**Off the Beaten Path**

by Howard Bryan

The old railroad community which oilman Robert O. Anderson recently bought, was notorious in the early 1880's as a headquarters for con men or "bunco steerers." Lamy was still an end-of-track town on the new railroad in 1880 when card sharks like Sawdust Charlie, Sheeney Frank and Winter Monkey Jack moved in and set up shop. Their victims, for the most part, were railroad passengers, enticed into the saloons for drinks and "a friendly little game of cards." The tourists usually were drunk and broke by the time they emerged from the saloons a little while later. Complaint after complaint was lodged by the suckers against the Lamy bunco steerers, but to little avail. Lawmen and their deputies raided the saloons occasionally, but the bunco men usually kept posted on their whereabouts and knew when they were coming. Few arrests were made.

Tom Ashton, the chief bunco steerer, couldn't understand what all the fuss was about. He said he was doing New Mexico a favor. Nobody was being robbed, he said, and nobody was being forced at gunpoint to play cards with his boys. Normally Ashton noted, the train and coach passengers would continue right on through New Mexico with their money. Money lost by the passengers at Lamy remained in New Mexico and was put into circulation locally, thus helping New Mexico's economic development. He even noted that he had contributed some of this money to church funds. Tom Ashton might be considered an early version of our Department of Development. Only he didn't care whether or not the tourists stayed another day - just as long as they left all their money behind.

Lamy owes its existence to the fact that the Santa Fe Railway, building down through New Mexico in 1880, decided it wasn't feasible from an engineering standpoint to extend the main line into Santa Fe as had been planned. So the railroad bypassed Santa Fe about 20 miles to the southeast. Santa Fe citizens approved a $150,00 bond issue to build a railroad spur line from the capital southeast to the main line. The new railroad junction was called Galisteo Junction at first, but the name soon was changed to Lamy in honor of Archbishop J.B. Lamy of Santa Fe. The Archbishop not only had led the fight for the $150,000 bond issue to build the spur line, but was once the owner of the old Bishop's Ranch upon which the junction was located. This ranch originally had been an old Spanish land grant, given to Diego Antonio Baca of Santa Fe and called "El Rancho de Nuestra Senora de la Luz," or "The Ranch of Our Lady of Light." Baca later sold the grant to Carlos Herrera, who turned it over to the Catholic Church in Santa Fe later in payment of a debt. Archbishop Lamy had inherited the ranch, in the name of the church, from his predecessors in office, but had sold it to a private citizen before the railroad junction was established there.

The bunco steerers eventually left Lamy to promote economic development elsewhere, leaving the village in the hands of legitimate business men. The saloons which sprang up at first were joined by mercantile stores, groceries, boarding houses, a hotel and a charcoal works. The Fred Harvey Co. opened a dining car at Lamy early in 1881, and this soon was replaced by a Harvey House restaurant, next to the depot, know as El Ortiz.

A fire almost wiped out the town in 1907, and the citizens had hardly finished rebuilding the town when another fire two years later swept the community again. Lamy never fully recovered from the second fire. The Harvey House finally closed down in 1941, and about the only activity in the town since that time has centered about the small wood depot and the Pink Garder Saloon. One of the few Lamy landmarks to escape both fires was the old adobe building which now houses the only business establishment remaining in the village. This thick-walled building originally housed a mercantile firm - perhaps Brown and Manzanares Co., which established a large outlet here in 1880. Later, the building housed a feed store, a saloon, and in recent years the Pink Garder Saloon. Mr. Anderson, the town's new owner, with the help of artist John Meigs, has restored the old saloon into a new restaurant and bar known as The Legal Tender, complete with the authentic atmosphere of Lamy's days of the bunco steerers. But without Sawdust Charlie and Winter Monkey Jack and the other bunco steerers of days gone by.

The Albuquerque Tribune, Feb. 14, 1969

[*Back to Lamy History Homepage*](http://www.lamymuseum.org/lamyhistory.html)

[**Ken Bower**](mailto:klbower@rt66.com)**: webmaster**