

7-1-2011

In Memoriam: Thomas J. Steele, S. J. (1933–2010)

Thomas E. Chávez

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmhr>

Recommended Citation

Chávez, Thomas E.. "In Memoriam: Thomas J. Steele, S. J. (1933–2010)." *New Mexico Historical Review* 86, 3 (2011). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmhr/vol86/iss3/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in New Mexico Historical Review by an authorized editor of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu, lsloane@salud.unm.edu, sarahrk@unm.edu.

In Memoriam

THOMAS J. STEELE, S. J. (1933–2010)

Thomas E. Chávez

Many of his friends called him “Father Tom”; others “Tom.” Those who did not know him or were in awe of him, addressed him formally as “Father” or “Father Steele.” His quiet, almost soft-spoken demeanor and the undivided attention he focused on whomever he conversed with, spoke of a gentle, caring man. He was known for his many real-life roles. He was a Jesuit priest, university professor, collector of art, museum curator, writer, philosopher, historian, and cowboy. In between the lines, he was a humorist as well.

Father Thomas J. Steele, S. J., died in Denver, Colorado, on 25 October 2010. He left a personal, professional, and pastoral legacy hard to match, and the results of his life’s work as a professional scholar and Catholic pastor will continue to touch minds and lives for decades to come. He was born in St. Louis, Missouri, on 6 November 1933 and grew up in this Midwestern city; “the wrong end of the Santa Fe Trail,” as he described it. He entered St. Stanislaus Seminary on 8 August 1951, thus joining the Society of Jesus. He attended St. Louis University, where he received BA, MA, PhL (Licentiate in Philosophy), and STL (Licentiate of Sacred Theology) degrees and then was ordained at St. Mary’s College in Leavenworth, Kansas, on 16 June 1964.

Characteristically enough Father Steele wrote that his life’s work became obvious to him when he inherited from his mother a thin, dittoed, hand-colored booklet entitled *God’s Saints*. The book had a hand-colored saint for every letter of the alphabet, and the person who haphazardly did the coloring was a young Tom Steele, while attending Christ the King Grade School in St. Louis. Not even the nuns teaching him could keep him and his colors between the lines. Nevertheless, Father Steele saw in the book the connection of saints,

“holy males and holy females,” with art and then history. As he progressed through his formal education, the germ of a book about these Catholic holy people took root and grew in him.

In 1965 he moved to Albuquerque, where he attended graduate school at the University of New Mexico and received a PhD in English and American Literature. While in Albuquerque, he became acquainted with New Mexican Spanish colonial art, especially the famous *retablos* (flat paintings on pine boards) and *bultos* (carved wooden sculptures) depicting various Catholic saints and religious scenes. He also befriended the famous New Mexican folklorist and scholar Gilberto Espinosa who, Father Steele recalled, “bent the twig of my nascent interest” in that art and its history. In 1969 with the aid of money received from a National Endowment for the Arts and Humanities Fellowship, Father Steele was able to start a personal collection of New Mexican Spanish colonial art. Among his many skills, Father Steele was good with his hands and restoration of his prized art collection became an occupation important to him. A little-known aspect of his many talents was that he was also an artist, despite his protestations about “staying within the lines.”

Before long, however, the value of his art pieces priced themselves beyond his personal means and his sixty-piece collection became, in his own words, “too valuable for my vow of poverty to be comfortable with.” So he let the devil out the side door by donating the collection of Spanish colonial art to the Regis Jesuit Community, which turned the collection over to Regis University in Denver in 1989. Father Steele did not lose control of his collection. He moved to Denver to teach English at Regis University, which, at first, housed the works in his room. Although Father Steele could not afford to buy more pieces, he was able to solicit the Jesuit community to purchase additions.

When his collection was transferred to Regis University, it had grown to 128 pieces and was eventually moved into a special room in the university’s Dayton Memorial Library. Father Steele became the collection’s official curator. Over the years, he organized many exhibitions, and, before his death, the collection had expanded to almost four hundred items. As Father Steele noted, his *santo* collecting transformed over the years from a passing interest to a hobby, an avocation, “and finally [to] the epicenter of a whole second career.” (Maybe he meant the third or fourth career, for he already was a priest, teacher, and artist.) Expanding his collection became, as he put it, “one of the more socioculturally-acceptable forms of obsessive-compulsive behavior.” He subsequently believed that he could write some pertinent articles on New Mexican *santero* art because of his “peculiar vantage points and abilities.” His theological training, “insider” experience in the Catholic

Church, interest in art, “skills at reading and interpreting literary symbols that might transfer into art,” and especially his immersion in the santero world shaped his perspective.

Those first articles grew into a classic book, *Santos and Saints: The Religious Folk Art of Hispanic New Mexico*, which was published in 1974 and issued in revised editions twice since. That book is still a standard work on santero art for any student of New Mexico and the Southwest. From these initial works, Father Steele eventually expanded his bibliography to over sixty publications, some demonstrating his aversion to “keeping in the lines.” In addition to his scholarship on santero art, he wrote books on history, architecture, music, philosophy, and translation (see selected bibliography).

To say his scholarly career was prolific is an understatement. Among his many contributions was an important book on *alabados*, the religious songs of the New Mexican religious confraternities, La Hermandad Nuestro Padre Jesús Nazareno, popularly known as the *Penitentes*. Father Steele’s *The Alabados of New Mexico* (2005) not only contains valuable contextual information but also translations of actual songs. Although not a work about religious art, *The Alabados of New Mexico* obviously touches a Catholic religious theme that is prevalent in the majority of his articles and books. Getting much farther beyond the lines, Father Steele even coauthored two editions of *A Guide Book to Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (1990). Always hard at work, he also added Native American art and artifacts to the santo collection, wrote about New Mexican Hispanic architecture and Penitente self-government, and edited a collection of articles celebrating the Catholic Church in New Mexico.

My favorite Father Steele book is one of his later entries. While he was retired and living in Albuquerque, his friends and major publishers, Barbe Awalt and Paul F. Rhett, worked with him to publish *The Regis Santos: Thirty Years of Collecting, 1966–1996* (LPD Press, 1997). In this volume, Father Steele unabashedly wrote about his collection and its intent: “Since I am a teacher, it is a teaching collection.” Of exhibiting the works of art, he wrote that he does not show each piece in its own place “separated from” the others by a “no-santo’s-land” of “neutral off-white wall.” The book, a marvel of learned erudition and scholarly devotion, displays his engaging writing skill. Father Steele’s personality—his passion—surfaces on the pages describing his collection. As a bonus, *Regis Santos* lists each piece of the collection in an appendix.

Father Steele’s humor was not limited to a book on “Zen and motorcycles.” He once wrote that Saint Valentine, the patron saint of lovers, also watches over golfers. An avid golfer himself, Father Steele explained that

Saint Valentine was martyred by arrows, “but no matter how many arrows his executioners shot into him, he was always ready for another nine holes.” In another instance, he noted that Santa Rosalía, the subject of a retablo that was his first purchase and the cover illustration of the original edition of *Santos and Saints*, is the protector against the plague. With tongue in cheek he quipped, “And since I’ve owned it [the Santa Rosalía retablo], I haven’t had the plague even once.” In another example of his wit, Father Steele called New Mexican writer Fray Angélico Chávez the “devil’s advocate with the name of an angel.”

Although born in what is now the Midwest, Father Steele became an avid westerner. One of his favorite hobbies was ranching, and he showed no shame in expressing his love for the open range and for being on horseback. He even enjoyed mending fences and claimed that he was “the best cowboy in Guadalupe County” and that he would “gladly work for nothing” and be the better for it.

Among Father Steele’s recent publications, *Archbishop Lamy: In His Own Words* (2000) and *The Indians of Arizona and New Mexico: Nineteenth-Century Ethnographic Notes of Archbishop John Baptiste Salpointe* (2010) are very indicative of the man. For the former, he set out to find all the sermons of Archbishop Jean Baptiste Lamy, New Mexico’s first bishop, who administered the territory’s Catholic Church from 1852 to his death in 1888. This enterprise was a major scholarly project, for the archbishop’s sermons were housed neither in one archive nor in one country. Flexing his language skills, Father Steele translated the Spanish and French sermons into English and transcribed those written in English. His object was to assemble a clear and true picture of the controversial archbishop. The broad scope and exceptional scholarship found in *Archbishop Lamy* prompted historians such as Marc Simmons to praise Father Steele for producing “a most unusual and extraordinary book” that “reveals much about [Lamy’s] inner world and motivation.” Through skill and perseverance in North American and European archives, Father Steele assembled a comprehensive collection of the cleric’s sermons not only in a book, but on a CD-ROM. This resource is reputedly the first electronic book produced in New Mexico.

The Indians of Arizona and New Mexico continued Father Steele’s interest in Catholic Church history. In this volume, he edited and annotated the writings of Lamy’s successor, Archbishop Jean Baptiste Salpointe, who worked with Native American tribes in both Arizona and New Mexico. The notes range over thirty years and provide a wealth of knowledge about Native Americans, intercultural relationships in the Southwest, frontier life, and Catholic Church philosophy. This book also demonstrates Father

Steele's ability and willingness to collaborate with other scholars on research projects. On *The Indians of Arizona and New Mexico*, Father Steele was the coeditor and coannotator with two other scholars. Indeed, a major portion of Father Steele's publications are coauthored or coedited works. He was more interested in achieving accuracy, comprehensiveness, and clarity than in keeping all credit and honors for himself. He even had a strong aversion to book signings. Accruing fame was not Father Steele's purpose in life; his goal was always to teach, enlighten, and share.

Father Steele's retirement from Regis was a misnomer, for the university made him professor emeritus and he retained curatorial control over his santos collection. Afterward, he moved back to Albuquerque, New Mexico, to be in a state about which he loved everything "except the politics." Despite a serious hearing problem, he relished in talking with people and engaged all his colleagues in intellectual debate and on research projects, helping them out with his expertise and experience. He became a penitente, fished the state's beautiful rivers and streams, and even taught part-time at the University of New Mexico. He received the esteemed Zia Award from the University of New Mexico Alumni Association, which is given to a select few alumni whose achievements have brought honor and prestige to the university.

Even as his health slowly failed, Father Steele continued to work. He planned to revise his first book, *Santos and Saints*, for a fourth edition and was working on a coauthored biography of Padre Antonio José Martínez. That project will come to fruition, for his coauthor, Father Juan Romero, and historian Robert Torrez have collected his boxes of research notes and photocopies in order to see the manuscript to completion. Father Steele gave his library to Regis University and his extensive collection of alabados to the University of New Mexico. At the end of his life, he gave away everything—books, santos, manuscripts, art works—so that he might continue to share them after his passing. Above all else, Father Steele, a quiet scholar and beloved teacher, was a good man, a warm humanitarian.

Within the last year, we New Mexicans have lost historians Ferenc Szasz, David Weber, Oakah Jones, and Harry Myers, who were preceded by too many to name here. New Mexico has been fortunate in the diversity and quality of individuals who have devoted their intellect and talents to the historical study of this place and its peoples. Father Steele, seventy-six years old when he died, has joined this pantheon of scholars and intellectuals, many of whom he knew personally and whom he worked with. And he stands shoulder to shoulder with them.

