

The Historical Committee Presents: *Hannett's Joke: Route 66*

by Eric Scott Jeffries

When I was a kid, before the lights of Albuquerque crowded up into the dark Sandia foothills, from atop Tijeras Canyon one could see Route 66 and its arterial bulge, Central Avenue, form a twinkling and delicate thread of countless lights from motels, hotels, gas stations, restaurants, residences, and cars receding into a thin thread into the far horizon beyond the West Mesa. The Duke City's lights shone in the midst of the Rio Grande Valley like a slim, golden, bright Christmas ornament. Route 66, now I-40, has been Albuquerque's most important commercial artery to the world, with money flowing in from the pockets of tourists and truckers traveling to and fro, east and west.

Few today are aware that the 1926 birth of Route 66 was originally christened "Hannett's Joke," conceived in the vision and sense of humor of one of New Mexico's most controversial trial lawyers and politicians, A.T. Hannett, New Mexico governor from 1924 to 1926. He served as the lead trial attorney in a number of prominent New Mexico trials, including what became the famous U.S. Supreme Court case, *Jencks vs. United States*,¹ which requires federal prosecutors to disclose to defendants potential impeachment evidence of prosecution witnesses. A.T. Hannett lived in a different era, in a rapidly changing world, when politics, trial practice, and the roads of New Mexico were more rough and tumble, less forgiving and less polite, all still mirroring the vestiges of our frontier heritage.



Arthur Thomas Hannett

Hannett's Joke had its origin in the bitter 1926 gubernatorial election campaign between Hannett, the Democratic incumbent, and Republican challenger, Richard Dillon, of Encino. Today, newspapers and politicians soft pedal their true partisanship. In the 1926 campaign both the newspapers and politicians, Democratic and Republican, were rabidly partisan and were not shy to show it.

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At a November 2, 1926 Albuquerque Republican Convention, Manuel Otero, a former Republican candidate, and Bronson Cutting, later to become a U.S. senator, but at the time a "frogleg Democrat," supported Richard Dillon. They articulated the Republican theme of the gubernatorial campaign.

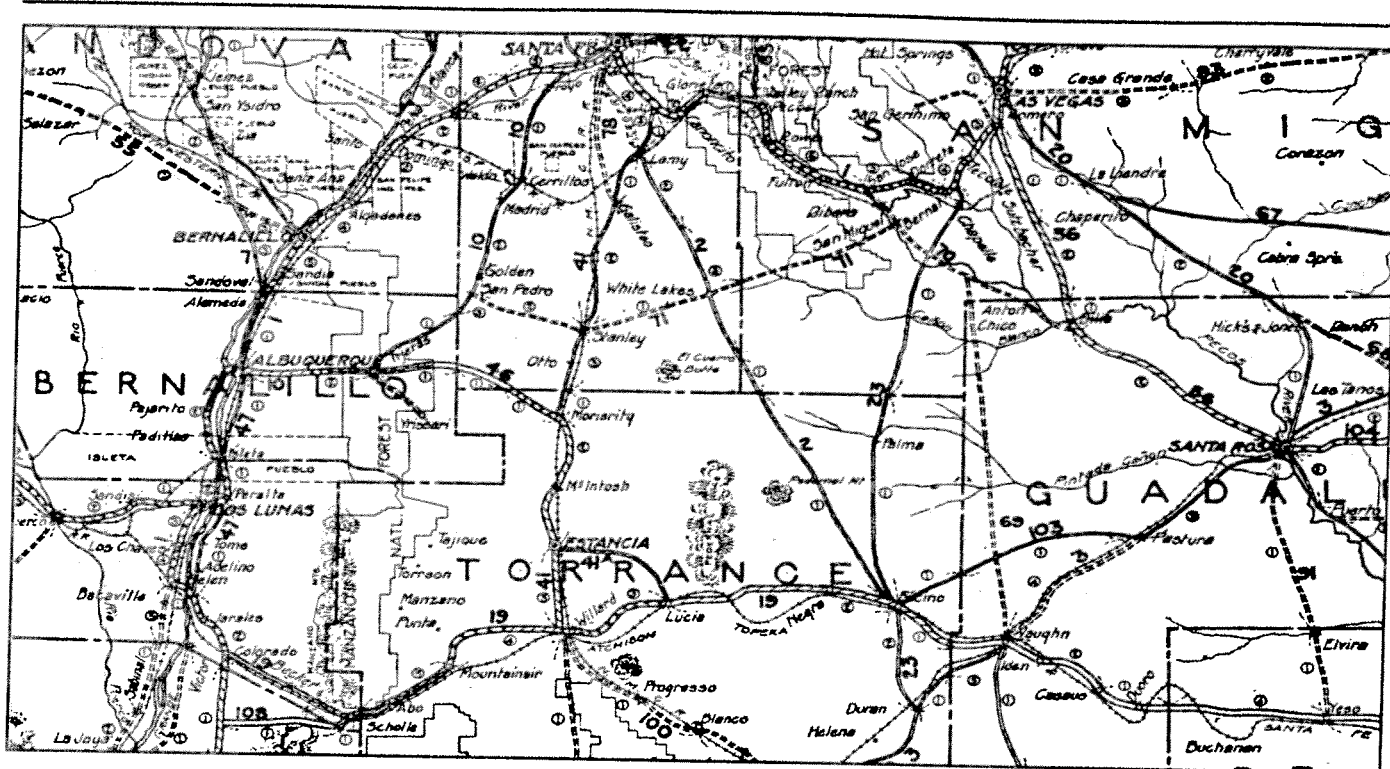
Col. Cutting was introduced by Manuel Otero "as a democrat who was an officer in the Hannett administration until it got so rotten he had to quit."

He [Bronson Cutting] charged Gov. Hannett with "stealing the election from Manuel Otero two years ago; with having double-crossed the candidate for treasurer; with being unfair to Spanish Americans in the selection of Ed Scope as a successor to Land Commissioner Justina Baca; and with using his office for the benefit of a little ring calling itself the Democratic Party.

"A man who goes in office by theft will continue an administration of fraud," he declared. "I will not stand from my own party what I will not stand from the other side. No republican administration was ever so filled with corruption as this one now happily drawing to a close."²

At the same time, somewhere in New Mexico, you can assume Gov. Hannett was speaking equally unkind remarks about Bronson Cutting.

At another November Republican banquet, long before the advent of judicial merit selection, the *Albuquerque Journal* quoted Judge Reed Holloman as admitting that in addition to being "a political judge he is a practical politician." The



quotes that followed proved Holloman more partisan than you might suspect even of a self-professed "political judge."³

That brings us back to Route 66. Before 1926, there was no direct route east from Albuquerque to Santa Rosa or vice versa. What few roads existed were more accustomed to the tread of feet and hooves than of rubber tires. If you were driving west from Santa Rosa to Albuquerque there were only two "graded" and "surface" roads. (See the 1923 State Highway map on the next page.) The northern route meandered from Santa Rosa to Romeroville, just south of Las Vegas, New Mexico, then on to Santa Fe through Apache Pass, the only road through the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, through Santa Fe, then south down La Bajada Hill and finally to Albuquerque.⁴ The principal southern route went from Santa Rosa to Vaughn, New Mexico, then through Encino to Mountainair on to Jarales south of Los Lunas, and finally north, through Belen, to Albuquerque.

According to his supporters at least, Republican challenger Dick

Dillon's profitable sheep-shearing and meat-production operation in Encino was one of his glowing qualifications to be Governor.⁵ Democrats dubbed Dillon "the Merchant of Encino."⁶ In 1926, located as it was on a major east-west route, Encino was a prosperous community. After a hard-fought campaign, on November 2, 1926, Richard Dillon wrested the office of the governor from A.T. Hannett. The merchant of Encino became the new governor.

A.T. Hannett was not about to let this upstart merchant of Encino have the last word. As a former highway commissioner and a governor who had greatly expanded New Mexico's highways, Hannett commanded respect and loyalty among the workers of the even then powerful Highway Department. In November 1926, Hannett summoned his highway engineers to the governor's office and placed before them a map of New Mexico. According to legend, with ruler and pen in hand, Hannett drew a straight line from Moriarty to a portion of the Romeroville highway just north of Santa Rosa. On that route beginning December 1, 1926,

Gov. A.T. Hannett told his engineers to survey, cut, scrape and grade a 69-mile highway before his gubernatorial term ended on January 1, 1927.⁷ The new highway would eliminate the need for travelers between Albuquerque and all points east to ever again pass through Romeroville to the north, or Encino to the south. A faster, easier route meant more traffic and more business for Albuquerque and New Mexico, but it spelled doom for the future of Encino. A.T. Hannett would have his last word and his revenge!

By December 1, 1926, State Highway Engineer, E.B. Bail, in Moriarty, and State Highway Engineer, Sam Fulton, in Santa Rosa, organized their highway crews at their respective beginnings to the new U.S. Route 66. The two crews were to join each end of the new Route 66 at Palma, New Mexico. Each crew had assembled a motley collection of construction equipment gathered from every equipment dealer in New Mexico, Colorado and El Paso, including a variety of different tractors, trucks, graders

Continued on page 38

and dilapidated World War I caterpillars.⁸ The equipment operators of the State Highway Department were eager to participate in "Hannett's joke."⁹ They fully expected the end of their own jobs, along with Gov. Hannett's, on January 1, 1927, the scheduled date for the inaugural ceremony of new Gov. Richard Dillon.

The math was simple: 31 days, including Christmas (a day uncelebrated that year by the Highway Department), to construct 69-miles of highway.¹⁰ The race was on! Engineer Bail's Moriarty crew forged eastward from Moriarty while Sam Fulton's Santa Rosa crew forged west to Santa Rosa through the open, flat plains country, each construction army eager to meet at the Palma, New Mexico midway point. The Moriarty crews' path was blocked by 27-miles of piñon forest, obstructing the route to Palma. With red flags men marked the path of least resistance through the piñon forest. Other men followed tying cables to the piñons, which, with tractors, were yanked out, roots and all. The roads were then cut with rough graders, followed by finishing tractors and graders.¹¹ Both crews stoically endured the bitter December cold with the misery of wind and snows on the eastern plains.¹²

Man's obstructions in the form of fences were cut down as the crews raced to Palma. Surprisingly, without benefit of the formal process of condemnation, not a single landowner sued to stop the construction of the road between Moriarty and Santa Rosa.¹³ They probably appreciated the economic benefit of having a major highway run through their land.

Nonetheless, there were some who bitterly opposed the new road.

According to the engineer's report, suspects from the little towns of Romeroville, Encino and Vaughn sabotaged equipment at night pouring sugar into gas tanks and sand into engines.¹⁴ To protect their equipment, the loyal crews took to sleeping around their road equipment.¹⁵

On January 1, 1927, Gov. Richard Dillon was sworn into office. That same day an engineer was sent to Palma to put an end to Hannett's Joke. As the result of a snow storm, he did not find the highway crews until January 3.¹⁶ By that time, the respective construction crews had already met in Palma completing a usable, if rough road of 69 miles destined to become the new U.S. Route 66. A.T. Hannett had the last laugh.

Like the happy end of a typical Hollywood movie, instead of firing the employees of the Highway Department for sealing the fate of Encino, Gov. Dillon honored their accomplishment and enthusiasm, by keeping everyone of them in the state's employment, with orders to continue improvements to the crude road.¹⁷ He probably realized the value of keeping the voters in New Mexico's most populous city happy with their new highway. After 1926, the original, primitive road received the federal funding needed to pave its sandy tracks to officially become the new U.S. Route 66. With the explosion in the population of New Mexico and the West in the '40s, U.S. Highway 66 became a major commercial highway for the entire nation. By the '60s it became part of the legendary and romantic myth of the West.

I do not know what happened to Richard Dillon's sheep operation for himself and his descendents. It probably disappeared like other

such sheep operations in the '50s, as New Mexico became increasingly urban. Nonetheless, Richard Dillon recognized that Hannett's joke was a product of a vision that would benefit us all. Ultimately, both the joker and his victim shared the last laugh. ■

Editor's note: Anyone interested in submitting an historical article for publication in the Bar Journal, should contact Eric Jeffries, chair of the State Bar's Historical Committee, at 243-3900.

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ENDNOTES:

¹ 353 U.S. 657, 1 L.Ed.2d 1103, 77 S.Ct. 1007 (1957)

² Albuquerque Journal, p.1 (November 2, 1926).

³ Albuquerque Journal, p.1 (November 14, 1926).

⁴ Appendix No. 6 Article Appearing in the New Mexico Professional Engineer, July-August, 1952, written by E.B. Bail, contained in the Sagebrush Lawyer, A.T. Hannett, Pageant Press, Inc. New York, New York (1964), (hereinafter "Sagebrush Lawyer") at p.280.

⁵ Albuquerque Journal, p.1, (October 19, 1926).

⁶ Sagebrush Lawyer, p.280.

⁷ *Id.*, p. 285.

⁸ *Id.*, p. 285.

⁹ *Id.*, p. 287.

¹⁰ *Id.*, p. 285.

¹¹ *Id.*, p. 286.

¹² *Id.*, p. 287.

¹³ *Id.*, p. 287.

¹⁴ *Id.*, p. 287.

¹⁵ *Id.*, p. 287.

¹⁶ *Id.*, p. 287.

¹⁷ *Id.*, pp. 286, 287.