

PIGEON'S RANCH

by Ruth W. Armstrong

Along old U.S. 85, now State Road 50, a few miles out of Santa Fe is a little known but important Civil War Battlefield. The state does nothing to protect it as an historic site or promote it as a point of interest, and until recently when historian Marc Simmons adopted it as a cause, it looked as if the ruins would sink into oblivion. They may yet. A few years ago the Daughters of the Confederacy placed a marker in Apache Canyon, a few miles from Pigeon's Ranch, but since I-25 replaced U.S. 85, few people see it.

The highway follows almost exactly the route of the Santa Fe Trail through the mountains, and it was here where the Trail swung around the southern foothills of the Sangre de Cristos that Union and Confederate soldiers fought a bloody three-day battle in 1862, part of the battle centered at Pigeon's Ranch, a way station on the Trail. Incredibly - given the fragile nature of adobe walls of several buildings and stone foundations remain. Part of the buildings were used until I-25 replaced U.S. 85, and the old timers among us remember well the signs along the highway ballyhooping "the oldest well in the USA." (See Post Card below) It wasn't that, but it was one of the most historic sites in the west. Travelers with aching backs and empty stomachs were happy to see it after the jarring 800 mile trek across the Trail. Foot-sore oxen and mules found rest and food.

Horse corrals held fresh stock if it was needed. This was the last stop before a stagecoach or wagon caravan reached Santa Fe. It was a place to put on a clean shirt, smooth back the hair, and spit on the boots. And in the summertime, surely the cold water from the stone well beside the road must have been true mountain nectar.

After autos came into use, travelers still stopped here for a bowl of chile, a cup of coffee, and roadside socializing. Walls of one room are covered with cowboy ballads; another with many historic cattle brands of the west. A post office occupied one corner for a while.

From the beginning this was a strategic location. Sometime during the 1850s a Frenchman named Alexander Valle, nicknamed Pigeon, established a stage station here on his ranch, not im-

aging that in less than a decade it would become a battleground. Little remains of what was a 23-room complex, almost too little to imagine what it was like a century and a quarter ago. New Mexico, with its predominately Hispanic and Indian population in 1862, with its isolation from the states, with its minute interest in the issue of slavery, seems an unlikely place for Civil War action, nevertheless, had the Confederates been victorious here in the Sangre de Cristos, it would have at least delayed, if not changed, the outcome of the entire war.

After American occupation many forts were built in New Mexico to protect westward moving settlers, miners and merchants. When the Civil War began many officers from these forts resigned to join the Confederate army. Southern officers thought it would be easy to capture the forts. In the New Mexico campaign Fort Union near Las Vegas was their main target, for it was the major supply post for other forts in the Southwest. If they could capture Fort Union they would have access to the gold fields of Colorado, and a base from which to push on to California with its gold fields and sea ports. It would have given them a continental sweep of the nation, gold to buy supplies and arms in Europe, and a sea coast free of the threat of blockade.

In July, 1861 Confederate troops had marched into New Mexico Territory from Texas, captured Fort Fillmore near Las Cruces, and made La Mesilla the capital of Arizona Territory which included the southern half of Arizona and New Mexico. General H. H. Sibley led 3,700 Confederate troops north on February 7, 1862, engaged in an indecisive battle near Fort Craig, continued north, capturing both Santa Fe and Albuquerque with no resistance, the Union troops having already retreated to Fort Union. Headquartered at Fort Marcy, General Sibley readied for the attack on Fort Union. Meantime the Colorado Volunteers under command of Colonel John P. Slough had made a forced march of 172 miles in five days through a spring blizzard to join the military and volunteer forces already gathered at Fort Union.

On March 26 advance troops met in Apache Canyon where Union soldiers carried that day. Next day the main body of Con-

Old Pigeon Ranch "Glorieta Pass" on Santa Fe Trail, New Mexico



Owned and Operated by Thos. L. Greer, Glorieta Pass, New Mexico

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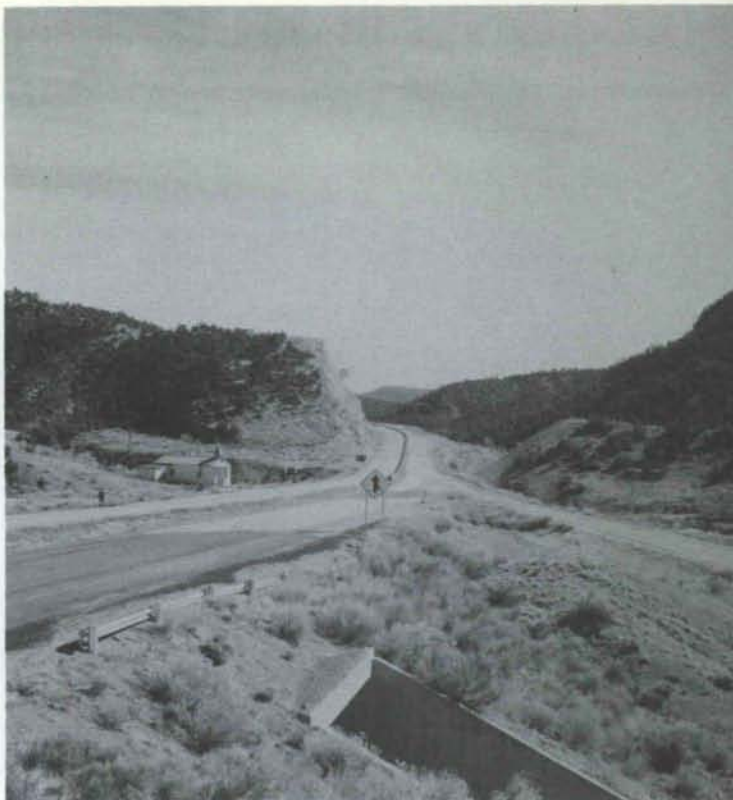
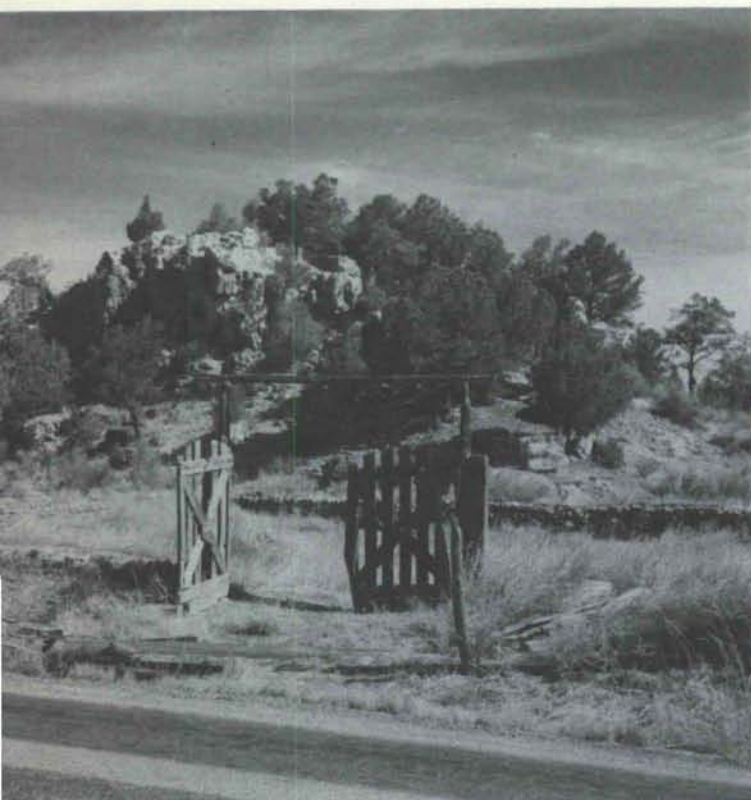
A popular post card, "OLD PIGEON RANCH" GLORIETA PASS ON SANTA FE TRAIL 20 miles and 20 minutes from Santa Fe, printed to lure tourists traveling along old U.S. 85.

(Printed on reverse side)

Scene of the last great battle in New Mexico between Union and Confederate Forces during the Civil War. Best explained in words of M. Valle, popularly known as "Pigeon" from his pronunciation.

"Government manns vas at my ranch and fill is cahnteen viz my visky and Goovornment manns nevaire pay me for zat viskey; and Texas manns coom oop and soorprize zem and zey forght six hour by my watch and my vatch vas slow".

(John P. Conron Collection)



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federate soldiers reached the scene, and both sides squared off for a real fight. Next day, March 28, the battle went on for six hours at Pigeon's Ranch.

A Confederate soldier described it (quoted in *The Devil Gun* by Ed Syers): "It snowed like hell all night and with morning here comes (the Confederate main force) right over the mountains, running. Had to run or freeze. Well, we sat up there all day (27th), thawing out and looking for them Yankees to come fight, but they dug in up to Pigeon's Ranch where the pass tops in them big rocks and red cliffs, fort-like kind of place. Directly (28th) we went up and hit them, and there warn't time for no cliff-climbing, everybody just jammed in them big red rocks, slipping and sliding in the snow in one awful free-for-all. We druv them to the ranch and they purely didn't go easy. They got behind a big adobe wall and in a gully, and we jumped in the gully with them, and stayed till we was all that was left. Then there was a big rock ledge and a hill and that's where it was the worst, bashing each other with boulders, knifing, gouging, packed so close and dressed alike, you couldn't tell who was who."

Meantime Col. Chivington of the Colorado Volunteers and Colonel Manuel Chaves, leader of the New Mexico volunteers, led 400 men over the mountains, circling the pass, and attacked the rear of the Confederate army, destroying all their supplies, wagons and mules. The soldier described that attack: "They circled right over the top of them mountains...seven miles from Pigeon's Ranch where we was supposed to be winning. Burnt them wagons, bayoneted them mules. Just a hell of a mess, snow and red mud and looked like a thousand mules and a hundred wagons down in them ashes - everything' we had, tents, blankets, and near every morsel of food. It was all gone."

In the holocausts of the next three years the western campaign was all but forgotten, and the fact that New Mexico supplied more volunteers to the Union cause in proportion to its population than any other state or territory, sending 6,561 out of a population of 93,000, was never recognized.

After the soldiers were gone, the signs of death and misery washed away by summer rains, the station at Pigeon's Ranch con-

tinued to serve travelers on the Santa Fe Trail, and then auto travelers on U.S. 85. Not until I-25 was built was it pushed into a forgotten backwater, to begin the relentless process of adobe melting back into the earth from which it came. Today you can walk through the silence of this mountain canyon and crumbling adobe walls, peer into the litter-filled depths of the old well and remember the history that took place here.

R.W.A.

Photographs — left-to-right

1. A gate (which has now disappeared) stands open to the stone corral at Pigeon Ranch where many a stage coach driver had sought refuge from attacking Comanches.

2. The Santa Fe Trail squeezed through Apache Canyon where New Mexico and Colorado Volunteers sneaked over the mountains and destroyed all the Confederate wagons, mules, ammunition, food and other supplies, ending the Confederate dream of capturing the west with its rich gold fields and Pacific ports.

3. A few crumbling adobe walls and ruins of a later building mark the site of Pigeon Ranch, a famous stage on the Santa Fe Trail and scene of a decisive battle in the Civil War.

4. A stone wall encircling a deep hole is all that remains of a well that furnished cold mountain water to travellers on the Santa Fe Trail and soldiers on both sides in the Civil War.

Anyone interested in the preservation efforts for Pigeon's Ranch headed by Marc Simmons, can contact him at P.O. Box 51, Cerillos, N.M. 87010.