

Ponil Park Townsite

Valle Vidal Unit – Carson National Forest

Distance from Casa del Gavilan to trail head:

50 miles – 75-90 minutes

Trail length: 2 3/4 miles each way Total 5 1/2 miles

Elevation decent: 200 feet

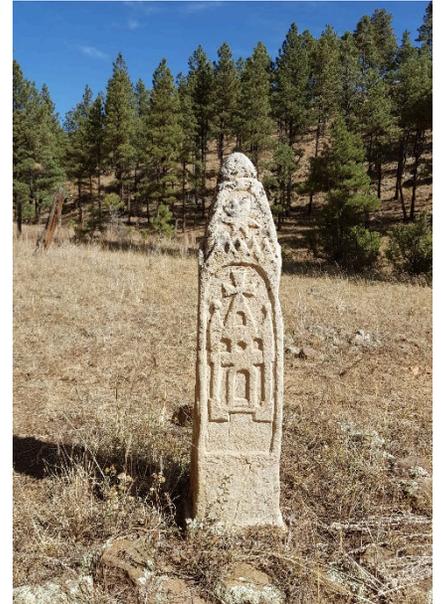
Difficulty: Easy

Points of interest: Follows good trail/road down a wide, level valley.

No passes or fees are required in Valle Vidal

When logging began in earnest in the Cimarron area, Ponil Park was one of several townsites that sprang up in the vast sea of timber in the mountains to the northwest of the town. Ponil Park, Ring, and other towns houses hundreds of loggers while the timber lasted. When the endless supply of trees ended, the loggers pulled up the tracks as they departed leaving scant evidence of their presence other than stumps as far as the eye could see. Only the grass was left to whisper in the wind.

The stumps, as well as other evidence of the massive logging from over a century ago, have disappeared from the Valle Vidal. What remains of these towns are a few old cabins, some of the machinery used to cut and haul the logs and lumber, and cemeteries of the loved ones they left behind. The marker at the right is located in the Ponil Park cemetery. It bears a striking resemblance to a marker of unknown origin on display in the St. James Hotel in Cimarron. Some speculate these markers were left by Knights Templar in some long ago venture to the area. While perhaps a romantic theory, it seems unlikely the old order would have traveled this far from home, or if they did – would have spent enough time in this wilderness to carve and post mysterious markers throughout the mountains. It seems more likely the markers were trail markers from the days of Spanish rule. When the town of Ponil Park grew near this marker, it's likely some thought this marker was a gravestone from long ago, so they added their own graves and markers around the mysterious stone.



The east side of Valle Vidal is typically closed between January 1st through March 31. During this time the gravel road through Valle Vidal is open but no hiking or other activities off the main road are permitted, which includes this hike. During winter months snow can block the road in places. Be cautious of driving into Valle Vidal during or after heavy rains, or in winter weather. Cell phones will only work for a mile or two off Highway 64. The rest of the time you'll be out of cell phone range and "on your own". Traffic along the road can be very sparse except for summer months and hunting season. Make certain you have a spare tire as flat tires do sometimes occur on the gravel road.

To reach the trailhead, drive north out of Cimarron on Highway 64 (toward Raton) five miles. On the right (east) side of the road you'll see a sign "Valle Vidal Unit Carson National Forest" pointing to the left (west). Turn west onto the gravel road. This part of the road passes through Ted Turner's nearly 600,000 Vermejo Park Ranch which runs into Colorado. You will see gated side roads for numerous gas wells along the main road. The road is a public highway, but no hiking or other activities are permitted off the gravel road. Twenty one miles from Highway 64 a sign marks the entrance into Valle Vidal. Beyond this point hiking and other off-road activities are permitted with some restrictions. Proceed another 7 miles to the parking area at Mile Marker 26. Park on the north (right) side of the road. Follow the trail/road to the south (across the road). Well maintained pit toilets are available in the McCrystal Campground a mile further on the main road if you want to drive up and back before you start your hike.

Whatever the long-forgotten origin of the marker mentioned earlier, a hike to the Ponil Park townsite is an easy, pleasant stroll into the backcountry of Valle Vidal. The hike will take about an hour each direction. The trail/road follows the upper portion of North Ponil Canyon through fields of distinctive orange and yellow sandstone from the Poison Canyon formation formed 60 million years ago when this area was at sea level on the western shore of the Western Interior Seaway that covered much of what is now the Great Plains. The trail follows Ponil Creek which, twenty miles to the south, runs along the north side of Cimarron. Evidence of long-ago forest fires can be seen on the ridges. When you reach the junction of Ponil Canyon (that you've been hiking through) and Seally Canyon – the first major canyon which comes in from the west (right) - the cemetery is on the far (south) side of the canyon. The white marker can be seen from quite a distance on a sunny day. The roadbed for the railroad that once ran all the way to Cimarron can still be seen winding through the canyon. While there isn't enough left of Ponil Park for it to be called a ghost town, evidence of the people that lived and worked in this remote setting a century ago makes for interesting exploring in the valley and along the hillsides.

If you want to go a bit further once you reach Ponil Park, turn west and hike into Seally Canyon which runs along the south side of "The Rock Wall". It's a similar wide, grassy valley with a good trail.

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