



## Story of the New Mexico Mounted Police

Originally published in El Defensor Chieftain newspaper, Saturday, May 7, 2011.

**Copyright:** © 2011 by Paul Harden. Article may be cited with proper credit to author. Article is not to be reproduced in whole or placed on the internet without author's permission.

By Paul Harden  
(na5n@zianet.com)

*In the late 1800s, the Southwest was full of outlaws, cattle rustlers, train robbers and every other sort of ruffian. To control crime in the Territory, the New Mexico Rangers were organized – today's New Mexico State Police. And, it all started in Socorro.*

### The Texas Rangers

Shortly after Mexico gained its independence from Spain in 1821, Americans were allowed into Texas to encourage settlement. However, their farms and ranches were often attacked and burned, and families were killed by small bands of Mexicans who crossed the border. In 1823, Stephen Austin, the "Father of Texas," obtained permission from Mexico to form a company of "rangers" to protect the people in the Texas frontier.

This was the beginning of the famous Texas Rangers. They have protected the Texas citizenry ever since.

The Texas Rangers became a model law enforcement organization that other states and territories emulated. Although, their fame wasn't limited to just the outlaw days. For three months, in 1934, Ranger Frank Hamer tracked famed bank robbers and murderers Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow, commonly known as "Bonnie and Clyde." He chased them through Missouri, Oklahoma and Texas until the pair were finally cornered in

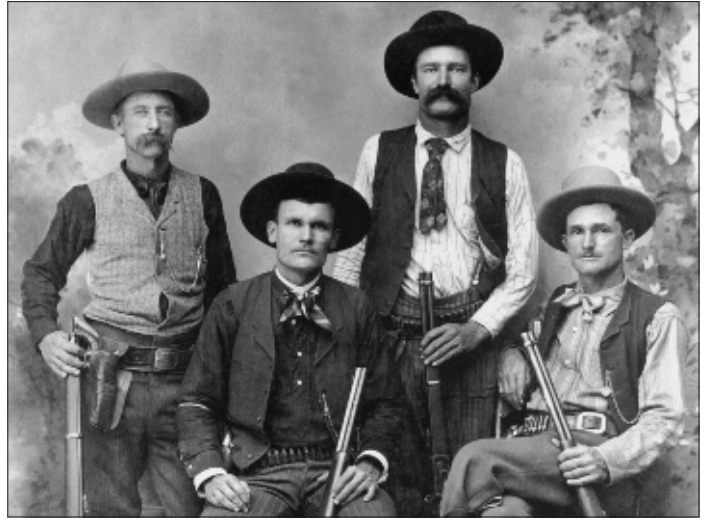


Photo: Texas Frontier Battalion

**The Texas Rangers. The early lawmen of the west wore cowboy dress, donned a six-shooter, and never parted with their Winchester rifles. Uniforms for lawmen did not come about until the 1930s.**

Louisiana. Hamer, along with three other Texas Rangers and two Louisiana patrolmen, killed the outlaw duo in a shootout that is still legendary today.

### The Arizona Rangers

In 1901, Arizona formed their own ranger organization to rid the territory of criminals and outlaw gangs. They were modeled after the Texas Rangers. The Arizona Rangers consisted of 26 men. In 1909, the governor proclaimed that the rangers were so successful in ridding the Arizona Territory of the criminal element they were no longer needed and disbanded the organization.

In 1957, the Arizona Rangers were reactivated – this time as a purely volunteer organization. Called the Auxiliary Police in other states, they serve as law enforcement support when needed, although members have no law enforcement authority.

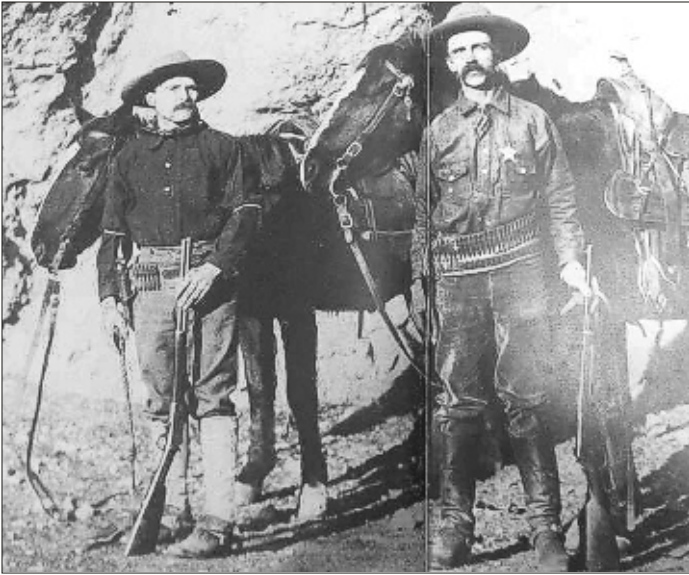


Photo: Arizona Rangers, Benson Company  
**Rangers in Texas, Arizona and New Mexico were often on the trail for weeks tracking train robbers to cattle rustlers - before they slipped into Mexico beyond the reach of the law.**

## Lawless New Mexico

By the late 1890s, crimes from bank robberies to train holdups were a regular feature in New Mexico's newspapers. Innocent people were being killed, their hard-earned money taken away, and their cattle stolen. Outlaw gangs, like the Black Jack gang, the Ketchum brothers, Cole Young, and many others, virtually terrorized New Mexico in this era. Some of the large cattle barons weren't much better.

The outlaws, who were not arrested or killed in Texas or Arizona, fled to lawless New Mexico. One would think that with the success of the Texas and Arizona Rangers, New Mexico would have created a similar ranger unit. But, they didn't. When a train robbery or murder occurred, it was the responsibility of the county sheriff to track down and apprehend the criminals. Most sheriffs were ill prepared, or unwilling, to track down a murderous outlaw gang.

The citizens of New Mexico demanded these outlaws and cattle rustlers be brought to justice. Finally, in 1899, a bill was introduced in the Territorial Legislature to create a 13-man company of mounted police. New Mexicans, still not real cozy with their neighbors to the east, decided not to model the police force after the Texas Rangers, but after the Royal Canadian Mounted Police — including a proposal to use the bright red uniforms of the RCMP.

Surprisingly, many of the Territorial legislators

argued against the bill by claiming the cost of the ranger unit could not be justified. Many of these legislators were themselves wealthy cattlemen. Many did not want a ranger unit that might interfere with their own shady practices of cattle rustling, wrongful branding and illegal land grabs. The bill was defeated.

## Forming the Mounted Police

It was not until six years later, in 1905, that another bill was introduced to form a mounted police unit. This time, it seemed to pass in the 36th Legislature. The law gave the governor the responsibility of selecting the rangers. In turn, Gov. Manuel Otero appointed Los Lunas businessman and rancher Solomon Luna, and Socorro's Holm O. Bursum, to select the first 11 men to become New Mexico Rangers. Luna and Bursum, well known for being staunch Republicans, were careful to select several Democrats so the police force would appear nonpartisan.

At first, there was little reported in newspapers of the formation of the police unit and selection of rangers. It all seemed to have an air of secrecy.

In early March, after reviewing more than 200 applications for the job of ranger, Luna and Bursum submitted their recommendations to the governor. Both were discharged from the governor's service and served no further role with the rangers. Those who were selected to be rangers were summoned to Santa Fe for an interview and approval by the governor.

In spite of the apparent secrecy, there were a few hints in the Socorro Chieftain newspapers, although most readers did not pick up on it at the time.

The March 11 Chieftain reported that County Assessor John Fullerton was suddenly being audited to ensure his "books were in order." Another short news story stated, "*Deputy Bob Lewis was reported to be a visitor in the territorial capital the first of the week. Possibly Bob was trying to instill a little democracy into the legislative sessions.*"

The March 18 Chieftain contained more hints that apparently went unnoticed. It reported that Cipriano Baca, former Socorro County Deputy Sheriff, arrived to be the guest of friends in Socorro. Next, Socorro Assessor John Fullerton was reported being in Santa Fe to "amuse himself with the legislative process."

Buried on Page 4 was the biggest hint of all. "R. W. (Bob) Lewis received a telegram last night informing him that he had been appointed sergeant of the mounted ranger police force."

The March 25 Chieftain contained a rather unexpected announcement. John Fullerton, recently elected as County Assessor, suddenly resigned his post after only three months on the job. No explanation for his resignation was given. Gov. Otero appointed A.B. Baca to fill the vacancy.

Finally, on April 1, the formation of the police force was announced in area newspapers, including the Socorro Chieftain. And it was exciting news indeed, especially for Socorro. New Mexico's first ranger police unit, officially called the New Mexico Mounted Police, or NMMP, would be headquartered in Socorro.

John Fullerton, former county assessor, was appointed by the governor to be the captain.

### Fullerton's Rangers

On April 1, Fullerton, and his newly formed company of rangers, traveled to Santa Fe to be sworn in by Gov. Otero. Capt. Fullerton was paid an annual salary of \$2,000, Lt. Cipriano Baca \$1,500 and Sgt. Bob Lewis \$1,000. The "privates" were paid \$900 per year.

The Socorro Chieftain lists the eight privates as "Geo. Elkins of Hachita, Julius Meyers of Estancia, J.J. Brophy of Clayton, William E. Dudley of Alamogordo, William Taylor of Deming, Herbert McGrath of Lordsburg, Francisco Apodaca of Cuchillo, and Octabiano Perea of Alamogordo." The men reported for duty in Socorro on April 15.



Defensor-Chieftain archives (microfilm)

The announcement of the New Mexico Mounted Police appeared in the April 1, 1905 Socorro Chieftain newspaper.

Apparently, the men didn't much care for being called mounted policemen. They were rangers and wanted to be called rangers. It wasn't long before the unit became known throughout New Mexico as "Fullerton's Rangers."

Each ranger provided his own horse, six-shooter weapon, and other items required on the trail. The Territory provided each man with a Winchester rifle. Horses killed in the line of duty were replaced by the Territory. When an arrest was made, the Mounted Police would turn their prisoners over to the nearest sheriff or deputy.

The Fullerton Rangers did not have uniforms. They did, however, don a badge — a five-point brass star embossed with a galloping horse and the words "New Mexico Mounted Police." This badge was used until 1912 statehood, when the star was changed to a shield design.

### Examples of "old west" law badges from in and around New Mexico





Courtesy of Socorro County Historical Society

In 1905, New Mexico's first police force, the "Fullerton Rangers," were headquartered in Socorro. Their offices were in the old Sedillo building and store on Court Street (left). Today, little of the historic building remains.



Photo by Paul Harden

Fullerton chose Socorro to be the base of operations, which was approved by the governor. Their headquarters were rented rooms in the old Sedillo house and store building on Court Street – and were within walking distance to the District Attorney's office in the courthouse.

In later years, the Sedillo building was remodeled by the Woods family into business and county offices. Much of the old building was razed in 2010 and now serves as parking behind the County Manager's building.

So who were these three men from Socorro that headed the first statewide police force?

### **Capt. John Fullerton**

John Fullerton was the first captain of the NMMP. Since the mounted police became known as the State Patrol in later years, Socorroan John Fullerton was the first captain of today's New Mexico State Police.

John Fullerton was born in Pennsylvania, in 1856. He married Susan Baker about 1880. John's father, James Fullerton, served with the First Pennsylvania Light Artillery during the Civil War. Months of swampy camp life and rainy marches left James, and hundreds of others, seriously ill. Poor health plagued James long after the war.

Seeking better climate, James decided to move to New Mexico with his two sons, William and John, and John's wife, Susan. In 1883, they homesteaded near the Bat Cave in the southern end of the Plains of San Agustin. Each homesteaded 640 acres and called their combined

land holdings the AJF Ranch.

Tragedy struck in 1893-1894 when John lost his wife and two sons to disease. Shortly thereafter, the elder Fullerton, James, moved to Socorro. John began to share his time between Socorro and the AJF Ranch.

In 1896, John also worked as a carpenter in the bustling mining town of Mogollon. That same year, Holm O. Bursum began construction of a road from Magdalena to Mogollon. Known as the Bursum Road, it was intended to more closely connect remote Mogollon to the county seat in Socorro. Bursum hired surveyors, laborers, and wagon masters who brought supplies to the workers for the project. John worked on the Bursum Road project for a time, although it is not known in what position he was employed. It is possible that this short period of working together

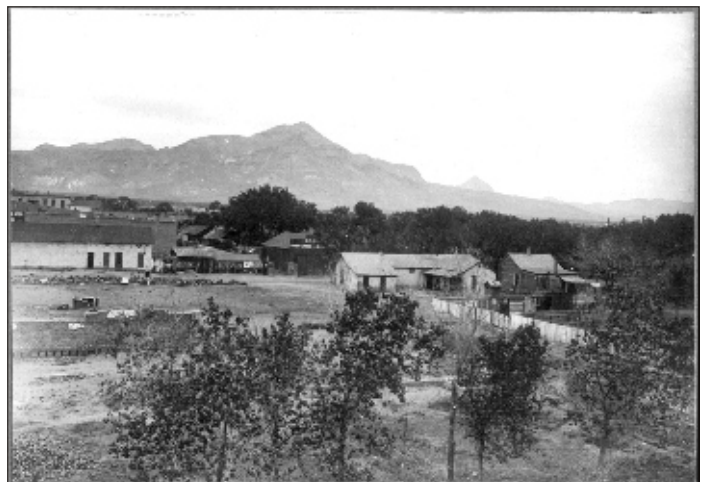


Photo courtesy Socorro County Historical Society

A view of Socorro along Manazares Street, and Socorro Peak, about the time of the formation of the New Mexico Rangers. Their headquarters was near the court house.

is why Bursum recommended John Fullerton to be captain of the rangers in later years.

In 1903, John Fullerton married Katharine Sleight. The following year, he ran for Socorro County Assessor. Upon winning the election, John and his new wife moved to Socorro, and left the operation of the AJF Ranch to brother William.

John had no known law enforcement experience. However, Bursum must have seen something in the 49-year-old Socorroan to make him the top lawman in the Territory. It is also said that when the Rangers were on the trail in western Socorro County, they always had a soft bed, a warm meal, and fresh horses if needed, at Fullerton's AJF Ranch near Horse Springs.

### **Lt. Cipriano Baca**

Unlike Fullerton, Cipriano Baca (often spelled Cypriano) was a well-seasoned lawman. Born in 1859, Cipriano worked for one law enforcement agency or another for most of his life. His early career was spent in Arizona and southern New Mexico. He became a deputy sheriff in Grant County, in 1891.

In November 1894, Holm O. Bursum defeated Leopoldo Contreras for the job of Socorro County Sheriff. Almost immediately, Bursum lured Cipriano away from Silver City, and hired him to be the deputy sheriff in Mogollon. In 1896, Cipriano was elected as county assessor. He made the two-day trip from Mogollon to the Assessor's Office in Socorro once a month.

Cipriano was an excellent deputy, who tamed the wild mining town of Mogollon as best as he could. The Aug. 7, 1896, Socorro Chieftain wrote of him: *"We boast on our present deputy sheriff, C. Baca, who keeps the camp in a most orderly manner and every good citizen receives protection, no bar room fights or street brawls here since he has been appointed."*

In 1898, Cipriano married Mary Berry from Kelly. She bore him 11 children over the years. Cipriano's attitudes began to change. He did not want to raise his children in a mining town with more bars than schools. In 1899, Cipriano lost his boss when Bursum decided to step down as sheriff. Charles Blackington was elected as the new Socorro County Sheriff. Shortly thereafter, Cipriano resigned as assessor and deputy sheriff to become a full-time deputy federal marshal. It is not known if his new boss, Sheriff Blackington,



Courtesy of Socorro County Sheriff's Department

**When the New Mexico Rangers were formed in 1905, Leandro Baca was the Socorro County Sheriff. His brother, Cipriano, was the first lieutenant of the Rangers.**

was a factor in Baca's leaving Socorro County.

In January 1900, Cipriano again went to work for Bursum, now superintendent of the New Mexico Territorial Penitentiary, in Santa Fe. A year later, Gov. Miguel Otero appointed Cipriano as sheriff of newly created Luna County.

In 1905, when the New Mexico Rangers were formed, Cipriano Baca was serving as a deputy sheriff in Bernalillo County. He applied to be a ranger. His old friend, Holm O. Bursum, obviously placed his application at the top of the list. Gov. Otero must have liked him as well. He appointed Cipriano to be lieutenant of New Mexico's first police force.

When Cipriano moved his growing family back to Socorro, Leandro Baca was the county sheriff. Leandro and Cipriano were brothers.

Lt. Cipriano Baca served with the NMMP for two years and resigned, in 1907, to serve in several law enforcement positions.

By 1910, lawlessness returned to Mogollon. Socorro County Sheriff Geronimo Sanchez

pleaded with Cipriano to return to Mogollon as deputy sheriff. Cipriano accepted. In short order, Mogollon returned to a peaceful town — at least as mining towns go.

If you've lost count of how many different law enforcement badges Cipriano wore over the years, you are not alone. He put on his last badge in 1918, when he returned to the New Mexico Mounted Police. He retired in 1920, and turned in his badge for the last time. He was 61 years old. New Mexico's first police lieutenant died of colon cancer in 1936, just short of his 78th birthday.

## Sgt. Bob Lewis

Robert Lewis, commonly called "Big Bob," was another well-known and accomplished lawman in Socorro County. Lewis was born in Alabama on March 10, 1866, a "baby boomer" of the Civil War. Growing up in Texas, he left home at age 16 for New Mexico. Although only 16, he was a large young man. At 6-foot-2 and 200 pounds, with a large muscular frame, Bob was an impressive man throughout his life.

In 1885, Bob ended up in western Socorro County as a ranch hand on the Bar N Ranch. He was a hard worker, loved the open range and learned every intimate detail of the land. It is said that he never lost a fist-fight — and when he had to use his gun, he was deadly accurate. Bob knew the

country of western New Mexico like the back of his hand. He had the uncanny ability to find almost anything, from lost cattle to a wanted outlaw.

In 1896, Bob Lewis married Flora Higgins, daughter of Pat Higgins of the La Jencia Ranch. Over the next few years, Bob served as the Magdalena marshal. In 1902, newly elected Socorro County Sheriff Leandro Baca hired Lewis as a deputy sheriff and jailer. He participated in just about every posse ever formed. With his keen knowledge of the country and tracking skills, he earned a reputation for always finding his man.

A 1905 Socorro Chieftain article reported: *"Pablo Garcia, a bad man from Polvadera, was delivered into the hands of Sheriff Leandro Baca Tuesday and placed behind the bars for assault and battery. This same Garcia has a record that no self-respecting man would care to emulate. Once, (while misbehaving in the county jail) he was sent to dream land by a smash on the jaw from the heavy fist of Deputy Bob Lewis whom it would not be easy to convince that he struck hard enough to suit the provocation."*

There is little wonder why Bursum recommended 39-year-old Lewis to be one of New Mexico's first rangers. Family oral history states that upon Lewis' interview, the governor wanted to find some fault to reject him from consideration, because Lewis was a Democrat. On the day of the interview, the towering, imposing Lewis entered the governor's office, wearing his deputy sheriff's badge and six shooter. Gov. Otero shook the deputy's huge calloused hand and could only ask, "Well, when can you start?" Lewis was hired as the first sergeant of the New Mexico Police.

Lewis served as sergeant until he resigned from the NMMP in 1909. After a spell of poor health, his doctor told him it was time to take off his badge and slow down.

According to the Socorro Chieftain, Lewis returned to Socorro County, in 1910, and purchased and operated the Socorro Plaza Hotel.

Bob Lewis was not cut out to be a hotel man. He got claustrophobic inside those four walls and missed the wide-open range. Shortly thereafter, Lewis was again found donning a brass badge as Magdalena's Marshal — a job he held for many more years. He remained active. He was always on the trail and worked hard into his mid-70s. Rheumatism, poor hearing and failing eye sight finally forced his retirement.

Robert Lewis died Aug. 18, 1950, at 84 years of age — one of the last of the old west lawmen, and the first sergeant of the New Mexico State Police.

### Descendants of Lawman Robert Lewis



Photos by Paul Harden

Socorroan Alan Lewis (left) is a great-grandson of Ranger Bob Lewis. Patrick Lewis (right) bears a striking resemblance to his lawman grandfather. He lives in Magdalena where Deputy Sheriff Bob Lewis also served as town Marshall.

## Move to Santa Fe

Fullerton's Rangers had an amazing first year in ridding the Territory of the criminal element. In the first year, they made an astounding 72 arrests. Many of these arrests were for cattle rustling, although they also included arrests on warrants for attack and battery to kidnapping.

In 1906, Herbert Hagerman became governor of New Mexico. In spite of the Fullerton's Rangers' impressive arrest record and other successes, the new governor discharged Fullerton as captain and appointed Deputy U.S. Marshal Fred Fornoff to lead the Rangers. The Socorro headquarters was ordered closed and moved to Santa Fe.

This move effectively removed the NMMP from the southern portion of the Territory. Fullerton's Rangers were gone, and the outlaws knew it. Cattle rustling in parts of New Mexico were on the rise. Eventually, Capt. Fornoff assigned a few of the Mounted Police to Deming to address the problem and patrol the border.

In 1909, newly elected Gov. George Curry reduced the NMMP from 11 rangers to six. In January 1912, New Mexico finally achieved statehood. The first elected state governor, William McDonald, called for an increase in the size of the Rangers. However, the first state legislature abolished the Mounted Police by a vote of 17-7. New Mexico's "old west" lawmen, first headquartered in Socorro, came to an end.

Or did they?

## Reactivation of the Rangers

On March 9, 1916, Pancho Villa and about 500 of his revolutionary soldiers entered the United States and attacked the town of Columbus, N.M. Pancho lost 80 of his men after killing 18 New Mexicans. This deadly attack, and breach of the border, stunned the people of New Mexico and the lawmakers in Santa Fe. As a result, the New Mexico Mounted Police were reactivated to secure the border with Mexico following the Columbus raid.

The Mexican Revolution ended in 1920; Pancho Villa was killed in 1923. As a side note, Pancho's grave was disturbed and his skull stolen in 1926 - about the same time Geronimo's skull was reportedly stolen by the Skull and Bones Society.

Two years after the attack on Columbus, the national Prohibition Act went into effect. The

NMMP were used to ensure all breweries and saloons in New Mexico had shut down and dismantled their equipment. In Socorro, this included the Hammel Brewery and the Capitol Bar.

However, a large problem during Prohibition, not often discussed, were the burro pack trains, supply wagons and automobiles that carried bootleg liquor from Mexico into New Mexico.

Many of the NMMP Rangers, some now equipped with automobiles, were sent to southern New Mexico to patrol the border and apprehend those who were transporting alcohol into the state. The Texas Rangers were faced with the same problem. Shootouts between the Rangers and the border smugglers and bootleggers were not uncommon during this era.

The Rangers were successful in stopping the bootleg liquor trade from Mexico and were again disbanded in 1921.

## New Mexico State Patrol

In 1933, the state legislature authorized a state-wide law enforcement agency to patrol the growing traffic along the state highways. It was called the New Mexico Motor Patrol — the precursor to today's New Mexico State Police.

The motor patrol began with 10 officers, each of whom were assigned a Harley-Davidson motorcycle with flashing red lights and a siren. Within a few months, the revenue generated from traffic tickets fully funded the motor patrol.

This was in the days before radio-dispatched police. When a serious crime occurred, the description of the criminals, and the vehicle they were driving, was broadcast over KOB radio in Albuquerque. At the time, this was the only way of communicating such information to the police, although it was a big hit with the audience as well.

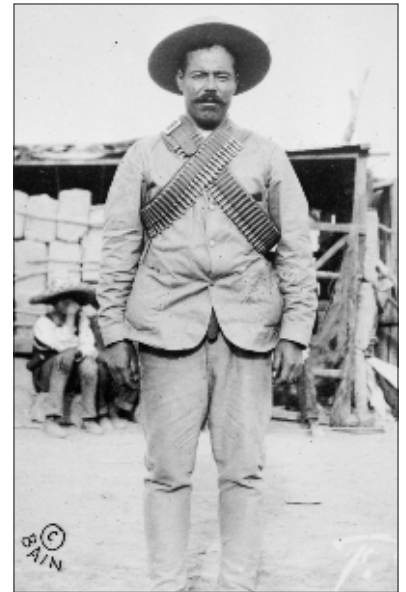


Photo: Library of Congress  
**The NM Mounted Police were reactivated in 1916 when Pancho Villa attacked and burned the town of Columbus, killing 18 New Mexicans.**



Courtesy of New Mexico State Police

**A few officers of the New Mexico Motor Patrol with their Harley-Davidson motorcycles. They were the first "rangers" to wear uniforms. In 1935, they changed their name to the present New Mexico State Police. It appears Harleys, and the State Police uniform, has changed little over the years.**

In 1935, the state legislature expanded the role of the motor patrol to 30 officers and changed their name to the New Mexico State Police. Some kept their Harley-Davidson motorcycles while others received a new 1936 Chevrolet sedan.

This is the state police that continue to serve the people of New Mexico today. However, instead of 30 officers, there are now about 600 officers and about 500 civilian employees. Today's New Mexico State Police was started by "Fullerton's Rangers" 106 years ago in Socorro. The local district office of the NMSP is located north of Socorro at Escondida. And yes, even today they still have to catch the errant cattle rustler.

---

*Some of the references used in this article:* "New Mexico's Rangers: The Mounted Police," by Chuck Hornung; "Fullerton's Rangers," by Chuck Hornung; "Murder in Mogollon," by the author (El Defensor Chieftain, May 2010); "New Mexico State Police," by Turner Publishing Co.; the Texas Rangers website; New Mexico State Police website; and fieldwork by the author. Some photos in this article did not appear in the original newspaper article.



Photo by Paul Harden

**The first captain of the New Mexico Police was Socorroan John Fullerton in 1905. Today, Captain Mark Umprovitch, commander of Socorro District 11, fills the shoes of a long and proud tradition.**



Photo by Paul Harden

**The New Mexico Rangers would travel for days to the nearest telegraph station to get orders or file a report. Today, Socorro District 11 Communications Supervisor John Gonzales is in constant contact with patrolmen through radio and computer networks.**

