could be a bit difficult: no substitutions, no special favors. I remember asking onetime if I could buy a whole bumbleberry pie to take home for a dinner party, and Ben emphatically said no. “Why not?”, I asked. “Because then I’d have to make another one!”, he retorted.) They both emphasized their good fortune in having such good staff, especially when they condensed their business to three days a week: first came Deirdre Schebeck, who took on working the front. Then Megan Kinney, a trained chef who walked in one day and said she’d like to work there, leaving Doreen free to manage the operation and Ben “to pretend to be the Executive Chef.” And then came Eva Czarnojanczyk, who joined the team as additional wait staff.

On the General Store website, the banner reads “Food done right.” After many years, Ben and Doreen are pleased to have received recognition for how well they have lived up to that motto. “We’re written up in a lot of ‘best mom and pop restaurants in New Mexico’ kinds of articles,” Ben said proudly. Regular customers all have their favorites: the Highway 152 Pile Up for breakfast, or a green chili cheeseburger for lunch, or a piece of bumbleberry pie for desert. And the online reviews concur. Take one example—“Bob & Zoë” wrote on Trip Advisor in 2021 about their visit to the General Store, calling it “A National Treasure”:

This place is the cafe that until now has existed only in your mind. A perfect mix of old time comfort and fresh, delicious food served up by someone who knows everyone by name and makes you feel like a part of the fabric of this charming little town after just one visit. If, like me, you believe these vanishing institutions deserve stature on par with our national monuments—then the Hillsboro General Store Cafe belongs on the cafe/diner Mount Rushmore.<sup>6</sup>

Well-known cowboy author Max Evans wrote of the Cafe, “It has wonderful food and it’s the only meeting place that’s been constant over all the years.”

Ben and Doreen started out being open five days a week, Friday through Tuesday. Then they added Saturday dinner, and eventually expanded to all seven days. But that proved to be too much, and they backed off to five. The 2008 financial crash made them realize that they needed the stability of two sources of income, and Ben took on driving the mail route from Deming, to Hillsboro, to Kingston, and back again. The Covid pandemic of course changed things more. “The General Store basically went to sleep,” Ben explained. “We did fine, because our expenses were low, and we started offering take-away, which we’d never done before, and opened up the patio.”

Reflecting on the role the General Store has had in Hillsboro, Ben and Doreen think of it as the glue



Ben and Doreen Lewis, January 2023.

<sup>6</sup>[https://www.tripadvisor.com/Restaurant\\_Review-g47060-d2166758-Reviews-Hillsboro\\_General\\_Store\\_Cafe-Hillsboro\\_Sierra\\_County\\_New\\_Mexico.html](https://www.tripadvisor.com/Restaurant_Review-g47060-d2166758-Reviews-Hillsboro_General_Store_Cafe-Hillsboro_Sierra_County_New_Mexico.html)

It's no secret that the General Store has been for sale for some time. Ben and Doreen are encouraging of someone taking over where they will leave off: "The place could use new energy. And our advice would be not to let anyone tell you how to run your business—or when to set your hours." They've thought about returning to Canada—this time to Ontario to be nearer their kids and grandkids. But they may decide to stay in the warmer climes of Hillsboro, and merely travel to Canada. As they reflect on what running the store has meant to them, Ben notes that "it's not what we do, it's who we are, literally our identity. We have no idea what stepping out of that role will be like."



***Coming up in the series, Eat Drink and Be Merry:***

Black Range Vineyards Wine Bar, S Bar X Saloon,  
Blanche's Cafe, Barbershop Cafe, Lynn Nusom's Kitchen

Note: For Ross Bell's Old School Antiques and Food, see *GZP* 14/4  
(November 2021),  
and for Tom Ying's Restaurant, see *GZP* 16/1 (February 2023).

Interior of the General Store Cafe, decorated for Christmas. Photo Sierra County Recreation and Tourism.

**CAN YOU HELP FILL IN THE STORY?**

The stories of many of Hillsboro's restaurants are well documented. But other establishments have left barely a trace of their existence—sometimes only a name. If you have any memory of, or know information about, these establishments (or any others), please be in touch at [hillsborohistoricalsociety@gmail.com](mailto:hillsborohistoricalsociety@gmail.com)!

Lee's Sumthin' Different Cafe  
Lett's Place  
Boyd's Dairy Cup  
Nugget Cafe  
Sammye's Cafe

Cactus Cafe & Grill  
Sweetwood Barbeque  
Idie Nunn Sweet Shop  
Percha Cafe  
TMO's Cafe

Gold Pan Cafe  
Henry's Restaurant  
Mrs. Giron's Cafe  
Philaura's Restaurant  
Torres Bar



THE SECOND ANNUAL CELEBRATION OF

**DIA DE LOS MUERTOS**

("Day of the Dead")

**Saturday, November 4**

Sunday, Sept. 10: Día de los Muertos volunteer meeting,  
Black Range Museum, 3:30 pm

Saturday, Sept. 16: Priscilla García Franzoni gives a talk on the history, rituals and  
symbolism of the Day of the Dead, Community Center, 4:00 pm

Sunday, Sept. 17: Paper flower making, Community Center, 3:30 pm

Sunday, Oct. 8: Mask making, Community Center, 3:30 pm

Sunday, Oct. 22: Ofrendas (altars), Community Center, 3:30 pm

Friday, Nov. 3: Pan de Muertos (a traditional sweet yeast bread), Community Center, 9:30 am

October 26 – 28 and November 1 -3, Cemetery Clean-up: *Watch for details!*

Be sure to stop by the  
 Black Range Museum and Gift Shop during the  
**Hillsboro Labor Day Weekend Street Fair**  
 Books, gifts, a warm welcome — and Travis Perry's blacksmithing!  
 Saturday, September 2

**Leah Tookey to Give HHS Talk  
 "The Magdalena Stock Driveway"  
 Saturday, October 7, 4:00 pm  
 Hillsboro Community Center**

The Magdalena Stock Driveway was the longest working stock trail in New Mexico. It was in operation until the 1970s, unlike the more famous Chisum and Goodnight Loving trails in Eastern New Mexico. This talk will tell the story of the trail ... how it started, how important it was to the cattle and sheep ranchers in Western New Mexico, and how it finally met its demise.



Leah Tookey is the retired Curator of History at the New Mexico Farm and Ranch Heritage Museum in Las Cruces. She has a master's degree in Agricultural History and Rural Studies from Iowa State University, and is a member of the Board of the Hillsboro Historical Society.

**HHS Sells Park Lots to the Hillsboro Community Center**



HHS Board Member Steve Dobrott and President Nichole Trushell hold the quit claim deed and check for \$11.00 transferring ownership of two lots in the Percha Creek Park to the HHC.

One of the peculiarities of the Percha Creek Park, located at the intersection of Highways 152 and 27 in Hillsboro, is that up until now, the Historical Society owned two lots of the park (on which the restroom is located), while the rest of the park is owned by the Hillsboro Community Center.

To resolve that idiosyncrasy, the HHS offered to sell its parcel to the HCC for \$10.00, and the HCC agreed to receive it, as well as the mining artifacts displayed thereon for an additional \$1.00. HHS originally acquired the lots at the time it purchased the Black Range Museum from June Anders, who donated them as part of the agreement.

Our thanks to Gary Sapp, who helped with the paperwork, and the Community Center board for its stewardship of this valuable resource!

**VOLUNTEER RECRUITMENT OPENHOUSE**

Look for an invitation to an Openhouse for new volunteers in the Black Range Museum and Gift Shop. Please contact Kathleen Blair for further details ([bluehare@citlink.net](mailto:bluehare@citlink.net)) — and watch your HHS emails!

Don't forget to visit our website

[hillsborohistoricalsociety.com](http://hillsborohistoricalsociety.com)

for information about the Historical Society, membership, and upcoming events!

## Black Range Museum Bookshelf Notes



Greetings to all from the Black Range Museum Bookshelf! In our Gift Shop we carry about 100 titles to offer for an interesting selection to feed your curiosity. We emphasize books relevant to the Hillsboro Historical Society's mission statement and topics developed in our museum displays. We have many titles on the people and events that have impacted our region of the southwest including Native Americans, mining, ranching, local community development, significant places, and historical events, as well as natural history. We also keep books on more current activities such as hiking and camping, field guides, a children's section, our giftshop artists' skills, and a few southwestern classics just for a good, thoughtful read! In

these periodic notes, I will try to keep abreast as we acquire new titles and revisit favorites. Just a note ... in keeping with our desire to conserve natural resources as well as keep costs down for you and us, some of our books are second hand but in good condition. Here are a few interesting titles to pique your interest in coming to visit your museum!

–Kathleen Blair

**Boy Who Made Dragonfly** - A beautiful retelling of the powerful Zuni Myth by Tony Hillerman, one of New Mexico's most beloved writers.

**Buffalo Soldiers: A Narrative of the Negro Cavalry in the West** - William Leckies' book is regarded as one of the best written on this subject. Units of the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> Cavalry operated out of several places in the southern Black Range, including a camp in Hillsboro, and had several significant local engagements.

**Nobody's Horses: The Dramatic Rescue of the Wild Herd of White Sands** - Don Heglund tells the story of the "last Roundup" of a historically significant wild horse herd from the White Sands Missile Range area. These are descendants of the horses of Pat Garrett, Eugene Manlove Rhodes, many smaller ranchers, and escapees from the historic Jornada del Muerto trail.

**Tracking Nana** - Nana was one of the most significant leaders of the Chihenne band of Chiricahua Apache and the southern Black Range was very much his home. R. M. Hagan brings him to life, focusing particularly on an extraordinary raid and pilgrimage he and a few followers made in 1881—when Nana was nearly 80 years of age—covering over 1,000 miles in less than a month including the Hillsboro area.

**Embree (Sonny) Hale of Sierra County, New Mexico: Stories of his life in Sierra County and in the Black Range** - Susan Roebuck published with the Hillsboro Historical Society this account of a notable, long-time local resident. During his life as a miner, ranch hand, and photographer, Sonny Hale was an excellent, good humored, and keenly observant witness to the development and history of the area.

**The Land of Journeys' Ending** - Mary Hunter Austin was an influential early American nature writer who settled in Santa Fe as part of the northern New Mexico arts and cultural core group in the early 1900s. She has many books, poems, and essays to her credit. In this book, first published in 1924 but reprinted many times, she describes the natural history, landscapes, and major cultures that have called New Mexico and Arizona home. Austin's writing is lyric prose based on both sensitive personal observation and well-grounded research.

**New Mexico Ghost Stories** - Antonio R. Garzas is a native New Mexican with a deep history and respectful interest in the state's folklore. He tells over 50 stories from all quarters and cultures of the state including both historic and contemporary, first-hand accounts of supernatural events from the humorous to the haunting. A good read!

## The Graves Cave House and Other Hermosa Tales

By Phyllis Graves Glines



Interior of the Graves Cave House, Hermosa, from the Truth or Consequences *Herald*, August 5, 1992.

*Phyllis Graves Glines (1937-2023) recently died in Truth or Consequences. In the 1940s, she lived with her family in Hillsboro, where her miner father and grandfather built a hammer mill above the east bridge (along the street now called "Glines Way"). In her own "Premature Obituary," published in the Sierra County Sentinel on August 19, 2022, she wrote, "We would go into Hot Springs for supplies. I remember seeing a line of bars on Broadway. I believe one was Arnold's Bar. I read the signs on the doors to say, 'No Miners Are Allowed.' I was convinced that my father could not go into the bars." She sent the following text to me shortly before she died. –Ed.*

The Graves Cave House is located in Palomas Canyon, east of the townsite of Hermosa, and downstream from the Yankey [sic] Girl mine.<sup>7</sup> The Yankey Girl was worked by my father, Don Graves, and Hermosa homesteader, Alvin Emerick. They hauled out enough ore in the late 1940s to the early 1950s to apply for a patent, but never did. Therefore, we claimed the cave house on a location notice filed with the BLM, that included the Bulldog fault and mine tunnel, just east of the cave house. It was claimed by doing yearly assessment work on the mine, and after the mining laws changed we paid a yearly assessment fee.

For several summers, before my father finished the cave house, we lived in a cabin, with a screened-in porch, below Palomas Falls. It was claimed by Alvin Emerick. We enjoyed a small pool of water at the falls, and played under the falls, bathing my younger brother in the pool.

I also want to write about Bettie Emerick Graves, my late brother Gene's second wife (now deceased). Bettie was 16 years old when she married Alvin Emerick, a WW I veteran who had a small disability check from poison gas exposure in Europe. Bettie was born in Coyote Canyon at a ranch camp where her father herded sheep for the Ladder Ranch. This would be towards present day San Miguel. The disability check, and perhaps state welfare help, were all they had to live on in Hermosa while raising five children. They survived on wild venison and bear meat, and Bettie canned watercress from around the Bulldog Spring near the cave house. I very much doubt Al worried about hunting season. When we visited in the evenings, he would get out his violin and play old tunes to entertain us.

After Al Emerick died, Bettie sold the Palomas Chief mine to the Ladder Ranch. She also gave up the homestead which sets just east of the Hermosa Ranch, and moved the family into T or C. The home is situated on Forest Service land, which the Ladder Ranch continued to claim with location notices, as well as surrounding property east of the Hermosa Ranch. One of the first things my brother and Bettie did, after they moved back to Hermosa (Palomas Camp) and built a large home on mining patents we owned, was to trade out property with the Ladder Ranch, to get back part of the Palomas Chief.

The Emerick homesteads consist of a green painted house with outbuildings that were headquarters for the Ocean Wave/Antelope group of mines. These patented mines have been owned by the Goetz family in T or C for many years. Continuing on east is a lovely meadow with an unfinished log cabin started by Alvin Emerick for his extended family. Again, none of this is on private property.

We were locked out of Palomas Camp in 1983 by the Ladder Ranch foreman, Art Evans, who locked the gate in front of the ranch houses. We then had to build a bypass (county) road around, cutting off before the ranch, near the cemetery and the Ocean Wave/Antelope mines, and going down Hickland Canyon. A lot of this work was done by hand by my late brother, Gene Graves, and my late sons, Silas (Joe) and Richard (Mark) Glines.

<sup>7</sup> For additional information on the Cave House, see the excerpts from Phyllis Glines' *The Argonauts of Yesterday* in GZP 15/3 (August 2022), including a photo of the exterior of the house.

After the 2022 Black Fire and resulting floods, the existing bypass road will have to be rebuilt, to access Palomas Camp, unless the road in front of the ranch can be used. Both access roads meet and continue to the Graves Cave House, and then down to the cabins and mines in Palomas Camp. I was also told the Turners used the bypass road (instead of their private road) going to and from Hermosa, down to ranch headquarters near Hillsboro.

We all worked from the 1950s to 1980s to preserve some of the buildings left standing in Palomas Camp. Gene Graves placed galvanized tin on the roof of the Emerick homestead to keep it from caving in. The cabin Kolleen Kralick Bean investigated in 1992 (during a *Passport in Time* excursion sponsored by the Forest Service) was the same one preserved and lived in by Gene Graves' family.

Also, west of the cave house lies a series of more caves. Several groups of spelunkers have gone into them. My brother, Gene, and I used to crawl in on our stomachs until we reached a large room. We had the old carbide lamps along with flashlights to go in and out. Later, my son, Stephen Glines, and nephew, Allen Graves, said that they remembered seeing large chunks of rock that had fallen from the ceiling.



A street sign for "Glines Way" in Hillsboro. Photo Joe Britton.

### **KINGSTON SCHOOLHOUSE MUSEUM FINDS A NEW HOME**

In July 2022 it became apparent that the Kingston Schoolhouse Museum needed to find a new home. A search was begun, but there wasn't much to choose from in Kingston. We finally chose what we thought was the better of two options and couldn't be happier.

The building, located at 28 Kingston Main Street (2 doors west of the old Victorio Hotel), was originally built in the 1880s as a one to three room adobe home. We're not quite sure of its original footprint. What we do know is that it served as the residence of George Curry who was territorial governor of New Mexico from 1907-1910. He lived in the home from 1941-1947 and wrote and published his autobiography during that time. We're very proud that we were able to preserve a historic property.

The restoration has been a daunting but worthwhile project. Walls were built on dirt with no foundation, rot and mold resulted from years of neglect and numerous leaks only contributed to the problems. Add to that the fact that we are a non-profit with no funding source and you might begin to see some of the issues that we have been up against.

The demolition took 5 grueling months. Reconstruction began in May and lots of progress has been made. It has all been done with volunteer labor! When completed, we will have more space for exhibits, a dedicated research center, restroom and lots of outdoor event space and parking.

There have been some amazing and unexpected results from all of this. Kingston is a community of about 40 residents; 19 of those individuals have volunteered their time to help us out. Additionally, we have received incredible donations of artifacts from both local individuals and others from around the state, and people are already volunteering to work in the museum when it opens. It appears to be bringing people together in support of a very worthwhile project.

We have become the "Kingston Ghost Town Museum" and we will need all new signage. We are very grateful to the Historical Society of New Mexico for a grant of \$1000 for the purchase of this signage. This grant will go a long way toward helping us to accomplish this goal. We're not done yet but hope to be by fall. We are planning to hold a grand opening celebration and want everyone to come! But we have lots of details to work out in the meantime.

We hope you will follow us on Facebook as the "Kingston Schoolhouse Museum." Our museum promotes only the history of Kingston and we have many rare artifacts that you will never see anywhere else. Some of these are posted on our Facebook page along with updated information on our renovation project. And, we will surely post our opening celebration date as soon as we can. We're planning lots of tours, food, music and fun, and we sure do hope to see you there.

If you are interested in joining our "Friends of the Kingston Museum" group, check it out on Facebook for more information. Or, you may contact me at 575 895-5501 or [Kingstonmuseum@gmail.com](mailto:Kingstonmuseum@gmail.com).



## Highway Cleanup Day Wednesday, November 1, 10:00 am

**Highways 152 and 27**  
(One mile of each)

Meet at the Black Range Museum

What to bring: a hat, gloves, sturdy shoes, and water—and a trash grabber stick if you have one. HHS will provide bags and safety vests.

## Bee Aggressive

*Harley Shaw writes to remind us that “history” comes in many forms, including the simple events that happen in local communities.*

*Below are excerpts from his notes about a Hillsboro episode involving bees back in 2002.*

**August 16, 2002.** Took garbage to dump. Rick Tafoya, who runs the dump, showed me scratches on his ankle that had been made by a striking rattlesnake that morning. Its fangs had penetrated his trousers but barely scraped his skin. The snake had rattled after it struck.

Later in the day, while I was having lunch at Ben’s and Doreen’s [General Store Cafe], J. R. Rutledge and Gino cut down a limb from a cottonwood in the city park. It housed a large beehive. The bees attacked. J. R. ran to the outhouses and managed an escape there. The bees seemed to focus on Gino, and he was stung at least 28 times. He managed to get to a water hose with a spray device and warded off the bees by holding the hose over his head and directing the water on himself. The only problem was the water was cold, and he soon reached the point that his choice was bee stings or hypothermia. At that point, others arrived to help, getting the principals into vehicles and hauling them away from the core of the bee activity. Gino was taken to Richard and Gloria Spellman’s home and stingers extracted.

The angry bees spread over town for a while, and everyone going to eat or pick up mail could be seen running and swatting. Within an hour, things had settled down, and J. R. and Gino went back to cutting trees—this time away from the park. I suspect that it will be a day or two before anyone can use the privies there. Mad bees don’t vacate quickly. Several folks were sure that the bees were the Africanized killer type, but my guess is that they were just good old wild honeybees who were royally pissed.

**August 18, 2002.** The saga of the bees continued today. J. R. Rutledge, who was trapped in the outhouse at the city park the day before yesterday, returned to continue cutting trees today. The bees appeared to be gone. He was in his power-lift, perhaps 20 feet above the ground (some said 30), when the bees struck again. They covered his face and he jumped from the lift. He injured, perhaps broke, his ankle when he hit the ground. His helpers got him on the tailgate of a pickup and hauled him away from the bee infested area. The fire department paramedics treated him, then took him to the Truth or Consequences hospital. We’ve heard nothing of his condition.

**August 19, 2002.** Report on J. R. Rutledge: he broke both ankles. One required considerable surgery. No report on any of the after-effects of the bees. A report came back that these are Africanized, so more dangerous. Word is that a specialist is going to attack them with a special food block. (According to later reports, personnel at the hospital were fighting mad bees hidden away in JR’s clothing.)

**August 21, 2002.** Had lunch with Embree Hale. During the bee outbreak earlier this week, Embree had stopped to try to help J. R. Rutledge and made the mistake of leaving his windows down in his SUV. The bees swarmed in and attacked his young black Labrador retriever. The dog tried to escape and nearly destroyed the door on the passenger’s side. Embree had to take the vehicle to a body shop to get it replaced.

J. R. Rutledge is in an Albuquerque hospital now—for his ankles. Apparently he recovered ok from the bee stings. [In fact, he fully recovered and lived many more years.]

## PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

### Backyard Development Progressing at the Black Range Museum

The good news is that we are making progress on the earthwork needed to ready our backyard for the planned Coachhouse building at the Black Range Museum. The hardworking backyard site development team of Steve Dobrott, Scott Kennicutt and Steve Morgan have been planning, designing the building, and reworking the backyard area for our future expansion. Those of you who live in Hillsboro probably know that an estimated 100 yards of dirt and rocks were moved out of the Museum's backyard for the site prep. The Coachhouse design has 700 square feet indoors for display and storage, and a 200 square foot covered porch. The indoor spaces will be climate-controlled and carefully designed to hold and display the Mountain Pride stagecoach. The backyard design will also include a shaded outdoor presentation space, and will have landscaped areas tied to our indoor museum displays. If we do not receive the stagecoach, we can certainly use the space—most likely for a *transportation and travel routes* themed display. As you likely know, our beautiful little Museum is fully stocked with beautiful exhibits and has no real storage room. In addition to the main display area for the coach, the new building will also have a climate-controlled storage area, which is a high priority need for the Museum.

Watch for updates on this exciting project. We will keep you posted on developments and member opportunities to help us succeed!

–Nichole Trushell



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### The Hillsboro Historical Society

P. O. Box 461, Hillsboro, New Mexico 88042

[www.hillsborohistoricalsociety.com](http://www.hillsborohistoricalsociety.com)

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**To become a member, please visit:**

[www.hillsborohistoricalsociety.com/contact/](http://www.hillsborohistoricalsociety.com/contact/)

The mission of the Hillsboro Historical Society is to preserve, collect, and protect the history of Hillsboro, Kingston, and the surrounding area.

HHS is a member of the  
Historical Society of New Mexico.

We are an all-volunteer, non-profit 501(c)(3) organization. All donations are tax deductible.

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To offer submissions or comments, please contact:  
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#### Working Committees

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*Anyone who might want to serve on one of the committees, please contact any of our board members*