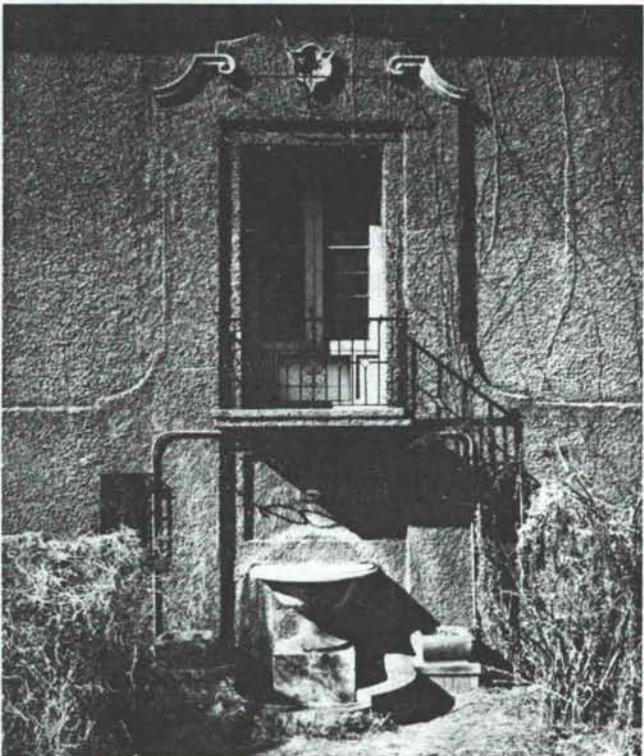


# The Alvarado Hotel



1) Photo: Jon Samuelson



2) National Park Service Photo By: Fred Mang, Jr.

For well over a half century a traveler's first impression of the American Southwest was through one of the many Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad stations and the associated hotel and restaurant operated by the Fred Harvey organization. Here the eastern or midwestern traveler was drawn into the romantic world of the Spanish conquistador and equally unfamiliar world of the Pueblo and Navajo Indians. On alighting on the platform the visitor encountered not the usual neo-Roman or neo-Renaissance station so characteristic then of the eastern sections of the country, but instead he was faced with a low two or three story structure, almost domestic in character. He encountered no overpowering piers and columns, no dentils and wreaths, no putti or cupids, but rather he found before him a simple unpretentious stucco covered building, often enclosing small intimate gardens and court yards, with shaded loggias, textured brick and tile floors, broad fireplaces and wood beamed ceilings.

These structures seemed to fit so naturally and unostentatiously into their Southwestern environment that little conscious thought was given to them as rather remarkable examples of architecture — examples which not only personify our age, but which in many ways have made a notable contribution to the American architectural scene.

(NMA, July/August, 1962)

"In a burst of rhetoric, a flow of red carpet and the flow of myriad brilliant electric lights" the Alvarado Hotel opened on May 11, 1902. Local businessmen and civic leaders expected that the building of the hotel "would attract the wealthier classes to stop in Albuquerque on their travels to the West."<sup>1</sup>

On January 2, 1970, the Alvarado Hotel closed its doors. On February 2, 1970 the wrecking crews began the removal of doors and windows as the first step toward final demolition. By March 15, 1970 the central section of the hotel crumbled under the relentless wreckers' ball. A small but valiant group of citizens staged a last ditch fight to save the Alvarado Hotel, but as too often happens, it was too late and too little supported.

Except for the valiant few it was apparent to this observer that the citizens of Albuquerque didn't really care. The City Commission itself appeared apathetic when on February 17, 1970 it deferred "indefinitely" a proposed historic zone ordinance for the Alvarado complex and

1. "Albuquerque Journal Democrat," May 11, 1902.

# 1902 - 1970

surrounding city blocks. On that date demolition had not drastically affected the central and most historically important section of the hotel structure. But the Commission was fearful that this ordinance might delay approval by the Federal government of the Urban Renewal Project, of which the blocks adjacent to the Alvarado and slated for inclusion within the proposed historic district, are a part.

Thus the Alvarado Hotel becomes a dusty memory.

Although the Alvarado Hotel and its adjacent railroad station have long been considered a vital part of any revitalization of downtown Albuquerque, no program to ensure the building's preservation was instituted. This inaction now seems incredible when one recalls the frequent "rumors"—always denied by railroad officials—that the hotel would be closed and the structure demolished. It should have been all too clear that time was running out and that the days of the building as a hotel were numbered. The structure was old and maintenance was high. The Alvarado was allowed to deteriorate. Highway motels were newer and flashier. Also the Santa Fe Railway and its hotel lessee, The Fred Harvey Company, have a long history of closing and then demolishing the chain of handsome railroad hotels and stations that once stretched across New Mexico and Arizona. After the 1968 sale of the La Fonda in Santa Fe, the Alvarado was the sole surviving active Fred Harvey hotel in New Mexico.

The final "rumor" began to circulate in early 1969. On February 3, 1969, the Albuquerque City Commission approved an application to transfer the Alvarado's liquor license to an indefinite Old Town site. Evidence was pointing toward the inevitable. Some few citizens became concerned, but the city fathers took no further action.

On May 23, 1969, the Alvarado Hotel and Railroad Station complex was placed on the New Mexico Register of Cultural Properties and was nominated for inclusion on the National Registry of Historic Places.

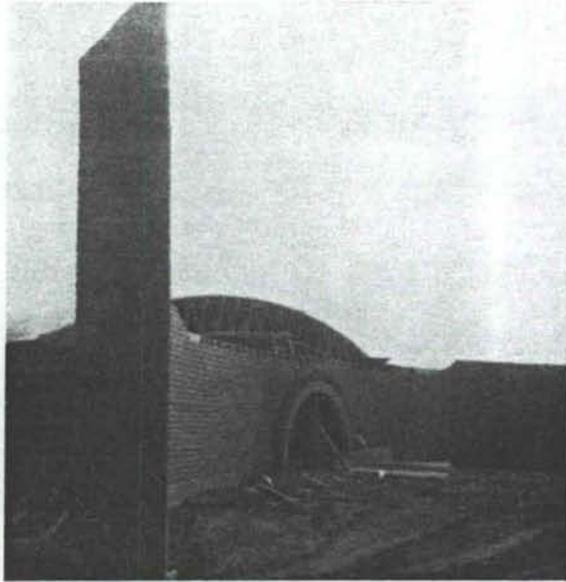
On June 3, 1969, the Alvarado management announced the closing of the coffee shop—more evidence, but no ad-



3) Photo: John P. Conron

4) Photo: John P. Conron





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mission from the Santa Fe Railway Company. The few citizens became alarmed and sought the involvement of the city officials, as it was evident that the city and railroad would, in the final analysis, have to be the ones to negotiate the transfer of the property to the city. Despite this, no effort was made by the city to initiate discussions with railroad officials. Indeed, concerned individuals were admonished not to rock the boat. The months passed.

Then came Friday, September 19, 1969. On that day John S. Reed, President of the Santa Fe Railway announced the closing of the hotel on January 1, 1970 and plans to remove the structure.

On the following Monday, Pete V. Domenici, Chairman of the Albuquerque City Commission, announced that the city would ask the railway to hold off the demolition of the hotel until it could be determined if the structure could fit into the downtown renewal plans. The Albuquerque Goals Committee had previously stressed the importance of preserving the Alvarado as "not only the heart and focus of railroad Albuquerque, but also an indispensable architectural source for the unique sense of place which Albuquerque has inherited."

On October 1st the State Planning Office addressed a letter to the President of the Santa Fe Railway Company in which it expressed concern for the future of the Alvarado Hotel. The letter pointed out the importance of the building to the historical heritage of New Mexico. In his reply, G. W. Cox, Vice President of the Railway stated:

"... that our engineers are firmly of the opinion that the building is too old to warrant remodelling or rehabilitation and while we plan to raze it, no time has been set for its demolition; neither have we decided what, if anything to do with the property after it has been cleared. We are open to suggestions, of course, and you may rest assured that future use of the property will be compatible with plans for redevelopment of downtown Albuquerque."

A detailed investigation of the hotel building by members of the Albuquerque Chapter, AIA, found the building to be structurally sound, although remodelling would be necessary to bring the building into conformance with present day fire codes.

From September through December members of independent and semi-official organizations including the Albuquerque Goals Committee, the Albuquerque Historical Society, the Albuquerque Chapter of the American Institute of Architects and the New Mexico Chapter of the American Institute

of Interior Designers, worked to find ways of obtaining and preserving the Alvarado.

But it was not until December 29, 1969—just four days before the scheduled closing of the hotel—that the City Commission appointed the Alvarado Preservation Committee to attempt to save the building.

The Santa Fe Railway released its sale price to the City Committee, the price of \$1.5 million was a staggering blow, especially when an informal estimate a year before had valued the property at about \$600,000. This outrageous asking price was countered with a plea for more time and a suggestion that the railroad donate the hotel to the city.

A deadlock ensued. No money was immediately available for purchase; the railroad company refused to donate it.

In a last ditch effort to persuade the company to delay actual demolition of the structure, the Alvarado Preservation Committee called a public meeting, for the evening of February 4, 1970.

But from a city-wide population of over 350,000 people only 200 persons attended. The emotion-charged meeting culminated in a 10 p.m. march in front of the now windowless building. Petitions were signed, signs were painted and a few hearty survivors appeared for picketing duty the following morning—but too few, too late—too much apathy.

The Alvarado Hotel is now several piles of available used building material in a local wrecking yard.

*John P. Conron*

*¡El Alvarado Esta Muerto!*

5) Photo: Gordon Ferguson

