

Otero County, Colorado

Otero County (population 21,000), established in 1889, has a rich historic heritage. Eighteenth century French trappers, Spanish missionaries, early Mexican homesteaders, Southeastern Plains tribes, Mountain Branch traders, those on the Santa Fe Trail, and the military have all contributed to the local story.

Agriculture and railroad-related industries dominated the economy. An Army Air Force pilot training base helped sustain the community during World War II. More recently, renewable energy bio-diesel companies and other manufacturers have been recruited, and tourism related to natural and cultural assets has become a major economic focus.

Otero County has 11 properties on the National Register of Historic Places and nine on the state register. In addition, the Comanche National Grassland, recently named one of Colorado's most endangered places, has at least 540 sites eligible for listing.

The historic 1935 Grand Theater in Rocky Ford is being restored through funding from the Colorado State Historical Fund, matched by the Grand Friends, a non-profit civic association.

Bent's Old Fort National Historic Site attracted 28,000 visitors in 2005, contributing over \$2 million to the local economy.

The National Park Service has partnered with Otero Junior College, the non-profit community theater, students, and community members to produce "Voices Under the Wind," using dramatized primary sources to interpret local history.

Other interesting local heritage tourism programs include a Santa Fe Trail Caravan re-creation which took a freight wagon and oxen out on the Trail, and an Explorer's Encampment featuring re-created camps of Pike, Long, and Fremont, attracting over 1,000 visitors. The local Koshare Indian Museum features a world-renowned collection of Plains and Southwest art and artifacts. It trains a youth dance group which performs in its "kiva" and on tour to large audiences. Other museums with archives and interpretive programs include the Otero County Museum, the Rocky Ford Museum, and the Fowler Historical Society and Museum.