

READY TO TRAVEL

TIME TRAVEL IN NEW MEXICO BACKCOUNTRY

by Jeannette and Bob Vallier

Indian Pueblos, lava fields, natural arches, radio telescopes, cryptic inscriptions on sandstone cliffs: west-central New Mexico has it all, along with scenic vistas that never end. At the center of all this spectacle is Datil Well Campground [GPS coordinates: N 34 degrees 18 min 37.2 sec; W 108 degrees 11 min 26.7 sec]. We first visited the site in the 1980s, and enjoyed the peace and quiet; listened to the sound of the wind in the junipers and piñon trees, a sound like no other; and sensed the brooding spirits of cowboys long gone and the palpable presence of the past.

Returning from a writers' conference in Colorado this spring and wending our way along one of the most wild-and-wooly routes in the Rocky Mountain region, we once again headed to Datil Well (more about that place and its surroundings in a moment); but nothing much changes in these parts, whether the time frame is in years or ages, so we didn't expect any cosmetic "improvements" in this rustic little dry camp. We weren't disappointed about that: still the same hard scrabble camp with twenty or so sites back in the scrub. What we did not expect, and were delighted and surprised to find, was (to borrow a title from the old *Readers Digest* series) one of "most unforgettable characters" we've come across in the boonies.

Michael Fuson likes to be called Mike. Along with his wife Ruth, he takes meticulous care of the campground and when necessary tends to the mechanical needs of campers. He can change trailer tires, deal with emergencies, and know whom to call on if more help is needed. Mike has an air of competence that can calm the panicked camper just by his presence. He admits that he has done it all—a construction supervisor, heavy equipment operator, truck driver; and once he came very close to partnering a friend who owned a license for a house of ill repute in Germany. He lived in Germany for two years as well as traveling elsewhere in Europe and the Middle East until he finally ran out of money in Morocco: he must not have run completely out of money because somehow he was able to ship his VW camper back to the states and return home in 1972.

In his youth he piloted a helicopter gun ship in Vietnam. His experience there led to his present avocation as a writer. His first novel, *The Black Heart*, was written about Vietnam, though he explains that it is not a story of field combat but an alternate history, a saga of "what might have been" if fate had rolled the dice differently. He spent six years meticulously researching the political history of the war and writing that book. It is available on Amazon and other booksellers but can be ordered on his web site www.tmichaelfuson.com. Fuson is now at work on his second novel; the only information he will reveal is its title: *Justice Served*. We bought a copy of *The Black Heart* and got it inscribed personally. To reciprocate, we gave him a copy of the TDR, a publication he had not known of before (which gives you an idea of how remote Datil is). The next morning

before we shoved off, Mike told us he'd spent half the night on the TDR website. He was especially impressed with the Cummins High Mileage club. Reckon up another savvy TDR member.

You can see that Mike is nothing if not intrepid; in fact "Intrepid" could be his middle name. He moved from the Mohave Desert in California and settled in New Mexico seven years ago in 2004. He is homesteading up the road at 8,000 feet, and hauls 3000 pounds of water at a time in his Turbo Diesel. What is he doing as camp honcho, anyway? We guessed that answering challenges is an inveterate part of his nature: six years ago he answered a BLM ad seeking a campground host for Datil Well; and he has been hosting venturesome travelers ever since, while he improves his homestead and pursues his career as a successful novelist. He has been off the grid since 1998, and the house he is presently building will also be off the grid.



Like a pilgrim's hut in the Alps, the little office shed where the Fusons offer hospitality to travelers at Datil Well campground. (Do you think there might be a political sentiment in that sign?)

Even with all his junketeering around the world and his dedication to writing, Mike is a committed family man with 4 children and 7 grandchildren. His charming wife Ruth aids and abets him in all his ventures. It was she who found the BLM ad, and she is his sidekick in hosting the campground. And Ruth helps in editing his novels—every writer needs an editor; it goes with the territory.

Now we come to the focus of our story: Mike Fuson is the proud owner of a '07 Dodge one-ton Turbo Diesel, with a 5.9-liter Cummins, a six-speed transmission, 4-wheel drive, and 180,000 miles, which he bought used at 127,000 miles via eBay from North Texas Truck in Mansfield, Texas, a dealer he recommends most highly as a straight shooter. The Turbo Diesel was virtually stock when he acquired it, but one add-one he inherited is the Hide-a-Hitch, which he appreciates because when not in use it takes up no room in the bed. He did add a Banks Power Chip, in the interests of efficiency.



World traveler, Nam helicopter warrior, homesteader, published novelist, and Turbo Diesel wrangler. — Mike Fuson and his mount.

Besides his obvious commitment to efficiency and thrift, Mike is something of a contrarian: he says he has never bought a brand new truck, and has no fear whatsoever of high mileage vehicles, figuring that the high-mileage diesels are likely to have been driven over the road, in Texas probably hauling cattle.

In this same spirit of a willingness to pursue a course contrary to common practice, Mike has built a modification to the air intake on his truck which he claims cost him only 48 dollars. In fact Mike says he made money on the deal, for he turned around and sold the factory box on eBay for \$50. His air box modification requires complete removal of the factory filter box which is held in place by a single bolt; installing the K&N Cone filter (Part #RF 1032 for his truck model), mounted to a 4" exhaust pipe which he cut from a piece he found by the roadside, connected to the factory intake, and secured by a quarter-inch stock bracket. Besides the fact that his ingenious remake of the air box is simple and cost next to nothing, Mike claims it has lowered EGT by 50–100 degrees when hauling a load; and, most satisfying to Mike, he says it has cut his shutdown time to 30 seconds. (He is chronically scandalized by operators who roll into a filling station after a long hot haul and flip the key off without a second's hesitation.) Mike maintains that he does pretty well, too, on fuel economy, running 22 mpg without a load on the open road. Not bad for a homesteader/campground host out in the middle of nowhere. **Editor's note: I would caution the use of a K&N filter in dusty conditions. To really lower temperatures the air filter should not be exposed to any underhood hot air.**

Middle of nowhere? On the map Datil Well does indeed seem to be a long way from anywhere, but there is a great deal to see and do in the region. To the north the Zuni and the Acoma Indians still occupy their prehistoric pueblos and live pretty much as they have for a thousand years: between the two pueblos nestles a sleepy Navajo town called Ramah where angora goats seriously outnumber people; and, throughout the region, a scattering of Indian trading posts that look like sets for old John Wayne movies. To the south are prehistoric cliff dwellings in the forests of Gila Wilderness.

Datil Well itself was one of 15 wells spaced every ten miles along the famous Magdalena Livestock Driveway established after the Civil War, a fenceless route that extended from west-central Arizona

to a railhead at Magdalena, New Mexico. In 1919 at the height of the cattle drives, 22,000 cattle and 150,000 sheep drifted their way along this route, accompanied by cowboys or sheepherders with their chuck wagons. The last cattle drives were held in the 1960s, and the Datil Well Campground was constructed by the Bureau of Land Management in 1970. History and time stand still in this country, a fact made graphic at El Morro National Monument, where a rocky cliff face bears a silent timeline inscribed by successive visitors over thousands of years: from prehistoric petroglyphs to the first Spanish explorers leaving their marks in their quest for the Seven Cities of Gold, to the first Anglos to enter the region in the early 19th century, to cowboys and pioneers in wagon trains—all of whom stopped to carve their names.

Even more remote to our 21st-century sensibilities is the badlands north of Datil known as El Malpais, blanketed with lava from eruptions ten thousand years ago and secreting extensive networks of caves under the hardened magma, a vast and eerie region not settled by Anglos till a few brave homesteaders staked their claims during the Great Depression. It is still one of the most sparsely settled areas of the West.

Twenty miles to the east of Datil on the Plains of San Augustin, is the incredible "Very Large Array" (VLA), the largest radio telescope in the world, spread out over miles of high desert, where there are deployed 27 separate mobile antennas, each one 82 feet high and weighing 230 tons, mounted on railroad tracks to permit shunting them around in configurations shaped like a giant Y. In essence, the Array acts as a single antenna with a diameter of 22.3 miles, pretty darn big when you compare it to the 200-inch diameter objective of Palomar optical telescope. The advantage of a radio telescope is that it cuts through the debris and dark matter in interstellar space and "sees" more and farther than can be reached through an ordinary telescope, galaxies so distant that it has taken billions of light years for what we "see" to travel across the universe—bringing the early days of creation into our latter-day present. That is real "time travel." The marvel is that there are no actual astronomers on site, since the Array is remotely programmed and interpreted by researchers working all around the world. The stillness of the place is broken only by a greeting from the clerk in a tiny gift shop and the drone of recorded commentary in a small exhibition building.



Looming like *Star Wars* juggernauts, 27 huge, mobile radio antennas, deployed across miles of desert in the Very Large Array aimed at the farthest reaches of the universe.

All in all, for a section of intermountain West with so few people, this is memorable country. Not just for the unique individuals you may meet, as we met Mike out there on the Plains of San Augustin, but for the unique country, where the uttermost reaches of the sky come to earth at the VLA, and history and prehistory have left their tracks in the wide open spaces, "and the skies are not cloudy all day" (as cowpokes are supposed to have sung around the campfire on the old-time cattle drives hereabouts).

So you can see that if you choose someday to say hi to Mike at Datil Well, you will not only meet a great storyteller but you can also be as venturesome as you wish, learn a thing or two, see some great country, enjoy peace and quiet, and maybe become a better person. Remember, as Mike says, happiness is looking back on your life knowing you wouldn't do anything differently. Like owning a Dodge Turbo Diesel.

Jeannette and Bob Vallier
TDR Writers



Your reporter interviewing Mike Fuson in the shade of the ramada where he writes his novels and tinkers with his Ram ...when he's not puttering with his cycle.