

## MYSTERY WITH A TOUCH OF CLASS AT FORT UNION

by Alma Gregory

*(Gregory is a member of Corazon de los Caminos Chapter and staff writer for the Hermit's Peak Gazette newspaper in Las Vegas, NM.)*

**G**O easy," I told the guy running the Bobcat because we didn't know what might be under the dirt," Roger Portillo, Jr., said. Portillo said he is the maintenance supervisor at Fort Union, although Supt. Harry Myers calls him the foreman.

Fort Union National Monument is a key site on the Santa Fe Trail in northeastern New Mexico. Its ruins, museum, and bookstore are well worth a stop in your travels on I-25. Take exit 366 at Watrous and drive eight miles west and north on state highway 161. The phone number is (505) 425-8025. They are also on the Internet.

On October 25, 1999, Portillo's crew of nine were digging up an old dirt bridge across a small gully running from the corner of laundresses'

*(continued on page 7)*



**New old steps discovered at Fort Union, with hospital in background** (photo by Alma Gregory).





This photo, looking northwest, shows the old flagstone trail between the hospital and main garrison (in background) and dirt bridge at the right, with the new walking trail at the left (photo by Roger Portillo, Jr.).

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(continued from page 1)

row to the hospital. When the Bobcat shovel clinked against stone, they stopped and began digging more carefully. What they uncovered was a well-laid flagstone path with two stone steps at each end connecting the depression to the old flagstone path on top of the ground.

"The steps seem to add a touch of class," Myers said. "We figure it was built probably in 1868 or '69 at the earliest. The hospital was finished in 1866-67."

The flagstone was quarried from a mountain south of the fort. The trail would have been the enlisted men's path that troopers used, Myers said, because there is a swale indicating a former trail from the corner of officers' row over to the hospital.

"The officers - surgeons were officers - probably drove a carriage to the hospital. The hospital had stables and a number of other outbuildings," Myers said.

Fort Union has received a grant in the form of "spill-over" money from the National Park fee program. While Fort Union charges a very small entrance fee, Grand Canyon charges \$25 now. Eighty percent of the fees go to the park where collected, and 20 percent go into a na-

tional pot.

Fort Union applied for and received funds to build new pathways around the fort, both for safety reasons, because the old flagstone is uneven to walk on, and to preserve the historic walkways.

Portillo said they first considered tearing up the old flagstone and repairing it, but decided they might do more damage that way, so decided to just build new parallel trails.

"The dirt bridge was put in by the park service, which took over here in 1954," Myers said. "What we don't know is why. What was the alignment of the trails? We know the swales are defined accurately because of the erosion. What was this trail originally used for? Why was it abandoned? It tells us something about how the roads were used here, but we may never know the full answer."

Portillo came to Fort Union from the Grand Canyon where he was in charge of the Log Cabin Syrup pilot project restoring the North Rim gatekeeper's cabin. He said there is one old Fort Union plat that mentions building flagstone trails, but not this particular one.

"This proves again that history is not dead," Myers said. "There are things still to be uncovered, literally and figuratively."