Old Trails Museum

Journeys To Winslow

The Railroads Build a Town: Early Days

The railroad ultimately drove settlement in northern Arizona Territory. Soon after the Civil War, President Andrew Johnson chartered the Atlantic and Pacific Railroad to build a transcontinental line along the 35th parallel. In December 1880, A&P track gangs laid out a new townsite just west of Sunset Crossing and south of Brigham City. The location provided access to the ample water supply from nearby Clear Creek. The first rail line arrived in the new town, named in honor of railroad executive Edward F. Winslow, in December 1881.

The A&P established a Western Division that ran from south of Albuquerque, New Mexico, to Needles, California. This 1882 map illustrates the Third Operating Division from Winslow to Williams in Arizona Territory. (Map courtesy of the David Rumsey Collection)

Sunset Crossing-East of Winslow shows early residents taking advantage of the underlying bedrock to cross the Little Colorado River. (Painting by Joseph Cruz Rodriguez)

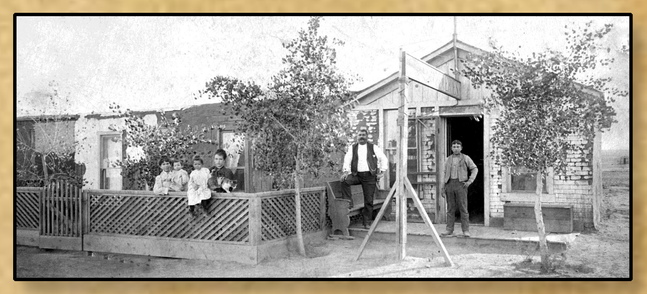
Winslow's First Workers and Residents

The A&P recruited Navajos, Mexican nationals, European immigrants, and US citizens to move to Winslow and help build the new line. The railroad designated Winslow as a major division point. Clear Creek supplied water for the division's permanent staff, steam engines, and rail yards.

In the 1880s, section crews like this one slowly worked their way across the Little Colorado River Valley.

These workers pause for a photograph in Winslow's rail yards in 1892.

Most early residents lived in railroad-tie shacks or tent "houses" like this one on Aspinwall Street. It was made of canvas over wood floors, with flaps that let breezes in.



Like many early residents of Mexican descent, Santiago and Emma Baca came from New Mexico Territory in the 1880s. In 1903, daughter Trinadad Baca Leyva (with cat) and her family stand outside their home and grocery store in Coopertown, or Palomas, located south of the tracks. Margaret Garduno Rubi, whose father worked for the Santa Fe after1895, reflected on life in the neighborhood of Sonora, just east of Palomas:

"People built adobe homes as they had in Mexico. They held dances in their homes, and musicians played violins, accordions, and guitars. A young girl never attended a dance without a relative or close neighbor . . . I had a friend I signaled to across the room to dance with me so I could tell other young men I already had a partner." Janice Henling interview for the *Winslow Mail*, 1980

Winslow's Early Businesses

As Winslow boomed, it attracted businesses typical of a Western town in the late 19th century. Winslow's main artery was Railroad Avenue, which ran alongside the tracks. It boasted mercantile stores, restaurants, hotels, and saloons. The town's early population was an ethnically diverse mix of railroaders, entrepreneurs, and cowboys. Winslow was an exciting place to be as the Old West entered the 20th century.

Fernando Thornton "F.T." LaPrade arrived from Georgia on horseback in 1886. He opened a blacksmith shop, helped build the first Clear Creek dam, and established Sunset Dairy on the Brigham City site in 1905 (behind him). LaPrade talked most of his siblings into joining him in Winslow. They either worked for the railroad or as shopkeepers. LaPrade's nephew, Jim LaPrade, Jr, stated:

"Dad arrived when the mail was still thrown on a saloon bar and men had to sort through it to find their own." Janice Henling interview for the *Winslow Mail*, 1980

The view of Railroad Avenue from the train depot in 1885.

Considered Winslow's first businessman, Frederick C. Demarest arrived by team and wagon in 1880. He erected tent "hotel rooms" as worker housing along Railroad Avenue. In 1885, Demarest (left) opened the Arizona Central Hotel, a two-story building with a restaurant and saloon.