

Welcome to

COLORADO'S

PURGATOIRE RIVER REGION

Driving Tour
& history

THE PURGATOIRE RIVER REGION

of eastern Las Animas and southern Otero counties has a unique identity based on its specific landscape and cultural heritage.



Canyons and arroyos crisscross this part of Colorado's eastern plains. Tall mesas run along the region's southern border, and the Sangre de Cristo Mountains rise in the west. The Purgatoire River, which originates in western Las Animas County and flows generally east-northeastward for approximately 175 miles to Bent County, has also served as a focal point for the region. Historically, the Mountain Route of the Santa Fe Trail ran through the heart of this region. The ranching industry, so prominent in the area, has created strong cultural and economic ties between eastern Las Animas and southern Otero Counties, forming a large, regional community. The region is rural, escaping the development pressures facing many other rural areas in Colorado and is instead threatened by gradual population loss. The built environment and working landscape has changed little since the 1940s, making it an ideal place to interpret the history of homesteading and the region's ranching heritage. The driving tours outlined on the map at the back of this brochure are designed to provide you with a flavor of the Purgatoire River region, and highlight the ways in which homesteading, transportation and ranching have shaped the area. The tours are intended to be self-guided, and should be enjoyed from the public right-of-way. We ask that you enjoy the tours from the safety of your vehicle, be mindful of private property rights, and be aware that the area is home to critters such as rattlesnakes. For information on how to safely explore the area, visit the Comanche National Grassland visitor center.



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HOMESTEADING

Many of the region's early residents came north from New Mexico, settling in the Purgatoire valley in the late 1850s and early 1860s on land acquired through Mexican land grants. They established small village-like settlements known as "plazas," in which an extended family and other associated families occupied a series of rooms and dwellings around a central open area. During the 1870s and 1880s, they were followed by a wave of settlers seeking land under the Homestead Act, signed by President Lincoln in 1862. The act offered 160 acres of land to any head of household—that is, single or married man or single, divorced, or widowed woman—who was at least 21 years of age and was a citizen of the United States or intended to become a citizen. In order to claim their land, a hopeful homesteader had to 1) file a claim; 2) build a residence and put the land into agricultural production; 3) reside on the land for five years; 4) file final paperwork including testifying to the land improvements made; and 5) find two witnesses to support their claim.

Settlement remained sparse in the region until changes to homesteading policy in the early 20th century helped create a homesteading boom. While 160 acres was sufficient to

establish a successful farm in states like Iowa, more land was needed in the drier lands of the West. The Enlarged Homestead Act of 1909 increased the number of acres per homesteader to 320 in areas where irrigation was not possible. Seven years later, the Stock Raising Act of 1916 allowed homesteaders to claim 640 acres on lands determined suitable only for grazing. Today, cattle ranching continues to be the predominant use of land in the area.



Acres allowed per homesteader

Homesteads in the Purgatoire River region ranged from single buildings to extensive complexes. Early settlers brought building traditions with them, but these often were adapted to use local materials or were replaced by regional building traditions. Homestead buildings were commonly constructed of locally quarried sandstone, adobe block or piñon or juniper posts found on site. In order to minimize the need for building materials, many homesteaders used the natural landscape in their construction, building dugouts into hillsides or incorporating rock outcroppings.



Homesteaders in the West faced dire conditions as they attempted to establish their new homes. Isolation, extreme weather, crop-eating insects, drought, floods, and other obstacles led to a nearly forty-percent failure rate; many homesteaders abandoned their claims and either returned east or moved on to stake new claims. The 1920s and 30s were full of tumultuous weather and economic depression, causing a sharp decline in population and the abandonment of many towns. Despite long odds, by 1934 more than 270 million acres of land in the United States had passed into private hands under the Homestead Act.

➤➤➤ **The homesteading driving tour follows Highway 109. Sites within the Higbee Valley, one of the earliest areas settled, include homesteads (both abandoned and still occupied), the Higbee Cemetery, the Higbee Dam and Nine Mile Canal, and the San Jose Plaza. Other sites, such as the Rourke Ranch National Historic District and the Lopez Homestead, are on the Comanche National Grassland.**



The town of Timpas, located approximately 17.4 miles southwest of La Junta on Highway 350, was once a lively stage stop on the trail between Bent's Fort and Trinidad. Facilities at the stage station included a general store, bar, livery stable, gambling hall and lodging. When the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe (AT&SF) came through in 1878, the railroad built substantial facilities in town including a rail depot, an agent's house, company bunkhouse and



stockyards. Timpas was used by several large cattle operations, including the JJ, Wineglass and Diamond ranches, as a shipping and receiving point. Growth was spurred in the late 1910s and early 1920s by the construction of an irrigation dam nearby, and Timpas became a thriving town with a school, bank, hotel, several stores, a pool and dance hall and a restaurant. After the dam washed out in 1922, the population waned. The post office was shuttered in 1970. Today, Timpas consists of the school, now privately owned, and several other residences. A USFS public picnic area and rest rooms can be found at Timpas.

TIMPAS



RANCHING

Before cattle were introduced from Texas in the era of open range ranching, Hispanic farmers moving north along the Purgatoire brought with them sheep descended of those shipped to the New World by Spaniards in the 1500s. As Hispanic plaza settlements spread along the Purgatoire, and with markets for wool and mutton in the mountain mining regions and in the coalfields of the Raton Basin, sheep ranching became a lucrative endeavor. The boom in sheep raising in the 1870s and early 1880s saw, at its peak, as many as 300,000 head of sheep exported annually from the region. Since World War II, the sheep industry has virtually disappeared from the region due to shifting consumer trends and preferences. Traces of the sheep industry can be found across the region, most commonly in the stone sheep pens ingeniously built into the natural landscape which incorporate boulders, bluffs, and other topographic features.

THE CALAMITOUS WINTER OF 1886-87 RESULTED IN THE DEATH OF APPROXIMATELY NINETY PERCENT OF THE CATTLE ON THE OPEN RANGE

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries Anglo-American and European interests running large cattle operations controlled the economy of the region. Settlement was sparse and the open range dominated the area. Hispanic sheep ranchers sometimes switched to more lucrative cattle ranching or found work as cowboys for the large livestock operations, such as the J.J. Ranch or the Bloom Cattle

Company. New waves of New Mexican settlers also claimed homesteads during the first few decades of the 20th century, many of whom worked for the large Anglo ranch operations in addition to raising livestock on their own land.

A series of extremely harsh winters in the mid-1880s, in combination with drought, contributed to the end of the large cattle operations. In particular, the calamitous winter of 1886-87 resulted in the death of up to fifty percent of the cattle on the open range. The homesteading boom of the 1910s ended the days of the open range, as farm fields replaced grasslands. Most attempts to farm, however, were ended by the drought and dust storms of the 1930s. Many homesteaders abandoned their land or sold out to their more successful neighbors, and cattle ranching again became the primary occupation of the region.

Today's cattle ranches are primarily family-owned, many dating back multiple generations. These are the families that stuck it out through the tough times of the Great Depression in order to gradually expand their land holdings as their neighbors left. The abandoned homesteads, now part of cattle pastures on existing ranches, have been left largely undeveloped and leave a remarkably intact record of the homesteading experience in the region.

➤➤➤ **The ranching driving tour follows Highways 160 and 350. Sites along these stretches of flat prairie include homesteads, old school buildings and New Deal projects such as WPA-built stone bridges and culverts. Additional public land access can be explored via the Comanche National Grassland.**



Bloom was an important stop for the AT&SF, as this was the first station southwest of La Junta where locomotives could take on water. Bloom was reportedly named for

Frank Gearhart Bloom, Trinidad banker and cattle baron, and a very important customer of the railroad. Bloom is located 31 miles southwest of La Junta, along Highway 350.

Delhi was an AT&SF stop as early as 1883. Although the name of the town is pronounced "Del-high", it is believed that this small settlement was exotically named for Delhi, India. At its peak, in addition to the now-vacant general store, Delhi had a public school, section house for railroad workers, "tourist camp" (a forerunner of today's RV park) and a population of 80 individuals. The town was largely abandoned in 1954 after the AT&SF railroad depot was retired.



BLOOM

DELHI

TRANSPORTATION

Transportation across the Purgatoire River area has taken a variety of forms since humans first traversed the region. Early peoples migrated through the area following game and seasonally available edible plants. Later groups moved along the paths and trails left by their predecessors.

The opening of the Santa Fe Trail in the early 1820s was important to southeastern Colorado, serving as a route around which settlement developed. From the Cimarron Cutoff at Caches, Kansas, the Mountain Route of the Santa Fe Trail followed the Arkansas River upstream to the west. Near Bent's Fort and the Arkansas River (now La Junta), it descended southwest, following Timpas Creek, and continued over Raton Pass and on to Santa Fe. The Santa Fe Trail accommodated the commercial development of southeastern Colorado, beginning with the establishment of the Bent & St. Vrain Company's Bent's Fort in 1833. Bent's Fort permanently established an American presence in the area and laid the groundwork for further development along the trail in the years to come.

The Mountain Route of the Santa Fe Trail evolved into a foundational transportation route in southeastern Colorado over which nearly all subsequent major modes of travel were overlain. As settlement in the area developed, stagecoach lines, railroads, and eventually asphalt-paved highways followed the route between Bent's Fort and Trinidad, and south from there over Raton Pass to Santa Fe.

Stagecoach lines ran along the Mountain Route of the Santa Fe Trail from 1858 to the early 1870s. In addition, other stage routes existed beyond this time between Pueblo and Santa Fe, via Trinidad and shorter routes in between communities. Travel by stagecoach was hardly luxurious, and travelers endured unpredictable weather, rough roads, bandits, and station food that could be nearly inedible.

In 1987, the Santa Fe Trail was listed as a National Historic Trail. Today, well-preserved wagon ruts can be seen at Iron Springs, Timpas and Sierra Vista.

21 Miles of the original Mountain Route of the Santa Fe Trail are available for a variety of non-motorized travel, giving visitors the opportunity to see what "travelling the trail" may have been like. Marked by a series of limestone posts, the trail is access from the Santa Fe Trail National Scenic and Historic Byway southwest of La Junta at Sierra Vista Overlook, Timpas picnic area and Iron Springs. Original trail ruts are still visible in several locations along the route such as Iron Springs Historic District, an important water-supply location along the trail.

On the trail, shortgrass prairie provides habitat for the burrowing owl, swift fox and mountain plover. Timpas picnic area has three sheltered picnic areas, a restroom and a short nature trail with good bird watching opportunities.

THE OPENING OF THE SANTA FE TRAIL IN THE EARLY 1820s WAS IMPORTANT TO SOUTHEASTERN COLORADO, SERVING AS A ROUTE AROUND WHICH SETTLEMENT DEVELOPED.



"Hole-in-the-Rock," a well-known landmark on the Santa Fe Trail and one of the most reliable sources of water on the Mountain Route route, was located just north of Thatcher. Hole-in-the-Rock disappeared after the AT&SF built a dam across Timpas Creek. With a peak population of 110, Thatcher had a post office, school, general store, and many businesses and residences as well as railroad facilities including a two-story depot. In the late 1920s, a helium dome (used for the Navy's fleet of airships) was discovered at a site near town by the Bureau of Mines through their National Helium Survey.

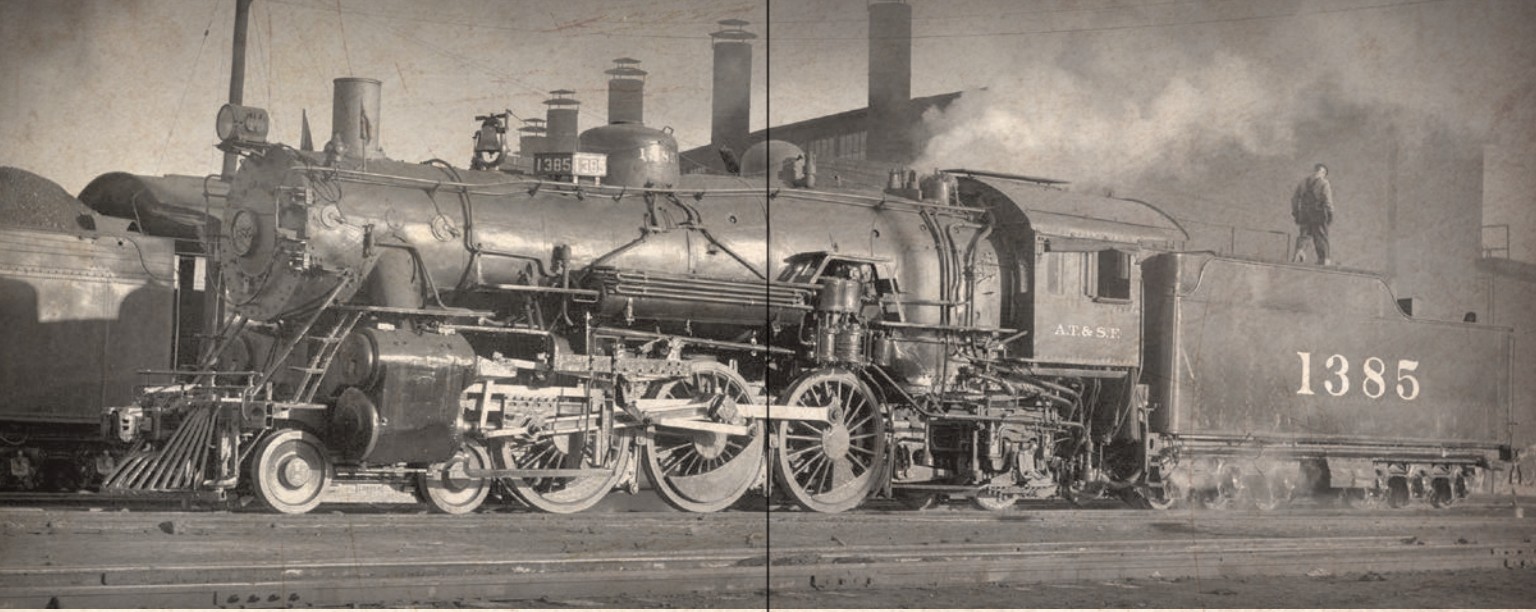
Thatcher was named for Mahlon D. Thatcher, a powerful Pueblo banker, and his brothers Henry and John. Along with their brother-in-law Frank Bloom, the Thatchers were owners of a large cattle operation headquartered near the future town site. The Thatchers were involved with the development of the AT&SF in the region, and likely instrumental in siting the town.





THE AT&SF DEPOT WAS A CENTRAL FEATURE OF TOWNS LIKE THATCHER (ABOVE) AND MODEL (BELOW). ONCE THRIVING TOWNS, THE POPULATIONS WANED AS THE DEPOTS WERE RETIRED IN 1965 AND 1956 RESPECTIVELY.





Among the various stagecoach stations between Bent's Fort and Trinidad are Hole-in-the-Prairie (near the town of Model) and Hole-in-the-Rock (now Thatcher).

Railroads reached southeastern Colorado in the 1870s. The Atchison Topeka & Santa Fe Railway (AT&SF) closely followed the established Santa Fe Trail in order to better establish shipping points for large cattle operations in Colorado and New Mexico. Small stations were occasionally built along the route near locations which were already stage stops, such as Thatcher and Timpas. Railroads were also the primary agents of modernity in the Purgatoire River region. They replaced stage line companies as the preferred carriers of the mail, and carried manufactured goods to the treeless expanses of the High Plains desert. The rail lines and depots in the area did good—sometimes even booming—business until World War II, after which better roads and increased truck transport weakened the reciprocal relationship between small towns and their railroads. Eventually, passenger travel

dropped so much that the railroad companies ceased service to many small depots.

State Highway 350 is a good example of a highway constructed to follow a historic feature. Running seventy-three miles southwest from US Highway 50 at La Junta to US Highway 160 near Trinidad, Highway 350 largely follows the Santa Fe Trail through the area and is a part of the National Scenic and Historic Byway system. State Highway 109 between La Junta and Higbee is shown on maps from the late 1800s as a historic stage and wagon route.

➤➤➤ The transportation driving tour follows the path of Highway 350, with signs noting local wildlife and interpreting the Santa Fe Trail available at the Iron Springs Historic Area, Timpas Picnic Area and the Sierra Vista Overlook on the Comanche National Grassland. In their heyday, many towns consisted of only a store, post office, school, and a few residences. Other towns, such as Thatcher and Timpas also had banks, hotels and other businesses.

TYRONE

Tyrone, located 54 miles southwest of La Junta, was settled in the late 1870s near "Hole-in-the-Prairie," a small depression in the landscape which served as a source of water for travelers on the Santa Fe Trail. Later, it became a stage station and eventually a stop on the AT&SF railroad. At its peak, Tyrone had a school, general store, train depot, garage and a population of 110. When irrigation rights to a nearby reservoir were lost, several farms in the area were abandoned and the town waned. The Tyrone School remains on the west side of Highway 350 at roughly County Road 64.



The town of Model was settled in the early 1910s, fairly late for the area. Initially an AT&SF railroad siding known as Poso, a post office was established here in 1911 and the name changed to Roby. Soon after, the Model

Land Irrigation Company constructed a reservoir and filed a town plat for what they hoped would be an irrigated agricultural community. Roby was renamed Model in 1912. By the early 1920s Model had a population of 100, and a grocery store, grain elevator, church and billiards hall as well as railway facilities. The population waned after the railroad depot was retired in 1956.

MODEL



EARL

Located 63.5 miles southwest of La Junta, the small community of Earl was established in the mid-1880s and is thought to have been named for an early area resident. Platted in 1921, at its peak Earl had a post office, school, general store, train depot, garage, and a population of 75 individuals. This prosperity, however, was short lived. The post office was closed within a few years, and by 1929 most businesses were shuttered. A rail station remained at Earl until 1961.



HOEHNE



Hoehne, an early German pioneer who came to the area in the early 1860s, was instrumental in the construction of many of the early irrigation ditches in the area. Hoehne's growth was jumpstarted when the AT&SF arrived in 1878. Railroad facilities included a depot, stockyards, water tank, company bunkhouse, section house and station agent's house. By the 1910s the growing town had two general stores, two churches, a number of residences and a school. Today, Hoehne serves the surrounding agricultural community with a post office, several businesses and schools.



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Scan this QR Code for more information on Homesteading in the area, and to download a driving tour podcast.

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