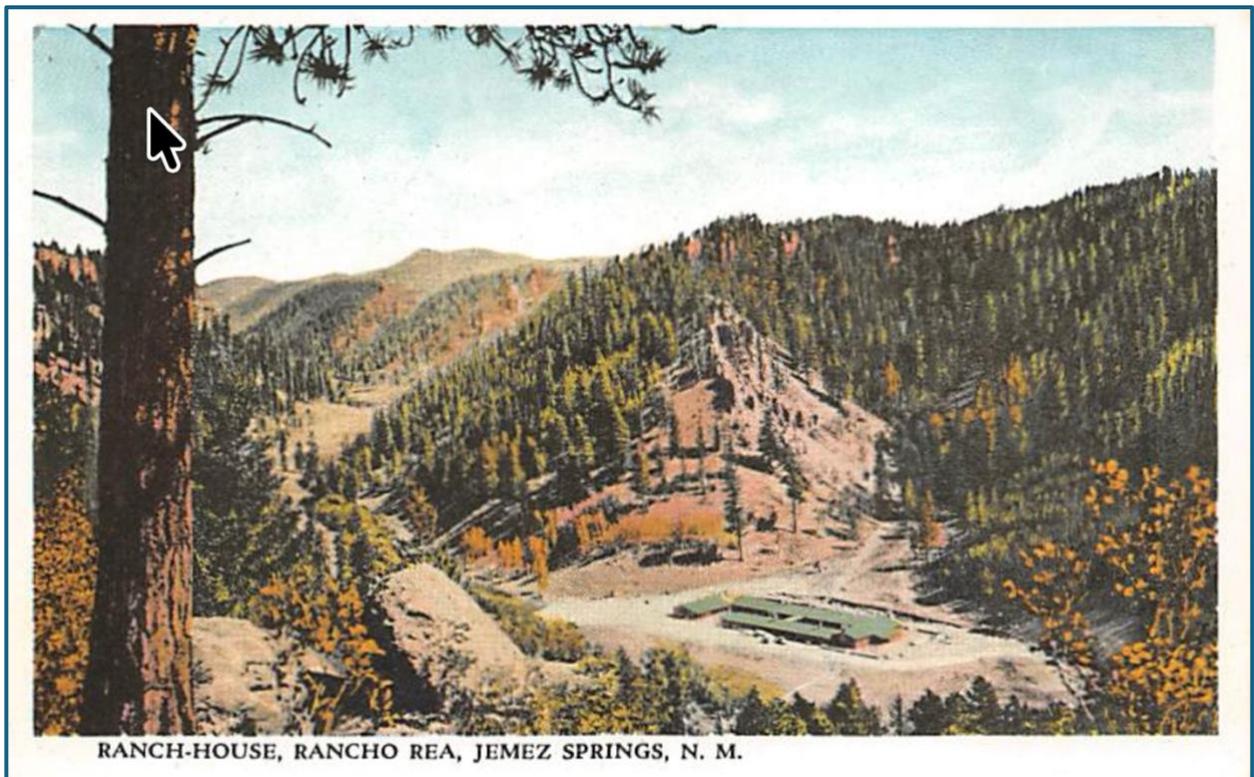


Seth Seiders, Rancho Rea, and the Legend of Al Capone in the Jemez Mountains

*A History of the Man, His Properties,
and the Gangster Stories that Refuse to Die*



Postcard, probably from the late 1920s, showing Ranch Rea in upper Cebolla Canyon.

Introduction

Deep in the Jemez Mountains of north-central New Mexico the Rio Cebolla winds through a narrow canyon of ponderosa pine, spruce, and volcanic rock. In a small meadow along this creek, roughly eighty-five miles northwest of Albuquerque and two miles upstream from the Seven Springs Fish Hatchery, a few faint traces of stone foundations lie hidden beneath meadow grass. These barely visible remnants are all that remain of one of the most lavish and mysterious guest ranches ever built in the American Southwest: Rancho Rea, later known as the Lazy Ray Ranch.¹

For nearly a century, the story of this remote property has been inseparable from two names: Seth Seiders, the enigmatic Chicago businessman who built it, and Al Capone, the infamous gangster who allegedly used it as a mountain hideaway during the Prohibition era. The Capone connection has been written about many times—in newspaper columns, magazine features, books, websites, and online presentations. At least a dozen published accounts have explored the question of whether America's most notorious mobster truly retreated to this secluded canyon in the late 1920s.



A shadowy portrait of Seth Seiders (at left) in 1925 (Forbes magazine), and Al Capone (at right) in 1932.

Yet for all the attention given to the Capone legend, the man who actually built and ran Rancho Rea—Seth Seiders—has remained a surprisingly shadowy figure in these accounts. Who was he, really? How did a self-made Chicago millionaire come to construct a mountain resort in one of the most isolated canyons in New Mexico? What other properties did he own in the Jemez Mountains, and what happened to his empire when it all came crashing down? And beyond the published record, what do the families

who have lived in these mountains for generations actually remember about the “Chicago Men” and their years in the Jemez?

This article attempts to answer these questions by drawing on a wide range of sources: historical newspaper accounts, legal records, published articles and books, personal memoirs, brochures and postcards, and—perhaps most valuable—the oral histories and recollections of Jemez Mountains residents whose families lived through the Seiders era. The goal is not to repeat what has already been written but to expand the story by focusing more closely on Seiders himself, his multiple property holdings in the Jemez Springs area, and the rich fabric of local memory that keeps the Capone legend alive.

Seth Seiders: The Self-Made Millionaire from Chicago

Seth Seiders was born in 1883 in Paulding, Ohio, a small town in the flat agricultural country of the state’s northwest corner. From his earliest years, Seiders displayed a single-minded drive to accumulate wealth. As a boy, he sold magazines, trapped muskrats for their pelts, and hawked buckets of wild blackberries to neighbors. He read, by his own account, “nothing but books about successful men,” and was consumed almost entirely with the idea of making money.²

By the mid-1920s, Seiders had made good on his childhood ambition. Operating out of Chicago, he founded Seth Seiders Syndicate, a company that built a fortune selling printed motivational materials—posters, pep talks, sales booklets, and inspirational mottoes aimed at American businesses. A 1926 profile by writer Neil M. Clark described him as “a big, well-dressed, blonde-headed man with an arresting gray eye.” Clark noted that Seiders had made his million in roughly six years, though the editor of *The American Magazine* expressed open skepticism about the nature of the business: “You can’t quite visualize his business,” the editor wrote. “Made a million in six years out of selling some kind of mottoes,’ you say. ‘Sounds kind o’ phony to me.’”³

However, this skepticism was partly unfounded. Seiders was a genuinely successful businessman and entrepreneur, even if not always above board. In a recent review of his contributions in motivational psychology of labor, Seiders’ and his partners are credited with establishing concepts that are still referenced today. It is evident that his business was thriving by the late 1920s, reportedly supplying products to 40,000 firms, with a projected \$12 million in annual sales for 1928. Seiders’ interests also extended well beyond motivational posters and booklets. He also owned the Webster Hotel in Chicago, as recorded in an August 1927 society column in the *Oak Park Leaves* newspaper, which introduced him in the context of hosting guests at his New Mexico ranch.⁴

Tom Abousleman, a lifetime resident of Jemez Springs, recalled years later: “There was a rumor that he was a little shady. Said he was in advertising, though that comes with a lot of territory.”⁵ Others were more blunt: Seiders was widely rumored to have made at least some of his money as a bootlegger during Prohibition, producing and distributing illegal alcohol. He was also known to have cheated on his taxes—a detail that would later prove to be his undoing, as it had been for his alleged associate, Al Capone.⁶

Seiders' personal life was as colorful as his business dealings. In 1928, the Chicago Tribune reported that a 20-year-old woman had sued Seiders (45) for "both mental and physical suffering," alleging he had forced her to dye her hair red. The paper noted dryly that "the business executive will associate with none but red-haired women." He was married at the time to a woman named Rhea, for whom his New Mexico ranch was named, and whom, by most accounts, he "adored." But the lawsuit, along with mounting debts, questionable business practices, and tax evasion, painted a picture of a man whose ambitions frequently outran his ethics and his means.

Seiders' Property Holdings in the Jemez Springs Area

Seth Seiders did not merely build a single ranch in the Jemez Mountains. He assembled a small empire of properties here, with holdings that stretched from the village of Jemez Springs to the high country of Cebolla Canyon. Understanding the full scope of his investments helps explain both his ambitions and his eventual financial ruin.

The centerpiece, of course, was Rancho Rea itself, located in the upper Cebolla Canyon at about 8,200 feet in elevation. But Seiders also owned or controlled property in and around the village of Jemez Springs, some twenty miles to the south and a couple thousand feet lower in elevation. The Rancho Rea Company maintained a dual address, operating from both 155 East Superior Street in Chicago, Illinois, and from Jemez Springs, New Mexico, as recorded in the company's promotional brochures.⁷

Among his Jemez Springs holdings was a property sometimes referred to as "Rancho Chico," described in multiple sources as a smaller property on the edge of the village that included a stone hotel building. Rancho Chico was the property and buildings later purchased by the Servants of Paraclete north of Soda Dam, which they renamed "Lourdes." This property appears to have served as a way station or secondary lodging for guests traveling between the railroad depots in Albuquerque or Bernalillo and the main ranch in the mountains. The *My Strange New Mexico* article by Harper Sullivan notes that Capone reportedly visited both Rancho Chico and the main Rancho Rea. According to Mary Lou Heaphy, she met him as a small child at this property just north of Soda Dam around 1931. Heaphy's Capone story is somewhat dubious for reasons discussed later, but her family did visit Seiders at his Rancho Chico hotel, as evident in a family photograph of the buildings in her book.⁸

Legal records from the early 1930s reveal additional property connections in Jemez Springs. A December 22, 1932 legal notice in the *Albuquerque Journal* described the forced sale of Seiders' land at Jemez Springs—"a piece of land at Jemez Springs situated about 20 chains [1,320 feet] below the falls of the Jemez River [Soda Dam]," known as the "Soda Spring land," located on both sides of the Jemez River within the Canon de San Diego Grant. The notice described a complex parcel of approximately twenty-four acres, bounded by the lands of neighbors, including J. W. Miller, Cecilio Baros, and Emeterio Archuleta, and divided into sections by these adjoining properties. The same legal notice also referenced the "La Esperanza Ranch at Jemez Springs" as a corporate entity connected to Seiders' operations.⁹

La Esperanza—“The Hope”—was the name of a large, two-story hotel in Jemez Springs built in 1922 by Charles Clay, and located immediately across the road from the old pueblo and mission ruins of Gisewa and San Jose (now known as the Jemez Historic Site). That hotel changed hands multiple times after Clay leased and then sold it around 1930. Eventually it was purchased by the Catholic Church, Servants of the Paraclete in 1947. During subsequent decades the priests demolished most of it, and built the current buildings on that site, possibly incorporating the foundations and first floors of La Esperanza. It seems that Seiders was still expanding his Jemez estate in the late 1920s, by building Rancho Chico north of Soda Dam, and purchasing at least an interest in La Esperanza Hotel.

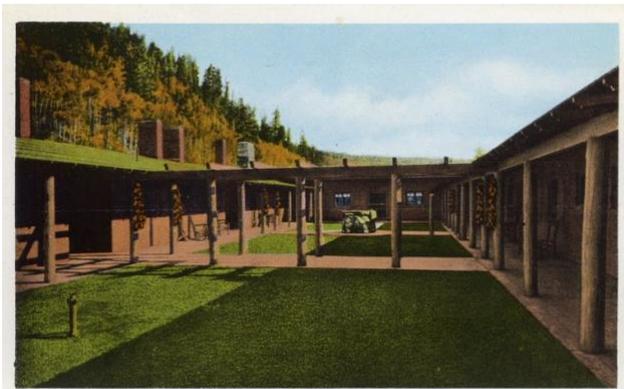
A March 27, 1931 article in the *Albuquerque Journal* reported on ambitious plans for a million-dollar resort development at Jemez Springs, listing among the existing hospitality properties in the area “the old Jemez Springs hotel on the Field property [probably the Stone Hotel built by the Oteros, now on Bohdi Manda],” “La Esperanza Hotel,” and “Rancho Rea, ‘dude’ resort.” The planned development, announced by promoter Joe Barnett, envisioned a twelve- to fifteen-story, 200-room hotel to be built by Colonel George E. Montgomery of Amarillo, Texas, at a projected cost of approximately \$1 million.¹⁰ Though this grand resort was never built, the article confirms that Jemez Springs in the early 1930s was already home to multiple hotel and resort properties, several of which had connections to Seiders’ over-extended operations.

Building Rancho Rea: A Mountain Fortress of Luxury

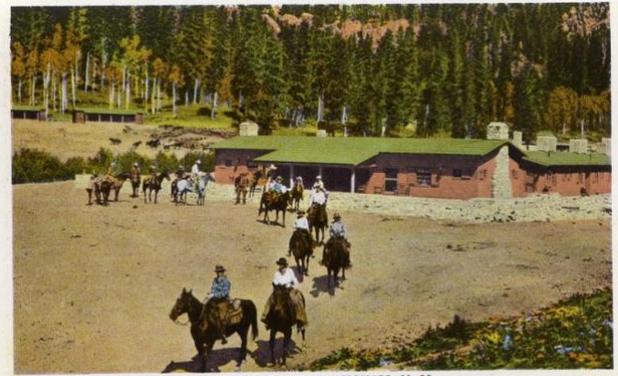
Seiders left Chicago for the Jemez Mountains in 1924, though he continued to spend at least half of each year in Illinois. What he built in the remote upper Cebolla Canyon over the next several years was extraordinary by any standard. The ranch was accessible only by a road Seiders built into the canyon through dense forest and volcanic terrain.

The main ranch house was a massive structure, and most materials had to be hauled over rough mountain roads from distant sawmills and the nearest railhead. The living and lounge room stretched nearly eighty feet, with a large stone fireplace at each end, tile floors covered with Navajo rugs, and ceiling vigas decorated with painted designs by artists from nearby pueblos. The room was furnished with “big, comfortable chairs and couches,” Indian pottery, animal heads and skins, and a reproducing piano. An orthophonic Victrola and an eight-tube Radiola provided music. The library featured another stone fireplace, walls lined with bookshelves, and the same rustic-yet-refined aesthetic.¹¹

The guest accommodations were equally impressive. Sleeping suites came in “varying color schemes,” with hardwood floors, electric lights, steam heat, private baths, and individual fireplaces. According to the brochure, the food was “fit for a king! Prepared by a French chef. Everything raised on the place.” A trading post offered “everything you’ll need”—Western clothing, cowboy hats, cameras, drugs and cosmetics, guns, ammunition, and fishing equipment, Indian pottery, rugs, silver, jewelry, and “cowboy souvenirs and far western novelties.”¹²



PATIO, RANCHO REA, JEMEZ SPRINGS, N. M.



OFF FOR THE TRAILS, RANCHO REA, JEMEZ SPRINGS, N. M.



LIVING AND LOUNGE ROOM, RANCHO REA, JEMEZ SPRINGS, N. M.



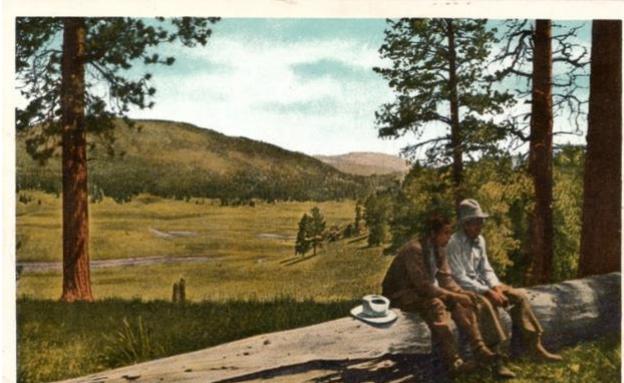
LOBBY, LA ESPERANZA RANCH JEMEZ SPRINGS, NEW MEXICO



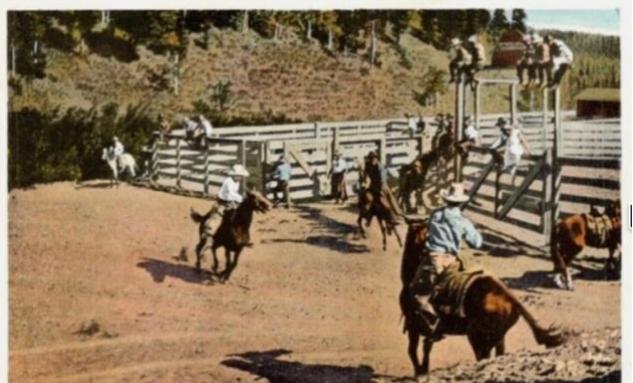
INTERIOR OF TRADING POST, RANCHO REA, JEMEZ SPRINGS, N. M.



TRADING POST, RANCHO REA, JEMEZ SPRINGS, N. M.



JUST LOAFIN', RANCHO REA, JEMEZ SPRINGS, N. M.



RODEO, RANCHO REA, JEMEZ SPRINGS, N. M.

Previous page: Postcards from Rancho Rea from the 1920s.

The recreational amenities rivaled those of the finest resorts in the country. The Rancho Rea brochure listed hunting, fishing, hiking, trail riding, pack trips, motor tours, weekly rodeos, polo, horse games, swimming, tennis, archery, trap shooting and target practice, horseshoe pitching, skiing, skating, tobogganing, sleighing, bobsledding, and trapping. A spring-fed swimming pool sat above the lodge. Stables, tack rooms, rodeo grounds, and corrals housed the horses and cattle used for guest activities. Across the Rio Cebolla, reached by a fishing bridge, stood additional recreation buildings, including a large log structure housing a technically illegal bar and dance floor.¹³

Transportation to this remote paradise was handled with corresponding style. “Fast, luxurious Santa Fe train service to Albuquerque or Bernalillo, N.M.,” the brochure promised. “Thence by Packard or Pierce-Arrow through the most colorful country in the Southwest.” Guests were limited to thirty at a time, and the ranch did not cater to “tourists and transients.” Instead, it marketed itself to long-term vacationers staying a month or more: “Just your own little party—plus true Western hospitality!”¹⁴

Roland Pettitt, writing in *The Monitor* of Los Alamos in October 1973, visited the ranch’s ruins and described what remained of its former grandeur. He noted the nearly eighty-foot-long lounge with its massive fireplaces, the baby grand piano, the decorative ceiling paintings, and the elaborate guest room complexes. Pettitt observed that the ranch “achieved a reputation for both elegance and infamy because of its rustic refinement.” He reported that the guest list had included “the who’s who of the time”—actresses, singers, and other celebrities from Chicago and the East Coast.¹⁵

Diana Caldwell Clark, whose grandfather, Elijah McLean Fenton Jr., lived six miles south of the ranch, offered a more intimate perspective. In a written recollection, she described how her grandfather’s sons “worked there during the summer guest season when they were teenagers as wranglers for the horses.” The ranch, she wrote, “was owned by Sid Siders [sic] at that time, and his wife’s name was Rhea. It was a rich man’s playground, along with being a guest ranch for the wealthy.” During the winter months, her grandfather “was hired to get the snow off the roofs of the buildings so they wouldn’t collapse. There was nobody at the Ranch during the winters.”¹⁶

The Rise and Fall of Seiders’ Empire

For a few glittering years in the late 1920s, Rancho Rea operated as one of the most exclusive retreats in the Southwest. The ranch advertised widely, placing display ads in newspapers across New Mexico. In June and July of 1931, the *Clovis Evening News-Journal* ran advertisements for Rancho Rea touting its location in the “cool, green Jemez Mountains” and its status as a retreat for discriminating guests. These ads continued to appear even as Seiders’ financial world was collapsing around him—a sign, perhaps, of a desperate effort to maintain revenue in the face of mounting debts.¹⁷

The onset of the Great Depression, combined with Seiders' own financial mismanagement and legal troubles, brought the enterprise crashing down with remarkable speed.

The first public signs of trouble appeared on April 18, 1931, when the *Albuquerque Journal* reported that the Charles Ilfeld Company, a prominent New Mexico wholesale firm, had filed suit against Seth Seiders and the Rancho Rea Company for unpaid debts. Additional creditors included the Ravel Brothers, for merchandise; the Albuquerque Lumber Company, for building materials; and R. G. Tompkins, for repairs. Seiders' business and personal indebtedness in these claims was nearly \$10,000 (approximately \$237,000 in 2026 dollars).¹⁸

Additional debts mounted rapidly. On May 25, 1932, the *Albuquerque Journal* announced that Rancho Rea had been placed on the auction block to satisfy a federal court judgment. Deputy U.S. Marshal Dan Padilla was ordered to take inventory of the property. The article revealed staggering liens against the ranch: \$55,000 in excess profit taxes plus an additional \$5,700 in other liens (almost \$1.5 million in 2026 dollars). Just over two weeks later, on June 10, 1932, the paper reported that Seiders had made "no comment" on the judge's order to auction his property. By this time, the paper noted, Seiders had "started an Indian curio store in New York."¹⁹

The December 1932 legal notice for the forced sale of Seiders' Jemez Springs properties confirmed the breadth of his financial collapse. Both the mountain ranch and his valley properties were being seized and liquidated to satisfy debts and back taxes. The timing was striking: Seiders' financial ruin closely followed Al Capone's guilty verdict for tax evasion in his October 1931 trial, and his imprisonment in May 1932.

Whether these events were connected—whether Seiders and Capone shared business entanglements as well as social ones—remains one of the enduring unanswered questions of this story. The *Guide to the Charles H. Rosenfeld Papers* at the University of Chicago hints at such a connection, noting that "by the late 1920s or early 1930s, Seiders was spending much of his time in New Mexico, where he was linked to Al Capone. [Rosenfeld was a close business associate of Seiders.] The fraud was discovered, and hearings took place in 1932, by which time the Syndicate had fallen apart."²⁰

In July 1935, a lawsuit provided further detail about the disposition of the property. G. E. "Tex" Thompson, along with George J. Honeck and Charles Chadwick, filed suit seeking a commission of \$1,100 on the sale of Rancho Rea, claiming the property had sold for \$11,000. Thompson, originally from Billings, Montana, had been brought in as a broker. The sale price of \$11,000 was a small fraction of what Seiders had invested in the property—a measure of how far the ranch's value had fallen since its glory days. By July 5, 1939, the *Albuquerque Journal* described Rancho Rea as "deserted," a ghost of its former self. The grand lodge and its outbuildings sat empty and deteriorating in the mountain canyon until its renaming and reuse as Rancho Real, and then the Lazy Ray Ranch (as described later).²¹

The arc of Seiders' story—from small-town Ohio boy to Chicago millionaire to bankrupt exile—mirrors in miniature the larger arc of the 1920s boom and bust that remade

American life. His properties in the Jemez represented a particular kind of Prohibition-era dream: the remote sanctuary where a man of questionable means could live like a king, far from the scrutiny of federal agents and metropolitan newspapers. That the IRS ultimately caught up with Seiders, just as it caught up with Capone, was perhaps the most telling parallel of all. Both men had built empires that depended on money flowing in channels that the government could not easily trace, and both saw those empires dismantled by the same prosaic instrument: the tax code.

What became of Seth Seiders after losing his Jemez properties is not well documented. The 1932 reference to his Indian curio store in New York suggests he attempted to reinvent himself, but few subsequent newspaper accounts or public records have surfaced to trace his later years. He mostly vanished from the public record—an ironic fate for a man who had once spent lavishly to make his mountain retreat the most talked-about destination in the Southwest.

The Al Capone Connection: Separating Legend from Evidence

No account of Rancho Rea can avoid the question that has dominated every telling of the story since at least the 1970s: Did Al Capone really visit Seth Seiders' ranch in the Jemez Mountains?

The basic facts of Capone's biography are well established. Born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1899, Alphonse Gabriel Capone rose to become the most powerful and notorious gangster in America during the Prohibition era. Based in Chicago, he built an empire through illegal liquor, gambling, and organized crime, reportedly earning tens of millions of dollars annually at the peak of his power. His career as a mob boss spanned roughly 1925 to 1931. He was arrested for income tax evasion in 1931, sentenced to eleven years in federal prison, and served much of his sentence at Alcatraz. Released in 1939 with his health ruined by advanced syphilis, he died in Florida in 1947 at the age of forty-eight.²²

There is one documented instance of Capone passing through New Mexico. In December 1927, Capone and several cohorts boarded an Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railway train from Chicago bound for Los Angeles. The train passed through both Santa Fe and Albuquerque. According to newspaper accounts, police and journalists quickly hounded the group, and they returned to Chicago by the same route. No documentation from this trip places Capone at Rancho Rea or anywhere in the Jemez Mountains.²³

The connection between Capone and Seiders, however, rests on more than coincidence. Both men operated in Chicago during the same period. The *Oak Park Leaves* society column from 1927, the Rosenfeld Papers at the University of Chicago, and multiple oral histories confirm that Seiders and Capone, at a minimum, knew each other. Seiders' rumored involvement in bootlegging would have placed him squarely within Capone's world. The security arrangements described at Rancho Rea—armed guards, restricted access, special identification required for delivery personnel—go well beyond what any legitimate guest ranch would require.²⁴

One compelling piece of testimony comes from S. Y. Jackson, who wrote a letter to the *Albuquerque Journal* published on May 3, 1977. Jackson stated unequivocally:

May I clarify the mystery as to whether Al Capone and his cohorts maintained a hideaway in the Jemez Mountains back in the 1930s? I know they did because my company did their laundry under special arrangements with the then-owners of the Lazy Ray Ranch up there.

Jackson went on to describe a laundry truck making the day-long round trip to the Jemez resort twice a week “during the times when Capone decided the New Mexico climate was healthier than Chicago’s.” The laundry driver carried special identification to pass the road guards. “The laundry business flourished during the times the ‘gang’ was ensconced at the ranch,” Jackson added, “since the Capone cohorts numbered between 40 and 50 per stay.”²⁵

The most confident local testimony comes from the late Mary Fenton Caldwell, who grew up in the Jemez Mountains, at the Fenton place located on the road to Rancho Rea, about six miles away. She offered a firm statement, as recorded in the 2019 *My Strange New Mexico* article by Harper Sullivan. “Capone was here, but he was kept pretty well hidden,” Caldwell said. “He had a hideout. There’s no question he was here.” She added: “He used to come by, and when he’d come by he’d just stop in and have dinner with you. There wasn’t a lot of people here back then.” On Seiders himself, Caldwell offered a telling assessment: “We kind of figured he was in partnership with Al Capone in some ways.” However, a caveat to Caldwell’s testimony is that it is not eyewitness; it had to be secondhand (probably from her parents, or others) because she was born about six months after Capone was incarcerated in May 1932.²⁶

Mary Lou Heaphy, author of the memoir *A Cliffie Experience: Tales of New Mexico, 1902–1940*, claimed to have met Capone as a child at “Sider’s place” just before the mobster was arrested for tax evasion in 1931. According to historian Don Bullis, Heaphy described a scene in which “when Capone was in residence, men with Thompson sub-machine guns guarded the drinking and gambling facilities.” However, similar to Mary Fenton Caldwell’s story, a caveat to Heaphy’s story is that she could only have been 4 years old in late 1931. So again, these memories are likely secondhand, “remembered” through family stories told by her parents.²⁷

Not everyone was convinced. Tom Abousleman, who probably knew Seiders at least indirectly (he was about 13 years old in 1931) was emphatic in his skepticism: “Seiders knew Capone, but Capone wasn’t up here. First I heard about those rumors was after World War II, at an auction. Guy was selling a milking stool from Seiders’ ranch and said, ‘Al Capone might have sat on this,’ and everyone rushed to bid on it.” According to Cathy Stephenson, step-daughter of Marcel Abousleman (Tom’s brother), all the Abouslemans, not just Tom, disbelieved the Al Capone stories.²⁸

Historian Don Bullis, writing in his *New Mexico Historical Biographies* in 2011, weighed the evidence carefully. He noted that Mike Smith, writing for *New Mexico Magazine* in July 2007, “found several residents who flatly declared Capone spent time at Seiders’ place in the late 1920s,” but also found “at least one source” who said Capone

did not visit the Jemez despite knowing Seiders. Bullis cited “Chicago Outfit” historian John Binder, who offered a judicious assessment: “He traveled widely and may have stopped at many places. Logically, it’s impossible to prove that he was never at a particular place.” Bullis concluded: “Aside from word of mouth, there does not seem to be any proof of the Capone connection to the Jemez Canyon. The legend, however, will live on.”²⁹

Shannon Wagers, writing for the Sandoval County Historical Society’s quarterly newsletter in 2017, offered a thoughtful analysis. She noted that Capone’s career as a mob boss from 1925 to 1931 was “fairly well documented,” making extended absences in New Mexico difficult to reconcile with the historical record. She acknowledged, however, that Capone “was known to enjoy bathing in hot mineral springs,” of which the Jemez area has many, and that a brief stopover was “possible” even if no documentation had surfaced. She concluded: “Unless new evidence surfaces, we’ll probably never know for sure³⁰

One line of circumstantial evidence that Wagers hints at is Al Capone’s attraction to vacationing at hot springs facilities because, at the time, soaking in hot mineral baths was a widely practiced treatment for alleviating the symptoms of syphilis. Capone eventually died from complications of the disease in 1947 after being released from Alcatraz Prison. Hot mineral baths relieved symptoms (neuralgia, paralysis, etc.), but they were not a cure. It is well-documented that Capone visited resort hotels and baths in Hot Springs, Arkansas, on many occasions before his prison years. Given this motive for pain relief, the Jemez Mountains, with multiple bathhouse facilities (at Sulphur Springs and Jemez Springs, and the various outdoor pools in the Jemez), would logically have been a significant draw for the syphilitic Capone.

The question of Capone in the Jemez first surfaced in the broader public consciousness on April 2, 1972, when a reader wrote to the *Albuquerque Journal’s* “Action Line” column asking about the persistent local legend. The paper investigated and published a response two days later under the headline “Al Capone, Gang Did Vacationing at Region Ranch.” The article drew on the recollections of longtime residents and presented the story as established local lore, though the original questioner remained “not convinced that there was evidence to support the story.”³¹ This exchange marked the beginning of the Capone legend’s transition from private oral tradition to published history—a transition that has continued, with varying degrees of accuracy, ever since.

Elsie MacKinnon, who ran the Laughing Lizard Inn & Café in Jemez Springs (at the time of the Sullivan article), offered a succinct summary of the local consensus: “It was a very private place and lots of things went on there that wouldn’t go on in the normal world. And that’s where Al Capone stayed.”³² Beyond the ranch itself, local accounts place Capone at multiple locations in the Jemez area. Employees at the Jemez Springs Bathhouse claimed he liked to drive down from the ranch for soaks in the famous mineral tubs. Residents told of visits to a nearby liquor store and even to an area church. These scattered sightings, if true, would suggest that Capone—or at least someone the locals identified as Capone—moved through the broader Jemez community and was not entirely sequestered at the ranch.

Voices from the Jemez: Residents Remember the Gangsters

Whatever the published record may or may not prove, the oral history of the Jemez Mountains is rich with stories about Capone and the “Chicago Men.” These stories have been passed down through families for generations, told at kitchen tables and community gatherings, and in recent years shared on social media platforms where Jemez residents old and new exchange memories and lore. Taken individually, any one of these accounts might be dismissed as hearsay or embellishment. Taken together, they form a remarkably consistent body of testimony about a time when wealthy, well-dressed, and well-armed outsiders from Chicago occupied the upper Cebolla Canyon.

There are multiple stories about armed guards along the road or entrance to Rancho Rea when the gangsters were present. For example, a story recently recounted on social media by Laura Padilla Crespín said: “Ralph Taylor, who was a long-time resident of Seven Springs, told us the story. Ralph passed several years ago but he was our neighbor and a wonderful story teller. He said there was a lookout post on 126 and the road to the fish hatchery.”³³

Diana Caldwell Clark’s written recollection preserves another encounter story. Her grandfather, Elijah McLean Fenton Jr., who regularly visited the ranch for odd jobs and to deliver milk and butter from his wife’s cows, once “encountered a man that was acting very devious and secretive and possibly had a scar on his face. Grandpa was sure that was Al Capone hiding out from the Law and grandpa was careful not to approach or interact with this man.”³⁴ As with Mary Fenton Caldwell’s (Diana’s mother) testimony, this is a compelling and credible story, but again, secondhand.

Amie Adams Green contributed recollections drawn from her family’s long history in the area. Her father, Paul Adams, Sr., born in 1922, “was quite curious if anyone actually had seen Al Capone. He said he could never pin anyone down. It was always secondhand info. They would say they knew of someone who had seen him.” Adams Green’s father was “actually leaning to the side that Al Capone was never up there but sent his boys to hide out.” This assessment came in part from a man her father knew at work: “This man’s father delivered gas, propane, and other things on a regular basis to both places but mostly to the Lazy Rae [sic]. He told my dad they’d seen lots of rough guys but never saw Al Capone.”³⁵

Adams Green also shared a specific memory of the relationship between local children and the visiting “Chicago group.” She recalled hearing Emmett Cart, a Jemez old-timer, talk about those years: “He was young and looked forward to the Chicago group coming out and bringing their kids. Money being what it was for most in NM, ammo was quite limited. But Emmett’s ‘job’ was to entertain the youngins who brought lots of ammo and guns with them, and they spent their days in the hills shooting squirrels and rabbits.”³⁶ This detail—wealthy Chicago visitors whose children arrived with abundant ammunition during the cash-strapped Depression years—captures the economic disparity between the visitors and the mountain communities they moved among.

However, this story from Emmett Cart, as recalled by Amie Adams Green, again raises doubts that the “Chicago” visitors Cart spoke of included Capone. Cart was born in 1928, so his earliest childhood memories of shooting rabbits, etc., with Chicago kids would be from the mid to late 1930s at the earliest, when Al Capone was in Alcatraz Prison.

Adams Green noted that Mary Lou Heaphy’s memoir, while interesting, may not be entirely reliable. Adams Green’s father and Heaphy had been childhood friends, and Heaphy had brought the family a signed copy of her book. After reading it, Adams Green’s father concluded that “most of it was childhood memories” and, in Adams Green’s words, “my dad’s summation was the library needed to catalogue it with their fiction books.”³⁷

The latest local account of possible “gangsters” at the dude ranch comes from Chip Berglund, who says his father, Marlon, told this story: “In the mid to late 50s, when my dad owned the property now known as the REA Co-Op picnic grounds, he would pack supplies from his little store (also the post office for La Cueva and Horseshoe Springs) up to Lazy Ray [the new name of Rancho Rea after about 1940] via horseback, when vehicles couldn't make it there due to heavy snow. They would take supplies and mail up and bring the outgoing mail back. He told me that some of the guests that wintered over were "from back east and often had shoulder holsters and pistols each time he visited." His assumption was they were "mafia members cooling off."³⁸

Taken together, these voices paint a picture of a community that was deeply aware of the unusual visitors in its midst—the big cars, the expensive clothes, the abundant cash, the armed guards—even if the visitors’ identities were never confirmed. The stories share a consistent core: wealthy, rough-looking men from Chicago occupied the ranch periodically in the late 1920s and into the 1930s, and possibly into the 1950s; they paid well and in cash; they maintained strict security; and they were, in the words of one account, “polite but cold.” Whether Al Capone himself was among them, or whether he merely sent his associates to enjoy the mountain air while he conducted business in Chicago, is a question that the oral tradition alone cannot definitively answer.

Amie Adams Green may have stated the most balanced local verdict, when it was pointed out that if Capone was hiding out he would be unlikely to introduce himself by name: “Exactly, and I doubt he’d go to the front door either. Well maybe if deliveries showed up he just stayed in a back room. There may never be an answer.”³⁹

After Seiders: The Later Life of Lazy Ray Ranch

After Seth Seiders lost Rancho Rea to debt and taxes in the early 1930s, the property passed through a succession of owners.

In May 1940, the *Albuquerque Journal* reported that the ranch had been purchased by Road McCann of Chicago. George C. Taylor, executor of the estate of E. G. “Tex” Thompson, handled the final details of the sale, and a District Court decision quieted title for the new owner. The ranch then passed to G. C. Kroggel, owner of the New

Mexico Diesel Electric Company and the Corona Light and Power Company, whose wife Earliene operated it. Mrs. Kroggel died on May 31, 1947.⁴⁰

Just weeks after Mrs. Kroggel's death, on July 19, 1947, the *Albuquerque Journal* announced that the property had been sold to a syndicate of California and Ohio businessmen. The sale was brokered by Thomas Hughes Sr. The new owner, the "Lazy Ray Syndicate," was led by Arthur E. Neeley, formerly of Westwood Village, California, who had served as executive secretary of the California Dental Society and had been associated with the University of California. Neeley became president and general manager, established his residence at the ranch, and joined the Albuquerque Chamber of Commerce. It was under this ownership that the property was officially renamed the "Lazy Ray Ranch."⁴¹

Through the 1950s, the Lazy Ray operated as a guest ranch, advertising in the *Albuquerque Journal* and the *Albuquerque Tribune*. A 1952 advertisement described it as a "Guest Ranch of Distinction" offering a full range of outdoor activities. By 1954, the ranch offered special fall rates of ten dollars per day (about \$121/day in 2026 dollars), including meals. This rate was about 30% less than the mid-1920s rates (accounting for inflation). The ranch accepted guests from May 1 through Thanksgiving, with a winter season from December 15 to February 15 for skiing and winter sports.⁴²

In its final years of operation, the ranch served more modest purposes. In August 1966, the Chi Omega sorority chapter at the University of New Mexico held a retreat there, making decorations and rehearsing skits. The Lovington Daily Leader ran a feature story about the ranch in June 1966, describing its history and noting that it had been in operation "for better than forty years." The article described the property as encompassing approximately 375 acres of private land surrounded by national forest.⁴³

By the early 1970s, the ranch was abandoned and deteriorating. An attempt to subdivide the property into half-acre lots for summer homes apparently failed to attract buyers. In 1970, the U.S. Forest Service acquired the land, incorporating it into the Santa Fe National Forest. The agency subsequently demolished the remaining structures. When Roland Pettitt visited in October 1973, the buildings were already being torn down, and he was documenting the last physical traces of what had been one of New Mexico's most extravagant resorts.⁴⁴

Today, the site of Rancho Rea is an empty meadow along the upper Cebolla Creek. Forest Service Road 314 leads to the Seven Springs Fish Hatchery—the same road that once served as the ranch's private driveway. An old dirt road, now closed to motorized traffic beyond a small picnic site, extends about a mile and a half to the former ranch site. Only faint traces of foundations remain in the meadow grass. A stock pond and the designated catch-and-release trout waters of the Cebolla are the only features that hint at the elaborate recreational landscape that once occupied this canyon.

The Legend Endures

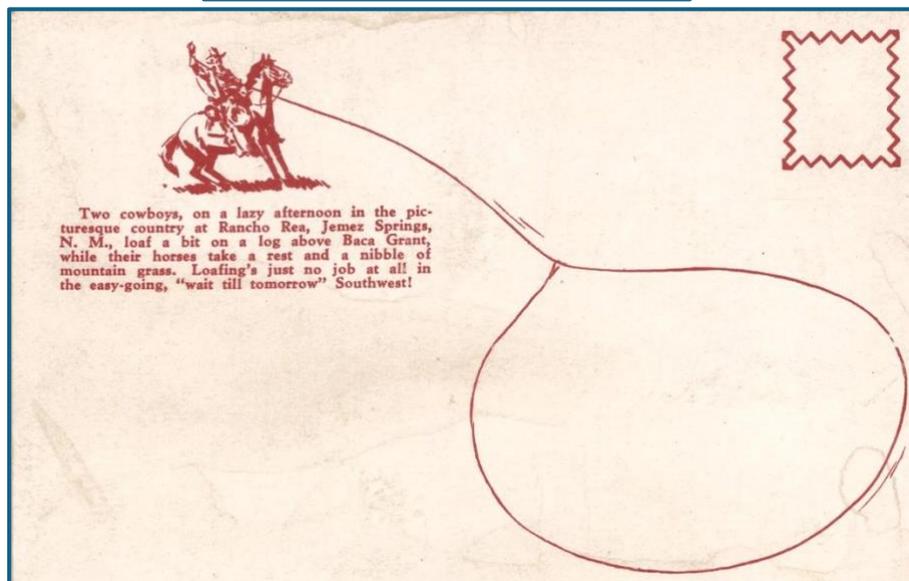
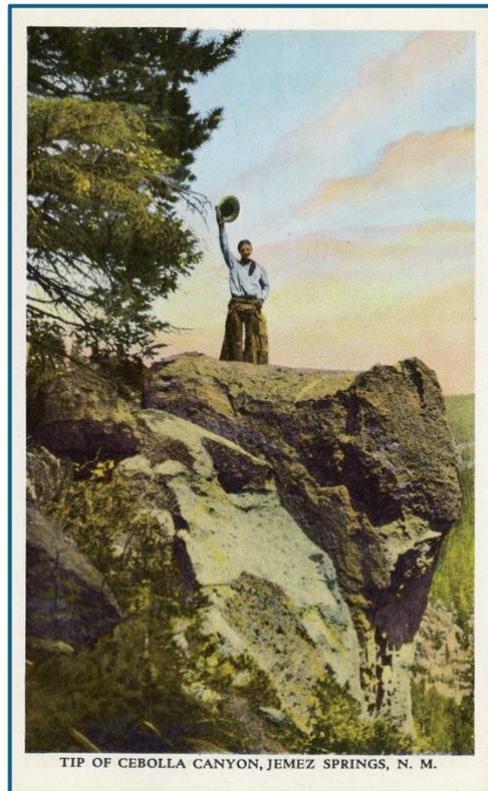
Nearly a century after Seth Seiders built his mountain retreat in the Cebolla Canyon, the story of Rancho Rea continues to captivate. The physical ranch is gone, reduced to fading traces beneath mountain grass. Seiders himself has largely vanished from history—a man whose ambitions outran his means and whose legacy is now inseparable from the far more famous gangster he allegedly hosted.

Yet the stories persist, and perhaps that is the most remarkable aspect of this history. In a remote mountain community where families have lived for generations, the memory of the “Chicago Men” and their years in the Jemez has been maintained with a fidelity and consistency that resists easy dismissal. The details may shift from teller to teller—armed men guarded the entrance to Rancho Rea, or the stranger had a scar on his face, or the children arrived with boxes of ammunition—but the core narrative remains steady: for a few years in the late 1920s and early 1930s, wealthy and dangerous men from Chicago occupied a lavish ranch in the high Jemez, and the mountain communities around them were drawn into a quiet, cash-based economy of discretion and service.

Whether Al Capone himself walked the meadows of the upper Cebolla or soaked in the hot springs at Jemez Springs may never be proven. But the story of Seth Seiders—the Ohio boy who made a million selling mottoes, who built a mountain fortress for his wife Rhea, who accumulated properties across the Jemez Valley, who made and lost a fortune in ways that were never entirely transparent, and who fell to ruin at the same moment his most infamous associate was marched off to prison—that story is worth telling in its own right.

The Jemez Mountains have always been a place where people go to disappear, whether into the hot springs and quiet canyons for healing and solitude, or into the dense forests and remote drainages to escape the world’s attention. Seth Seiders found both possibilities in these mountains. Al Capone, if the stories are true, found the same. And the people who lived among them—the wranglers and woodcutters, the laundresses and delivery drivers, the children shooting squirrels in the hills with borrowed ammunition—carried the memory forward, kitchen table by kitchen table, generation after generation, until it became as much a part of the landscape as the mountains themselves.

A visitor to the upper Cebolla Canyon today will find no markers, no interpretive signs, no historical plaques. The meadow where Seiders built his fortress of luxury is quiet, overgrown, and beautiful. The trout still rise in the Rio Cebolla. The ponderosa pines still creak in the wind. The road that once delivered guests in Packards and Pierce-Arrows now dead-ends beyond a fish hatchery. But if you walk the old road or follow the creek upstream through the narrowing canyon, you might still sense something of what drew a restless Chicago millionaire to this place a century ago—and what made it, for a brief and remarkable moment, the most improbable intersection of gangland Chicago and the mountains of New Mexico.



Ranch Rea postcards from the 1920s. The one at the bottom (above) is the address side of the postcard shown at left, bottom on page 6.

AI Acknowledgement: The text in this article was partly generated with the assistance of a large language model (LLM), specifically Opus 4.6 within Claude. The main body of information that I directed the LLM to use for generating a draft text was a set of about 40 documents that I have collected, including magazine and newspaper articles, personal recollections, and quotes from local Jemez Springs people, brochures, postcards, and other materials. The draft text that was generated by the LLM was extensively edited and revised by me, including many deletions and additions of text. I checked all facts, quotes, and endnotes for accuracy. I selected and inserted all the photos.

Endnotes:

¹ Roland Pettitt, "Visit With Ghosts -- Lazy Ray Ranch Weekend," *The Monitor* (Los Alamos), October 4, 1973; Judith Isaacs, "Seven Springs Historic Structures," Jemez Valley History website, <https://jemezvalleyhistory.org/other-institutions-overview/>.

² Neil M. Clark profile of Seth Seiders as cited in Harper Sullivan, "Al Capone's Hideout," *My Strange New Mexico*, September 10, 2019, archived at <https://web.archive.org/web/20190916165300/mystrangenewmexico.com/2019/09/10/al-capones-hideout/>; and Shannon Wagers, "Al Capone Slept Here -- or did he?," *Sandoval County Historical Society Newsletter* (El Cronicon), March 2017, pp. 15-16, https://web.archive.org/web/20240713225623/https://sandovalhistory.org/newsletter/2017_elcronicon_mar.pdf

³ Clark profile, as cited in Sullivan and Wagers (see note 2).

⁴ See David A. Gray, "Managing Motivation, The Seth Seiders Syndicate and the Motivational Publicity Business in the 1920s," *Winterthur Portfolio*, 44(1):77-121; *Oak Park Leaves*, August 27, 1927, society column; cited in April M. Brown, "The Legend of Al Capone's Jemez Hideout," digital curation project, *History 260*, May 11, 2018, <https://prezi.com/p/os4mrb3unre4/the-legend-of-al-capones-jemez-hideout/>

⁵ Tom Abousleman, as quoted in Sullivan, "Al Capone's Hideout" (see note 2); Tom Abousleman was born in 1918, so he would have been about 13 years old when Seiders was in bankruptcy proceedings in 1931.

⁶ From the University of Chicago Library, Guide to the Charles H. Rosenfeld Papers 1906-1968: "It appears that in the mid-1920s, Seiders engaged in a scheme whereby part of his paycheck would be paid out to several top-level executives (allegedly including Rosenfeld), as a means of avoiding part of his income tax obligation. The executives were to return the overage at a later date. In exchange, Seiders agreed to transfer ownership of his first company to the other participants in the scheme once he had made \$1 million. By the late 1920s or early 1930s, Seiders was spending much of his time in New Mexico, where he was linked to Al Capone. The fraud was discovered, and hearings took place in 1932, by which time the Syndicate had fallen apart." <https://www.lib.uchicago.edu/e/scr/c/findingaids/view.php?eadid=ICU.SPCL.CHROSENFELD&q=Seiders>

⁷ Rancho Rea Company brochure, undated (ca. 1927-1930). "Rancho Rea: In the Cool, Green Jemez Mountains, Most Beautiful in America." Listed dual addresses: 155 East Superior St., Chicago, Ill., and Jemez Springs, New Mexico. Chicago Telephone: Superior 0857; Curiously, Seiders dopped the "h" from his wife's name "Rhea" in naming of the original ranch. Presumably, this name was the origin of later versions of the ranch name, including "Rancho Real" and "Lazy Ray Ranch."

⁸ Sullivan, "Al Capone's Hideout" (see note 2); Mary Lou Heaphy, *A Cliffie Experience: Tales of New Mexico, 1902-1940*; Heaphy was born October 25, 1927, so the oldest she could have been when she says she met Capone at Rancho Chico in about 1931 was 4 years old. Yet, she tells the story as if she personally remembered the details of sitting on the lap of the man with a scar on his face, and who gave her silver dollars. She says her parents knew he was Capone at the time. Perhaps they told this story to her in subsequent years, and she repeated it like many of the other stories about her mother and family in her book. Her book does include a photo of some buildings at Ranch Chico, which later was called "Lourdes" by Servants of Paraclete when they owned it. Amie Adams Green, whose father Paul Adams, Sr., knew Heaphy as a child, said of her book that librarians should "catalogue it in the fiction section."

⁹ Legal notice, *Albuquerque Journal*, December 22, 1932, p. 15. "Debt Sale, Ranch Rea -- La Esperanza."; The Baros and Archuleta properties referenced here are now the parcels owned by their descendants, the Sandoval family and relatives, and also now a Trujillo family, and the "new" Forest Ranger Station built in 1965, and again in 2023.

¹⁰ "Million Dollar Resort at Jemez Planned," *Albuquerque Journal*, March 27, 1931, p. 2.

¹¹ Rancho Rea Company brochure (see note 7); Pettitt, "Lazy Ray Ranch Weekend" (see note 1).

¹² Rancho Rea Company brochure (see note 7).

¹³ Rancho Rea Company brochure (see note 7); Pettitt, "Lazy Ray Ranch Weekend" (see note 1); Sullivan, "Al Capone's Hideout" (see note 2); Sullivan also said that "...hop plants grew around a mysteriously locked building, and there was more than enough room for friendly local girls, banquets, and slot machines."

¹⁴ Rancho Rea Company brochure (see note 7).

¹⁵ Pettitt, "Lazy Ray Ranch Weekend" (see note 1).

¹⁶ Diana Caldwell Clark, written recollection, undated, from Frank Gonzales personal collection. "This is the story my grandfather, Elijah McLean Fenton Jr. told to me when I was a teenager."

¹⁷ Rancho Rea display advertisements, *Clovis Evening News-Journal*, June 27, 1931, p. 3, and July 8, 1931, p. 4.

¹⁸ "Rancho Rea, Seiders Sued," *Albuquerque Journal*, April 18, 1931, p. 3.

¹⁹ "Rancho Rea on Auction Block," *Albuquerque Journal*, May 25, 1932, p. 2.; "Seiders No Comment on Judge Order," *Albuquerque Journal*, June 10, 1932, p. 20.; Legal notice, *Albuquerque Journal*, December 22, 1932 (see note 9).

²⁰ *Guide to the Charles H. Rosenfeld Papers, 1906-1968*, University of Chicago; cited in Brown, "Legend of Al Capone's Jemez Hideout" (see note 6).

²¹ "\$100 Law Suit, Rancho Rea," *Albuquerque Journal*, July 20, 1935, p. 7.; "Rancho Rea, Deserted," *Albuquerque Journal*, July 5, 1939, p. 9.

²² Don Bullis, "Capone, Alphonse 'Al' 'Scarface' (1899-1947) Chicago Gangster New Mexico Tourist (?)," *New Mexico Historical Biographies* (Function, Kindle Edition), 2011; Don Bullis, "Ellos Pasaron Por Aquí: Did Al Capone hang out in Jemez Springs?", *Rio Rancho Observer*, Nov. 2021; Bullis quotes a 2007 *New Mexico Magazine* article by Mike Smith, <https://www.rroserver.com/opinion/ellos-pasaron-por-aqui-did-al-capone-hang-out-in-jemez-springs/216467>

²³ Bullis (see note 22); Wagers, "Al Capone Slept Here" (see note 2), pp. 15-16.

²⁴ *Oak Park Leaves*, August 27, 1927 (see note 4); *Rosenfeld Papers* (see note 6); S. Y. Jackson letter, *Albuquerque Journal*, May 3, 1977 (see note 25).

²⁵ S. Y. Jackson, letter to the editor, "Capone Laundry Recalled," *Albuquerque Journal*, May 3, 1977, p. 5.

²⁶ Mary Fenton Caldwell, as quoted in Sullivan, "Al Capone's Hideout" (see note 2); Mary Fenton was born December 11, 1932. Al Capone was already in jail before she was born, and his latest possible visit to Jemez Springs could have been late 1931 or early 1932. So, Mary's identification of Al Capone's presence in the Jemez could only have been secondhand information from her parents or others.

²⁷ Bullis (see note 22), citing Mary Lou Heaphy *A Cliffie Experience: Tales of New Mexico, 1902-1940*, (and see note 8).

²⁸ Tom Abousleman, as quoted in Sullivan, "Al Capone's Hideout" (see note 2); Cathy Stephenson, personal communication to Tom Swetnam, January 31, 2026.

²⁹ Bullis (see note 22); citing Mike Smith, "Al Capone's Hideout," *New Mexico Magazine*, July 2007; and John Binder, *The Chicago Outfit*.

³⁰ Wagers, "Al Capone Slept Here" (see note 2), pp. 15-16.

³¹ "Al Capone, Gang Did Vacationing at Region Ranch," *Albuquerque Journal*, April 4, 1972; see also "Action Line" column, *Albuquerque Journal*, April 2, 1972.

³² Elsie MacKinnon, as quoted in Sullivan, "Al Capone's Hideout" (see note 2).

³³ From Jemez Chat Facebook posting and replies, on 08/21/24

³⁴ Diana Caldwell Clark (see note 16).

³⁵ Amie Adams Green comments on Jemez Chat Facebook, social media discussion, February 1, 2026; Amie Adams Green recalled Emmett Cart's memories and noted that a recording of Cart telling this story was made at the Presbyterian Church and may be archived at the local library.

³⁶ Amie Adams Green, Jemez Chat discussion (see note 35)

³⁷ Amie Adams Green, Jemez Chat discussion (see note 35)

³⁸ Chip Berglund, Jemez Chat Facebook, social media discussion, August 21, 2024.

³⁹ Amie Adams Green, Jemez Chat discussion (see note 35)

⁴⁰ "Chicago Man Buys Rancho Rea," Albuquerque Journal, May 22, 1940, p. 6.; "Kroggel Death, Owner of Lazy Ray," Albuquerque Journal, June 5, 1947, p. 2.

⁴¹ "Rea Ranch Sold to Syndicate," Albuquerque Journal, July 19, 1947, p. 5.

⁴² Lazy Ray Ranch advertisement, Albuquerque Tribune, July 11, 1952, p. 3; Lazy Ray Ranch advertisement, Albuquerque Journal, October 8, 1954, p. 35.

⁴³ Chi Omega Retreat, Lazy Ray," Albuquerque Journal, August 18, 1966, p. 20.; "Lazy Ray," Lovington Daily Leader, June 19, 1966, p. 2

⁴⁴ Pettitt, "Lazy Ray Ranch Weekend" (see note 1).