

# COLORADO HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## COLORADO STATE REGISTER OF HISTORIC PROPERTIES NOMINATION FORM

**SECTION I**

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**Name of Property**

Historic Name First State Bank of Aguilar

Other Names Gianella Building; Aguilar State Bank

**Address of Property**

address not for publication

Street Address 102 East Main Street

City Aguilar County Las Animas Zip 81020

**Present Owner of Property**

(for multiple ownership, list the names and addresses of each owner on one or more continuation sheets)

Name Whitney Trust for Historic Preservation Jo Ann Grace, President

Address 210 South Spring Street Phone 213-628-4384

City Los Angeles State California Zip 90012

**Owner Consent for Nomination**

(attach signed consent from each owner of property - see attached form)

**Preparer of Nomination**

Name Patricia L. Romero Date 27 May 2005

Organization Apishapa Valley Historical Society

Address P. O. Box 459 Phone 719-941-4678

City Aguilar State Colorado Zip 81020

**FOR OFFICIAL USE:**

Site Number 5LA.1108

5-26-2005 Nomination Received

Senate # \_\_\_\_\_ House # \_\_\_\_\_

8-12-2005 Review Board Recommendation  
 Approval  Denial

9-14-2005 CHS Board State Register Listing  
 Approved  Denied

**Certification of Listing:** President, Colorado Historical Society

Date

**COLORADO STATE REGISTER OF HISTORIC PROPERTIES**

Property Name First State Bank of Aguilar

**SECTION II**

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**Local Historic Designation**

Has the property received local historic designation?

no

yes ---  individually designated  designated as part of a historic district

Date designated \_\_\_\_\_

Designated by \_\_\_\_\_ (Name of municipality or county)

**Use of Property**

Historic Commerce/ financial institution

Current Vacant/ Not in Use

**Original Owner** Luigi Gianella

Source of Information surmised from 5/12/1909 warranty deed and chiseled inscription on

Building [L. Gianella]

**Year of Construction** between 1909 and 1912

Source of Information surmised from 1/7/1911 *Walsenburg Independent* article and chiseled

inscription on building [4M 1912]

**Architect, Builder, Engineer, Artist or Designer** Unknown

Source of Information \_\_\_\_\_

**Locational Status**

Original location of structure(s)

Structure(s) moved to current location

Date of move \_\_\_\_\_

**SECTION III**

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**Description and Alterations**

(describe the current and original appearance of the property and any alterations on one or more continuation sheets)

**COLORADO STATE REGISTER OF HISTORIC PROPERTIES**

Property Name First State Bank of Aguilar

**SECTION IV**

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**Significance of Property**

**Nomination Criteria**

- A** - property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to history
- B** - property is connected with persons significant in history
- C** - property has distinctive characteristics of a type, period, method of construction or artisan
- D** - property is of geographic importance
- E** - property contains the possibility of important discoveries related to prehistory or history

**Areas of Significance**

- |   |  |   |
|---|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Agriculture                        | <input type="checkbox"/> Economics                     | <input type="checkbox"/> Landscape            |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Architecture            | <input type="checkbox"/> Education                     | <input type="checkbox"/> Architecture         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Archaeology – prehistoric          | <input type="checkbox"/> Engineering                   | <input type="checkbox"/> Law                  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Archaeology – historic             | <input type="checkbox"/> Entertainment/ Recreation     | <input type="checkbox"/> Literature           |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Art                                | <input type="checkbox"/> Ethnic Heritage               | <input type="checkbox"/> Military             |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Commerce                | <input type="checkbox"/> Exploration/ Settlement       | <input type="checkbox"/> Performing Arts      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Communications                     | <input type="checkbox"/> Geography/ Community Identity | <input type="checkbox"/> Politics/ Government |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Community Planning and Development | <input type="checkbox"/> Health/Medicine               | <input type="checkbox"/> Religion             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Conservation                       | <input type="checkbox"/> Industry                      | <input type="checkbox"/> Science              |
|   | <input type="checkbox"/> Invention                     | <input type="checkbox"/> Social History       |
|   |  | <input type="checkbox"/> Transportation       |

**Significance Statement**

(explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets)

**Bibliography**

(cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets)

**SECTION V**

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**Locational Information**

Lot(s) 19 Block 10 Addition Romero's Addition, Town of Aguilar

USGS Topographic Quad Map Aguilar

**Verbal Boundary Description of Nominated Property**

(describe the boundaries of the nominated property on a continuation sheet)

**COLORADO STATE REGISTER OF HISTORIC PROPERTIES**

Property Name First State Bank of Aguilar

**SECTION VI**

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**Photograph Log for Black and White Photographs**

(prepare a photograph log on one or more continuation sheets)

**SECTION VII**

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**ADDITIONAL MATERIALS TO ACCOMPANY NOMINATION**

**Owner Consent Form**

**Black and White Photographs**

**Color Slides**

**Sketch Map(s)**

**Photocopy of USGS Map Section**

**Optional Materials**

**For Office Use Only**

Property Type:  building(s)  district  site  structure  object  area

Architectural Style/Engineering Type: (Two-Part Commercial Block)

Period of Significance: 1911 - 1927

Level of Significance:  Local  State  National

Acreage less than one

P.M. 6th Township 30 S Range 65 W Section 27 Quarter Sections SE SE NW SE

UTM Reference: Zone 13 Easting 530551 Northing 4139259 (NAD 27)

Site Elevation: 6408 feet

Property Name First State Bank of Aguilar

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## DESCRIPTION and ALTERATIONS

Completed in 1912, the First State Bank, also known as the Gianella Building, sits at the southeast corner of Main Street and Romero Street in the small town of Aguilar. Aguilar is nestled at the foot of the Twin Spanish Peaks in south central Colorado's Sangre de Cristo Range. The two-story stone building with its one-story brick rear addition occupies a corner lot. A wide concrete sidewalk runs between the north façade and Main Street. This wide expanse of sidewalk rounds the corner and terminates past the building's main entrance. A narrower sidewalk and a strip of grass run the length of the west façade along Romero Street. The rear (southern portion) of the lot is filled with grass, and a large deciduous shrub grows at the southeast corner of the building. A narrow strip of grass on the east side separates the bank building from a smaller adjacent building that houses the post office.

Constructed of locally quarried stone, the two-story building has a full basement and a rectangular plan with an oblique corner entrance. The walls are regularly coursed, quarry-faced, buff-colored sandstone. A projecting course of larger, quarry-faced stone blocks forms a beltcourse that extends across the north and west walls delineating the two floors. Another beltcourse—this one of large, slightly projecting, smooth-faced blocks—runs between the second floor windows and the parapet wall. The north and west walls culminate in a raked parapet wall capped with stone coping. The flat roof once hidden by this parapet wall was removed in the 1970s. Steel I-beams that span the width of the roofless building protrude from the west and east walls. Although plywood panels cover all the window openings and most of the doors, historic photos indicate the original fenestration pattern. The upper story windows were tall, narrow, wood frame, double-hung sash with one-over-one lights; the main floor windows appeared to be a large plate glass with a two-light transom.

The building's northwest corner entrance faces the intersection. An iron boot scraper is imbedded in the concrete next to the stone stoop. This semi-circular stone stoop leads to the angled entrance marked by a round arched opening trimmed with radiating voussoirs. The double leaf entry contains two glazed and paneled wooden doors below a semi-circular arched transom. Above this entry on the second floor is a tall narrow window opening. The oblique wall culminates in a large semi-circular arched stone block incised to form radiating voussoirs around a five-pointed star. Below this design are two carved panels—the upper one contains "4M1912" and the lower one has "L. Gianella" (the original owner). Three stacked stones with a large cap form short, squat columns that flank the arched stone block, as well as anchor the parapet walls at the northeast and southwest corners of the building.

The north façade fronts Main Street. Four evenly spaced, tall, narrow window openings fill the upper story. The first floor is dominated by two large display window openings.

The west façade fronts Romero Street. Four widely spaced, tall, narrow window openings punctuate the upper floor. Three larger windows with stone lintels and a round-arched doorway pierce the main level. The slightly recessed doorway contains a plywood-covered semi-circular transom. The glazed and paneled door led to the stairway that accessed the second floor.

The east wall has five, evenly spaced window openings across the upper floor. These tall, narrow window openings have smooth stone lintels and lugsills. There is one window on the main floor. Located toward the rear of the building, this window contains an inset framework of metal bars.

The south end (rear) of the building has two window openings piercing the upper story wall above the one-story addition. Although its exact date of construction has not been determined, the addition does

Property Name First State Bank of Aguilar

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appear on the 1930 Sanborn Map and is noted as a dwelling. The addition has red brick walls on the west and south sides, with coursed stone forming the east wall. The addition may have originally had a flat roof. The shed roof, which slopes downward from west to east, appears to be a later alteration, as does the expanse of stucco filling the space between the roof and the brick on the west and south walls. The west wall of the brick addition is punctuated with four openings--two large windows flanking a door and an adjacent door to the north. Two centered pilasters of alternating coursed brick and stone break the expanse of the south wall. These pilasters frame an offset door opening. Like the earlier stone construction, plywood panels cover all these window and door openings.

According to locals, the original interior featured unusual parquetry in the main entry area. There were wood floors and walls of lath and plaster throughout the rest of the building. Very little interior fabric remains. Some of the plaster walls still exist, but the wood floors were removed. The original ceiling in the main lobby and offices was pressed metal, and some of this material is still visible. A ground floor 10x12 foot fireproof concrete vault supported by a masonry foundation was added in 1922; the steel doors from the St. Louis manufacturer are still in place.

In 1957, a local entrepreneur purchased the building with plans to convert it to a museum that would house and display church and other historical iron bells. In the early 1970s, the roof was removed in order to install steel I-beams which were forced through the outside walls. Mr. Cordova died in 1987 before completing his project, leaving the building with large holes on the upper east wall and no roof. Needless to say, extensive damage resulted. The current owners purchased the building in 1997 and subsequently covered the upper story windows with plywood panels.

Property Name First State Bank of Aguilar

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## SIGNIFICANCE STATEMENT

The First State Bank of Aguilar, also known as the Gianella Building, is eligible under Criterion A for its association with the town's commercial history. The building housed the First State Bank of Aguilar. Founded in 1910; it served as the town's "one and pioneer banking institution" until 1927.

The First State Bank is also eligible under Criterion C for architecture as it represents a type and method of construction. The building possesses the distinctive characteristics of the two-part commercial block, and it is one of only two stone commercial buildings in Aguilar.

According to Longstreth (1987:24), "the two-part commercial is the most common type of composition for small and moderate-sized commercial buildings throughout the country. Generally limited to structures of two to four stories, this type is characterized by a horizontal division into two distinct zones." These divisions reflect the differences in the interior use. The street level with its large display windows of plate glass, indicates public spaces, such as banking, retail, or hotel lobby areas. The upper zone with its smaller windows suggests more private spaces, such as hotel rooms, offices, or meeting hall. The Gianella Building clearly epitomizes this type in its design and its various historic uses.

The building is one of only two commercial buildings in town constructed of stone. The other building is the 1909 Arcade Hotel and Saloon (5LA.1109), located on the northeast corner of Main and Balsam streets. These two buildings stand at opposite ends of the town's main street and delineate its commercial core. Both buildings are rumored to have been designed by Antonio Lo Presto, the original owner of the Arcade Hotel. The buildings share similar characteristics, in addition to their two-story, stone construction. They are both built on a corner with an oblique main entrance and employ round arched openings. However, while the Gianella Building confines its use of the round arch to the two doorways, every door and window of the Arcade Hotel's two primary facades possesses a round arched opening. Due to their height, stone construction and location, both buildings are visual landmarks in Aguilar.

### Historical Background

Aguilar was named in honor of Jose Ramon Aguilar, a prominent landowner who served as one of the town's first trustees, in the Colorado House of Representatives, and as a Las Animas County Commissioner. He even served two terms as the town's mayor. Jose Ramon Aguilar was born in Mora County, Territory of New Mexico in 1852 and he came to the Apishapa Valley at the base of the Spanish Peaks in 1879. He owned the land on which the town now stands, and the town was named in his honor in 1888.

That same year, the Peerless Coalmine initiated an industrial boom and the town grew rapidly. Numerous coal mine camps also developed in the area. These mining camps were essentially company towns, controlled by large fuel corporations. Hundreds of Greeks, Italians, Slavs and Poles came from Europe and became the local coal miners. The miners in the coal camps lived in company housing and bought from the company store with pay vouchers. Miners living in Aguilar had more freedom, as it was not a company town. Aguilar became a melting pot of nationalities. The town was incorporated January 18, 1894.

According to the 1912-1913 Las Animas County Directory, Aguilar had a population of 1400. The

Property Name First State Bank of Aguilar

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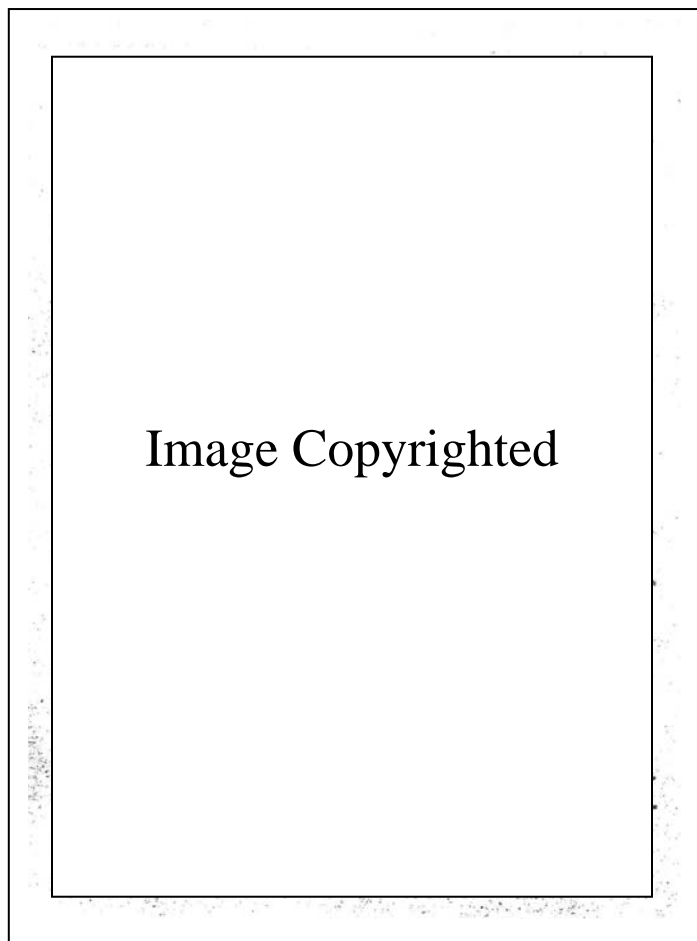
directory noted that the town, two miles west of the Colorado and Southern Railway, had numerous churches, "good schools, several substantial stores, a lumber yard, hotels and livery stables, etc., and a wide-awake weekly newspaper—the Apishapa Valley Record." The description also noted the Empire Coal Mining Company and the Aguilar Coal and Mining Company operated two mines that employed about 200 men.

The area was booming from all the mining activity, and a group of citizens felt that a bank was needed. According to a stock share certificate dated 28 December 1910, the First State Bank of Aguilar was chartered in that year. Its directors and presidents included H.M. Stockwell, W. T. Emberton, A. I. Lindsay, F. O. Carson and D.B. Carson (allegedly related to Kit Carson). According to their minutes, the Town Board Trustees designated the First State Bank of Aguilar as the depository for all the town funds on May 22, 1911.

The date on the building would lead one to conclude that construction on the bank building was completed about 1912. However, a small article in the January 7, 1911 issue of the *Walsenburg Independent* stating that "The First State Bank of Aguilar opened for business this week and are now ready to attend to your banking needs" would seem to indicate an earlier completion date. Extensive research has failed to determine whether the bank actually opened in this building before construction finished or if the bank was located elsewhere prior to completion of this building.

The building occupied Lot 19, Block 10 in the Romero Addition—property purchased by Luigi Gianella in 1909. The building was apparently dedicated to him and he resided in the brick rear addition until his death. Gianella was born in Torino, Italy in 1870 and died in Aguilar in 1952. His obituary stated that he served as a blacksmith for various coal mines in the area during his lifetime (*The Morning Light*, 24 May 1952). The building was constructed from sandstone that was hand quarried from a nearby coal mine by Italian stone masons. The local mines had attracted a "melting pot" of European immigrants who were known for this trade. The Italian influence was very prominent in this town where the "Fratellanza Italiana di San Guiseppe" was organized.

The bank ran frequent advertisements in the local press. The one at right is from a February 9, 1922, issue of the *Aguilar Press*. Later that same year, a concrete vault was installed in the building for the purpose of making the bank "up-to-date in every particular." The local newspaper reported that a contract was let for the 10x12 concrete vault. The article noted that "the vault will be of a hollow-wall nature, sufficiently large to accommodate up to 500





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safety deposit boxes, aside from all valuable papers belonging to the bank. The furniture and fixtures of the bank will be rearranged, a savings deposit window placed at the south side of the lobby, and other changes made in the interior of the bank" (*Aguilar Press*, 11 May 1922).

Local miners, ranchers, and business owners utilized the bank. During the years the bank operated, Aguilar reached its peak population of 2500, and the business directory listed over 90 businesses in the town. The first Bell Telephone office was located on the second floor, along with a doctor's office, a dentist's office, and two rooms that are known to be leased as apartments. The bank was near the center of town and became the source of several stories including bank robberies (*The Chronicle-News*, 15 April 1921) and the mysterious disappearance of bank President W. T. Emberton, which was never solved (*The Chronicle-News*, 10 May 1923 and 21 April 1926).

By the late 1920s, the demand for coal decreased causing the closure of most nearby mines. The local economy declined, forcing many families to move. On September 15, 1927, the bank closed by order of the state bank commissioner. While depreciated reserves were cited as the cause of the suspension, the newspaper reported that "there was a calm feeling of security in the community that the bank affairs would be adjusted satisfactorily" (*The Chronicle-News*, 15 September 1927). Despite the initial secure feeling, the last of the remaining assets of the defunct institution were sold at public auction the following May to a Dr. H. E. Abrahams for \$10,750 (*The Chronicle-News*, 22 May 1928). The aftermath of the bank's closing left the community in turmoil with many unanswered questions about the future.

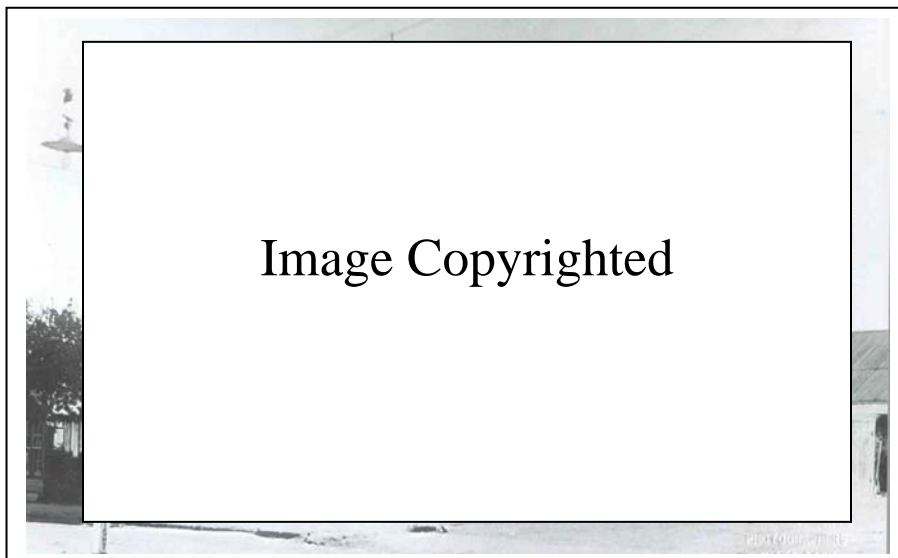
Despite the closing of the bank, the building continued to serve the community in other ways. Events such as high school senior class dinners, local club meetings, and an annual fair with a flower show were held in the building. A December 20, 1934, article in the *Las Animas County News* (formerly the *Aguilar Press*) noted that the Calendar Club hosted a bazaar and turkey dinner in the building, which proved to be a big success. The Gianella Building was also the location of the National Youth Administration Sewing Project for young ladies who sewed clothing for needy families. One of the most fascinating stories about the building involves the production of illegal liquor in the basement during Prohibition. A concrete vat in the basement still stands as testimony to the local stories that are part of the town's reputation as "Little Chicago." (Although an editorial in *The Chronicle-News* disputed this claim, stating that Aguilar was a respectful town, full of respectful businessmen.) Locals tell of a large haul of illegal liquor that federal agents confiscated from the bank basement. The last known use was as a doctor's office, with Dr. W. Merritt utilizing the second floor. Luigi Gianella lived in the rear addition until his death in 1952.

In 1957, A. M. Cordova purchased the abandoned building. Cordova was a local entrepreneur who dreamed of a museum to house and display a collection of church and other historical iron bells. He removed the roof in the early 1970s in order to install steel I-beams which were forced through the outside walls. Mr. Cordova died in 1987 before completing the project. In 1997, the Whitney National Trust for Historic Preservation purchased the building in an estate sale. These owners also have some of the original fixtures and documents relating to the bank building. In 2004, Colorado Preservation Inc. placed the building on its Colorado's Most Endangered Places List.

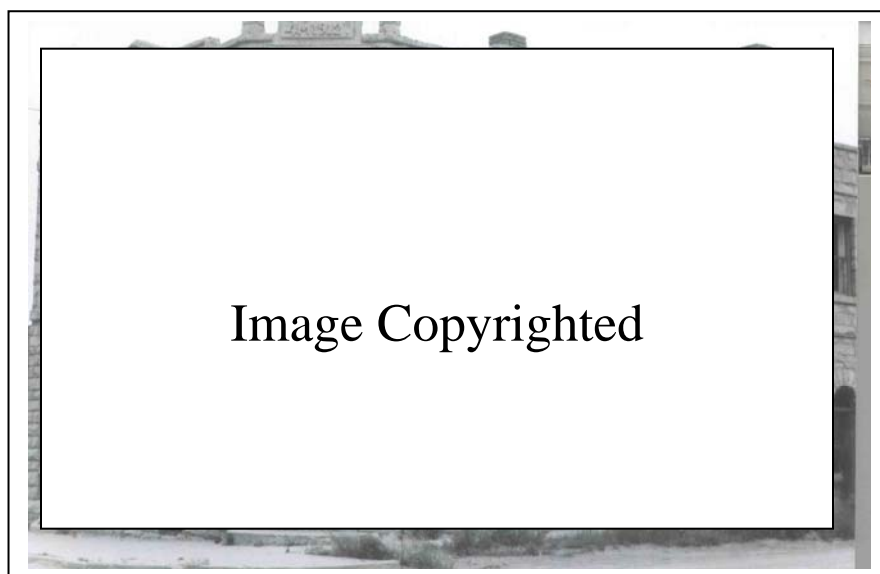
Property Name First State Bank of Aguilar

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While it is not known when this photograph was taken, it was prior to the bank's closing in 1927.



A ca. late 1960s photograph of the abandoned building.



Property Name First State Bank of Aguilar

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## BIBLIOGRAPHY

*Aguilar Centennial 1894-1994*. Dallas, TX: Curtis Media, 1994.

Aguilar Town Hall, Aguilar, Colorado. Minutes of the Town Board Trustees and plat map.

"The History of Jose Ramon Aguilar" in *Centennial Booklet*, 1994.

Las Animas County Courthouse, Trinidad, Colorado. Records of the County Clerk and Recorder.

*Las Animas County Directory*. R.L. Polk Directory Co. 1912-13; 1915-16; 1918-19; 1926-27; 1929.

Longstreth, Richard. *The Buildings of Main Street: A Guide to American Commercial Architecture*. Washington, D.C.: The Preservation Press, 1987.

Ryan, Carol and Ryan, Peggy. "Aguilar, the Town that Refused to Die" in *Colorado Preservation, Inc.* Spring 2004, page 6.

Sanborn Map of Aguilar. Sanborn web site. <http://Sanborn.umi.com>. Accessed May 18, 2005.

### Newspapers

*The Aguilar Press*. 11 February 1922 "Overland '4' Sale"; 11 May 1922 "Contract Let for Vault"; 25 May 1922 "Report of the Condition of the First State Bank"; 1 June 1922 "New Arrangements at Bank Underway".

*The Chronicle-News* (Trinidad). 15 April 1921 "Bandits Hold up Bank This Afternoon—Are Captured"; 10 May 1923 Aguilar Banker has Disappeared"; 21 April 1926 "Mystery in Strange Disappearance of Banker W. T. Emberton of Aguilar Remains Unsolved After Three Years"; 15 September 1927 "Aguilar Bank Closed Today"; 16 September 1927 "First State Bank of Aguilar in Hands of State Examiner"; 10 October 1927 "Aguilar Bank Director Beaten by Depositor in Fight at Dance Pavilion"; 22 May 1928 "Assets of Aguilar State Bank Sold to Dr. H. E. Abrahams at Public Auction Sale Today"; 12 July 1928 "Former Cashier of Aguilar Bank Arrested on Charge of Fraud—In Jail Here".

*The Evening Picketwire* (Trinidad). 16 April 1921 "Bandits Got \$1070 At Aguilar Bank Plucky Cool Headed Girl Cashier Saved The Big Roll In The Vault".

*Las Animas County News*. 20 December 1934 (notice regarding Bazaar and Turkey Dinner at Bank Building).

*The Morning Light* (Trinidad). 25 May 1952 "Luigi Gionelli [sic] Died Friday Afternoon".

*The Walsenburg Independent*. 7 January 1911, "Opening of New Bank".

**COLORADO STATE REGISTER OF HISTORIC PROPERTIES  
CONTINUATION SHEET**

**Page 8  
Section V**

**Property Name** First State Bank of Aguilar

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**GEOGRAPHICAL DATA**

**VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION**

Lot 19, Block 10, Romero Addition, Town of Aguilar.

**1930 Sanborn Map**

Property Name First State Bank of Aguilar

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## PHOTOGRAPH LOG

The following information pertains to all photographs:

Name of Property: First State Bank of Aguilar  
Location: Aguilar, Las Animas County  
Photographer: Georgia Telfer  
Date of Photographs: May 2005  
Negatives: Apishapa Valley Historical Society

Photo No.                      Photographic Information

- 1 North façade from Main Street; view S
- 2 Detail-Northwest oblique main entrance; view SE
- 3 Northeast corner; view S
- 4 Detail-oblique corner roofline above main entrance; view SE
- 5 West façade from Romero Street; view SE
- 6 South entrance to rear addition; view N
- 7 West side of addition from Romero Street; view E
- 8 West façade and south end; view NE
- 9 Southeast corner with Post Office at right; view NW
- 10 Interior—main entry and large window opening; view NW
- 11 Interior—main floor with door opening to office at far left, vault, and opening at right to back room and staircase to upper story; view S
- 12 Interior—main floor with rear view of vault and remains of staircase at right; view E
- 13 Interior—vault door with plastered walls; view S
- 14 Interior—detail of vault door; view S

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CONTINUATION SHEET**

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Section VII**

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**USGS TOPOGRAPHIC MAP**  
Aguilar Quadrangle, Colorado