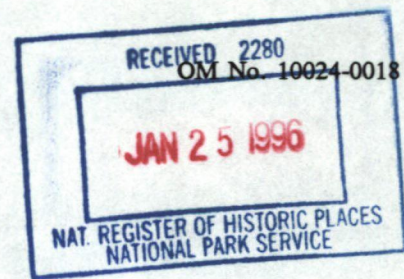


(Oct. 1990)

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
REGISTRATION FORM



1. NAME OF PROPERTY

HISTORIC NAME: Rio Vista Farm Historic District

OTHER NAME/SITE NUMBER: El Paso County Poor Farm; Camp Rio Vista; Bracero Center

2. LOCATION

STREET & NUMBER: 800-01 Rio Vista Road

NOT FOR PUBLICATION: N/A

CITY OR TOWN: Socorro

VICINITY: N/A

STATE: Texas CODE: TX COUNTY: El Paso

CODE: 141 ZIP CODE: 79927

3. STATE/FEDERAL AGENCY CERTIFICATION

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this x nomination    request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property x meets    does not meet the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant    nationally    statewide x locally. (    See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

*Laurie J. Jannell*

Signature of certifying official

*8 Jan. 1996*

Date

State Historic Preservation Officer, Texas Historical Commission

State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property    meets    does not meet the National Register criteria.  
(    See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of commenting or other official

Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. NATIONAL PARK SERVICE CERTIFICATION

I hereby certify that this property is:

   entered in the National Register

   See continuation sheet.

   determined eligible for the National Register

   See continuation sheet.

   determined not eligible for the National Register

   removed from the National Register

   other (explain):

Signature of the Keeper

*Edson B. Beall*

Date of Action

*2/22/96*

Entered in the  
National Register



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**5. CLASSIFICATION**

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**OWNERSHIP OF PROPERTY:** public-local; public-state

**CATEGORY OF PROPERTY:** district

<b>NUMBER OF RESOURCES WITHIN PROPERTY:</b>	<b>CONTRIBUTING</b>	<b>NONCONTRIBUTING</b>
	17	5 BUILDINGS
	0	2 SITES
	0	2 STRUCTURES
	0	0 OBJECTS
	17	9 TOTAL

**NUMBER OF CONTRIBUTING RESOURCES PREVIOUSLY LISTED IN THE NATIONAL REGISTER:** 0

**NAME OF RELATED MULTIPLE PROPERTY LISTING:** N/A

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**6. FUNCTION OR USE**

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**HISTORIC FUNCTIONS:** DOMESTIC/institutional housing

**CURRENT FUNCTIONS:** VACANT/NOT IN USE; GOVERNMENT/correctional facility

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**7. DESCRIPTION**

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**ARCHITECTURAL CLASSIFICATION:** Mission/Spanish Colonial Revival; Prairie School

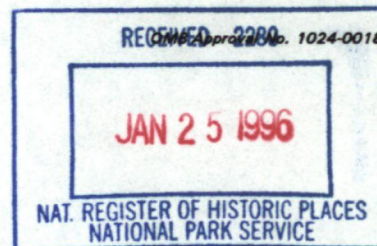
**MATERIALS:** FOUNDATION STUCCO; BRICK  
WALLS ADOBE; BRICK  
ROOF ASPHALT; METAL: TIN  
OTHER WOOD

**NARRATIVE DESCRIPTION** (see continuation sheets 7-5 through 7-14)



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet



Section 7 Page 5

Rio Vista Farm Historic District  
Socorro, El Paso County, Texas

The Rio Vista Farm Historic District encompasses a well-preserved complex of historic institutional buildings associated with El Paso County's Poor Farm program (see Map-51). The district includes approximately 14 acres of relatively level land northwest of the community of Socorro. Bordering cotton fields, elm and cottonwood trees establish an insular setting largely unchanged since the early 20th century. Extant historic resources include the 1915 Main Building, constructed in the Prairie School style on a quadrate cruciform plan, and a quadrangle of adobe buildings erected in the Mission Revival style in 1935-36. Of the original 21 buildings associated with the historic operation of the facility, 17 survive with sufficient integrity to be classified as Contributing elements of the historic district.

The district encompasses a relatively flat tract within the Rio Grande River valley in the El Paso region. Running approximately 600 feet west of the district, Mesa Drain provides a vital source of irrigation for area farmers as part of a regional flood control system (see Figure-54). A branch of the drain known locally as the Mesa Spur runs between 200 to 500 feet to the northeast. An old river channel defines the western boundary of the district. Hundreds of acres of cultivated cotton fields characterize the surrounding region. A single-lane dirt road encircles the district to create a visual boundary between the building complex and the surrounding agricultural fields.

Most of the district's resources consist of modestly scaled, 1-story buildings that are vacant or used for storage purposes. The Main Building currently houses offices for the local sheriff's department. These buildings are generally in good condition. Other visible features include concrete-slab foundations for one historic building and one post-1945 building. Chain link fences topped with razor wire define parking areas. Major arboreal vegetation within the district includes groupings of elm and cottonwood trees along the northern boundary of the district, with grass and gravel parking lots comprising the surface of most of the rest of the district.

Upon purchasing Tract 6 of the Socorro Grant, Block No. 3, in 1915, El Paso County immediately subdivided the 204.69-acre parcel into lots 6A, 6B and 6C. The county established its poor farm on Lot 6A (15.14 acres), while the State of Texas leased lots 6B (124.65 acres) and 6C (64.52 acres) for use as an experimental farm. About 1940 the county divided lot 6D (.43 acres) from lot 6A (see Map-52), turning control of this small parcel over to the state. As all buildings and activities associated with the historic operation of Rio Vista Farm were confined to these lots, the district embraces only tracts 6A and 6D. El Paso County recently sold tract 6A to the City of Socorro, with the State of Texas retaining control of tract 6D. Texas A&M University continues to use 6B, 6C and 6D as an experimental cotton farm. The neatly plowed rows of these fields set the district apart from its agricultural surroundings (see Photo 1). Most property beyond these tracts



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section 7 Page 6

Rio Vista Farm Historic District  
Socorro, El Paso County, Texas

has been intensely developed since 1945. Property in the area now includes the H.D. Hilley School and numerous residential subdivisions, as well as commercial development focused primarily along North Loop Road.

Dividing the district into two distinct physical components, the unpaved Rio Vista Road links the district to North Loop Road, a principal north-south thoroughfare approximately one-half mile to the southwest. Other unpaved streets within the district encircle the two primary groups of buildings. Property south of Rio Vista Road comprises the 1915 County Poor Farm. The Main Building (Building No. 2; see Photo 2) survives as this facility's most prominent landmark, with a separate brick Washroom (Building No. 3) standing behind it. These 1-story buildings feature load-bearing masonry construction surfaced with brick. The Main Building's original plan incorporated a rectangular core flanked by four wings extending at 45-degree angles from each corner. The simple detailing and low horizontal emphasis tie the building to the Prairie School style. County Commissioners funded rear additions to the building in 1935. The noncontributing El Paso County Sheriff's Department Substation (Building No. 1; see Photo 9) occupies an adjacent parcel to the west of these historic facilities.

The 1915 complex originally included a 1 1/2-story frame Superintendent's House (see Figure-56) and its adobe barn. Located opposite the Main Building on the north side Rio Vista Road, then known as Poor Farm Road, the Superintendent's House was a vernacular building with a steeply pitched side gabled roof. Historic photographs reveal a 1-story screened-in porch extending across the facade. The 1-story adobe barn featured an open bay on the west end of the south elevation. These buildings were razed between 1951 and 1953.

The district's second component consists of a quadrangular complex erected in 1935 by the Texas Transient Bureau and the Works Progress Administration (WPA). Encircled by an unpaved road, the complex consists of rows of adobe buildings with rectangular footprints and nearly uniform dimensions (Buildings Nos. 5-10, 15-17 and 19). Buildings in each row are set 15 feet apart, with continuous metal-roofed canopies linking them (see Photo 4). Nearly identical in appearance, all buildings in the complex display Mission Revival stylistic elements including curvilinear parapets and stucco veneers. The Mess Hall/Kitchen (Building No. 4; see Photo 8) anchors the west end of the complex, while the c.1951 Bracero Processing Building (No. 21) closes the east end. These buildings surpass the scale of those lining the north and south sides of the complex. This layout creates a wide courtyard, with the recreation hall (Building No. 14) providing the only historic intrusion into the open space (see Photo 5). Concrete-slab foundations attest to the existence of two former buildings (Nos. 22 and 23) within the courtyard, although these were probably associated with the Bracero program. To the east, three functionally related historic buildings reflect the scale and materials of the lateral buildings of the courtyard (Buildings Nos. 11-13; see Photos 6 and 7). Separated from the main cluster by the loop road (which appears in 1936 aerial photographs of the complex; see Figure-54), these buildings complete the historic complex.



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section 7 Page 7

Rio Vista Farm Historic District  
Socorro, El Paso County, Texas

Additional functions included an infirmary in Building No. 5, administrative offices in Building No. 6, headquarters in Building No. 7, school facilities in Building No. 12, officer's barracks in Building No. 19 and dormitory facilities in Building Nos. 8-11, 13 and 15-17.

Since 1935, only sporadic development has taken place within the confines of the district. New buildings constructed during the late 1940s and early 1950s included two large buildings (Nos. 21 and 22) in the courtyard and a c.1948 metal quonset (No. 18) on the site of an old dormitory building. Although construction of Buildings Nos. 21 and 22 changed the open character of the courtyard, a concrete-slab foundation is all that remains of Building No. 22. Building No. 21 survives with relatively few alterations to its exterior walls covered with synthetic (asbestos) siding. The quonset on the south side of the courtyard approximates the building footprint of an adobe dormitory destroyed by fire. Other changes include demolition of the 1935 Laundry/Toilet/Shower Building (No. 23), as well as the historic superintendent's house and barn. Constructed in 1952 to replace the superintendent's house, Building No. 1 now serves as a sheriff's substation. Other recent constructions include the Ramada (Building No. 20), a small cinder block building (No. 24) on the south side of the courtyard, and an open shed used as a shooting range (Building No. 25).

### DEFINITION OF CATEGORIES

#### CONTRIBUTING

This category includes buildings constructed between 1915 and 1945 that participate in the district's historic character as the County Poor Farm. Such buildings must be at least 50 years old and retain sufficient integrity to be recognizable to this period of significance. Ideally, Contributing buildings should retain original fabric such as windows, doors, decorative features and materials. A resource need not be completely unaltered to be classified as Contributing, however, as nearly all buildings experienced at least minor changes since their completion. A 1935 addition to the rear of the Main Building, for example, bespeaks its physical evolution during the period of significance. Such historic alterations do not detract from the integrity of the resource. More recent alterations may hamper a building's ability to contribute to the district, although the strength of the association with the poor farm operation may mitigate uncharacteristic changes in scale or materials. While such alterations detract from the original character of the resource, it may still be classified as Contributing if the its basic form remains intact. Most changes within the district are easily reversible alterations, such as the replacement of tar-paper roofing on the adobe dormitories with asphalt shingles. While many doors and windows in the complex have been boarded up, the original fenestration appears to survive. In a few instances, original paneled wood doors have been replaced with metal doors. Few, if any openings have been enlarged or permanently enclosed. All extant buildings retain their basic forms, major decorative and structural features, and historic fenestration patterns to a remarkable degree. The addition of non-historic canopies and wood or



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section 7 Page 8

Rio Vista Farm Historic District  
Socorro, El Paso County, Texas

metal partitions between buildings fails to offset the overwhelming sense of time and place conveyed by the intact historic resources, as they continue to retain integrity of location, setting, feeling and association. Coupled with the intact configuration of buildings, survival of basic architectural fabric, and the absence of modern intrusions in the surrounding agricultural landscape, most of the district's resources continue to foster a sense of the historic character of the County Poor Farm.

### NONCONTRIBUTING

This category chiefly consists of non-historic (post-1945) properties. These resources typically exhibit few of the district's character defining attributes. Such intrusive examples include the open ramada and facilities associated with the sheriff's department substation. Other resources are classified as Noncontributing simply because they do not meet the age criteria. Buildings associated with the 1951 Bracero Center, for example, should be re-evaluated in the future for their significant associations with postwar agricultural trends in the region.

This category also includes historic resources so severely altered that they are unrecognizable to the period of significance. The only resource of this type is the concrete slab foundation of a toilet/laundry room (Building No. 23) in the center of the camp. As this site contains no additional historic fabric, it does not add to our understanding of the camp except to mark the place of a historic component. It is unrecognizable to the district's period of significance and does not contribute to the historic character of the camp. A second concrete slab foundation survives from a post-1945 building that may have been associated with the Bracero program. Constructed after the period of significance, it also is classified as a Noncontributing feature. Like the historic-period slab, it retains no additional architectural fabric linking it to the historic character of the district.

While archaeological properties also may be classified as Contributing or Noncontributing, no surface evidence was found of razed historic resources known to exist within the district's boundaries. Archival information indicates the location of the superintendent's house and a barn north of Rio Vista Road across from the Main Building. As archaeological assessments were not within the scope of this project, future investigators should explore this area of the farm for additional evidence.



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section 7 Page 9

Rio Vista Farm Historic District  
Socorro, El Paso County, Texas

## INVENTORY OF PROPERTIES

### EL PASO COUNTY SHERIFF'S DEPARTMENT SUBSTATION (Building No. 1 - Noncontributing)

The El Paso County Sheriff's Department Substation is a 1-story frame building constructed about 1952 as the Superintendent's Residence. Built on a rectangular concrete slab foundation, the frame residence has no stylistic ornamentation. A low-pitched, cross-gabled roof covered with asphalt shingles surmounts the wood-sided house and its masonite addition. Facing north onto Rio Vista Road, the primary facade features a central wood door and two sliding, aluminum-sash windows. A high wooden fence extends around the rear of the building, thereby obscuring portions of the sides and rear of the building. Alterations include the enclosure of front and side porches and the replacement of the original windows. Although associated with the operation of the County Poor Farm, the building does not date to the period of significance. It is therefore considered a Noncontributing element in the historic district.

### MAIN BUILDING (Building No. 2 - Contributing)

Constructed in 1915, the brick Main Building follows a quadrate cruciform plan with four angled wings radiating from a central rectangular core. The building occupies a level parcel of land on the south side of Rio Vista Road. A 50-foot concrete sidewalk extends to the road from the building's primary entrance on the north facade. Now painted, this facade presents a symmetrical composition featuring a small 3-bay porch across the central core. Concrete steps extending from the front sidewalk provide access to the porch. The porch has an almost trapezoidal shape due to the convergent wings. The primary entrance includes paired paneled doors with glazing and a transom window over both doors. Outer bays within the porch contain double french doors. Fenestration includes four opening on each angled front wing. Those on the west side feature double-hung windows with 6/1 lights, while plywood sheets cover those on the opposite wing. End bays of both wings 3-bay porches extending the width of the wings. Enframing these porches, brick piers with corbelled caps pierce the roofline. A multi-hipped roof covered with asphalt shingles displays eaves with exposed rafter tails reminiscent of the Craftsman style. The overall simplicity of the composition, however, demonstrates the influences of the Prairie School style.

The rear elevation approximates the front facade, although it retains the original brick finish. Additions to this elevation include a square extension of the central core and a smaller single-room addition offset from this extension. The rear angled wings remain fairly intact, although sheets of plywood cover many of the window openings.



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section 7 Page 10

Rio Vista Farm Historic District  
Socorro, El Paso County, Texas

The interior arrangement centers on a single, hexagonal-shaped reception and intake area. Glass doors form the rear wall of this central room. The large, square room behind it currently houses a classroom for the sheriff's department. Historically this room served as a day room where inmates could read, play cards, and visit with one another. Four wings radiate from the central reception area at 45-degree angles. The two front wings (on the northeast and northwest) appear to be somewhat wider than the two rear wings. Denoted as wards by a 1947 map of the complex, each wing originally consisted of a single undivided room about 27-feet wide by 54-feet long. These wards originally housed rows of beds for inmates, segregating elderly women, elderly men and Spanish-speaking men. With the arrival of children at the facility in 1935, this arrangement shifted to accommodate girls in one wing, women another, and men in the third wing and the new addition. Boys lived across the road in the barracks-like dormitories built by the WPA. The fourth wing of the Main Building served as a dining hall. Today, temporary partitions divide one of the rear wings and the rear addition.

Despite such alterations, the Main Building retains its primary character-defining features. Its historic cruciform plan, fenestration and materials remain recognizable to the district's period of significance. The Main Building is one of two extant properties dating to the initial operation of the County Poor Farm.

### WASHROOM (Building No. 3 - Contributing)

South of the Main Building, the relatively small 1-story Washroom exhibits load-bearing brick walls on a square concrete foundation. The primary (west) elevation includes four vertical divisions. The inner bays include two separate doors set under a concrete lintel. The outer bays include window openings covered with plywood sheets. A small concrete slab extends along the base of two doors. A flat parapet that obscures the flat or slightly pitched roof surmounts this composition. Historically, the building functioned as a laundry facility for the entire poor farm. Today it stands vacant, with plywood obscuring its windows. The building nevertheless retains its salient physical features, such as its original materials, fenestration pattern and modest design elements.

### MESS HALL/KITCHEN BUILDING (Building No. 4 - Contributing)

Built in 1935 by the Texas Transient Bureau and completed by the WPA, the Mess Hall/Kitchen Building terminates the west end of the adobe complex. A concrete foundation underpins the rectangular plan. Stucco covers the adobe walls, which in turn support a gable roof sheathed in metal. The primary (south) facade includes three vertical divisions. Small, buttress-like piers frame the double-door entrance and flanking 4-light wood-frame windows. The composition rises to a curvilinear Mission Revival style parapet. The original bell has been lost, although its mate still resides at the opposite end of the building. The most distinctive feature of the Mess Hall



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section 7 Page 11

Rio Vista Farm Historic District  
Socorro, El Paso County, Texas

and Kitchen is the exterior stone chimney on the west elevation. Its rustic masonry cascades at the base, exemplifying the hand work adopted by WPA projects during this period.

### DORMITORIES (Building Nos. 8-11, 13, 15-17 - Contributing)

The eight extant dormitories share physical characteristics common to most of the buildings in the 1935 complex. The dormitories include Building Nos. 8-10 along the north side of the courtyard, Building Nos. 15-17 along the south perimeters and Buildings Nos. 11 and 13 east of the road that encircles the main complex. Dormitories share features such as rectangular plans measuring 75 feet across by 22 feet deep aligned on an east-west orientation. Each rests on a concrete slab foundation. Single doors flanked by single windows occur in each end elevations, which in turn are capped by Mission Revival style parapets. Fenestration on elevations facing onto the courtyard includes single-door entrances flanked by double-hung windows with 4-light wood sash. Continuous shed-roofed canopies extend along the courtyard elevations of the dormitories on the southern perimeter of the courtyard. Fenestration on the outer elevations opposite includes 11 openings with similar types of windows. Virtually unaltered, all of the dormitories are easily recognizable to the district's period of significance. Although many are in only fair condition, they retain their original forms, materials, setting, and design elements. The following discussions detail individual deviations from the prototypical form for this class of resources:

Dormitory No. 8 conforms closely to the prototype, except that it displays three doors opening onto the courtyard. Little changed since its construction in 1935, it retains its most important physical features and is classified as a Contributing element in the district.

Dormitory No. 9 conforms closely to the prototype, although it features no doors on the courtyard side. Because it changed very little since its construction in 1935, it is classified as a Contributing element in the district.

Dormitory No. 10 terminates the east end of the row of buildings on the north side of the courtyard. It exhibits a shed roof porch on the east elevation. This building remains little changed since its construction in 1935 and is therefore classified as a Contributing element.

Dormitory No. 11 is one of three historic buildings (Nos. 11, 12, and 13) physically separated from other Texas Transient Bureau buildings by an unpaved road that circles through the complex. Unlike those dormitories on the courtyard, the buildings at the far east end of the complex feature neither canopies nor porches (see Photo 7). Few physical changes detract from the historic character of this building apart from double metal doors and asphalt shingling on the roof. Still strongly recognizable to the district's period of significance, it is classified as a Contributing element of the district.



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section 7 Page 12

Rio Vista Farm Historic District  
Socorro, El Paso County, Texas

Dormitory No. 13, like No. 11, occupies the eastern edge of the complex. The building remains virtually identical to the other dormitories apart from the installation of metal doors and asphalt shingling on the roof. Because it retains its integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling and association, the building is classified as a Contributing element.

Dormitory No. 15 occupies the southeast corner of the courtyard. Virtually unchanged since its construction in 1935, it conforms to the prototype except for the lack of windows in the end elevations. It is classified as a Contributing element in the district because few alterations or changes detract from its integrity.

Dormitory No. 16 remains unaltered since its 1935 construction. It exactly matches the prototype although, like Building Nos. 15 and No. 17, it displays no windows in the end elevations. The building is classified as a Contributing element in the district because few alterations or changes detract from its integrity.

Dormitory No. 17 is identical to Building Nos. 15 and 16. This building has changed little since its construction in 1935, retaining its most important physical features. It is therefore classified as a Contributing element in the district.

### INFIRMARY (Building No. 5 - Contributing)

Occupying the north side of the courtyard, this virtually unchanged building displays many of the same physical characteristics, orientation, and materials found elsewhere in the district. A continuous canopy along its north wall connects the property to Building No. 6. Despite its use as an infirmary, the interior arrangement conforms to the prototype of a single open room.

### TECHNICIAN'S OFFICE (Building No. 6 - Contributing)

Due east of Building No. 5, this building is part of a row of similar buildings along the north side of the courtyard. A continuous canopy runs along the north wall, linking it with Building No. 5. Because the Technician's Office retains its integrity of location, design, setting, materials, feeling and association, it is classified as Contributing.

### HEADQUARTERS (Building No. 7 - Contributing)

The Headquarters is within this same row of similarly sized and detailed properties along the north side of the courtyard. The lack of substantive physical changes leaves the building's integrity intact. As the building retains its Mission parapet, original windows and doors and finish materials, it is categorized as a Contributing element.



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section 7 Page 13

Rio Vista Farm Historic District  
Socorro, El Paso County, Texas

### SCHOOL (Building No. 12 - Contributing)

Flanked by Dormitories Nos. 11 and 13, the School occupies the far eastern end of the 1935 complex. Used for educational purposes, it nevertheless displays many of the same physical features as the dormitories in the district. The interior arrangement also consists of a single open room. Changes include the replacement of its original doors with plywood doors and of the historic tar-paper roof with asphalt shingles. As the building's most important design elements survive, it is classified as a Contributing element of the district.

### RECREATION HALL (Building No. 14 - Contributing)

One of two buildings originally erected in the interior courtyard of the 1935 complex, the Recreation Building fits the prototype for the district's adobe buildings. It, too, houses a single open room. Children living at Rio Vista Farm in the post-Depression era used the building for hobbies and arts and crafts projects. Retaining its salient features, the building continues to contribute to the character of the district.

### QUONSET (Building No. 18 - Noncontributing)

This hemi-cylindrical metal building occupies the site of a dormitory destroyed by fire in 1948. Although its dimensions nearly match those of the old dormitory, the quonset shares no other physical characteristic with historic properties in the district. Currently used for storage purposes, the building falls outside the district's period of significance and fails to conform with the character of the district as a whole. Currently categorized as Noncontributing, its status could be re-evaluated for its contributions to the postwar operations of the poor farm once it reaches 50 years of age.

### OFFICER'S BARRACKS (Building No. 19 - Contributing)

On the south side of the courtyard, this building shares similar physical characteristics with most other historic properties in this section of the district. Minor differences include a slightly more ornate parapet and two windows in each end elevation. Flanked by nonhistoric buildings on the east and west, this building has lost some of its immediate historic setting. Its physical similarities nevertheless visually reinforce its place in the district.

### RAMADA (Structure No. 20 - Noncontributing)

Such open frame shelters commonly provide shade in school yards throughout the Southwest. Documentary evidence suggests that it dates beyond the period of significance. As the structure does not display materials or physical features common to the district, it is classified as a Noncontributing element.



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section 7 Page 14

Rio Vista Farm Historic District  
Socorro, El Paso County, Texas

### BRACERO PROCESSING CENTER (Building No. 21 - Noncontributing)

This 1-story building terminates the east end of the courtyard. It features a rectangular building footprint based on a concrete-slab foundation. The building exhibits two wings with asbestos siding and louvered glass windows. Originally used to process workers as part of the Bracero Center, the property does not date to the period of significance. As it also fails to share common physical features with historic buildings in the district, it is classified as a Noncontributing element. The building should be re-evaluated for its significant contributions to agricultural history in the region once it achieves 50 years of age.

### BRACERO BUILDING SITE (Site No. 22 - Noncontributing)

The only visible physical feature at this location is a concrete-slab foundation that marks the site of building constructed in the 1950s to accommodate the Bracero Center. As the building site retains little to link it with the district's significance, it is classified as a Noncontributing element.

### LAUNDRY/TOILETS/SHOWERS BUILDING (Site No. 23 - Noncontributing)

Like Site No. 22, this property consists of a concrete slab foundation. Although it marks the location of building constructed in 1935, few of the property's historic physical features survive to link it to the district's significance. This lack of integrity forces classification as a Noncontributing element in the historic district.

### BRACERO BUILDINGS (Building Nos. 24 and 26 - Noncontributing)

These small buildings, with cinder-block construction and low-pitched gable roofs, were constructed in the 1950s during operation of the Bracero Center. Their original use is unknown. They do not date to the district's period of significance, nor share the design elements, workmanship and physical features seen on historic properties in the district. Consequently, the buildings are classified as Noncontributing. This status should be re-evaluated once they reaches 50 years of age.

### SHOOTING RANGE SHED (Structure No. 25 - Noncontributing)

This 1-story metal structure provides limited shelter for sheriff's personnel using the shooting range. The site historically served as a large garden irrigated by the Mesa Spur. With wood-pole and corrugated metal construction, the current structure is open only on the north. It detracts from the historic character of the district as its materials and major design elements differ from those exhibited on historic properties in the district. Moreover, the structure was built after the district's period of significance and is therefore classified as Noncontributing.



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**8. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE**

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**APPLICABLE NATIONAL REGISTER CRITERIA**

- ☒ **A** PROPERTY IS ASSOCIATED WITH EVENTS THAT HAVE MADE A SIGNIFICANT CONTRIBUTION TO THE BROAD PATTERNS OF OUR HISTORY.
- ☐ **B** PROPERTY IS ASSOCIATED WITH THE LIVES OF PERSONS SIGNIFICANT IN OUR PAST.
- ☒ **C** PROPERTY EMBODIES THE DISTINCTIVE CHARACTERISTICS OF A TYPE, PERIOD, OR METHOD OF CONSTRUCTION OR REPRESENTS THE WORK OF A MASTER, OR POSSESSES HIGH ARTISTIC VALUE, OR REPRESENTS A SIGNIFICANT AND DISTINGUISHABLE ENTITY WHOSE COMPONENTS LACK INDIVIDUAL DISTINCTION.
- ☐ **D** PROPERTY HAS YIELDED, OR IS LIKELY TO YIELD, INFORMATION IMPORTANT IN PREHISTORY OR HISTORY.

**CRITERIA CONSIDERATIONS:** N/A

**AREAS OF SIGNIFICANCE:** Social History; Government/Politics; Agriculture; Architecture

**PERIOD OF SIGNIFICANCE:** 1915-1945

**SIGNIFICANT DATES:** 1915 1935 1936

**SIGNIFICANT PERSON:** N/A

**CULTURAL AFFILIATION:** N/A

**ARCHITECT/BUILDER:** Braunton & Leibert (1915 architects); Trost & Trost (1935 architects);  
McKee, R.E. (1935 builder); Nilson, E.R. and McGhee, Percy (1936 architects)

**NARRATIVE STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE** (see continuation sheets 8-15 through 8-43)

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**9. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHIC REFERENCES**

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**BIBLIOGRAPHY** (see continuation sheets 9-# through 9-#)

**PREVIOUS DOCUMENTATION ON FILE (NPS):** N/A

- ☐ preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
- ☐ previously listed in the National Register
- ☐ previously determined eligible by the National Register
- ☐ designated a National Historic Landmark
- ☐ recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey #
- ☐ recorded by Historic American Engineering Record #

**PRIMARY LOCATION OF ADDITIONAL DATA:**

- ☒ State historic preservation office (*Texas Historical Commission*)
- ☐ Other state agency
- ☐ Federal agency
- ☒ Local government (*El Paso County Courthouse*)
- ☒ University (*UTEP Special Collections*)
- ☐ Other -- Specify Repository:



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 15

Rio Vista Farm Historic District  
Socorro, El Paso County, Texas

Set amid irrigated cotton fields in the Rio Grande valley south of El Paso, the Rio Vista Farm Historic District contains a significant collection of government sponsored social welfare buildings dating to the early 20th-century. The complex includes components of a 1915 poor farm and a Depression-era transient camp completed under the Works Progress Administration (WPA) in 1935-36. The institution addressed El Paso's most compelling public welfare needs for nearly half a century following its establishment by El Paso County's commissioners court in 1915. In a departure from traditional approaches at Texas county poor farms, both neglected children and the aged poor received shelter at the facility. It served a variety of additional welfare roles, including stints as transient worker housing, a temporary base for a Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) unit and a processing center for migrant farm workers employed through the Bracero Program. Rio Vista Farm's success owed much to the exceptional mother/daughter management team that supervised the facility from 1916 to 1964. Despite intense post-World War II suburban development in the region, surrounding cotton fields continue to preserve Rio Vista Farm's historic agricultural setting. This exceptional collection of early 20th century buildings is eligible for listing in the National Register under Criterion A for its significance in the areas of Politics and Government, Social History, and Agriculture. It is also nominated under Criterion C as a significant collection of early 20th century institutional buildings.

With its roots in the county poor farm traditions of the late 19th century, management of Rio Vista Farm was predicated on the reform ideals of the progressive movement. When the citizens of El Paso county voted in 1911 to purchase land for a new county farm, the archaic practice of shuttling the poor was losing ground to progressive era ideals (Cottrell, 1989). Indeed, upon its completion in 1915, El Paso County's poor farm was one of the last such institutions established in Texas. Sweeping changes in public welfare programs implemented by the progressive movement all but eliminated the poor farm system in the state by the mid-1930s. El Paso nevertheless maintained Rio Vista Farm until 1964, partly as a result of the remarkable family of caretakers who oversaw the institution's operation throughout its nearly 50 year existence.

From 1916 on Rio Vista Farm was run by John and Agnes O'Shea or their daughter, Helen O'Shea Keleher. Largely through their efficient and caring management - a combination of enlightened social theory and a sense of *noblesse oblige* - El Paso's county poor farm survived, even flourished, when the relief programs initiated during the Great Depression supplanted other county farms throughout Texas. Helen O'Shea Keleher, in particular, strived to maintain a homelike atmosphere at the farm where the residents lived like members of a family. Although her beliefs and practices contrasted sharply with traditional poor farm management, they were consistent with the ideals of America's early 20th-century social reform movement. Her ardent advocacy of these ideals brought more than 4,000 children to live at Rio Vista Farm over the course of her career.



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 16

Rio Vista Farm Historic District  
Socorro, El Paso County, Texas

The facility ultimately hosted a variety of public welfare programs including a Texas Transient Bureau camp constructed by the WPA, a temporary CCC camp, shelter for hundreds of homeless people during the Depression, and a processing center for the Bracero Program. This plan brought thousands of Mexican farm laborers to work in agricultural areas of the United States following World War II. By the 1960s Social Security and other welfare programs made it virtually impossible for applicants to qualify for residency at Rio Vista Farm. State law precluded residency at the county poor farm for those with income from any source. When the El Paso county commissioners decided to close the facility in December 1964, only four elderly clients and Helen Keleher remained at Rio Vista Farm. Although she continued to support worthy causes for the next 20 years, on the occasion of her 90th birthday Keleher recalled that she was most proud of her achievements with the children of Rio Vista Farm. In many regards, the history of Rio Vista Farm is the history of one family's commitment to a social ideal.

### EARLY HISTORY OF THE REGION

The written history of this region dates to the 17th century Spanish and Indian settlements along the Rio Grande. Fleeing present-day New Mexico after the Pueblo Revolt of 1680, these settlers farmed the dry Rio Grande valley by establishing a network of irrigation ditches known as *acequias*. Cut from the river, the *acequias* crisscrossed the valley from the villages at Paso del Norte (now Juárez in Mexico) and Ysleta, to Socorro and San Elizario, a distance of about 20 miles along the river. All of these villages lie on the south side of the Rio Grande in Mexico. A major flood about 1829 created a new principal channel that left the settlements at Ysleta, Socorro and San Elizario on the north side of the river (Morrow 1981:23). As a result, the villages eventually became part of the Republic of Texas and later the United States. Farming continued as usual, however, with residents of the Socorro Grant (an ancient Spanish land grant that included the village of Socorro and the surrounding land) tending orchards, vineyards, gardens and fields of grain watered by a community irrigation system (Mills, 1962).

Agricultural and settlement patterns changed dramatically with the establishment of rail service by the Southern Pacific in 1881, ushering in an era of prosperity that would establish El Paso's ascendancy in the valley. Within a few years, El Paso's population surpassed 5,500. The Chamber of Commerce began promoting "more than 1,000,000 acres of alluvial farmland" in the lower valley to farmers "back East" (City and County of El Paso 1886: 18). Anglo-American farmers to new towns like Clint (1883) and Fabens (1884) on the railroad line, began to eclipse Socorro and San Elizario as agricultural centers. Successful agriculture was dependent on water, however, and in a land where rainfall was sparse and the river flow unpredictable, El Paso valley promoters and farmers realized they had to secure more reliable irrigation.



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 17

Rio Vista Farm Historic District  
Socorro, El Paso County, Texas

In 1891, the Franklin Canal, projected to revolutionize agricultural productivity in the valley, was completed. It expanded and extended the reach of the irrigation far beyond the Rio Grande to previously uncultivated areas of the valley. Land sales and new farms multiplied in the Socorro Grant and many of the new farmers had Anglo surnames (Peterson et. al. 1992: 60). The effect was phenomenal. In 1880, before both the railroad and the Franklin Canal, El Paso county's 279 farms consisted of a total of 14,024 acres assessed at a value of \$444,092. By 1900, 45,000 acres of land were under irrigation with a value of \$1,440,047 (Hammons 1942: 122). Still, the increased usage drained the Rio Grande's flow to a trickle, causing water shortages and drought. When it rained, however, the river often flooded the entire valley, destroying crops in the fields. Land developers, farmers and lawmakers worked to complete a dam on the upper Rio Grande, in New Mexico, to regulate the river's flow. In the years immediately preceding Elephant Butte Dam's completion, astute farmers and businessmen realized that irrigation-accessible land would soon increase in value and they hurried to buy up the remaining uncultivated parcels in the valley (Peterson et.al. 1992: 62). Most of the land along North Loop Road, the main arterial serving Rio Vista Farm, was first sold and developed during this period.

Individual farmers and land speculators were not the only ones who scrambled to buy land in the Lower Valley in anticipation of Elephant Butte Dam. The county commissioners court knew that land prices would increase in the valley after the dam was completed. They seized the opportunity to purchase a site for a permanent poor farm in an area not yet served by the irrigation system, but which would soon benefit from an expanded system with the completion of the dam.

### THE COUNTY POOR FARM SYSTEM

Debate over care for indigent residents consumed the El Paso county commissioners court for more than three decades following the county's organization in 1871. On the heels of the Civil War, the state of Texas adopted a new constitution stipulating that each county would establish a "Manual Labor Poor House" for the care and employment of its indigent population (article XII, section 26; cited in Cottrell, 1989:170). In this way, the state assigned the authority and responsibility for the poor to the individual counties. Inherent in the provision was the sentiment that the poor were somehow responsible for their condition, possibly criminal, and should perform some manner of work in exchange for their keep. This concept, with roots in a 17th century English law intended to "relieve distress and preserve order," was pervasive throughout the United States in the 19th century. English law, enacted by Parliament in 1601, defined "three classes of poor: those who were vagrants and deserved punishment, those who were able-bodied and could be put to work, and those who were distressed and needed a place to live (for example, in an almshouse)." By defining poverty, the laws also indicated methods of relief - through forced work programs and subsidized shelter and food. Colonists brought these Elizabethan concepts of relief to America where they eventually found their way into state constitutions. States, in turn, generally relegated indigent care to individual counties, as did Texas in 1869 (Cottrell, 1989: 171). In urban



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 18

Rio Vista Farm Historic District  
Socorro, El Paso County, Texas

regions, almshouses or poor houses were established, but in agricultural states, such as Texas, counties more commonly instituted poor farms. Such farms provided both a place to house the poor and a means for the county to get a return on the investment through the sale of surplus crops.

Government relief in 19th century America generally took one of two forms. Commitment of indigents to an almshouse or a poor farm was known as "indoor relief," while direct relief, through subsidies paid to indigents was known as "outdoor relief." "Indoor relief" -- concentrating paupers under one roof and under the supervision of a government-appointed overseer -- was preferred in most cases because it was less expensive and under greater control by the state. However, most Texas counties experimented with a combination of the two methods, depending upon their circumstances. In most cases, after a period of exclusive "outdoor relief" in which direct payment was given to indigents or the individuals who cared for them, county governments concluded that it was less expensive and more efficient to establish a poor farm to handle indigent concerns. The El Paso county commissioners court wrestled with the merits of "indoor relief" versus "outdoor relief" from the 1870s until 1915, when Rio Vista Farm was established, and then periodically until the farm closed in 1964.

### EL PASO'S FIRST POOR FARM: 1885

The earliest minutes of the El Paso county commissioners court reveal that the county engaged in a form of "outdoor relief" during the 1870s and 1880s after El Paso county was organized (1871). Minutes for 3 January 1882 are an illustration. Commissioners voted to allow \$15 for the maintenance of a "destitute old woman living in the vicinity of El Paso within the county" (El Paso county commissioners court minutes [EPCCCM], Vol. 1: 158). Nearly every court session dealt with some aspect of indigent care. It was the commissioners' responsibility to determine entitlement of applicants for "pauper" status, to set payment for their care, and to approve bills presented by individuals who sheltered or fed them. In addition, the commissioners were required to review medical and burial fees for paupers. In the 1880s, El Paso's standard stipend was \$15 per month for each pauper "entitled to support . . . from the indigent fund in accordance with law" (EPCCCM, 9 June 1884, Vol. 2: 151). Widows of indigents were routinely paid \$10 per month (EPCCCM, Vol. 2: 217). While El Paso had no official poor house, certain individuals apparently made their living or augmented their incomes by caring for numbers of indigents in their homes. In 1884, for instance, the county commissioners voted to pay \$39.37 to C.T. Konblanch for keeping several paupers for two weeks (EPCCCM, Vol 2: 213). In general, such individuals were allowed the standard monthly figure of \$15 per pauper. By the mid-1880s, however, paupers crowded the indigent rolls and financing their care increasingly drained county resources. When creative solutions like buying the paupers one-way railroad tickets to other places -- frequently Albuquerque -- failed to solve the indigent problem, the county commissioners finally resolved to build a poor farm in an attempt to concentrate the poor under one roof and save money (EPCCCM, Vol 2: 229). Court minutes also indicate that the commissioners hoped to discourage future



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 19

Rio Vista Farm Historic District  
Socorro, El Paso County, Texas

applicants for indigent status by establishing a county farm. It was one thing to receive payment from the county and quite another to be committed to the poor farm as an inmate.

By February 1885 the commissioners began accepting bids from property owners in the lower valley "for the sale to the county of 100 acres of land for the establishment of a poor farm" (*The Lone Star*, 28 January 1885). Three commissioners who lived in the lower valley communities of San Elizario and Ysleta were appointed to "examine localities" and report back to the court (EPCCCM, Vol. 2: 729). However, when the court met on 11 February 1885, they voted to revoke their earlier resolution to establish and maintain a county poor farm. The reasons for their decision are unknown but later discussions indicated that the price of land in the valley had risen considerably since the arrival of the railroad in 1881. Discouraged in their efforts, the commissioners continued paying individual allotments until 1889 when the poor farm debate resurfaced. Maintaining paupers on an individual basis was a continual drain on county resources and finally the "large expense of the county to daily care for paupers" prompted the commissioners to action (EPCCCM, Vol. 2: 2).

Early in 1889, the county commissioners rented a building in San Elizario as a temporary poor house. At the same time, they established a "sinking fund for the purchase of a Poor Farm" (EPCCCM, 13 February 1889, Vol. 2: 677). Money issues again dictated the selection of a suitable farm. Throughout 1889 and 1890, the county commissioners received bids, examined parcels, rejected bids, and debated the matter at every meeting. Their stated intention was to "select the cheapest, most available location" (EPCCCM, 6 March 1890, Vol. 3: 16), but they could not agree on a specific piece of property. Another point of contention concerned the size and location of the farm. The commissioners first resolved that the farm should be "not less than 5 or more than 30 acres and to be convenient to railroad", later refined to "not less than 10 nor more than 50 acres and situated not more than 25 miles from El Paso and not more than 1/2 a mile from a railroad" (EPCCCM, 4 December 1890, Vol. 3: 58).

The commissioners' inability to choose a site created a backlog of indigent cases. Throughout the farm selection process, paupers continued to apply for assistance and commissioners responded on a case-by-case basis. Some received direct aid while others were committed to the temporary poor farm in San Elizario. Commissioners frequently voted to buy indigents one-way railroad tickets to destinations far from El Paso. Despite their apparent dedication to acquiring a satisfactory poor farm, the county judicial system intervened. On 9 December 1890 county Judge A. Blacker ordered the court to remain in session until the commissioners selected a county farm site (EPCCCM, Vol. 3: 59).

Under Judge Blacker's orders the commissioners all went "down the valley" to inspect the proposed sites for the county farm. This was an apparently frustrating excursion and commissioners White and Armendariz led the vote to reopen the original bids with a stipulation that the farm be



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 20

Rio Vista Farm Historic District  
Socorro, El Paso County, Texas

"not less than 3 nor more than 10 acres" with no limitations on railroad access (EPCCCM, Vol. 3: 65). The modification of the selection criteria is probably a reflection of increased prices in the lower valley, particularly on parcels with railroad access. The commissioners finally agreed to purchase a tract of land near Belen Station at Santa Rose, in Section 4 of the Socorro Grant. They purchased the 474-acre parcel from Mariano Sierra for \$1,186 (EPCCCM, Vol. 3:75, 97). A.H. Parker, the county surveyor, was paid \$50 for making the survey and map of the poor farm (EPCCCM, Vol. 3: 97). Although the exact location of the first county poor farm remains unknown, the 1881 A.H. Parker survey of the Socorro Grant depicts the Sierra parcel in Section 4 (White, 1986: 103).

By 12 February 1891 architect George E. King was selected to prepare plans and specifications for the new poor farm. After some dissent from commissioners Lowenstein and Armendariz over the expense (EPCCCM, Vol. 3: 77), the court agreed to pay King \$163.50 with contractors Buchanan and Powers to build the buildings for \$4,672 (EPCCCM, Vol. 3: 82). Lowenstein continued to object but was outvoted. Construction started in February and by March 1891 the commissioners planned its completion. They sold a cow, calves and horse to outfit the new poor farm with furniture and other necessities. commissioners Armendariz and White purchased trees for the property (EPCCCM, Vol. 3: 82). A brick wall enclosed the farm (EPCCCM, Vol. 3:136) and commissioner Armendariz marked out a one acre section on the southeast portion of the farm for a pauper cemetery (EPCCCM, Vol. 3: 203). While the farm neared completion, plans were made to move women at the Ladies Hospital to the farm as soon as it was completed. The commissioners voted to discontinue individual payments for pauper care and to move all paupers to the new poor farm (EPCCCM, Vol. 3: 82; Vol. 3: 103), thus ending the practice of "outdoor relief."

On 1 June 1891 S.H. Buchanan of Buchanan and Powers, the contractors, presented the court with a certificate from architect Al Larmour, who replaced George King, that the work was completed. The commissioners adjourned to examine the poor farm building at Santa Rosa on June 22, and on June 23, the newly-appointed superintendent, commissioner Jesus Montes, was instructed to move the inmates and their effects from the temporary poor farm at San Elizario to the new poor farm (EPCCCM, Vol. 3:1 35). With the opening of the new poor farm, all aid to paupers not living at the county farm ceased (EPCCCM, Vol. 3: 136). On 24 August 1891 commissioner and poor farm Superintendent, Jesus Montes reported that the cost of the maintaining paupers was reduced to \$1,900 per year, including the expense of moving indigents to the farm from the old hospital, and the salaries of the superintendent, cook, supplies, etc. (EPCCCM, Vol. 3: 196).

From Armendariz's survey of the cemetery to Montes's appointment as superintendent, it is clear that the county commissioners were very personally involved in the establishment and maintenance of the poor farm. To learn standard poor farm management techniques, Judge Blacker traveled to Ft. Worth, Waco, Austin and San Antonio in April 1891, just before El Paso's new farm



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 21

Rio Vista Farm Historic District  
Socorro, El Paso County, Texas

opened (EPCCCM, Vol. 3: 111). The commissioners were very aware of their role as guardians of public resources and they were constantly on the alert for less expensive ways to conduct county affairs. When the county commissioners set up the temporary poor farm in San Elizario, they appointed R.J. Carr of San Elizario as superintendent at a salary of \$75 per month (EPCCCM, Vol. 2: 2). Carr was aware of the county's primary concerns and in his first report to the commissioners court, reported that he had reduced the cost of keeping paupers from \$2 to \$0.1875 cents per head (per day), a feat lauded in the newspapers (*El Paso Herald*, 15 February 1889). One wonders at the quality of care superintendent Carr's clientele received at less than a quarter per person. Carr did not explain where budget cuts were made. Due to illness, Carr's son, Samuel, succeeded his father as superintendent, but the Commission felt the \$75 monthly salary was too high. They fired Carr and replaced him with Crespi Aranda who proposed to run the farm for \$50 a month (EPCCCM, Vol. 3: 97). 2 On 14 May 1891 the commissioners, still seeking to reduce costs, replaced Aranda with one of their own members -- Jesus Montes -- who planned to supervise poor farm operations for \$40 per month. The cook, however, was given a raise from \$15 to \$20 per month. At the same time, commissioner Lowenstein assumed the duties as purchasing agent to insure that the poor farm obtain the lowest prices for goods (EPCCCM, Vol. 3: 121). While there appears to have been some self-interest behind certain appointments and decisions, the El Paso county commissioners court consistently sought the least expensive solutions to safeguard the public trust and resources.

While the county commissioners court minutes record details of the poor farm's construction and expenses, very little is known about the inmates, as they were called. In most cases only their names were recorded in the official county records. Both Anglo and Hispanic surnames appear on El Paso's indigent lists in the late-19th century when the first poor farm was debated and built, but Hispanic surnames far outnumbered Anglo. The larger number of Hispanic indigents listed in the pauper rolls reflects the larger percentage of Hispanic residents in El Paso county during that period, in general. Widows were frequently given monthly stipends from the county but they were not necessarily considered paupers. More men than women appear in the indigent lists. An occasional description such as "a destitute old woman," "an afflicted old man," or a man judged "unable to take care of himself," offers little information about the individual other than their approximate age, economic condition and possible mental or physical health. However, it does appear that many paupers were approaching death by the time they were added to the county rolls. Pauper burial lists presented regularly to the commissioners court often contained the names of indigents who were added to relief rolls only a few months -- or weeks -- earlier. Only adults qualified as "indigents" and most were elderly or disabled in some way. In the two decades spanning the 1880s and 1890s, only one case involving an indigent child came before the commissioners court. In that instance, the court sent the child and its mother to live with relatives in Albuquerque. If a pauper was found to have any living relatives, no matter how distant or far removed, they were denied assistance and encouraged to prevail upon their family for support. The criteria ensured that only the most destitute qualified for county support in El Paso.



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 22

Rio Vista Farm Historic District  
Socorro, El Paso County, Texas

Regardless of the stringent criteria for indigent assistance, El Paso citizens were wary of government "handouts" at taxpayer expense and suspicious of expensive public programs. In 1893, the new poor farm was barely completed before local newspapers began a campaign to discredit its construction as an extravagant use of public money. Commissioner Montes countered the attack in reports detailing how the poor farm would save the county money. Bowing to public pressure, the Commissioners removed Montes and took bids for a new poor farm superintendent. George Kohlhaas presented the lowest bid and was awarded the contract to operate the farm for the princely sum of \$500 [per year] (*El Paso Herald*, 1893). Montes' removal was not enough to satisfy the citizens of the county and after several years of protest, the county closed its hard-won poor farm.

### RIO VISTA FARM: 1915

Beginning about 1911, however, the county commissioners once again broached the subject of the poor farm. By this time, the demographics of the county and its leadership had changed considerably since the earlier poor farm. In 1885, when the first county farm was planned, the majority of county commissioners, including Juan Armendariz, Jesus Montes, and Gregorio Garcia, were of Hispanic descent -- their ancestors among the earliest permanent settlers in the valley. Morris Lowenstein, a lower valley farmer and produce merchant, was the lone Anglo on the court for several terms. The commissioners represented the bulk of the county's population which was concentrated in the semi-rural lower valley communities of Ysleta, Socorro and San Elizario, until after the turn of the century. By 1911, however, the city of El Paso surpassed the valley in population, and a large number of the newcomers were Anglos. The 1915 county commissioners -- Judge Adrian Pool, James Clifford, Seth B. Orndorff, representing Socorro, George Pendell, J.M. Walling -- all had Anglo surnames, including those representing the lower valley communities where Hispanic families were still in the majority. By that time, these relative newcomers had seized a disproportionate share of the elected offices and influence. They dominated El Paso's political and social arenas for the next several decades, leading the county to a period of substantial economic and agricultural expansion up to the Great Depression.

For several years, building a new poor farm and county hospital commanded the attention of the commissioners court. They took the matter to the voters and proposed a \$30,000 bond election for 20 June 1911 (*El Paso Herald*, 16 May 1911: 1). Citizens voted down the measure but the commissioners brought the issue back to the voters in 1915. On 28 June 1915, 83 people petitioned the commissioners' court to order a \$750,000 bond election for "the construction, maintenance and operation of a Hospital and poor farm, or in aid thereof" (EPCCCM, 28 June 1915: evidence, UTEP Special Collections). The issues were later separated from each other, with voters considering a tax to pay the interest on \$100,000 at 5 percent interest and create a sinking fund for the establishment of "County Poor Houses and Farms" (EPCCCM, 12 July 1915: evidence, UTEP Special Collections). This time the bond election passed and poor farm bonds were printed and



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 23

Rio Vista Farm Historic District  
Socorro, El Paso County, Texas

issued by 28 September 1915 (El Paso *Herald*, 28 September 1915). The city of El Paso agreed to pay a third of the operating cost of the county farm.

Commissioners repeated the steps their predecessors took 25 years earlier. In October 1915 commissioners Seth Orndorff, George Pendell, and Judge Adrian Pool went "down the valley" to examine several possible sites for the \$100,000 poor farm (El Paso *Herald*, 15 October 1915). On 16 November 1915 commissioner Pendell ordered the county to purchase 198.45 acres of land in the Socorro Grant and an additional 8.408 acres of "hill lands" for a total price of \$29,775.60 (EPCCCM, 16 November 1915: evidence, UTEP Special Collections) [Note: acreage totals differ with subsequent surveys]. At the same time, the county commissioners voted to lease most of the land to the state as an experimental farm, reserving about 14 acres for the poor farm. Judge Adrian Pool offered the State use of the land "in connection with the county poor farm which the county commission will establish from funds out of a \$100,000 bond issue recently voted" (El Paso *Herald*, 10 September 1915).

The commissioners hired the El Paso architectural firm of Braunton & Leibert to draw plans for the new El Paso county poor farm building and ordered bids for the "Brick, Adobe and Hollow Tile" building (EPCCCM, 13 March 1916: evidence, UTEP Special Collections). County minutes record few details of the new poor farm. It apparently caused little argument or discussion among the members -- unlike the first farm. The Main Building consisted of a central reception/lobby area with four wards extending outward from the center. Behind the Main Building construction crews built a separate wash house for laundry. Shortly after the Main Building was completed in 1915, the commissioners ordered the construction of a barn and superintendent's house across Rio Vista Road, to the north of the Main Building. Once the county issued bonds, secured the land, and initiated construction, little mention of the county poor farm appears in the commissioners court minutes, other than normal operating costs, until the late 1920s.

### JOHN AND AGNES O'SHEA: 1915-1929/1959

One reason the county encountered few problems with its second poor farm may be attributed, at least in part, to its efficient management. On 16 April 1916 shortly after the completion of the Main Building, county Judge E.B. McClintock appointed John O'Shea to operate the county farm along with his own 640-acre adjacent farm (El Paso *Herald*, 8 January 1969; El Paso *Herald*, 11 April 1946). O'Shea's wife, Agnes, took charge of the inmates. Such appointments were often given as political rewards and were considered plum assignments because they offered financial stability and the opportunity to profit by reducing inmate services (Cottrell, 1989). In O'Shea's case, however, the appointment appears more practically, than politically, inspired, in spite of his many political and economic interests. John O'Shea owned several modern pieces of heavy equipment including hay balers and his workers could easily and quickly move across the road to work the county poor farm (Keleher, 1984: 17). In fact, O'Shea was financially



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 24

Rio Vista Farm Historic District  
Socorro, El Paso County, Texas

independent, due to lucrative real estate investments, and did not need the appointment to secure his livelihood. O'Shea operated the county farm from his appointment in 1916 until his death on 8 January 1929. Agnes O'Shea continued to supervise inmates at the farm during this period.

John O'Shea enjoyed a multi-faceted career in his adopted Southwest; he was a railroad builder, conductor, real estate broker, and farmer. O'Shea traveled to Alamogordo, New Mexico, in 1893 to direct the construction of a narrow-gauge railroad to Cloudcroft, destined to become a favorite mountain resort of the El Paso-Alamogordo region (Keleher 1984: 1). One of Alamogordo's pioneer settlers, O'Shea was also one of Cloudcroft's first developers. Between 1893 and 1898, he built 100 three-room houses in the mountain village (Keleher, 1984: 2). In 1898, when the narrow-gauge railroad was completed, O'Shea moved his family to El Paso where he became a conductor on the El Paso and Northeastern Railroad (later the El Paso and Southwestern and later still, the Southern Pacific). In 1906, he brought the first train -- the Golden State Limited -- into El Paso's new Union Station to the cheers of the citizens (Keleher, 1984: 5). By 1908, John O'Shea owned several farms in the upper valley above El Paso where he grew grapes, peaches, apples and pears (Keleher, 1984: 5). Along with other entrepreneurs and developers he supported the construction of Elephant Butte Dam and bought a 640-acre farm near Las Cruces in anticipation of its completion (Keleher, 1984: 12). One of the first to cultivate an irrigated farm in the upper valley following the completion of Elephant Butte dam in 1915, O'Shea lived to profit from his timely investment (El Paso *Herald*, 9 January 1929). At the same time he bought another 640-acre farm "down the valley" -- next to the newly purchased county farm -- where he moved his family about 1915 (Keleher, 1984: 14).

From 1915 until about 1919, when members of the Ivey family introduced cotton into the lower valley, O'Shea raised alfalfa, corn, maize, and milo on his own farm and the adjacent county farm. Once the Iveys demonstrated that long-staple cotton could be successfully grown in the valley, O'Shea planted cotton in both farms and made money for himself and the county (Keleher, 1984: 17). The fields surrounding Rio Vista Farm remain planted in cotton to this day.

### THE GREAT DEPRESSION: 1929-1939

Despite O'Shea's efficient and profitable agricultural endeavors, overcrowding and maintenance problems at the poor farm forced the El Paso county commissioners court to reevaluate its usefulness by the mid-1920s. In 1927 the Commission decided to sell the farm and establish an "old folks home" elsewhere in the valley (El Paso *Evening Post*, 10 December 1927: 3). The commissioners may have been influenced by changing economic forces in the lower valley. Since the establishment of the farm in 1915, increased irrigation on the upper Rio Grande enhanced the valley's agricultural potential, increasing land values throughout the 1920s. At the same time, modern social thinking viewed the practice of committing the indigent to a poor farm as something of a Dickensian horror. Such institutions were disappearing from the rural landscape. With valley



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 25

Rio Vista Farm Historic District  
Socorro, El Paso County, Texas

land prices and El Paso county's population at an all-time high, it made good economic sense for the commissioners to sell the farm for top dollar and build a rest home for the elderly inmates. That is exactly what the county commissioners intended before the stock market collapse in October 1929.

Early in 1929 the county initiated plans to shut down the poor farm and move the remaining elderly inmates to a nursing facility. Closing the farm would not have greatly inconvenienced John O'Shea, who had served nearly 13 years as superintendent. O'Shea was a wealthy farmer by any standards: he owned several prosperous farms in both the upper and lower valley, 58 rental properties in El Paso and was involved in numerous other real estate investments. Helen O'Shea Keleher said her father believed himself to be a millionaire when he died of a heart attack at the age of 74, on 8 January 1929 (Keleher, 1984: 12; *El Paso Herald*, 8 January 1929). Had he lived a few more months, he would have seen the collapse of the stock market render his investments nearly worthless and his property more of a liability than an asset. Following her husband's death, Mrs. O'Shea assumed the operation of the county farm and sent for her married daughter, Helen O'Shea Keleher, then living with her husband in San Antonio, to assist her. It was to be a temporary situation until the poor farm closed its doors. As events transpired, the Great Depression hit El Paso county particularly hard, putting thousands of people out of work and out of their homes. As businesses closed their doors all over the country, the conditions created by the Depression ushered in the greatest period of growth and expanded mission for the county poor farm in its history.

With 25 percent of Texas' workers unemployed by 1935, 1,250,000 received state aid. El Paso county's unemployment figures far surpassed state levels. With 6,000 families on relief roles in the mid-1930s, El Paso county was one of the most desperate Texas counties (Rogers, 1976: 26). In a county that had seen tremendous growth during the 1910s and 1920s, doubling its population each decade, the city of El Paso alone lost more than 6,000 citizens during the 1930s (Warren, 1975: 15). Many moved across the Rio Grande into the Mexican countryside to escape the abject poverty of the city. Increased unemployment and dwindling revenues strained local government services. In 1934, City of El Paso's mayor, R.E. Sherman, asked the commissioners court to assume full responsibility for the upkeep of the county poor farm because the city could no longer afford to pay its portion of the operating costs (*El Paso Herald*, 12 August 1934). Since it opened in 1915, the county and City of El Paso jointly funded the poor farm, with the City paying one-third of the operating costs. The following year, commissioners Louis J. Ivey and W.W. Hawkins opposed funding an isolation ward for the City-County Hospital unless the City agreed to resume paying its share of the poor farm operating costs. The tactic worked and the City resumed funding its share of the poor farm (*El Paso Times*, 12 August 1934 and 11 June 1935).

Faced with depressed farm prices and increased numbers of indigents, the county commissioners court abandoned its plan to sell the poor farm and decided instead to repair the superintendent's roof and build an addition to the Main Building. Simultaneously, they began investigating the numerous state and federal relief programs and partnerships President Roosevelt's



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 26

Rio Vista Farm Historic District  
Socorro, El Paso County, Texas

New Deal policies established. On 14 July 1934 the court voted to apply to the Federal Emergency Administrator of Public Works for a loan and grant to make improvements to the City-County Hospital and additions to the county poor farm. The contract between the county of El Paso and the United States Government clearly defined El Paso county's needs and its desperate situation: to provide the most economical housing and health facilities for the "increased number of destitute persons" for which the current poor farm and county hospital were "wholly inadequate" (EPCCCM, Vol. 17: 138). In securing public works funding, the commissioners also hoped to provide employment to local men on relief rolls (EPCCCM, Vol. 17: 137-39).

The addition to the poor farm consisted of a one-story, semi-fireproof extension of the main room of the existing poor house building, known as the Main Building. When completed, it housed indigent men. It was projected to cost no more than \$26,750 (EPCCCM, Vol. 17: 138). The addition to the county Hospital was to be a three-story fireproof addition costing \$50,750 (EPCCCM, Vol. 17: 139). Because the county had insufficient funds for the project, it issued time warrants to the Federal Emergency Administrator of Public Works in the amount of 75 percent of the projected cost of \$69,000 (EPCCCM, Vol. 17: 139). El Paso's premiere architectural firm, Trost & Trost, drew the plans and supervised the construction of the Main Building addition, for 5 3/4 percent of the construction costs (EPCCCM, Vol. 17: 6). R.A. Thompson, the State Engineer for the Federal Emergency Administration and Public Works, approved the plans and specifications for the addition and the county commissioners court authorized Trost & Trost to collect bids from contractors to be opened 23 October 1934 (EPCCCM, Vol. 17: 74). Contractors were notified that the contract with El Paso county would include provisions of the Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works and the construction provisions of the loan and grant. Federal requirements included paying not less than the minimum wage and compliance with the "the approved code of fair competition" and the "President's Re-employment Agreement under Section 4 (a) of the National Industry Recovery Act" (EPCCCM, Vol. 17: 145). Contractor R. E. McKee, who had offices in both Los Angeles and El Paso, received the contract for the addition (EPCCCM, Vol. 17: 291; *El Paso City Directory*, 1935).

### THE TEXAS TRANSIENT BUREAU: 1935

As the Depression deepened, more and more skilled and unskilled laborers took to the roads and rails in an often-fruitless search of work. By 1934, tens of thousands of transients roamed the country looking for jobs. Wherever new construction projects were announced, hundreds of transient workers appeared seeking employment, despite the standard convention of hiring local people first. Urban and transportation centers attracted large numbers of unemployed transients but such communities were unable to provide much assistance. Shortly after Texas Governor Miriam Ferguson was elected, she created the Texas Rehabilitation and Relief Commission (March 1933) to superintend federal funds and statewide relief activities. The Commission established a Transient



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 27

Rio Vista Farm Historic District  
Socorro, El Paso County, Texas

Bureau, under the authorization of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, to provide shelter and assistance to the thousands of uprooted workers -- called "non-resident transients" -- who had landed in Texas (Steely, 1984: 6).

Approved transient employment projects included housing projects or "colonies" consisting of: ". . . camp sites, . . . barracks, mess hall, lighting facilities, water facilities, sanitary facilities, recreational and educational facilities (Texas State Archives, 4-19/332 in Steely, 1984: 7). Such transient camps, as they were known, sprang up in places where large numbers of homeless workers congregated. As the capital of Texas, Austin drew thousands of unemployed workers who hoped to work on construction projects for different governmental agencies and the University of Texas (Steely, 1984: 7). El Paso, a major transportation crossroads and the only major urban economic center for hundreds of miles, also attracted large numbers of transients in search of work at this time (Rogers, 1976: 26). Both counties provided transient camps for these workers. The "Austin Transient Camp," also known as the "Q Ranch," was built beyond the city limits in northwest Travis to house some of the men who flocked to the capital for work (Steely, 1984: 1). It is a contemporary of the camp El Paso County commissioners approved for transients at the poor farm.

In March 1935 Texas Transient Bureau officials approached the El Paso county commissioners court to request a portion of the county poor farm for a transient camp. The proposed camp would house a minimum of 160 persons and would be built according to the specifications and requirements of the Transient Bureau, as outlined by the Federal Emergency Relief Administration regulations of 15 February 1935 (EPCCCM, Vol. 17: 304). In keeping with the traditions of the poor farm, the Bureau proposed not only to house transients, but to employ them in planting and growing vegetables -- possibly within the existing poor farm -- for their own use. Any surplus was to be sold for the continued maintenance of the camp. After the 1935 crop year, the Transient Bureau also requested use of an additional 15 acres, noted as an "old river bed in cultivation" on a 1924 map of the farm. The area referred to by the Transient Bureau lay to the north of the poor farm and is depicted in an oxbow in the 1936 aerial photographs of the area (Figure X ). The camp complex itself would be built on an uncultivated portion of the poor farm, lying north of Rio Vista Road, excluding the superintendent's house and the barn. Once the Transient Bureau no longer required the use of the property, the buildings were to be given to the county as part of the county farm. The commissioners agreed that the arrangement was to the county's advantage and they authorized Judge Joseph McGill to execute a contract with Marshall B. Thompson, State Director of the Texas Transient Bureau (EPCCCM, Vol. 17: 304). By a separate contract, the county negotiated an agreement with farmer F.H. Terrell, who leased both the river bed tract and the uncultivated portion of the poor farm proposed for the camp. The county compensated Terrell by paying him \$507 to release the contract (EPCCCM, Vol. 17: 305). Operations at the poor farm would remain unchanged.



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 28

Rio Vista Farm Historic District  
Socorro, El Paso County, Texas

On 3 April 1935 the commissioners voted to increase El Paso county's Permanent Improvement budget by \$3,500 to purchase construction materials for the Texas Transient Bureau building project at the county poor farm (EPCCCM, Vol. 17: 323). The Texas Transient Bureau furnished all additional funds for the construction of the buildings and improvements. At that meeting, the El Paso Division of the Texas Transient Bureau submitted E.R. Nilson's plans and specifications for the compound, named Camp Rio Vista (EPCCCM, Vol. 17: 324). Nilson's plans consisted of 12 sheets including the camp alignment, buildings and roads, recreation halls, infirmary, bath, offices, dormitory, dining hall, electric distribution lines, tools and storage, garage and Negro recreation building. Apparently, the Transient Bureau intended to accommodate African Americans at the camp but no further evidence of this plan has been found. Finally, the El Paso county commissioners court retained the authority to designate the exact location of the improvements on the ground (EPCCCM, Vol. 17: 324).

Buildings constituted only part of improvements the Texas Transient Bureau planned for the county farm. The Transient Bureau planned to employ workers by filling and leveling two tracts of farmland including the area noted as the "old river bed in cultivation." El Paso county promised to pay the regular irrigation charges on the acreage allotted for Transient Bureau use with the Bureau to pay any excess. The Transient Bureau intended to put the land "in the best possible condition for cultivation of such crops as it may determine to plant" (EPCCCM, Vol. 17: 324). In other words, the Bureau proposed to level, fill and improve the county's farmland while retaining the prerogative to select the crops to be planted. Although unstated, the contract implied that the transients were to provide both the construction and farm labor in return for food and shelter. Both county officials and the Transient Bureau were pleased with the arrangement. County Judge Joseph McGill signed the contract on behalf of El Paso county with Marshall B. Thompson signing for the Texas Transient Bureau (EPCCCM, Vol. 17: 324). The projected cost to complete the project was estimated at \$30,000, including a contribution of \$3,500 by El Paso county (EPCCCM, Vol. 17: 327). On 8 April 1935 the county hired El Paso architect Percy McGhee to supervise construction of the camp for \$300 (EPCCCM, Vol. 17: 327). At the same time, A.G. Trost approved the completed addition to the existing poor farm Main Building (EPCCCM, Vol. 17: 400-01).

Unfortunately, the Texas Transient Bureau barely began construction when the agency discontinued. At its 3 September 1935 meeting, the county commissioners court recognized that the camp would not be completed or used as contemplated, but they voted to pursue alternate funding sources for the project, primarily to furnish employment for hundreds of unskilled workers. The commissioners hired architect Percy McGhee to modify Nilson's plans, specifications and cost estimates to complete the job, and to present the project to the Works Progress Administration (WPA) authorities for designation as a Works Project (EPCCCM, Vol. 17: 575). The commissioners further resolved to pay for the construction costs through the issuance of bonds (EPCCCM, Vol. 17: 575). At its 26 November 1935 meeting, the commissioners announced that the WPA approved the application. McGhee supervised the completion of the project, now



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet**

Section 8 Page 29

Rio Vista Farm Historic District  
Socorro, El Paso County, Texas

projected to cost \$107,000 (EPCCCM, Vol. 18: 77). He hired a "suitable man" to oversee construction. Both skilled and unskilled labor from the county relief rolls signed up to work at the complex (EPCCCM, Vol. 18: 77; 103). By 16 December 1935 the county commissioners court had successfully transferred the former Texas Transient Bureau project to the WPA. Commissioners determined the status of equipment abandoned at the site by the Transient Bureau to be "on loan" from the Texas Relief Commission (EPCCCM, Vol. 18: 104).

The county's commitment to finish the project was not made lightly. The terse wording of a commissioners court resolution requesting food for its impoverished citizens reveals only a little of the county's desperate circumstances:

. . . it is reported to the commissioners' court by [its] case workers that there are a large number of persons in the county . . . who are receiving no benefits from relief and are not eligible for relief . . . and such persons are represented to be in destitute circumstances and some of them even approaching the point of starvation . . . (EPCCCM, Vol. 18: 192).

In securing the WPA project, the county fed and sheltered about 100 workers for the duration of the construction project. Workers ate at a county commissary erected at the poor farm and most workers slept in the partially completed buildings (EPCCCM, Vol. 18: 77). The project was only a temporary solution but the commissioners were already looking ahead to their next project.

**THE CIVILIAN CONSERVATION CORPS IN THE EL PASO VALLEY: 1936**

During the course of the transient camp negotiations, the county electorate voted Louis K. Ivey, a cotton farmer from the lower valley, into office. Ivey immediately encouraged the commissioners court to apply for federal flood control and soil erosion relief projects. Ivey was particularly anxious to get a Civilian Conservation Corps [CCC] camp established in the valley for soil erosion control in the San Felipe Canyon area and on the Carlsbad Cut-off road (EPCCCM, Vol. 17: 412-13). He persuaded the commissioners court to send him to Austin to investigate obtaining a CCC camp for the valley (EPCCCM, Vol. 17: 418-20).

Since 1933, when the first group of 216 young men completed training at Fort Bliss and were sent to forests in New Mexico and Arizona, the CCC maintained an active presence in the El Paso area (El Paso *Times*, 9 May 1933: 1). Within a year of its inception, more than 1,500 applicants enrolled at Fort Bliss where they trained and received tentative assignments to one of 12 relief camps in the New Mexico District, which included El Paso county, New Mexico and Arizona (El Paso *Herald-Post*, 18 July 1934: 2). Of the total 96 camps established in Texas over the life of the program, only 20 were located in West Texas (Hendrickson, 1974-75: 42), with El Paso county having the lion's share. Like the majority of CCC camps elsewhere, El Paso's camps were devoted



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 30

Rio Vista Farm Historic District  
Socorro, El Paso County, Texas

to soil conservation, erosion control, and dam construction and maintenance (Hendrickson, 1974-75: 42). The CCC was one of the most popular of the New Deal programs and after two years of operation, Washington allocated 505 new camps for soil erosion work, 14 of which were slated for the New Mexico District (El Paso *Times*, 11 May 1935: 10).

CCC operations, like many New Deal programs, required cooperation between governmental agencies at all levels. Camps in the El Paso area were originally part of the New Mexico District, with headquarters in Albuquerque. Fort Bliss in El Paso county provided physical training similar to military boot camps for the participants. The Soil Conservation Service [SCS] administered camps devoted to erosion and flood control, and other soil conservation concerns. The town of Ysleta, about 12 miles southeast of El Paso and only four miles west of the poor farm in Socorro, hosted the lower valley's first CCC camp, established for "drouth relief." The CCC soon built a second camp at Elephant Butte Dam, in the upper valley, and another at Carlsbad, New Mexico (El Paso *Herald*, 14 July 1934: 7).

To be eligible for works relief programs, a proposed project had to meet the following controlling principles established by President Roosevelt:

- \* The projects shall be useful.
- \* Projects shall be of a nature that a considerable proportion of the money spent will go into wages for labor.
- \* Projects which promise ultimate return to the Federal Treasury of a considerable proportion of the costs will be sought.
- \* Funds allotted for each project should be actually and promptly spent and not held over until later years.
- \* In all cases projects must be of a character to give employment to those on the relief rolls.
- \* Projects will be allocated to localities or relief areas in relation to the number of workers on relief rolls in those areas.

The ultimate purpose of the program was ". . . to move from the relief rolls to work on such projects or in private employment the maximum number of persons in the shortest time possible" (Records of the State Reclamations Department, Box 2-9/583).



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 31

Rio Vista Farm Historic District  
Socorro, El Paso County, Texas

Encouraged by his trip to Austin, Commissioner Ivey returned to El Paso county. The El Paso *Herald Post* reported that he had extracted a definite commitment from J. G. Lindley, director of soil conservation works projects, to build a 200-man CCC camp at Fabens, about 13 miles east of Socorro, by 1 October 1935 (El Paso *Herald Post*, 12 August 1935: 1). Before the flood control plan was enacted, however, the Rio Grande overflowed its banks, inundating the entire valley in one of the century's worst floods. When the Socorro levee broke on 24 September 1935, flood waters destroyed more than 1,000 acres of cropland between Socorro and Fabens. Between one and three feet of water covered North Loop Road from the Nichols Refinery in east El Paso to Carolina Drive in Socorro. This road provided the county farm's only link to the rest of the valley (El Paso *Herald*, 25 September 1935). Despite the disaster and the obvious need for flood control, cutbacks in the CCC program stalled the Fabens project. Budget reductions closed many established CCC camps following September 1935, and a new camp for Fabens seemed unlikely (El Paso *Herald Post*, 17 January 1936: 16). Nevertheless, commissioners Ivey and John L. Andreas urged U.S. Senator Morris Sheppard for not one, but two camps; one for flood control work in the upper valley, above the City of El Paso, and another for the development of the Fabens-San Felipe drainage project (El Paso *Herald Post*, 9 January 1936: 12). Ivey and Andreas persevered and by March 10, 1936, Ivey announced approval of a CCC camp devoted to soil conservation at the San Felipe Arroyo near Fabens. The project goal was to "protect certain County Roads, including the Fabens-Carlsbad Cut-off Road, North Loop Road at and near Fabens, streets and alleys in Fabens, from flood waters" (EPCCCM, Vol. 18: 232).

War Department regulations required the county of El Paso to provide the CCC tent camp at Fabens. While county commissioners prepared to purchase land for the camp in Fabens they feared that delays or the lack of facilities might jeopardize the project. On 9 March 1935 the commissioners court granted permission for the Camp to occupy "twelve or more buildings and adjacent grounds as required . . . on property known as the El Paso county poor farm, for the purpose of establishing a Civilian Conservation Corps Camp. Said occupancy to be for a period of approximately sixty (60) days, beginning on or about 1 April 1936 and extending to 1 June 1936" (EPCCCM, Vol. 18: 232). On 25 April 1936 CCC company 889 W-Jr., arrived at the Ysleta railhead from Fort Bliss, inaugurating Soil Conservation Service Project 40 (SCS-40) in the valley. The CCC company assigned to repair and construct dams reported to the newly finished facility at the county poor farm, the former Texas Transient Bureau's "Camp Rio Vista". Scheduled only to occupy the camp through the first of June, the CCC company remained at Rio Vista until 13 August 1936, when the Fabens facility was completed (National Archives, Record Group, SCS cards). However short their stay at Camp Rio Vista, the CCC camp left a lasting impression in the community. Many valley residents recall that the CCC built and occupied the camp when, in reality, the Texas Transient Bureau initiated the project completed under the auspices of the WPA.



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 32

Rio Vista Farm Historic District  
Socorro, El Paso County, Texas

As soon as they arrived in the valley, the enrollees went to work in the San Felipe Arroyo on a series of dams designed to protect Fabens and the rich island farms from floods. Commissioner Ivey announced the arrival of the first group of 116 enrollees at the site on 26 April 1936 (El Paso *Herald Post*, 28 April 1936: 1). As many as 1,000 CCC enrollees were temporarily stationed at Camp Rio Vista before moving on to Fabens.

Throughout their occupation of the Camp Rio Vista, county commissioners prepared for the CCC's eventual abandonment of the facility. At their 23 June 1936 meeting, commissioners voted to open the camp to hundreds of homeless El Paso residents once the CCC vacated the buildings (EPCCCM, Vol. 18: 418). Reacting to government restrictions on federal aid to certain "indigent paupers of El Paso County," the court decided to make provisions for such people at Rio Vista. Although not clearly documented, the restrictions seemed to prohibit aid to alien residents (i.e. Mexican citizens), living in El Paso county. To assist the hundreds of county residents who were ineligible for federal relief, the county commissioners court expanded the traditional role of the county poor farm to include indigent tuberculars, destitute families, and alien mothers with "citizen children." The county required such alien mothers to work for their support if physically able to do so (EPCCCM, Vol. 18: 418). Newly enacted county regulations allowed families to take a limited amount of furniture with them as long as it was free of vermin and could fit in a 10 by 20 foot space (EPCCCM, Vol. 18: 418). In one of the few contested issues of the county commissioners court during this period, the resolution barely passed, with Ivey opposing the proposal (EPCCCM, Vol. 18: 418). By this single act, the county commissioners court greatly enlarged the role of local government to provide welfare for its residents -- whether legal or illegal, citizen or not. This same act ultimately altered the traditional role of the county poor farm from that of an "old folks home."

Immediately after the CCC camp moved to Fabens, the poor farm opened to hundreds of El Paso county's homeless and destitute residents. By September 1936, 300 people, including 118 children, moved to the farm (El Paso *Herald*, 11 April 1936). The commissioners court relegated the operation of Rio Vista Farm to the City-County Hospital Board of Managers which also assumed responsibility for the feeding and care of its inmates (EPCCCM Vol. 18: 493). The day-to-day operation of the farm, however, remained with Agnes O'Shea and her daughter, Helen O'Shea Keleher, who supervised the newly-arrived children (El Paso *Herald*, 11 April 1946).

### HELEN O'SHEA KELEHER AT RIO VISTA FARM: 1936-1964

The arrival of 118 homeless children initiated tremendous changes in the poor farm's mission and operation. On 14 September 1936 the commissioners court faced its first challenge in this regard when the county Probation Officer reported having difficulties with children at the farm "for the reason that the authority of disciplining said children is divided between the parents and the authorities" (EPCCCM, Vol.18: 513). The commissioners court decided that children determined to be "paupers and destitute" were also "dependent and neglected" and therefore qualified to live at the



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 33

Rio Vista Farm Historic District  
Socorro, El Paso County, Texas

county farm. Such children were remanded to the custody of the superintendent of Rio Vista Farm (EPCCCM, Vol. 18: 513). Although Agnes O'Shea officially ran the farm, through an agreement with the county authorities, her daughter took charge of the children. Helen O'Shea Keleher rose to the task and soon all the children were remanded to her custody. Children quickly outnumbered the adult inmates -- a dramatic change from traditional poor farms -- and thus Rio Vista Farm became more like a large foster home than a poor farm. In fact, the children's presence prompted the name change to Rio Vista Farm, after the title of the Transient Bureau camp. Keleher argued that the children should not have to bear the stigma of living at the "poor farm." She requested that the county officially change the farm's name to Rio Vista Farm and the commissioners court readily consented (*El Paso Times*, 7 June 1936). Indeed, Keleher's theories about institutional living deviated greatly from conventional poor farm wisdom.

Helen O'Shea Keleher was born in Denver, Colorado, in 1894 but she and her mother traveled to Alamogordo to join her father the following year. In 1898 the family moved to El Paso. Helen O'Shea was the only child of doting parents and a popular local socialite in her teens and twenties. In 1922 she married E. E. Keleher and settled in San Antonio. When her father died in 1929, Helen Keleher returned to the El Paso valley to assist her mother and tend the family business. Although O'Shea left all his considerable property to his wife and daughter, the economic reversals of the Great Depression threatened to ruin them (Keleher, 1984: 12). Because no one had very much money, the women asked their tenants to remain in their farms and houses to maintain the property and protect the buildings in lieu of rent (Keleher, 1984: 12). Mrs. Seth Orndorff, wife of the county commissioner and a neighbor of the poor farm, persuaded Agnes O'Shea to remain at the farm and continue to supervise the inmates until it closed (Keleher, 1984: 14). Once the commissioners decided to keep the poor farm, she was assured of a small but reliable income -- about \$50 per month -- that helped pay her property taxes. In this way, the family managed to keep their real estate throughout the Depression (McKay, interview 20 September 1993). Helen Keleher traveled back and forth between San Antonio and El Paso to help her mother from 1929 until 1936, when she took charge of the children (Keleher, 1984: 14).

Although Helen O'Shea Keleher's early life as a pampered socialite little prepared her for social work, she took to the task with fervor. She believed, "There's just a hair-line's difference between a dependent and neglected child, and a delinquent child" (Keleher, 1984: 19) and she made it her life's work to make that difference. It was not an easy task. The children sent to the county farm were among the most destitute of El Paso's poor during a period in which people literally starved to death in the alleys of Shack Town. So starved and weak when they arrived at the poor farm en masse, many of the first 118 children did not have the strength to hold themselves up. Literally starving, some of the children could not keep food down. Rio Vista staff had to feed them small bits of food, five or six times a day. Nearly all the children had rickets and lice and some suffered from congenital venereal disease contracted from their mothers, many of whom worked as prostitutes. Rio Vista Farm admitted some of the mothers along with their children. Several were



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 34

Rio Vista Farm Historic District  
Socorro, El Paso County, Texas

"left blind and crazy" in the latter stages of venereal disease, according to Keleher. Some of the mothers were so young that officials didn't know whether to classify them as children or adults (Keleher, 1984: 21). One six-year old child, his mother in the last stages of cancer, was found living among a small herd of goats by the river (Keleher, 1984: 22). Rio Vista Farm became a refuge for some of El Paso's most destitute poor.

Nearly all the children admitted to Rio Vista Farm during this period had Hispanic surnames. Although many of their mothers were Mexican citizens, Keleher suspected their fathers were U.S. soldiers stationed at Fort Bliss. In taking a child's history, Keleher frequently listed "United States Army" in the space designated for "father." When asked about the practice, she replied that every Monday morning when she went to court, the Military Police escorted batches of soldiers while the local sheriff's deputies brought in the young girls charged with prostitution. Later, the same girls appeared in court with a child in tow (Keleher, 1984: 19), so she reasoned that these soldiers fathered a good number of the children. Many of these children eventually came to live at Rio Vista Farm. Occasionally they received "doorstep" children abandoned or left in a basket at the poor farm door (Keleher, 1984: 22).

After receiving the initial group of 118, Keleher continued to accept new children at the farm. Many were petty criminals, arrested for small crimes of theft or vagrancy. Keleher described the process by which she acquired her charges:

I would go down to the court house every Monday morning to the Juvenile Court, and Judge [Dave] Mulcahy was the juvenile judge. The police would come in with a child and his mother, if they had a mother, and then I'd listen to the case. I would know that if that child was sent to the Reform School, what he didn't already know he would be getting ten times worse. And the judge, before sentencing them, would look at me. Then he'd say, "Now I'm taking you away from your mother" (Keleher, 1984: 19). If I thought I could do something, I'd nod. Judge Mulcahy would say to the child: "This is your new mother" (Carroll, 1964).

The children called her Miss Helen. Once assigned to her, the children received baths, a hot meal and visited the doctor - many for their first examination. All children were tested for venereal diseases (Carroll, 1964).

After the CCC camp moved to Fabens, Keleher filled all the vacant dormitories with children and assigned house mothers for each building. A husband and wife team looked after the older boys. Frank Hernandez, who came to live at the farm as a child of about six years old, recalled that as many as 200 boys and 175 girls lived at the farm in 1938 (Hernandez, interview 2 March 1992). Several of the buildings housed entire families, some of whom remained at the farm



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 35

Rio Vista Farm Historic District  
Socorro, El Paso County, Texas

throughout the Depression (Carroll, 1964). The elderly inmates of the old poor farm continued to live in the Main Building under O'Shea's supervision. Keleher assumed full responsibility for the children, who by that time, far outnumbered the poor farm inmates.

The county funded the children's basic needs. Keleher recalled her relationship with the county authorities:

We had everything for [the children]. The county was generous. I worked under twelve county judges and they and the commissioners never turned me down for anything. But I was very careful what I asked for, because I never went over my budget (Keleher, 1984: 21).

During the Depression, when money was hard to come by, Keleher obtained extra services for her children through barter and persuasion. One family of destitute actors put on plays, dances and charades and taught the children arts and crafts in exchange for room and board. The children went to the movies in Ysleta once a week after Keleher convinced the theater owner to let them in free on the "dull" days (Carroll, 1964). Women employed in sewing rooms established under the WPA provided clothing for the children. When the county physician informed Keleher the children needed more sunshine to overcome rickets, she persuaded the county to build a giant sandbox for them. She planted vines around the exterior so the children could stretch out on the sand in privacy (Keleher, 1984: 21). An El Paso nurse regularly made "house calls" to the farm, giving shots in exchange for produce grown in the garden (McKay, interview 20 September 1993).

As much as possible, Keleher tried to establish a family model at the farm, particularly for the sake of the children, but the sheer numbers of residents required a certain amount of regimentation. Designed as institutional and regimental buildings, the facility left little room for modification. All of the residents, old and young, slept in multi-person wards. Singles rows of beds lined the wards of the Main Building. To make life more homelike, colorful blankets covered the beds and each ward contained easy chairs and radios. The boys slept in the barracks-style dormitories of the former CCC camp, while girls shared one of the three wards in the Main Building. During the height of the Depression, many children lived with their parents in the dormitories. The Main Building contained a day room and several porches for the elderly inmates while the children used the Recreation Hall at the camp for arts, crafts and games. On Sundays, the Recreation Hall held church services (*El Paso Herald*, 20 September 1945: 5). Although Keleher invited ministers of different denominations to take turns giving the Sunday morning service, nearly all the children took their First Communion in the Catholic Church.

Life at Rio Vista Farm was not unlike that of other lower valley farms at that time. In some ways, it was almost idyllic. A 1945 newspaper article described the setting:



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 36

Rio Vista Farm Historic District  
Socorro, El Paso County, Texas

[Rio Vista Farm lies] "in the Lower Valley between Clint and Ysleta on the North Loop Road. Huge cottonwood and Elm trees shade the buildings. Lawns, hedges and flowers resemble pictures from a garden magazine" (El Paso *Herald Post*, 19 September 1945: 1).

The article's accompanying photograph showed 13 children playing croquet on the lawn in front of the Main Building. The children were taught to treat each other as brothers and sisters and "Miss Helen" as their mother (El Paso *Herald Post*, 19 September 1945: 1). A former resident, brought to the farm as an orphan at the age of five or six, explained simply, "It was the only family I ever knew" (Hernandez, interview 2 March 1992).

Like other farm families, each of the residents took responsibility for chores, depending on their age and ability. The children cared for the lawns and hedges. The boys tended large gardens and produced much of the food consumed at the farm. Boys also earned extra money by picking cotton on the adjoining state experimental farm. Through the 4-H Club, the girls learned to sew and can vegetables, skills they put to good use by mending clothes and canning produce grown in the garden (El Paso *Herald*, 20 September 1945: 5). The farm maintained some livestock and one elderly resident took charge of the chickens and the chicken coops. Both O'Shea and Keleher loved animals and several dogs usually lived at the farm. Some elderly inmates kept their own pets, including a parrot. O'Shea believed it was therapeutic (El Paso *Herald*, 20 September 1945: 5). The farm provided recreational activities, too. During the summer, the children swam in the irrigation canals that watered the surrounding fields and held picnics on their sandy beaches. Shade trees dotted the 14-acre farm and children built tree houses and play houses (El Paso *Herald*, 20 September 1945: 5).

Helen Keleher hoped to teach the children skills that would make them valuable citizens despite their early disadvantage. All the children attended Socorro School where John O'Shea served as trustee years before. Not all children progressed beyond the 8th grade but the older ones who exhibited the aptitude and desire were bussed to Ysleta for high school. Still others attended college. O'Shea and Keleher personally financed the educations of several Rio Vista children at the University of Texas at El Paso, and established scholarships for others (Keleher, 1984: 27). Keleher helped each child open a savings account and visit different businesses to prepare for life beyond the farm. She believed that all children had potential if they were nurtured early in life. On her 90th birthday, she described her work, "You know, it was like cultivating a weed and getting a beautiful flower out of it. You never saw anything like it in your life" (Keleher, 1984: 21). When asked what accomplishments she was most proud of, she said "My 50 years taking care of those children. That was the happiest time. I felt like I did more good then, than anything. That was something that nobody else wanted to do" (Keleher, 1984: 27).



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 37

Rio Vista Farm Historic District  
Socorro, El Paso County, Texas

### POST-DEPRESSION YEARS: 1940-1951

As the United States made preparations for war in the waning years of the Depression, most of the adults obtained jobs and left the farm (*El Paso Herald*, 11 April 1946). Fourteen of the boys raised at Rio Vista Farm served in the military during World War II and three were killed in action (*El Paso Herald*, 11 April 1946; Keleher, 1984: 21). By 1945 the number of children declined dramatically until only 12 boys and 10 girls, ranging in ages from six to sixteen, remaining at the farm (*El Paso Herald Post*, 20 September 1945: 5). Agnes O'Shea, who had logged 29 years as poor farm superintendent, remained in charge of the 25 elderly inmates. It was the smallest number recorded since before the Great Depression (*El Paso Herald Post*, 19 September 1945: 1, 5). Elderly people continued to live in the Main Building. The four wings extending from its lobby were divided into three wards -- one for men, one for women and one for young girls - and a dining hall (*El Paso Herald Post*, 19 September 1945: 1). The former Texas Transient Bureau complex remained in use as dormitories, recreation and work shops. A housemother stayed with the boys who occupied only one of the WPA-built barracks buildings. They used the separate toilet and bath house facilities built for the camp. The farm employed a staff of four, including Agnes O'Shea, her daughter Helen Keleher, a full-time cook and a housemother for the boys' dormitory. O'Shea and Keleher did the heavy housecleaning themselves (*El Paso Herald Post*, 19 September 1945: 1). About 1952, the county built a new superintendent's house next to the Main Building of the poor farm, to replace the old house on the north side of Rio Vista Road (Hernandez, interview 2 March 1992). It was the last construction project for the county poor farm.

### THE BRACERO PROGRAM: 1951-1964

While the inmate population at Rio Vista Farm declined significantly in the post-war years, Rio Vista Farm continued to serve the county in other ways. In 1948, the United States entered into an agreement with Mexico to grant temporary work permits to thousands of formerly illegal farm workers in this country (*El Paso Times*, 12 September 1949). Known as the Bracero Program, the policy gave farmers throughout the country access to abundant, low-cost labor. Announcement of the program precipitated a mass exodus across the border to processing stations where prospective workers were given physical examinations and temporary shelter before being trucked to farms throughout the southwest. In 1951, the former Transient Bureau camp at Rio Vista Farm became the Bracero Reception and Processing Center for much of West Texas and New Mexico (*El Paso Times*, 31 December 1964). An estimated 80,000 Mexican farm workers were processed through the Bracero Center at Rio Vista Farm each year. Under the U.S. Department of Labor the federal government leased the complex from the county to cover the cost of improvements (*El Paso Herald Post*, 28 May 1956). The Bracero program constructed three buildings within the camp specifically for its operations (Hernandez, interview 2 March 1992). Although they do not yet meet the age criteria for Contributing buildings, they should be reconsidered in the future for their associations



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 38

Rio Vista Farm Historic District  
Socorro, El Paso County, Texas

with a significant trend in the agricultural history of the Southwest. The Bracero Program also utilized the adobe barracks buildings for dormitories, offices and auxiliary functions. By that time, the few children who remained at the farm lived in the Main Building (Hernandez, interview 2 March 1992).

### RIO VISTA FARM CLOSES: 1964

Although the Bracero Program brought increased activity to Rio Vista Farm during the 1950s and early 1960s, the poor farm population had declined. Shortly after the Bracero Program ended in 1964, the El Paso *Herald* announced the farm's impending closure, as well. Only four elderly inmates remained. The newspaper article explained that "Social Security, welfare programs and state law . . . combined to reduce the population of Rio Vista Farm . . . to the current four who live at Rio Vista, outside of Helen Keleher, the superintendent who occupies an adjoining cottage" (El Paso *Herald*, 1964). State law required poor farm tenants to be completely without income from any pension or other source. Those in need of medical or nursing care were also prohibited from living at the farm (El Paso *Herald*, 1964). While this had always been the official policy, county commissioners suspended the regulation during the 1930s because so many people fell through the cracks of the established relief programs. By the mid-1960s, social security and other forms of welfare provided necessary services to nearly all citizens requiring such assistance. The poor farm outlived its usefulness.

Keleher had long been financially independent (El Paso *Herald* 1964). When O'Shea gave half of the property she inherited from her husband to her daughter in 1944, Keleher began selling the land and investing the proceeds (Keleher, 1984: 17). When Helen O'Shea Keleher died on 17 November 1985, she left most of her money to various organizations and charities in the El Paso area, including a \$1,000,000 gift to the University of Texas at El Paso and a \$500,000 donation to the El Paso Cancer Treatment Center (El Paso *Times*, 18 November 1985). She was active in 21 clubs and organizations but in an interview a few years before her death, Helen Keleher declared that the years she spent at Rio Vista Farm were "the most productive part of my life" (El Paso *Times* 18 November 1985). The O'Shea Keleher School in East El Paso honors both Keleher and her father who was a member of the Socorro School District Board of Trustees for eight years and served as president for several terms (McKay, interview 20 September 1993).

Rio Vista Farm ceased operations on 31 December 1964, ending a half-century of service to the citizens of El Paso county. Today, the three State-owned dormitories at the easternmost end of the complex are on loan to Texas A & M University and are used for storage. Texas A & M continues to operate the surrounding 190-acre cotton farm originally part of the poor farm property. The long white-washed adobe barracks buildings of the Transient Bureau and CCC camp still survive, although most are vacant. Local 4-H Clubs meet in the former Mess Hall and keep goats in the fenced interior of the transient camp. The Main Building, a Wash House, and the



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 39

Rio Vista Farm Historic District  
Socorro, El Paso County, Texas

superintendent's house, built for Helen Keleher about 1952, remain of the old county poor farm. The buildings serve the county sheriff's department as offices, classrooms and a police sub-station.

Throughout its different uses - as a home for the aged, the indigent, and neglected children, a temporary CCC camp, and a Bracero Reception Center - Rio Vista Farm has maintained its rural character despite the extensive suburbanization of the lower valley following World War II. Today, as the remaining irrigated cotton fields along North Loop Road rapidly give way to residential subdivisions and commercial development, Rio Vista Farm is one of the last intact remnants of the lower valley's agricultural past. It also contains the largest collection of historic buildings associated with early 20th century social welfare programs in El Paso's lower valley.

The Main Building retains its original 1915 architectural fabric to a remarkable degree. A rear addition designed by the El Paso architectural firm Trost and Trost, in 1935, while lacking the stylistic characteristics of the Main Building, is visible only from the rear, is unobtrusive and detracts little from the integrity of the building. Other alterations to the Main Building are minor and include the enclosure of several porches, some windows, and one French door at the entrance. Although the two rear wings are unpainted, the brick facades of the two front wings and the entry have been painted white since at least 1945. All alterations to the Main Building appear to be reversible with the possible exception of the painted brick. The small brick washroom at the rear of the building completely retains its original architectural appearance although the windows are boarded. The 1952 superintendent's house, now used as a police sub-station, was built outside the period of significance and does not contribute to the historic district.

Despite neglect, an accumulation of junk, and overgrown vegetation, the Depression-era Texas Transient Bureau complex remains nearly unchanged since its completion in 1936. It is an outstanding example of a WPA-built work camp and conveys a powerful sense of the Great Depression and its public welfare programs. Principal intrusions at the camp site include the chain link and razor wire fencing that surrounds the complex, rusting cars impounded by the Sheriff's Department, some added porches, and numerous metal and board partitions between buildings. All but two of the original 17 adobe camp buildings survive. One adobe dormitory burned about 1948 and a metal quonset-type building replaced it on the same foundation. The concrete foundation of another is a Noncontributing site in the historic district. Not surprisingly, the three buildings used by Texas A&M and the Mess Hall Kitchen, used by the El Paso County 4-H Club, are the best maintained of the adobe buildings. Overall, the complex is remarkably intact and conveys a vivid image of Depression-era work camps. In all but one case, Noncontributing elements within the transient camp date after the period of significance. They include the metal quonset hut, a rectangular building and adjoining toilet facility built about 1950, an open ramada, a tiny cement block building and the concrete foundation of a very large post-1945 building. All of these Non-contributing elements inside the camp compound were probably associated with the Bracero Program of the 1950s and 1960s. A three-sided, frame shelter covered with sheets of corrugated metal and



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 40

Rio Vista Farm Historic District  
Socorro, El Paso County, Texas

plywood, lies apart from both complexes, to the north of the transient camp, used by the sheriff's department as part of a firing range. It, too, is a Non-contributing feature of the district.

To an extraordinary extent, the farm retains strong visual associations with the patterns of early 20th century rural life in the lower valley. Rio Vista Farm is a legacy of Elephant Butte Dam and its effect in the valley. Its opening coincided with the completion of the dam in 1915 and its operation became part of a new era in valley agriculture due to the resultant irrigation expansion. Very few large-scale farming operations existed along North Loop Road, the main arterial closest to Rio Vista Farm, before the dam opened irrigation to that region of the valley. Once the dam opened irrigation to previously arid lands, real estate developers promoted the area to farmers across the United States. North Loop Road quickly developed into a rich agricultural region, first planted in alfalfa and orchards and later in cotton, the most lucrative cash crop in the valley. Rio Vista Farm, set in the midst of this latter-day agricultural frontier, and its residents played an important role in the area's development. Set in the midst of an extensive tract of cotton fields, the cultivation of which became possible only through reliable irrigation, the farm is a vestige of the valley's tremendous agricultural development following the completion of Elephant Butte Dam. Today, as suburban and commercial redevelopment quickly replace former fields in the area along North Loop Road, the farm retains the rural flavor of that historic agricultural development through its unaltered 1915-1935 buildings and its country setting.

Landscape patterns that emerged along the North Loop Road, including Rio Vista Farm, are evident in the 1936 aerial photographs of the Socorro Grant. Above the railroad tracks that span the valley from El Paso to Tornillo, some 35 miles to the southeast, farms formed right angles -- squares and rectangles superimposed on the fairly flat, regular landscape of the flood plain. Broken only by the necessary intrusion of the acequias which rose or fell according to slight changes in elevation and the still-evident channels of the old river bed, most of the post-1915 farms are larger and more geometric in shape than the earlier garden plots and small subsistence fields -- sub-divided with every generation -- that clung close to the river and its adjacent acequias. Although the western boundary of Rio Vista Farm is bowed in the shape of the old river channel, tiny Rio Vista Farm conforms to a grid pattern in all other respects and it is set in the midst of the much larger state-leased tract that conforms to this pattern.

Unpaved farm roads and an occasional row of trees defined property boundaries, while clumps of trees, surrounded by cultivated fields, marked building enclaves usually consisting of an adobe farm house or two, a few tenant or temporary labor houses, various outbuildings, a barn, wooden sheds, grain silos, and perhaps a rock-walled fruit packing shed. Farm roads led straight paths from the building complex to the nearest all-weather roads. Three major county roads -- North Loop, built in anticipation of increased development following the completion of the dam, the County Road (Alameda/Texas 20) that paralleled the railroad tracks, and the South Road or Mission Trail that skirted the Rio Grande -- extended the length of the valley providing access to El Paso



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 41

Rio Vista Farm Historic District  
Socorro, El Paso County, Texas

and railroad stations. Until the early 1930s, cottonwood trees lined both sides of the highways forming a tree-shaded canopy that spanned the valley. In 1933, members of the cotton-farming Ivey family had the trees cut down, ostensibly to save lives lost in automobile collisions. Others suggest that the Iveys removed the trees because they drained too much water from the irrigation ditches.

The larger, regular fields of the post-1915, post-Elephant Butte Dam, agricultural development reflect the mid-western agricultural techniques brought to the valley by an influx of Anglo farmers bent on commercial farming at that time. Heavy equipment, such as hay balers and harvesters, were more efficient when used on the larger parcels with long, straight rows of crops than on the smaller, crazy-quilt plots tended by hand in the villages near the river. Larger acreage and greater efficiency equalled more profitable agriculture, and the most successful valley farmers during the 20th century were those who owned and operated farms in this newly opened area. The county commissioners certainly realized the potential value of the land they purchased when they bought a 206-acre parcel for their new poor farm. Their selection of Superintendent John O'Shea, who owned equipment capable of farming the adjacent fields, reflects their understanding of the new trends in commercial agriculture. While the approximately 14 acre tract that comprises Rio Vista Farm was never under commercial cultivation, its immediately surroundings -- consistently planted in cotton since about 1920 -- contributed to the overall agricultural revolution that took place in the valley from 1915 onward.

The buildings and grounds of the poor farm complex mirrored rural trends of the period. Both the superintendent's house and the Main Building faced the road (Rio Vista Road) that connected the complex to the major arterial, North Loop Road. Although neither of the two domestic buildings were made of adobe, both the barn and the Wash House exhibited local influences of style and materials. Like other farms throughout this part of the valley, Rio Vista Farm maintained a large vegetable garden irrigated by the nearby Mesa Spur *acequia*. In fact, the farm had two gardens. According to oral accounts, one garden was maintained in the vicinity of the second superintendent's house (now the police substation) while the other was across Rio Vista Road north of the 1935 Mess Hall and Kitchen building.

Irrigation also enabled the O'Sheas and other valley farm families to plant trees, shrubs and flowers that would not normally grow in this arid part of the valley. Cottonwood trees, requiring great quantities of water, flourished along the irrigation canals and they continue to define their routes in places where farmers allow them to live. A number still survive at Rio Vista Farm, particularly around the Main Building. Because much of the lawn in front of the Main Building is used for parking, most of the grass has died. Likewise, many of the bushes and vines of the O'Shea/Keleher period are dead through neglect. However, enough survive at the farm, along with the great Cottonwoods, to impart a sense of the oasis that each farmhouse complex represented in this otherwise desert-like part of the valley.



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 42

Rio Vista Farm Historic District  
Socorro, El Paso County, Texas

Except for the institutional nature of its mission, Rio Vista Farm was very much like the other farms along North Loop. They grew their own food and bartered for other goods. Everyone helped with chores on the farm. Boys cultivated the gardens. Although inmates of the farm didn't grow cotton themselves, the boys picked cotton by hand on the adjacent state experimental farm for spending money. Girls canned fruits and vegetables, cooked meals and mended clothing. Some of the elderly people took charge of feeding the chickens and caring for other farm animals. In the summer the children built tree houses in the giant cottonwoods and swam in the irrigation canals. This was typical of farm life throughout this part of the lower El Paso valley from the time irrigation was first introduced, in 1915, through the post-war period when suburban development began to supplant agricultural endeavors.

Today, Rio Vista Farm is one of the few surviving vestiges of the predominantly agricultural landscape that characterized lower valley development in the first half of the 20th century. Although the valley experienced tremendous suburban redevelopment after World War II, Rio Vista Farm remains surrounded by nearly 200 acres of cotton fields with virtually no outside encroachment. Its building configuration is nearly identical to that recorded by the 1936 aerial photographs. A farm road consisting of sun-bleached sand, encircles the building complex. The all-weather Rio Vista Road divides the complex into two dissimilar parts. Unpaved parking areas cover the sites where the barn and original superintendent's house once stood, on the north side of Rio Vista Road. Cottonwood and sycamore trees still provide shade for the Main Building and a thicket of scrubby desert cypress trees line the northern perimeter of the WPA complex, defining the property boundary. Although the garden is no longer in evidence, vestiges of the hedges, lawn and trees, that made Rio Vista so homelike, remain. Such landscaping features became possible only after the extension of irrigation to the dry northern reaches of the valley with the Elephant Butte Dam. The vines and desert palms that adorned the entrance to the Main Building are gone. Flower gardens, along with trees and shrubs requiring regular attention, are gone, as well. Landscaping features that detract from the overall character of the district include chain link fences topped with razor-wire used to enclose parking lots and detract from the historic appearance of the farm.

Because the surrounding acreage remains in cultivation and because both the 1915 poor farm building and the 1935 relief workers camp experienced very little alteration since their construction, Rio Vista Farm retains its historic character to an exceptional degree. A product of an effort to harness the Rio Grande to increase the area's productivity, Rio Vista Farm contains the largest collection of related buildings associated with the early 20th-century agricultural development of the lower valley. The portion given to the 1930s transient camp is certainly the most comprehensive and intact example of a Depression-era relief camp in the county, and possibly the state. Virtually intact, the adobe complex evokes a powerful sense of the Great Depression and of the governmental attempts to ease the crisis. The poor farm Main Building and Wash House are the only known public welfare buildings of the period in the lower El Paso valley. Although built at different times and for different segments of the population, both the poor farm and the Transient Camp represent a similar goal: they are the products of a government's response to the social problems of its citizens.



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 43

Rio Vista Farm Historic District  
Socorro, El Paso County, Texas

Architecturally, Rio Vista Farm is a significant collection of eleemosynary buildings in the El Paso region that exemplifies the distinctive characteristics of its type, period, and methods of construction. Products of the Progressive Era, the 1915 county poor farm Main Building and wash house represent the prevailing attitudes of that period toward the poor in their modest scale and domestic ambiance. The Main Building exhibits several features distinctive for its time and location, including an unusual cruciform plan, brick construction, corbeled wing supports, decorative rafter tailings and outstanding craftsmanship. Little changed since its construction, the Main Building retains all of its original distinguishing features. The 1935 buildings of Camp Rio Vista employ the barracks-like plans, camp design, and rustic aesthetic typical of CCC and WPA construction, as well as the adobe brick and Mission Revival detailing prevalent in the Southwest at that time. While the white-washed buildings are interesting individually, as a collection they comprise a virtually unaltered and nearly intact Depression-era camp that is highly significant. Together the 1915 poor farm and the 1935 transient camp represent a significant and distinguishable entity, whose separate components speak to the social and economic challenges of their times.



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet**

Section 9 Page 44

Rio Vista Farm Historic District  
Socorro, El Paso County, Texas

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United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet**

Section 9 Page 45

Rio Vista Farm Historic District  
Socorro, El Paso County, Texas

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United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Section 9 Page 46

Rio Vista Farm Historic District  
Socorro, El Paso County, Texas

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United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section 9 Page 47

Rio Vista Farm Historic District  
Socorro, El Paso County, Texas

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**10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA**

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**ACREAGE OF PROPERTY:** approximately 14 acres

UTM REFERENCES	Zone	Easting	Northing	Zone	Easting	Northing
1	13	379920	3503540	3	13	380300
2	13	379920	3503300	4	13	380300

**VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION**

( ☐ see continuation sheet 10-48)

**BOUNDARY JUSTIFICATION**

( ☐ see continuation sheet 10-48)

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**11. FORM PREPARED BY** (with assistance from Bruce Jensen, THC Architectural Historian)

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**NAME/TITLE:** Hardy-Heck-Moore & Associates: Terri Myers (Historian); David Moore (Historian)

**ORGANIZATION:** for the City of Socorro

**DATE:** September 1993/December 1995

**STREET & NUMBER:** 2112 Rio Grande

**TELEPHONE:** (512)478-8014

**CITY OR TOWN:** Austin

**STATE:** TX

**ZIP CODE:** 78703

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**ADDITIONAL DOCUMENTATION**

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**CONTINUATION SHEETS**

**MAPS** (see continuation sheet Map-49 through Map-53)

**PHOTOGRAPHS** (see continuation sheet Photo-61)

**ADDITIONAL ITEMS** (see continuation sheet Figure-54 through Figure-60)

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**PROPERTY OWNER**

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**NAME** City of Socorro/State of Texas

**STREET & NUMBER** 124 South Horizon Boulevard **TELEPHONE** (915)858-2915

**CITY OR TOWN** Socorro

**STATE** Texas **ZIP CODE** 79927



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section 10 Page 48

Rio Vista Farm Historic District  
Socorro, El Paso County, Texas

### VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

The nominated property consists of Tracts 6A and 6D in Block 3 of the Socorro Grant according to the 1927 survey of the Socorro Grant, as recorded in the El Paso Central Appraisal District, and more particularly described as follows:

Beginning at the southwest corner of Tract 6A also common to Tract 6B, thence N86 09'E, along the boundary line of Tract 6A a distance of 506.95 feet to a corner; Thence, N03 14'W, along the boundary line of Tract 6A a distance of 302.60 feet to a corner, also common to the south right-of-way line of Rio Vista Road (Poor Farm Road); Thence, N86 46'E, along the boundary line of Tract 6A, also being the south right-of-way line of Rio Vista Road (Poor Farm Road) a distance of 661.18 feet; Thence leaving said boundary line and continuing along the boundary line of Tract 6D, also being the south right-of-way of Rio Vista Road (Poor Farm Road) a distance of approximately 105 feet to the southeast corner of Tract 6D; Thence, leaving said boundary line N03 14'W, along the east boundary line of Tract 6D a distance of 459.38 feet; Thence, S86 46'W, along the north boundary line of Tract 6D a distance of approximately 105 feet to the northeast corner of Tract 6B; Thence, S86 46'W, along the north boundary line of Tract 6A a distance of 780.61 feet to a corner on the west boundary line of Tract 6A; Thence, S30 39'W, along the west boundary line of Tract 6A a distance of 392.90 feet; Thence continuing along the west boundary line of Tract 6A, S39 05'W, a distance of 128.10 feet to a corner, also common with the north right-of-way line of Rio Vista Road (Poor Farm Road); Thence leaving said north right-of-way line S30 56'32"W, a distance of 47.85 feet to a corner, also common to the south right-of-way line of Rio Vista Road (Poor Farm Road); Thence leaving said south right-of-way line, S11 02'W, along the east boundary line of Tract 6A a distance of 230.16 feet to a corner on the west boundary line of Tract 6A; Thence, S04 11'E, along the west boundary line of Tract 6A, a distance of 83.90 feet, to the point of beginning. Containing 14 acres more or less.

### BOUNDARY JUSTIFICATION

Boundaries for the nominated property encompass all buildings, outbuildings and auxiliary structures that historically comprised the 1915 El Paso County Poor Farm and the subsequent 1935 Texas Transient Bureau camp. Deed records historically differentiated this property from surrounding agricultural fields. Currently planted in cotton, these fields completely encircle the building complex to visually demarcate the legal boundaries of the historic poor farm tract.



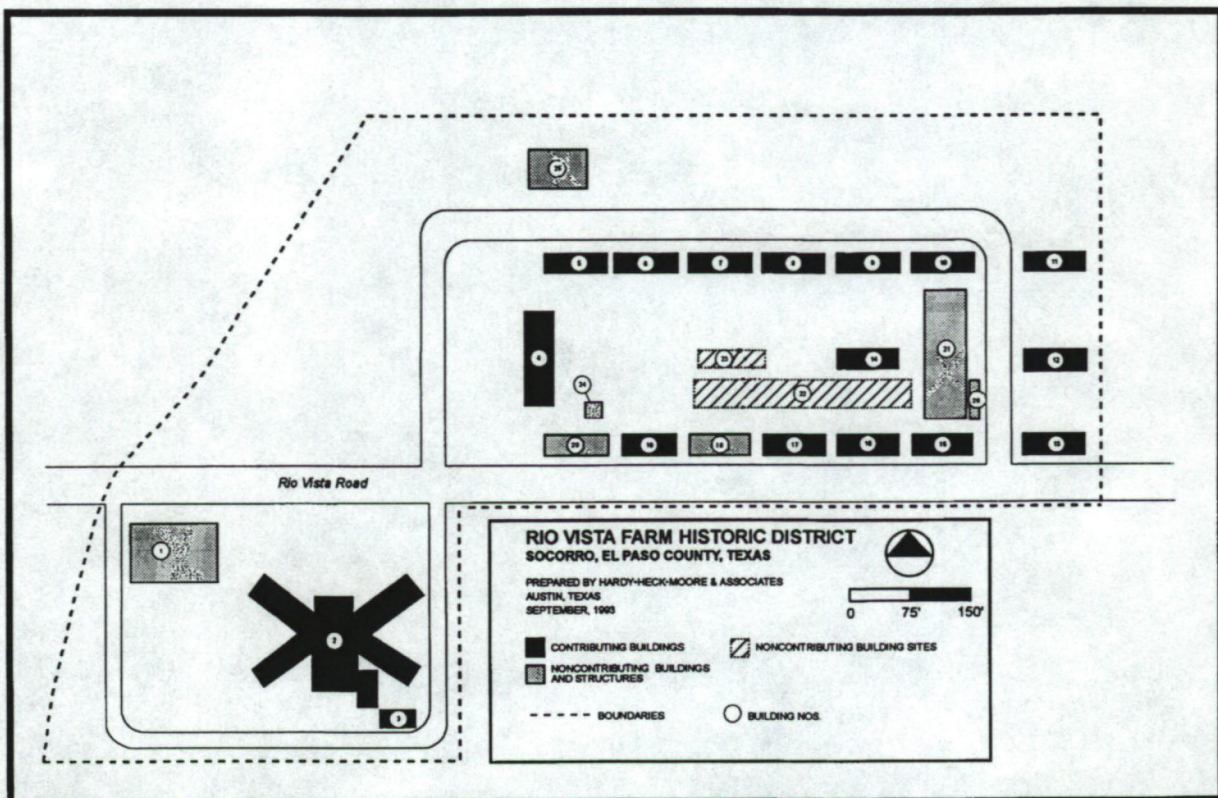
United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Rio Vista Farm Historic District  
Socorro, El Paso County, Texas

Section MAP Page 49

### SITE MAP





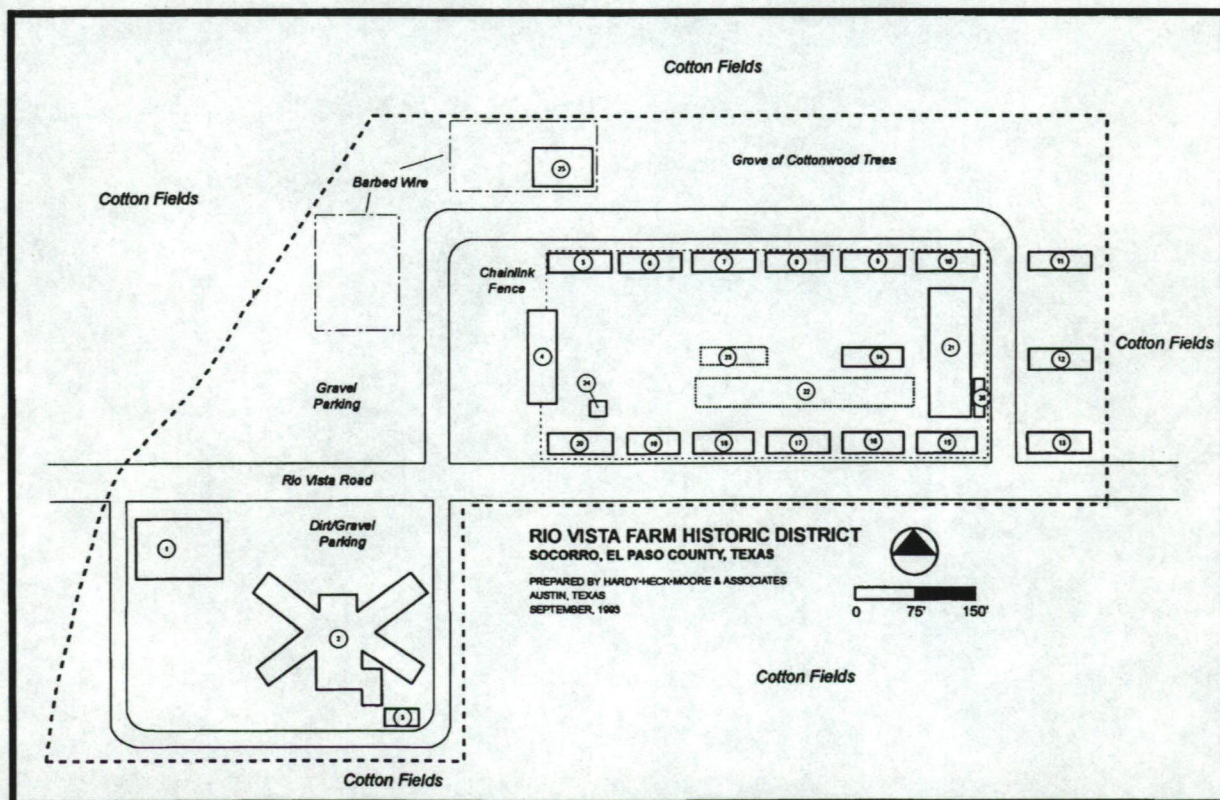
United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section MAP Page 50

Rio Vista Farm Historic District  
Socorro, El Paso County, Texas

### SITE MAP WITH LANDSCAPE FEATURES





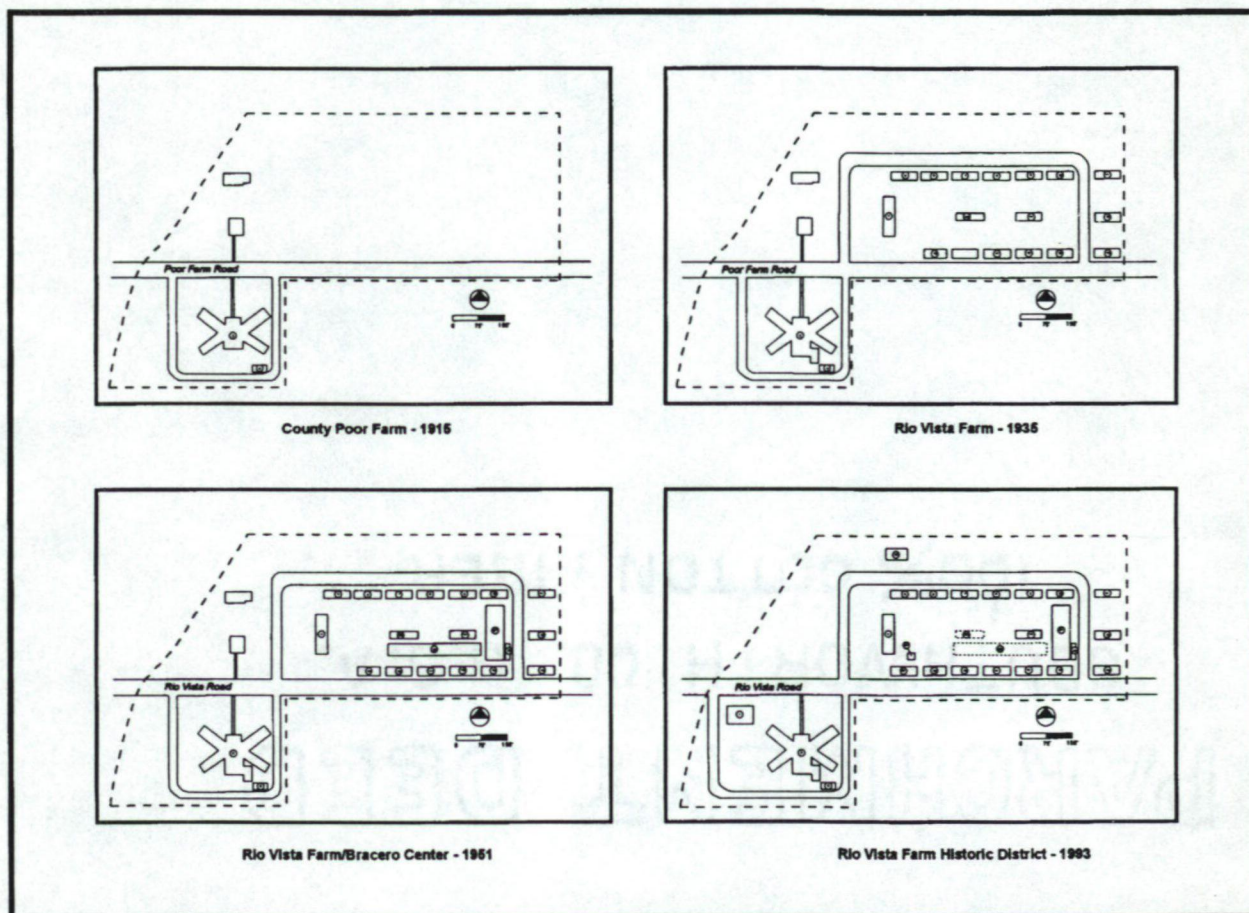
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National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section MAP Page 51

Rio Vista Farm Historic District  
Socorro, El Paso County, Texas

### MAJOR PERIODS OF DEVELOPMENT





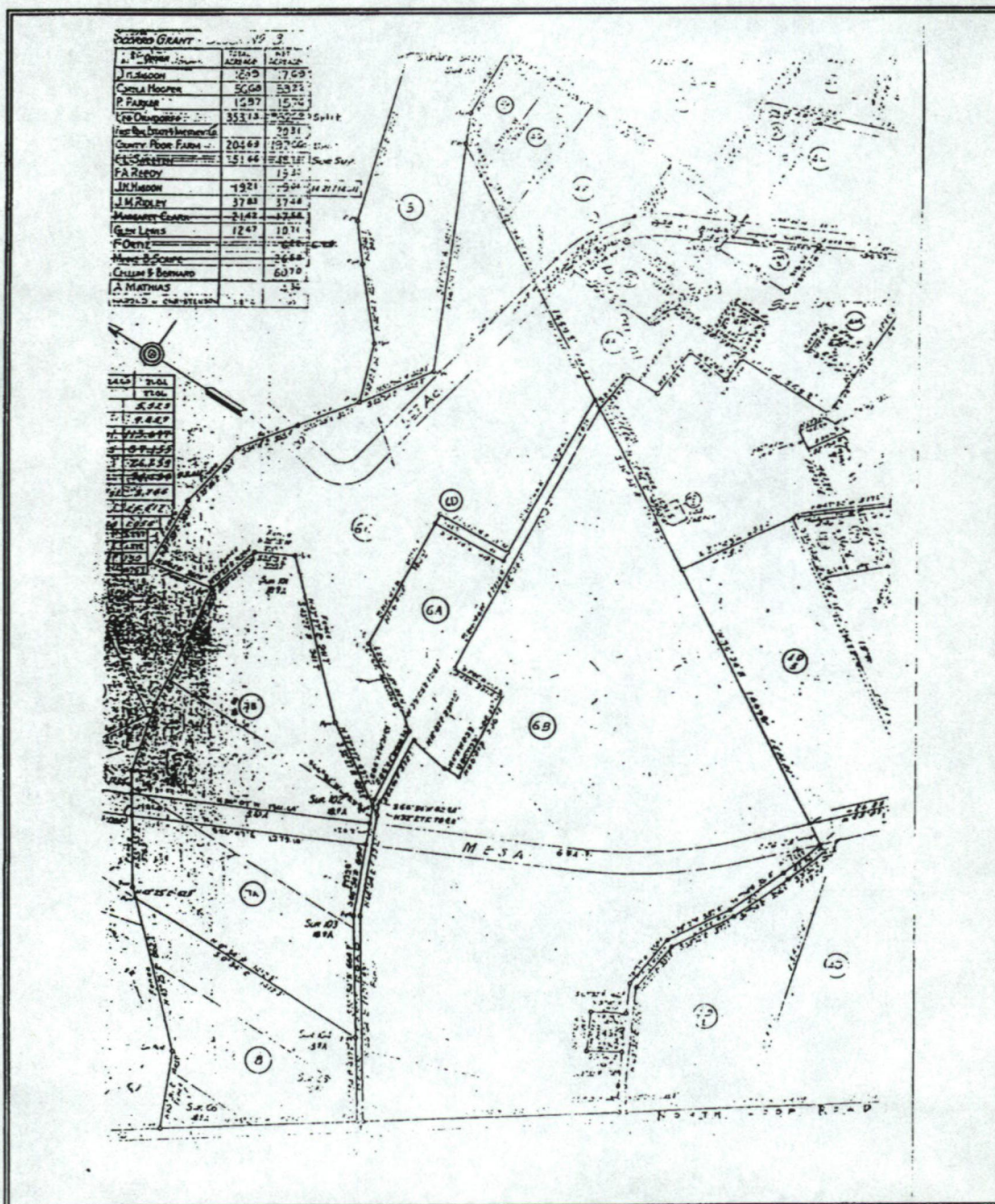
United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section MAP Page 52

Rio Vista Farm Historic District  
Socorro, El Paso County, Texas

SOCORRO GRANT, BLOCK NO. 3 (SOURCE EL PASO COUNTY PLAT MAPS, c.1940 )





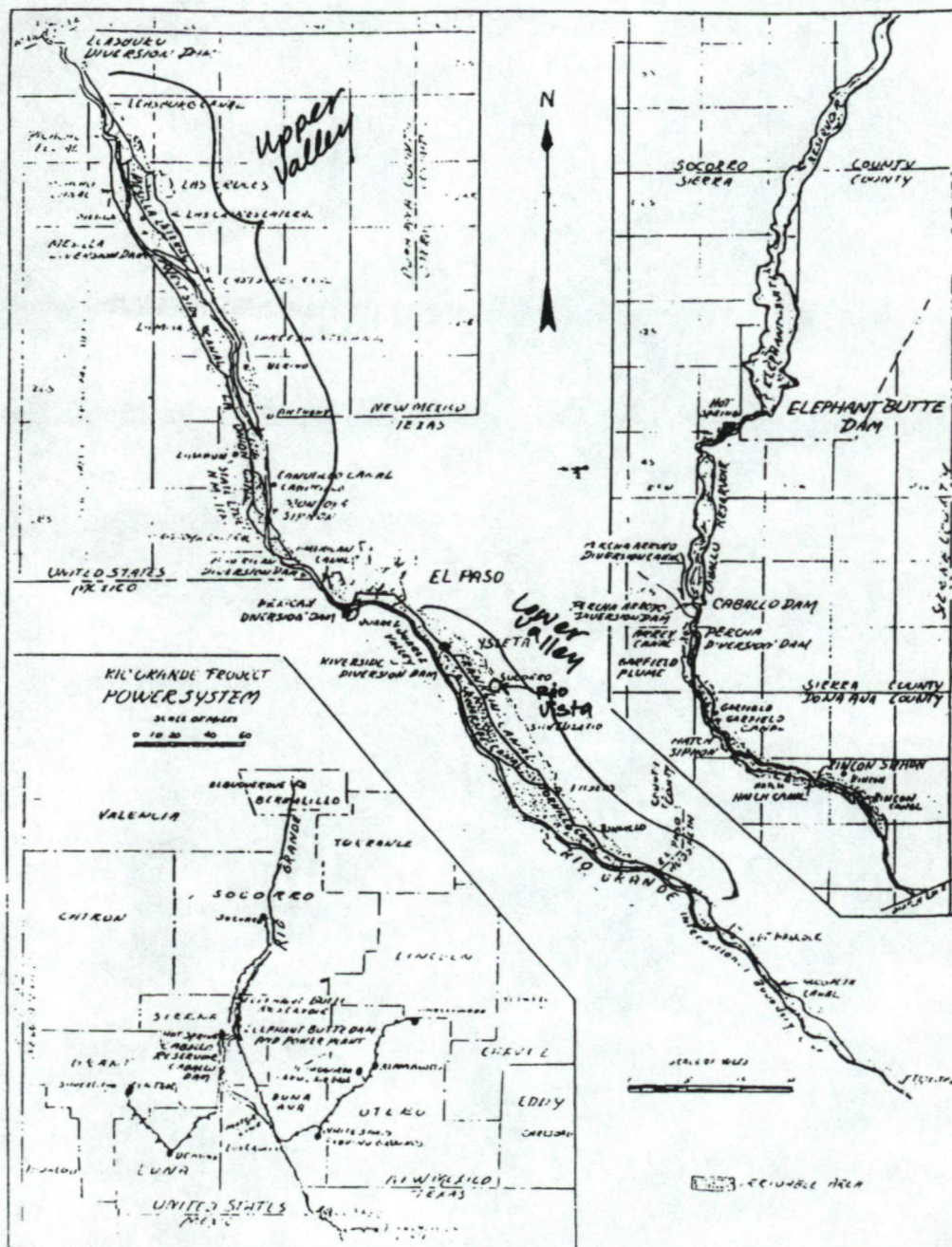
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National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Section MAP Page 53

Rio Vista Farm Historic District  
Socorro, El Paso County, Texas

HISTORIC CONTEXTUAL MAP (SOURCE: WHITE, 1950 - NOTATIONS ADDED)





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## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section FIGURE Page 54

Rio Vista Farm Historic District  
Socorro, El Paso County, Texas

**AERIAL PHOTO OF DISTRICT AND SURROUNDINGS**  
(SOURCE: TEXAS HIGHWAY DEPARTMENT, 1936)





United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section FIGURE Page 55

Rio Vista Farm Historic District  
Socorro, El Paso County, Texas

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**COUNTY POOR FARM, MAIN BUILDING, c.1916**  
(SOURCE: MCKAY HISTORIC PHOTO COLLECTION)





United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section FIGURE Page 56

Rio Vista Farm Historic District  
Socorro, El Paso County, Texas

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**COUNTY POOR FARM, MAIN BUILDING, c.1917**  
(SOURCE: MCKAY HISTORIC PHOTO COLLECTION)





United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section FIGURE Page 57

Rio Vista Farm Historic District  
Socorro, El Paso County, Texas

**SUPERINTENDENT'S HOUSE, c.1920**  
(SOURCE: MCKAY HISTORIC PHOTO COLLECTION)





United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section FIGURE Page 58

Rio Vista Farm Historic District  
Socorro, El Paso County, Texas

**JOHN AND AGNES O'SHEA, c.1920**  
(SOURCE: MCKAY HISTORIC PHOTO COLLECTION)





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National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section FIGURE Page 59

Rio Vista Farm Historic District  
Socorro, El Paso County, Texas

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**HELEN O'SHEA KELEHER AND FRIEND, c.1920**  
(SOURCE: MCKAY HISTORIC PHOTO COLLECTION)





United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section FIGURE Page 60

Rio Vista Farm Historic District  
Socorro, El Paso County, Texas

**AGNES O'SHEA, c.1954**

(SOURCE: MCKAY HISTORIC PHOTO COLLECTION)





United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section PHOTO Page 61

Rio Vista Farm Historic District  
Socorro, El Paso County, Texas

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### PHOTO INVENTORY

RIO VISTA FARM HISTORIC DISTRICT  
800-01 RIO VISTA ROAD  
SOCORRO, EL PASO COUNTY, TEXAS  
TERRI MYERS - PHOTOGRAPHER  
JULY 1993

ORIGINAL NEGATIVES ON FILE WITH THE TEXAS HISTORICAL COMMISSION

- PHOTO 1 - View of the district from entry road, camera facing northeast
- PHOTO 2 - View of primary (north) elevation of main building, camera facing southeast
- PHOTO 3 - Oblique view of southwest wing of main building, camera facing southeast
- PHOTO 4 - Oblique view of north and west elevations of Infirmary, camera facing southeast
- PHOTO 5 - View of interior courtyard towards Recreation Hall, camera facing east
- PHOTO 6 - View along east side of Loop Road, camera facing northwest
- PHOTO 7 - Oblique view of south and west elevations of dormitory, camera facing northeast
- PHOTO 8 - View of east elevation of mess hall and kitchen, camera facing northeast
- PHOTO 9 - Oblique view of north and east elevations of sheriff's facility, camera facing southwest
- PHOTO 10 - Oblique view of south and west elevations of quonset hut, camera facing northeast



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
EVALUATION/RETURN SHEET

REQUESTED ACTION: NOMINATION

PROPERTY NAME: Rio Vista Farm Historic District

MULTIPLE  
NAME:

STATE & COUNTY: TEXAS, El Paso

DATE RECEIVED: 1/25/96 DATE OF PENDING LIST: 2/06/96  
DATE OF 16TH DAY: 2/22/96 DATE OF 45TH DAY: 3/10/96  
DATE OF WEEKLY LIST:

REFERENCE NUMBER: 96000131

NOMINATOR: STATE

REASONS FOR REVIEW:

APPEAL: N DATA PROBLEM: N LANDSCAPE: N LESS THAN 50 YEARS: N  
OTHER: N PDIL: N PERIOD: N PROGRAM UNAPPROVED: N  
REQUEST: N SAMPLE: N SLR DRAFT: N NATIONAL: N

COMMENT WAIVER: N

☒ ACCEPT ☐ RETURN ☐ REJECT 2/22/96 DATE

ABSTRACT/SUMMARY COMMENTS:

Entered in the  
National Register

RECOM./CRITERIA \_\_\_\_\_

REVIEWER \_\_\_\_\_ DISCIPLINE \_\_\_\_\_

TELEPHONE \_\_\_\_\_ DATE \_\_\_\_\_

DOCUMENTATION see attached comments Y/N see attached SLR Y/N







RIO VISTA FARM HISTORIC DISTRICT  
800-01 RIO VISTA ROAD  
SOCORRO, WILLIAMSON CO., TEXAS

PHOTOGRAPH 1 of 10







RIO VISTA FARM HISTORIC DISTRICT  
800-01 RIO VISTA ROAD  
SOCORRO, WILLIAMSON CO., TEXAS

PHOTOGRAPH 2 of 10







RIO VISTA FARM HISTORIC DISTRICT  
800-01 RIO VISTA ROAD  
SOCORRO, WILLIAMSON CO., TEXAS

PHOTOGRAPH 3 of 10







RIO VISTA FARM HISTORIC DISTRICT  
800-01 RIO VISTA ROAD  
SOCORRO, WILLIAMSON CO., TEXAS

PHOTOGRAPH 4 of 10







RIO VISTA FARM HISTORIC DISTRICT  
800-01 RIO VISTA ROAD  
SOLORRO, WILLIAMSON CO., TEXAS

PHOTOGRAPH 5 of 10







RIO VISTA FARM HISTORIC DISTRICT  
800-01 RIO VISTA ROAD  
SOCORRO, WILLIAMSON CO., TEXAS

PHOTOGRAPH 6 of 10







RIO VISTA FARM HISTORIC DISTRICT  
800-01 RIO VISTA ROAD  
SOCORRO, WILLIAMSON CO., TEXAS

PHOTOGRAPH 7 of 10







RIO VISTA FARM HISTORIC DISTRICT  
800-01 RIO VISTA ROAD  
SOCORRO, WILLIAMSON CO., TEXAS

PHOTOGRAPH 8 of 10







RIO VISTA FARM HISTORIC DISTRICT  
800-01 RIO VISTA ROAD  
SOCORRO, WILLIAMSON CO., TEXAS

PHOTOGRAPH 9 of 10



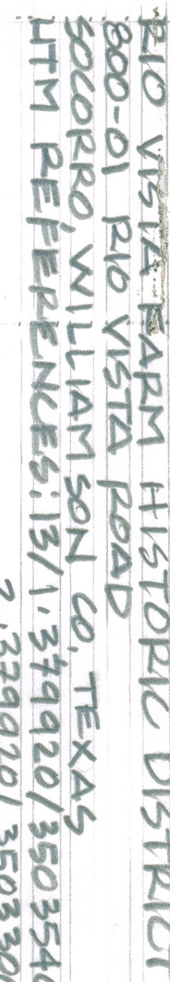




RIO VISTA FARM HISTORIC DISTRICT  
800-01 RIO VISTA ROAD  
SOCORRO, WILLIAMSON CO., TEXAS

PHOTOGRAPH 10 of 10





1955  
PHOTOREVISED 1967 AND 1973  
AMS 4747 III NE-SERIES V882

Polyconic projection. 1927 North American datum  
 10,000-foot grid based on Texas coordinate system,  
 central zone  
 1000-meter Universal Transverse Mercator grid ticks,  
 zone 13, shown in blue  
 Revisions shown in purple compiled by Geological Survey from  
 aerial photographs taken 1967 and 1973. This information not field checked  
 Purple tint indicates extension of urban areas