

The Cambray Overpass and the Federal Grade - Separation Program



Photo of west approach of Bridge 1705, 1931 (NMDOT Collection, Courtesy New Mexico State Records Center & Archives)

Bridge 1705

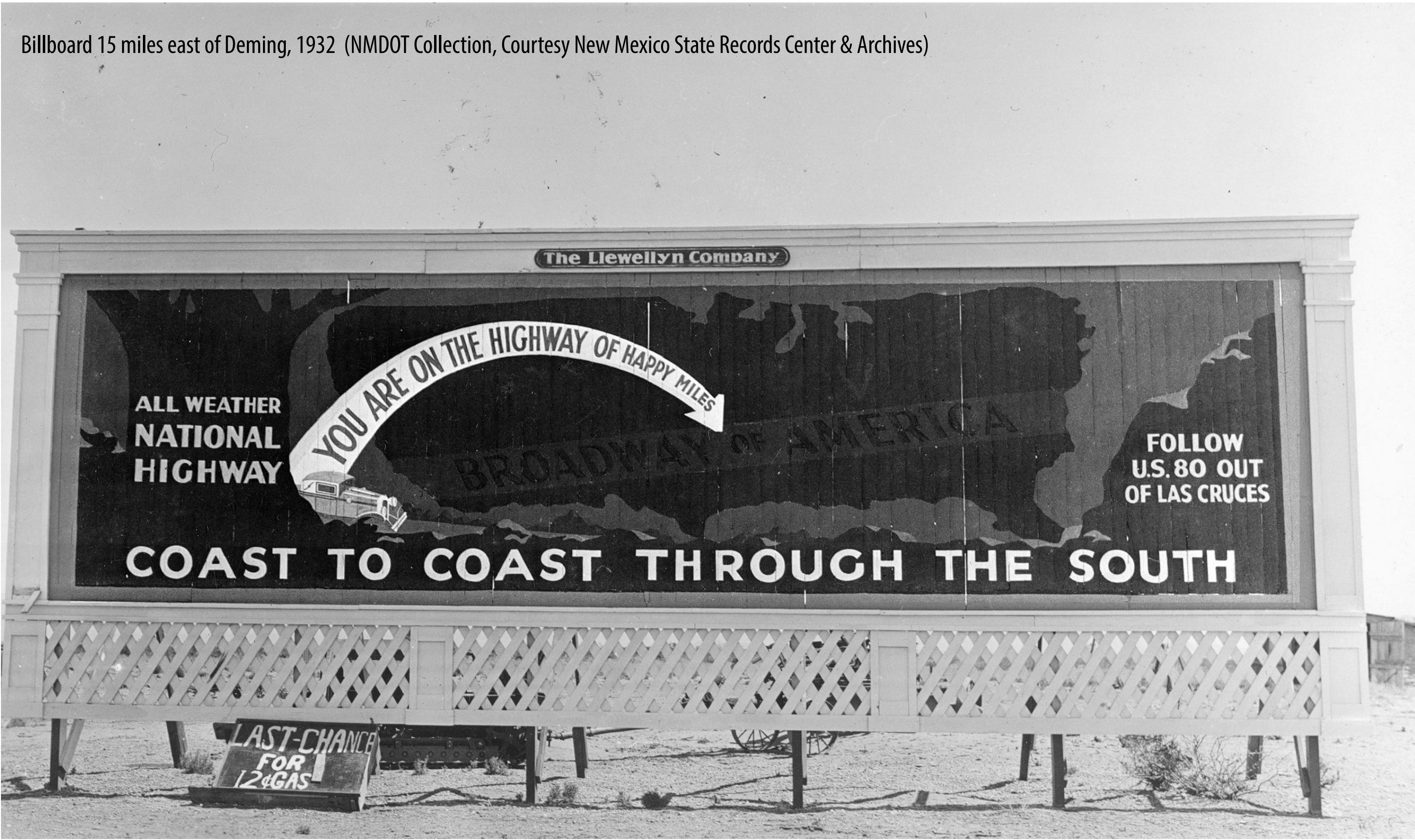
The historic Cambray Bridge on New Mexico State Highway 549 (NM 549) east of Deming was built over the Union Pacific Railroad tracks at Cambray, Luna County, New Mexico. The steel-and-timber stringer bridge was the oldest example of a railroad overpass documented in the state's inventory of historic bridges, and was determined eligible for the National Register of Historic Places in 2004. Built in 1930, the bridge was replaced in 2013 since it no longer met safety requirements, and a bridge with more height was required for additional railroad tracks and increased use by the Union Pacific Railroad.



Screening plant for gravel surfacing project on US 80, FAP 169-A, 1929 (NMDOT Collection, Courtesy New Mexico State Records Center & Archives)

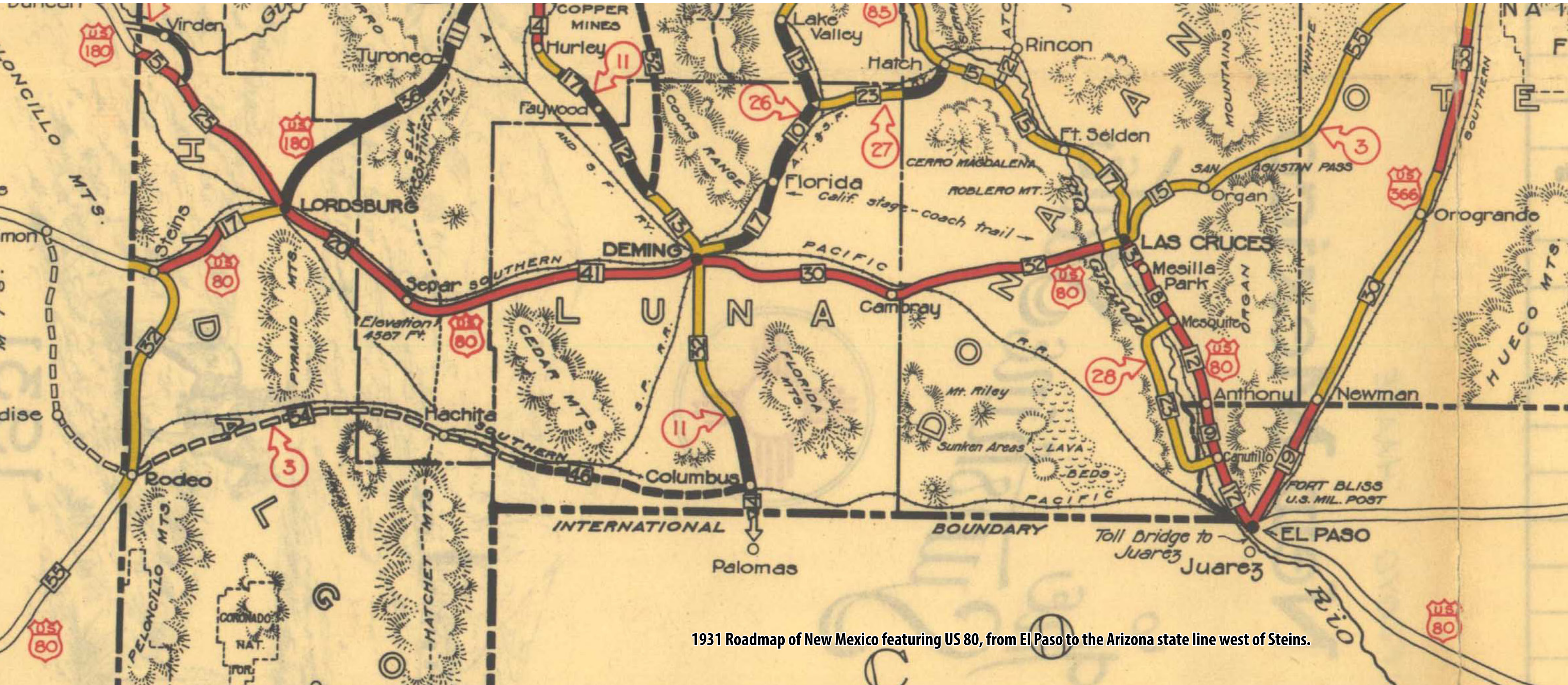


Spreading gravel on subgrade FAP 143-D on US 80, 1930 (NMDOT Collection, Courtesy New Mexico State Records Center & Archives)



Billboard 15 miles east of Deming, 1932 (NMDOT Collection, Courtesy New Mexico State Records Center & Archives)

The Cambray Bridge was significant, in part, for its association with the federal grade-separation program, aimed at eliminating at-grade railroad crossings from our nation's highways. Train-automobile collisions at these crossings claimed many lives and by the mid-1920s grade-separation projects, such as the Cambray Bridge, made up a large part of the budget for the many road construction projects known as Federal Aid Projects (FAPs) which were made possible by the Federal Road Act of 1916. Many other FAPs were awarded along US 80 (now NM 549) throughout Luna County, in the 1920s and 1930s. Typical FAPs between Deming and Las Cruces included road improvement projects involving grading, gravel and oil surfacing, fencing, and drainage. Projects such as these not only improved the highway, but contributed to the growth of communities along the route, such as Cambray.



1931 Roadmap of New Mexico featuring US 80, from El Paso to the Arizona state line west of Steins.

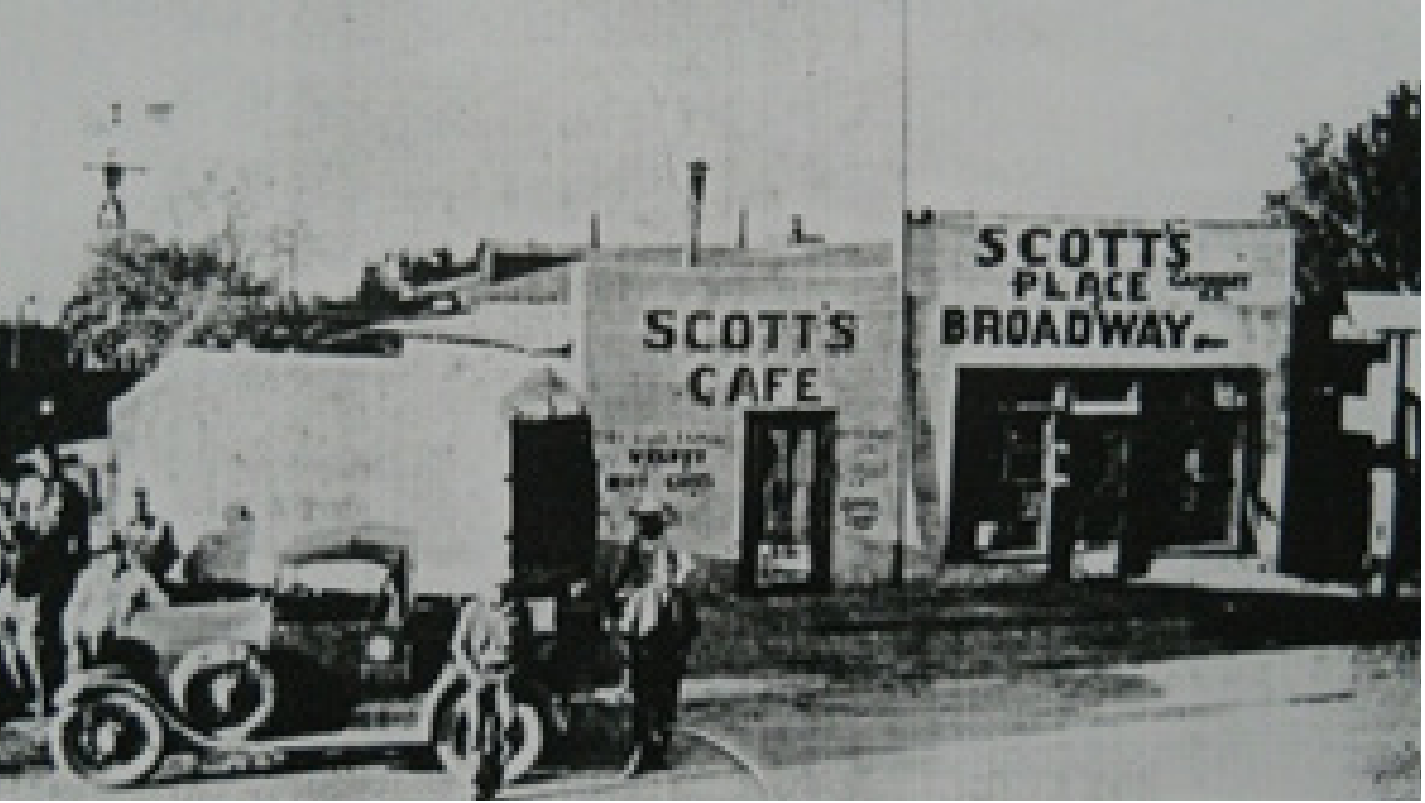
THE CAMBRAY BRIDGE AND HISTORIC US 80



Shawn Kelley, 2011

Historic US 80 and the Town of Cambray

The town of Cambray began as a water stop along the Southern Pacific Railroad. Following part of the old Butterfield stage route, the railroad reached the Cambray area in 1880. This segment of the railroad, known as the Sunset Route (connecting San Francisco and New Orleans), was heavily used for shipping cattle and served dozens of ranchers in the Cambray area. With the railroad siding at Cambray, a community grew and prospered.



Scott's store, which operated along US 80 at Cambray during the 1920s and 1930s. (Photo courtesy Luna Deming Mimbres Museum)



Interior of Midway Café, operated by the Leach family, along US 80 east of Cambray, ca. 1956 (Photo courtesy Juanita Dabbs)



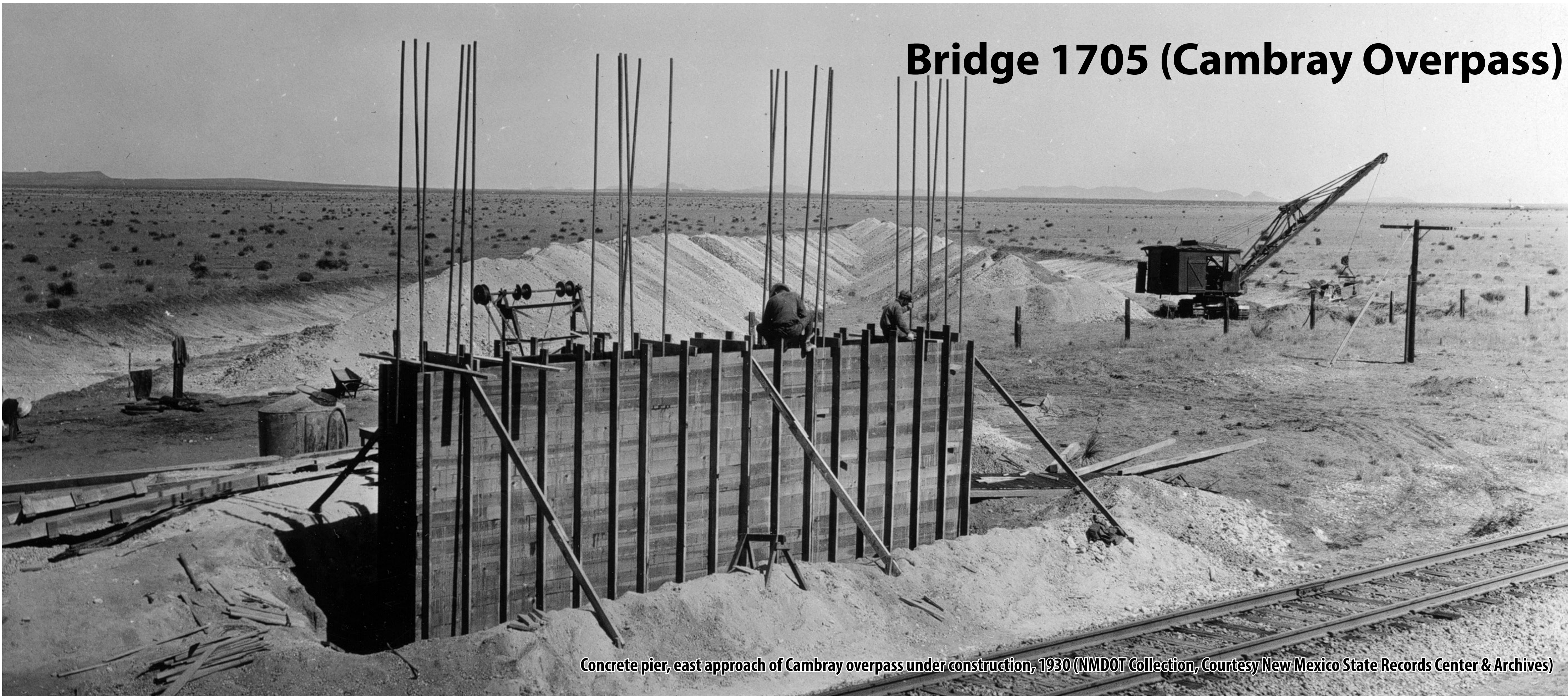
Shawn Kelley, 2011

The highway through Cambray, designated as US 80 in the mid-1920s, was known previously by many names including the Dixie Overland Highway and the Old Spanish Trail (Borderland Route), and was touted as the only all-weather, coast-to-coast highway of its time. Communities along this popular route prospered, serving travelers' needs with a variety of roadside businesses. However, Cambray was bypassed in 1949 when US 80 was rerouted, and local roadside commerce declined at the same time the town's economic connection to the railroad was in its final stages of decline. In the mid-1930s Cambray had lost its railroad siding and freight office, and with the arrival of the diesel engine in the 1940s the town was no longer needed as a water stop. In 1952, the Cambray Post Office closed. Only the ranchers and farmers remained, thinly spread across an expansive landscape without a dynamic community at its center—and Cambray slowly joined the ranks of New Mexico's ghost towns. Today the range around Cambray continues to be ranches by a number of families with historic connections to the community. The town lives on in their memories and stories about a bygone era.



Shawn Kelley, 2011

Bridge 1705 (Cambray Overpass)



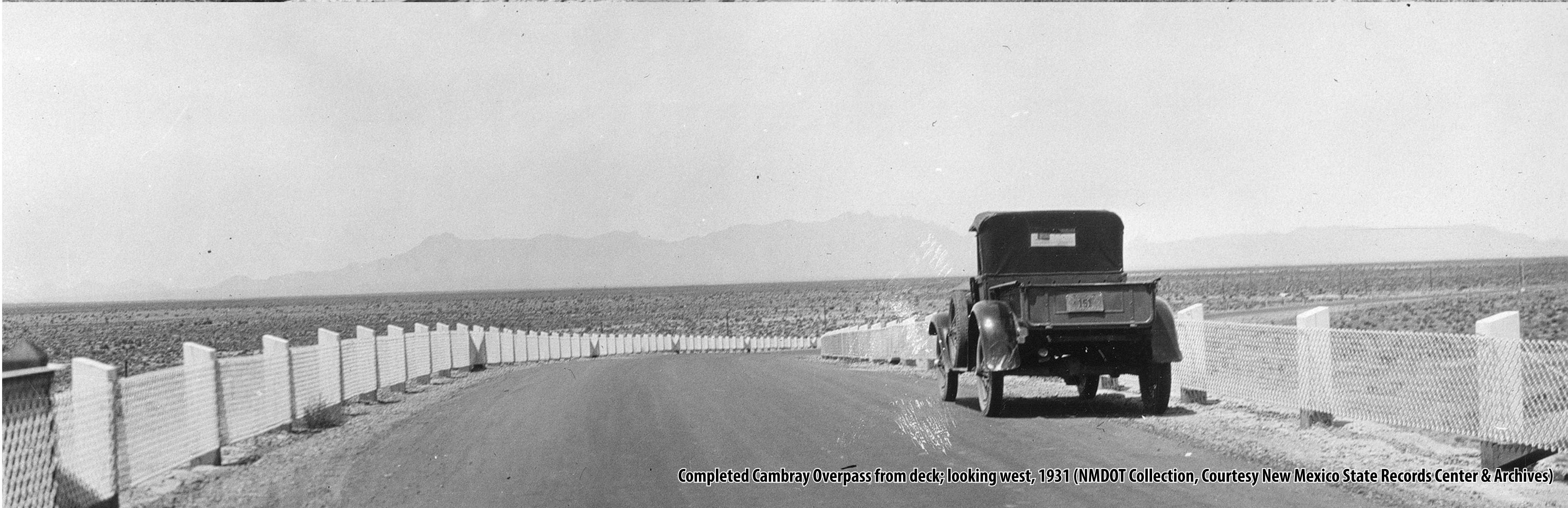
Concrete pier, east approach of Cambray overpass under construction, 1930 (NMDOT Collection, Courtesy New Mexico State Records Center & Archives)



Cambray overpass under construction; looking east, 1930 (NMDOT Collection, Courtesy New Mexico State Records Center & Archives)



Completed Cambray overpass; looking west showing railroad under Bridge 1705 with the town of Cambray on both sides of the tracks in the distance, 1932 (NMDOT Collection, Courtesy New Mexico State Records Center & Archives)



Completed Cambray Overpass from deck; looking west, 1931 (NMDOT Collection, Courtesy New Mexico State Records Center & Archives)