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SANTA BARBARA YESTERDAYS

Las Cruces hotel ruins

By Walker A. Tompkins
News-Press Historian

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The ghost town of Las Cruces, located north of Gaviota Pass at U.S. 101 and State Highway 1 to Lompoc, was a booming little settlement a hundred years ago.

Today Las Cruces has been reduced to the sagging adobe and shingle ruin shown above. In its heyday before the turn of the century the building served as a stage station, store, saloon, restaurant, blacksmith shop and hotel.

Las Cruces means "the crosses." The name was applied to the area around 1790 when Franciscan friars, noting a number of unidentified grave mounds in the vicinity, marked them with wooden crosses. Historians theorize that the graves might have marked an Indian battlefield, since so many arrow and spearheads were found there.

A warm sulphur springs, now a county park, bubbled from a crease in the foothills

a half mile southeast of the town.

IN SPANISH DAYS, Las Cruces' proximity to Gaviota Creek made it an important watering place for travelers between La Purisima and Santa Barbara Missions by way of San Julian, the "kitchen ranch" granted to the Royal Presidio of Santa Barbara by King Carlos III.

Starting in April, 1860, Concord stagecoaches changed teams at Las Cruces on their way to the Lompoc Valley or, via the Alisal Canyon cutoff, to the Santa Ynez Valley and points north. A small settlement sprang up around the stage station and barns.

The center portion of the adobe pictured above served as a hotel for travelers in the late '60s. A barroom complete with counter and backbar mirror was added in the lean-to nearest the camera, the outer wall having been knocked out by vandals in recent years.

Whenever the shingle roof required patching, the successive owners of the structure laid new rafters, sheathing and shingles over the first, so that portions of the ruins show the wreckage of three layers of roofing.

THE INTERIOR adobe walls have also been heavily damaged in the past 10 years, more by vandalism than by the weather. Layers of old-fashioned wallpaper scab the main interior walls which enclosed a dining room for travelers, with a kitchen adjoining. The lean-to on the left, or west frontage of the building was cut up into cubicles for sleeping rooms. According to the late Sen. J. J. Hollister Sr., who was the last private owner of the property, the rooms at one time were a brothel.

The smaller additions on the right were shops and storage rooms. When Hollister and I explored the ruins in 1960 the walls were hanging with

branding irons, harness, chains and blacksmithing tools dating to the years when Las Cruces Ranch was part of the Hollister Estate ranching operation.

During the 1880s and 90s, farmers from the Santa Ynez Valley had to haul their grain via Alisal Canyon to Gaviota Wharf, operated by Hollister & Dibblee, a trip which required 14 fordings of the creek. The farmers stopped overnight at Las Cruces on their return, and the old hotel became a lively gambling hall and whisky emporium.

IN 1901, when the railroad put the Gaviota Wharf and the stagecoach lines out of business, Las Cruces began its toboggan slide into oblivion.

A huge haybarn east of the hotel ruins, a Hollister Ranch addition of the 1890s, has a manager incorporating two planks which may well be the largest piece of milled fir lumber in California. They are nearly four inches thick,