New Mexico Quarterly

Volume 2 | Issue 4

1932

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New Mexicana

Journal of J. J. Webb, 1844-1847

In the July NEW MEXICO QUARTERLY, parts of the Memorandum Book of Manuel Alvarez were printed. The Journal of Alvarez, with notes culled from the richest minds of antiquity and the best thought of his own day, is a permanent reminder of one type of immigrant to New Mexico in the early nineteenth century. Though commerce and adventure played their part in the travels of Alvarez from his native Spain, they did not harden his mind into narrow, monied furrows. The Account Books of Alvarez, another interesting set of records, indicate the fine generosity accompanying his business life. In a number of instances, payments on substantial debts are postponed in the books where financial disaster caused by Indian raids or by other losses of unavoidable sort overtook the debtors. There are frequent losses to Alvarez by deaths, and one instance where such a loss is supplemented by further credit extended to the destitute family of the deceased man. A cultured man, familiar with classic languages and the major tongues of Europe in his time, humanist in learning and love of life, Manuel Alvarez represents the lettered aristocrat who occasionally crossed the Cimarron and landed in the great province of New Mexico.

James Josiah Webb, though a less learned individual, bore the same claims to the title of gentleman that did Alvarez. Representing another tradition, that of New England, Josiah Webb brought to New Mexico a less cosmopolitan viewpoint but an equally sturdy fair-mindedness and ability. Engaged in the Santa Fé trade while Alvarez was still serving as United States consul and diplomatic agent, Webb and Alvarez must have met not only in business but also in the political life of the new territory, for Alvarez was active in organizing the provisional “state” assembly in 1850, by which Webb’s partner, William Mes-
servy, was elected first delegate from New Mexico to the Congress of the United States. Webb himself in 1856 was elected to the lower house of the New Mexico Assembly as one of the four representatives from the county of Santa Fé. He was a conscientious legislator for one year.

Josiah Webb was only twenty-six years of age when he entered the Santa Fé trade. Born in Connecticut, and there apprenticed in the merchandising institutions of two prosperous uncles, he yet chose to leave familiar ways and places, and try the unknown paths of barter in the Southwest. Like most of the other pioneers on the trail, he established contacts at St. Louis, the commercial end of the trail, and with his first stock of goods-in-trade ventured the long stretch from Independence, Missouri, to Santa Fé, New Mexico. The “stake” of this first trip for Webb was six hundred dollars. His train consisted of one wagon, four yoke of oxen, and some additional equipment generously furnished on credit by Samuel C. Owens, the most prominent merchant in Independence. That was the expedition of 1844. In 1854, at probably the height of Webb’s success in the Santa Fé trade, with his then partner, William Messervy, the firm of Messervy and Webb, was purchasing goods in the East that cost from $35,000 to $45,000 annually, which were shipped in two trains, one in the spring and one in the fall, made up of from sixty to seventy wagons. In 1849, Webb wrote from Santa Fé to Doan, King and Company, of St. Louis, that he had “the largest store and premises in town.” By the end of 1847, Webb had accumulated a sufficient fortune to realize the desire of returning to his native Connecticut.

He arranged with John M. Kingsbury, who had succeeded Messervy as his partner in 1853, to handle the Santa Fé house of business while Webb purchased goods in the East and lived in Connecticut. For two years this arrange-

1. Webb carried about $1,200 worth of goods, but half of it was gained on credit in St. Louis.
ment operated, and then both Kingsbury and Webb desired to withdraw from the mercantile business. It took more than a year to sell out the stock of the Santa Fé store. In May, 1861, the firm of Webb and Kingsbury closed its doors. For seventeen years the name of the senior member of the firm, James Josiah Webb, had been a by-word for honest dealing and reliable citizenship in Santa Fé. In his after life in Connecticut, Webb was elected to the senate of the state of Connecticut and was unusually successful in the operation of a model stock and dairy farm. The same study and application to farming made him as successful in that field as he had been in trade in the Southwest. Webb was instrumental in securing the establishment of the Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station at New Haven. That he began to write his memoirs of New Mexico after being for thirty years absent from the state is the most definite evidence of the happiness which he found there during almost two decades of his long life.

In the library of the Historical Society of New Mexico there is a typewritten copy of the original Journal of J. J. Webb 1844-1847. The copy was presented to the Historical Society by Mr. James Henry Webb, Superior Court Justice of Connecticut, 1914-1924, the son of the trader; James Henry Webb was born in Santa Fé December 22, 1854. Until 1931, this copy, with one other kept by the Historical Society of Connecticut, was the only available source other than the original memoirs. A published volume of the Journal has now appeared in The Southwest Historical Series, edited by Ralph P. Bieber.² Webb began to write his story a little more than a year before his death. When he died in 1889, he had completed only the years, 1844-1847, but the almost four years of personal history are fruitful in details of the trail, of personalities prominent in old Santa Fé, of the tangled relations between native and newcomer in these early days.

Reminiscences like those of Webb are literary only because genuine experience of living moderately tuned to the vehicle of expression is of itself the sum and substance of literature. Many an old trapper, telling yarns about a camp fire, has had a gift of style to be envied by the product of the short story course. Webb, of course, though not of college training, was an educated man. He had passed through the district school and the village academy of his native town. There is many an echo, furthermore, of another educational agency so often to be noted in pioneer life: the Sunday School and church and its text books, the Bible and the Catechism—in the case of Webb, that rigorous disciplinarian, Presbyterianism. The thread of this last discipline is noticeable in the background of some of his observations on human conduct. The captions introducing excerpts from the Journal are those of the editor and sponsor for New Mexicana.

A Glimpse of Kit Carson

One day we camped on the Rio Culebra (a small stream running from the mountains into the Rio Grande), and in the early afternoon saw three men approaching camp at a brisk gallop, each with a led horse. They dismounted, unsaddled, and in a few minutes had a fire kindled, and the coffee pot over the fire. They were soon recognized as old mountain men and acquaintances of several of the party—Kit Carson, Lucien Maxwell, and Timothy Goodale. As soon as they got dinner cooking (coffee boiling, a prairie dog dressed and opened out on a stick before the fire), Carson and Maxwell came to our camp. This was my first interview with these three celebrities. It was very short, and I can remember nothing of the interview except that they left Pueblo that morning and expected to reach Taos that night. They soon left, ate their dinner, saddled their horses, caught their led horses, and were off; Kit galloping up to the trail rope, or lariat, of his horse and, stooping in
his saddle, picked it up and was off without breaking a gallop, giving us this word of caution:

"Look out for your hair, boys! The Ute are plenty about here."

A New Mexican Meal

We were about a day and a half getting to Rio Colorado, where I took my first meal in a New Mexican house. It was a simple meal after a fast of thirty-six hours. I do think it was the best they had and prepared for company —baked pumpkin, wheat gordos, and atole. The gordos are prepared by grinding the wheat on the metate, wetting the meal with water sufficient to pat it into cakes about the size and rather thicker than our buckwheat cakes, and baking them on a flat stone without the addition of soda or yeast and frequently without salt.

No Hogs in New Mexico

We met with a warm and cordial reception, and [were] entertained with that hospitality universal among the American residents in New Mexico at that time on the arrival of the gringos [strangers], especially countrymen, at their houses. Our bill of fare was the usual dishes of chile colorado, beans, atole, tortillas, etc., Americanized by the addition of bacon, ham, coffee, and bread. Mr. Turley had a pen of some fifteen or twenty hogs, which he fed from the mill and distillery, and raised pork enough for his own family. But there was no market for hog products outside of his own wants. This was the only place where [I] ever saw hogs kept in any numbers, either in New or Old Mexico, and during my fifteen years' residence and travels over New Mexico and through the states of Chihuahua, Durango, Zacatecas, and Aguascalientes, I never saw fifty hogs in all, besides what I saw at this place.
**Entry into Santa Fé**

From the big canyon we cross a spur of the mountain, not very high but very steep and rough; so it was necessary to "double" to get up. Thence through heavy pine timber and by a very rough and winding road to Arroyo Hondo, six miles from Santa Fé, where we camped for the night and made preparations to enter the long-sought end of our journey.

The men here wash their faces and hands, and those possessed of that luxury would don a clean shirt. But those having no spare clothes would content themselves with fixing up shirts and trousers by substituting splinters for buttons and tying a handkerchief around their necks in such a way that it would cover the holes in their shirts as much as possible. But the most important preparation for the drivers was to put on new and broad crackers, so as to be able to announce their arrival by the cracking of their whips, which would nearly equal the reports made by the firing of so many pistols.

**Santa Fé in 1845**

There were but a very few houses north of the Palace on the street now called Palace avenue. Don Agustin Duran, Don Felix García, Don Antonio Sena y Baca, and James Conklin and one or two others lived not far from where the Presbyterian Church now stands and had quite grand houses for the time; and some of them [had] two or three acres cultivated in corn, beans, and red peppers, and a few apricot trees, the only fruit then raised in the town. There were three residences on Palace avenue, extending from the corner of Washington street towards the cienaga, in one of which we quartered for a few days when we first arrived, and where I afterwards lived a year with my family, owned by Don Juan Sena.
A Footnote to Miss Cather's Archbishop

There was an old church about the center of the block on the south side of the plaza which had not been occupied as a place of worship for many years; and after the organization of the Territorial government, [it] was opened by the authorities and fitted up for a courthouse. When [it was] nearly finished and ready for occupancy, the claim was set up that it was Church property, and it was a sacrilege to devote it to such a purpose.

"How can we come into these sacred precincts as litigants or witnesses and try our cases or give testimony, standing upon the graves of our fathers?" said the Mexicans.

And with due regard for the delicacy of their feelings, and in obedience to the demands of Bishop Lamy, the plan was abandoned, and the property turned over to the Church. It was shortly after sold to Don Simon Delgado and fitted up for a store, where he kept an assorted stock of dry goods, groceries, and liquors, and disposed of them for cash, as he found customers among the poor and needy. I presume the bones rest in peace and quiet, as the transfer was made by the Church for a valuable consideration instead of being appropriated by the government and devoted to secular uses.

A Mexican Fandango

A Mexican fandango in those days was a curiosity. The sala, or dancing hall, [was] from twenty to thirty feet long, and fifteen to eighteen feet wide, with sometimes benches on the sides (but frequently without seats of any kind) and packed full, only leaving sufficient space through the center for the couples to waltz through, up and down. When the dance began, the men would place themselves in line on one side, and when the line was complete, the women would begin to rise and take their positions opposite the men, almost always in regular order, without manifesting any
choice of partners; and when the numbers were equal, the music would strike up and the dance proceed.

I have witnessed some most ludicrous scenes at these *fandangos*. It was not anything uncommon or surprising to see the most elaborately dressed and aristocratic woman at the ball dancing with a peon dressed only in his shirt and trousers open from the hip down, with very wide and full drawers underneath, and frequently barefoot, but usually with moccasins. And such disparity of ages! On one occasion I saw at a ball given by Governor Armijo an old man of eighty or over dancing with a child not over eight or ten. I could not help the reflection that it was a dance of the cradle and the grave. They do literally dance from the cradle to the grave. And I have never seen anything lascivious or [any] want of decorum and self-respect in any woman in a *fandango*, whatever might be her reputation for virtue outside. I have known of disorders and serious brawls in *fandangos*, but it was almost invariably where Americans and whiskey were found in profusion.

*New Mexico Unknown in Heaven.*

I forgot to say, while speaking of the Pinos and the Ortizes, that Don [Pedro Bautista] Pino, the father of Don Miguel and Don Facundo Pino, was much beloved and honored by the early traders, having proved a true and trusted friend to them in all their business and social relations, and one on whom they could rely for counsel and assistance in all dealings with the authorities. Mr. Vaughn often spoke of him with the highest respect and admiration, and to illustrate the esteem in which he was held by the Americans, delighted in relating a dream of an old trader who was quite a wag and related by him the day after the funeral of his old friend. It was the habit to close the stores from twelve till two every day for dinner and siesta, and the Americans would meet at one of their places of business to talk over various matters and have a social chat. This wag came in one day, and Mr. Pino's death coming up as the subject of
conversation, he said he had a very peculiar dream the night before, and it had made such an impression on his mind [that] he must be excused for relating it.

"I dreamed," he said, "that I died, and was transported directly to the gates of Paradise. On arriving, I knocked at the door and was admitted by St. Peter in person, and invited into the anteroom for examination. There were many ahead of me, and among them Mr. Pino. When his turn came St. Peter asked his name and where he was from. He replied:

"'My name is (Pedro Bautista) Pino, from New Mexico.'

"'How dare you attempt such a trick upon me?' said St. Peter. 'You are a fraud and an imposter. There is no such place on earth as New Mexico. Go to your place, where you will find plenty of company of your kind.'"

T. M. P.