***Archaeology and History in Your BackYard - Estancia Salt Lakes***

Hello Everyone, this is **Archaeology and History in Your BackYard** and my name is Bill Simms. KXNM 88.7 FM and the Torrance County Archaeological Society are pleased to bring you a series of programs designed to acquaint you, our listening audience, with little known people, places and events that took place in the past, right here in your own back yard. For the most part, we will be covering interesting facts, stories and legends about the past, and people that lived right here in the Estancia Valley and surrounding areas here in Central New Mexico. Our goal is to inform, educate, and possibly enlist your help in preserving and protecting the past.

Our show today will again focus on one of the most obvious features, right here in our back yard, The Estancia Valley Salt lakes.

First, let’s start with a little ancient history… During the last ice age, about 20,000 years ago, melting glaciers filled the Estancia Basin with water to it’s spill point, creating one of the largest fresh water lakes in the whole southwest. Just for your reference, the present day town of Estancia would have been covered by about 85 feet of water. Over the next few thousand years, early man took up residence around the lake, taking advantage of fishing, and hunting of wild game present at the time, such as Bison and Mammoth. Folsom Man camping sites have been documented around the shores of the ancient lake, as well as the fossilized remains of bison and mammoth.

During the next few thousand years, the glaciers began to melt off and retreat to the north and the lake, as well as the climate in the Estancia Valley, began to dry up. As the huge lake began to dry up and shrink, the dissolved minerals in the lake water became more and more concentrated, the bison and mammoth became extinct, and Folsom Man left, as well.

What we see today, to the east of Estancia, that we call the “salt lakes” is a series of disconnected flat bottomed depressions extending about 30 miles along the valley and about 10 miles wide These depressions occasionally collect puddles of shallow water. One of these depressions has attracted a huge amount of attention over the last thousand plus years, because the mineral that is being deposited around it’s shores, is very pure SALT! The deposits in other depressions are mainly gypsum with only minor concentrations of salt.

Well, this is where our story really begins…

Artifacts found around the lake, indicate that indian cultures from all over the southwest came to the lake to collect salt for the last several thousand years. The early-day Spanish visiting New Mexico in 1581 became very enthusiastic about the Estancia Valley salt deposit, now called “La Salina”, because salt was a crucial component in the recently invented “Patio Process” for the recovery of silver from silver ore. Under early Spanish rule, large quantities of salt from La Salina were harvested. Oxen trains loaded with salt traveled to northern Mexico delivering salt to processing plants near the silver mines. Salt was also harvested for local consumption. This heavy use of salt by the colonial Spanish, began to cause considerable friction between the local Pueblos, but also the Plains Indians, particularly the Apaches. There was now insufficient salt for intertribal trade and Apaches attacked the Pueblos, as well as the Spanish colonists in retaliation.

There was a gap in salt collection during the time of the Pueblo Revolt from 1680 to 1696, but danger from the Apaches continued. So the governor of New Mexico, at the time, announced that because of the grave need for salt, an armed escort would be provided to take citizens from the surrounding area to La Salina. On the appointed day, all who wanted to obtain salt for that year, would gather at the village of Gallisteo, and leave in a group for La Salina.

Over the years conflict with the Apaches diminished, and more peaceful times prevailed. for the next 150 years, farmers, ranchers and salt merchants harvested La Salina salt at will. There is no evidence that fees or taxes for salt harvest were ever imposed or paid. The lake was open to all, and salt was free for the taking..

An early-day rancher recalls journeying to the lake in 1927. He said, “It was a four day journey to La Salina from northeast New Mexico. We left early in October with four wagons and angled across the country to Willard, where we turned back east to La Salina. Dipping into the lake’s shallow water with perforated buckets, we drained and loaded salt into sacks that were then piled onto the wagon beds.” The rancher remembered that the lake was nearly surrounded with the horses and wagons of people from all over the country gathering their year’s supply of salt.

Ownership of La Salina over the next 50 years was fraught with fraud and deceit, not to mention complications created by the earlier Mexican-American war, which left La Salina in the middle of a territory that was in legal dispute by New Mexico and Texas. The state of Texas, in 1890 issued **a 640 acre grant** encompassing La Salina to a man named Henry Volcker. The Volckers took little interest in the lake, and by the year 1905, the property was abandoned. Anyway, when the dust settled, La Salina and the surrounding 640 acres was sold for back taxes. From 1916 to 1940, the lake had numerous owners, including the Willard Salt Lake Company and the New Mexico Salt Refining Company. All of these owners tried to make a paying operation out of harvesting La Salina Salt, with little or no success.

It is interesting that, even though considerable effort was expended to try to make La Salina a paying enterprise, resolute, unorganized actions kept La Salina public and available to all New Mexicans for nearly a century.

Today, the old salt workings can be seen along the north edge of the lake. A gravel and cross-tie pier extends into the lake about 1000 feet, where salt brine was pumped back to shore and into asphalt lined settling ponds for evaporation. Rusted equipment that was used to move the salt from the settling ponds to the hoppers, that filled burlap sacks, is still scattered about the shore.

The Torrance County Archaeological Society has permission from the landowners to make periodic trips to La Salina and lead tours.

The Torrance County Archaeological Society meets at 7 PM the first Tuesday of every month from March through November. Our October 6th speaker will be Dr. David Kilby, whose presentation will be **“Ice Age Time Capsules, Clovis Caches and Pleistocene Problems”**  We meet at the East Torrance Soil and Water Education Building at 700 S. 10th St. in Estancia. Please come and join us.

You can listen to Archaeology in Your Back Yard Monday at 1 PM, Tuesday at 7 PM, Friday at 10 AM and Saturday at 4 PM. Thanks for listening.