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Review of *Ghost Towns Alive: Trips to New Mexico's Past* By Linda G. Harris

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Ghost Towns Alive: Trips to New Mexico's Past. By Linda G. Harris. Photographs by Pamela Porter. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2003. xiii + 242 pp. Photographs, maps, selected readings, index. \$39.95 cloth, \$19.95 paper.

Not even ghost towns are exempt from progress. In New Mexico, some ghost towns are disappearing into the earth or being subsumed by ranches, while others are reincarnating themselves into outright tourist attractions. Accordingly, books about them are morphing from travel guides that tell us what we'll see, to coffee tables that show us what we missed. *Ghost Towns Alive* by Linda Harris is one of the former, but its artistic photos and clever, sensitive writing nod to the latter.

Harris offers her definition of “ghost town” as a place founded for a purpose, later to decline. By adding “accessible and visually interesting,” Harris narrows her selection to sixty-eight diverse towns and two forts. Some, like Madrid just south of Santa Fe, are rebounding with such vigor they should forfeit their right to be included. Others, like Casa Salazar northwest of Albuquerque, are so forlorn that they belie the book’s title. Harris has organized the towns into eleven chapters based on location and, by extension, shared history. Of interest to eastern Plains g-towners will be chapters two and three, covering those places kept alive by the Santa Fe Trail and, later, the symbiotic economies of mining and railroad-ing, as well as chapter six, a hodge-podge of sites between Interstate 40 and U.S. 380.

Concise but compelling essays impart the history of each town, while anecdotes illuminate the human histories that exist(ed) there. In Johnson’s Mesa, a town in far northeastern New Mexico, for example, Harris tells of the special ring system that residents used on their telephones to alert other townspeople whether a call was public or private. Harris’s gift for description is evident throughout; she summarily depicts the big nothing of south-central New Mexico by stating, “In a place where a curve in the road counts as a landmark, the sky bears the responsibility for the scenery.” Though such evocations occasionally trespass, there is warmth behind the words. Regrettably, some of the first-person accounts of Harris’s visits to these sites overwhelm the narrative, leaving the reader with more to remember about the weather on the day of her visit than the town itself.

Pamela Porter’s accompanying photographs prove that New Mexico ghost towns have had the good sense to be photogenic in their decline. Her context shots, which include features of the surrounding landscape, are more interesting than the close-ups. (If you’ve seen one broken window frame in a sagging adobe. . . .) Included also are historic photos, some showing former residents, whose pale,

long-ago eyes are more haunting than any abandoned town.

Well researched, well written, *Ghost Towns Alive* makes one thing clear: appreciate now, before it’s too late.

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