



## Ranching and the Wild West



*Several ranches were homesteaded on White Sands National Monument before it was established. (NPS Photo)*

**B**y the 1940s the wild, western ranches had been tamed. At the end of WWII, most of the Tularosa Basin had become an active missile range and the expansive grasslands were no longer safe for cattle ranchers.

In the 1800s, New Mexico became part of the American Frontier, famously romanticized as the Wild West. While there are stories of famous outlaws and the sheriffs that shot them, most of the Tularosa Basin was settled by homesteading families. This does not mean that elements of the cowboy culture of the Wild West are not found within the monument. In fact, spent bullet casings, horseshoes, and empty glass bottles are sometimes found hiding under a dune. However, the story of the Tularosa Basin is better told, not by the lore of the Wild West, but in the lives of the people who settled the land and raised their families.

In the 1880s, a brief period of heavy rainfall supported the return of lush grasslands in the Tularosa Basin. These grasslands attracted the attention of goat, sheep, and cattle grazers, predominately from Texas, seeking to make their fortune

in livestock. Large cattle drives pushed into the Tularosa Basin, and family homesteaders were establishing ranches throughout the basin. For sixty years, ranching was the dominant economy of the Tularosa Basin. Several ranches were homesteaded on White Sands National Monument before it was established, including Walters Ranch, Watson Ritch Ranch and the Lucero family ranches on the Lake Lucero shoreline.

In 1897, the Lucero brothers, Jose, Felipe, and Estevan, began ranching on the south shore of the lake that would eventually come to bear their name. The Lucero family ranch homesteads were staples on the western shorelines of Lake Lucero in the early twentieth century. By 1940, Felipe consolidated the family's ranches into a 20,000 acre property. Shortly afterward, the National Park Service took over ownership of

the Lucero family properties with their appropriation of Lake Lucero and Alkali Flats. The remnants of the Lucero family legacy are still evident on the landscape such as the stock pens, watering trough, a water well, and a fallen wind mill which visitors can experience on a ranger-led tour to Lake Lucero during the year's cooler months.

The wooden posts of a historic corral are still standing at the Lake Lucero northern family ranch.



Many family homesteaders raised livestock in the Tularosa Basin during the late 19th century.