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OCTAVIANO AMBROSIO LARRAZOLO

*By* PAUL A. F. WALTER

Sufficient time has elapsed since the death of Octaviano Ambrosio Larrazolo on April 7, 1930, to evaluate his services to the people of New Mexico who elected him governor in 1918 and sent him to the United States senate in 1928, after having defeated him thrice for territorial delegate to the United States house of representatives and once for justice of the state supreme court. It can now be said that both defeat and victory, disillusionments and incomplete triumphs, came to him because of intense feeling engendered by his fiery and persistent pleas for race consciousness addressed to the Spanish-speaking people of the state. Whether for good or for evil, it is because of the impress he gave his day that the cleavage between the descendants of the Spanish conquerors and colonists and those who came from other states continues to be accentuated in political life and is felt even in business, in the professions, and in social activities. More than to any other partisan leader it is owing to him that the demand by the Spanish-American group for at least one-half of the candidates on the tickets of the two major parties has become a *sine qua non* in every state campaign.

So dominated was Larrazolo by this race separatist idea that he left the Democratic party which had thrice honored him by nominating him for congress, and espoused the opposition party on the plea that "the Democratic

party of the territory, or at least a very considerable portion of it, had manifested a decidedly unfriendly feeling and disposition toward the Spanish-American element in New Mexico to which he belonged.”<sup>1</sup> By an irony of fate, the Spanish-American whom he placed in nomination at the succeeding Republican state convention, failed to get a place on the ticket, and in the ensuing campaign it was the Democrats who nominated a Spanish-American for the governorship who defeated the Republican Anglo candidate. As stated by Twitchell,<sup>2</sup> “There existed another element of dissatisfaction, which was more subtle in its organization and calculated, if carried to its logical sequence, to cause a disruption of the party and to lead to consequences most disastrous. This was the Larrazolo native-son propaganda which had been most industriously disseminated for more than a year in certain northern counties and like a back-fire it had attained such serious proportions and had made such pronounced impress in some quarters that Larrazolo himself could not block its headway. When the time came for putting into effect the doctrine which he had industriously preached, the results were most unwelcome to the Republicans, even to the chief apostle of racial preference, for, put in practice, it had proved a two-edged sword, encompassing the defeat of the Republican candidate for congress, a Spanish-American, and electing the Democratic candidate for governor.” Further: “The Republican leaders could see no handwriting on the wall when Larrazolo was defeated for the nomination for justice of the supreme court.” As a matter of fact, in the past twenty years no Spanish-American has been elected to the state supreme court. Except for the brief, ineffectual few days of Larrazolo at Washington, no Spanish-American has occupied a seat in the United States senate, and except for Larrazolo’s own two years’ term as governor, and a few weeks during which Ezequiél C. de

1. Twitchell, *Leading Facts of New Mexican History*, II, 599.

2. *Ibid.*, V, 415-417.

Baca occupied the executive office, no Spanish-American has been elected to that high position. It was the reaction from the race propaganda which denied Larrazolo a re-nomination for the governorship and which embittered much of his later life, when both friend and foe apparently questioned his sincerity in any position he took on policies of government and statesmanship outside of his fervent racial propaganda.

As a matter of fact, Larrazolo was a descendant of neither Spanish conqueror nor colonist of New Mexico. He was born at Allende, a small settlement in the southern part of Chihuahua, Mexico, on December 7, 1859, the son of Octaviano and Donaciana (Corral de) Larrazolo, and it was in Mexico that he spent the first eleven years of his life, though hardly cognizant of the storm that convulsed his native country during the years of the Reform and the French invasion of the Austrian Maximilian while the United States was in the throes of the Civil War.

However, Maximilian had been executed and his French minions expelled by 1870 when Larrazolo crossed the border into the United States, a protégé of the Most Reverend J. B. Salpointe, bishop of Arizona. The plastic years of his boyhood were spent in Tucson, Arizona, for it was 1875 before he accompanied Salpointe, who had been advanced to be archbishop at Santa Fé, to the capital of New Mexico, where Larrazolo had two desultory years at St. Michael's College. There he first manifested his forensic powers in class debate and declamatory contests. He returned to Tucson in 1877 to teach school, but the following year accepted the principalship of the public school at San Elizario in El Paso county, Texas. He held this position for six years, at the same time taking a keen interest in Democratic party matters which in 1885 brought him the chief deputyship in the district court and in the El Paso county clerk's office. For a time he also filled the position of clerk of the United States district and circuit courts for the El Paso branch of the western district of Texas.

He resigned in 1886 to accept the nomination on a non-partisan ticket for clerk of the thirty-fourth judicial district of Texas. He was elected, and re-elected, the latter time on the Democratic ticket. The clerkships gave him ample opportunity for qualifying himself for admission to the Texas bar and he received his certificate for admission in 1888, at the age of twenty-nine years. He was elected, and re-elected, state's attorney of the district which he had served as clerk, and it was not until after the expiration of his second term that he planned to become a citizen of New Mexico.

In 1895, at the age of thirty-six, Larrazolo moved from El Paso to Las Vegas, where he opened a law office. His oratorical gift and the friendship of Don Felix Martinez, the dominant personality of the Democratic party in northern New Mexico, soon gained him recognition and plunged him into the turmoil of partisan politics in a day when political methods in San Miguel county were a matter of bitter recrimination throughout the territory. This was during a national Democratic administration and during the term as governor of William T. Thornton, who had been appointed to that position by President Grover Cleveland. In 1896, Harvey B. Fergusson, a Democrat, was elected to congress, Larrazolo taking an active part in bringing about the Democratic victory. This put him in line for the Democratic nomination for congress in 1900, but he was defeated by Bernard S. Rodey, the Republican candidate, the latter receiving 21,557 votes against 17,857 votes for Larrazolo. The latter blamed his defeat on Democratic defection in so-called Anglo counties, where ordinarily his party rolled up heavy majorities. However, the Democrats again named him their standard bearer for congress in 1906, when William H. Andrews, a newcomer from Pennsylvania, defeated him by the narrow margin of 22,915 votes against 22,649. Almost as close was the result in 1908, when Larrazolo received 27,217 votes for congress and his Republican opponent, Andrews, 27,605. The Socialist candidate received

1,056 votes, or more than five times as many as he had two years before. This increase was ascribed to Democrats who were opposed to Larrazolo on account of his race propaganda and yet did not wish to vote for the Republican candidate. Be this as it may, there were accusations of grave irregularities at the polls and Larrazolo brought a contest for the congressional seat. As might have been expected from a Republican house, he failed in his effort to unseat Andrews. It was Andrews who in 1910 succeeded in securing the passage of the Enabling Act, which brought statehood to New Mexico.

While not a delegate to the constitutional convention, Larrazolo's influence helped to write into it strong provisions guaranteeing the rights of the Spanish-speaking voters against disfranchisement and protecting them against discrimination on account of language or racial descent. It assured the use of the Spanish language officially, together with English, for years to come. Larrazolo campaigned effectively for the adoption of the constitution, and as a result of the favorable consideration of the claims of Spanish-Americans by the Republican majority of the constitutional convention, he disavowed his allegiance to the Democratic party in a letter to William C. McDonald, then chairman of the Democratic state committee, and who was soon to be the successful Democratic candidate for the first state governor. The acquisition of the stormy petrel of race propaganda was viewed with misgiving by many Republicans and their prophecy that it would bring disaster to the party, then strongly dominant in the new state, proved apparently to be well-founded, for McDonald was elected governor by 3,000 plurality and every Spanish-American on the ticket, no matter on which side, when pitted against a so-called Anglo, was defeated.

This aroused Larrazolo to even more fervent espousal of the cause which he had made his own. Thenceforth, he gave it whole-souled allegiance, in season and out of season. Indirectly, it was his zeal which resulted in the election of a

Democrat, Ezequiél C. de Baca, to the governorship over his Republican Anglo opponent, but here again the irony of fate intervened, for De Baca died on February 18, 1917, seven weeks after his inauguration, and was succeeded by Lieutenant-Governor Washington E. Lindsey, who thus became New Mexico's war governor.

It was not until 1918, in his fifty-ninth year, that Larrazolo attained his ambition for high political office. But it was not an Anglo whom he defeated, his Democratic opponent being Felix García, who received 22,433 ballots as against 23,752 for Larrazolo. Larrazolo as post-war governor dealt intelligently and open-mindedly with problems that arose. Already his illness, which was to prove fatal eleven years later, had put its mark upon him, but he took vigorous part in the movements of the day. New Mexico shared in the post-war prosperity and while the census of 1920 did not show the phenomenal growth disclosed by the census of 1910, yet there was satisfactory increase in population and in wealth. The legislature which met early in 1919, created Hidalgo county, and with the consent of Governor Larrazolo enacted laws providing for the Girls' Welfare Home, the Child Welfare Board, and the State Health Board, progressive and important pieces of legislation which kept New Mexico in line with much older and richer states in that respect. In the fall of 1919, when a strike of coal miners threatened disturbance and destruction of property, Larrazolo handled the situation firmly. He declared martial law and called out the militia, despite furious criticism leveled at him. A special legislative session, called in 1920 to bring about tax reforms, authorized a revenue commission whose chief accomplishment was to provide a method of assessing mining property based on production.

Governor Larrazolo was an ardent advocate of the cession of the public lands to the states in which they are located. He made vigorous propaganda for this step at meetings of western governors and in Washington, but

without material result for the time being, although the question is still a live one engaging the attention of a presidential commission and of congress. He urged federal aid to farmers and stockmen when, towards the end of his administration, deflation from war prices for livestock and the effects of drouth on agriculture first became manifest.

Larrazolo failed of renomination to the governorship in 1922. In 1924 he received the Republican nomination for one of the judgeships of the state supreme court, but he was defeated at the polls. Those closest to him realized that he felt these set-backs bitterly. However, in 1928 he received the Republican nomination for the unexpired term of the late Senator A. A. Jones, a Democrat, who also had hailed from San Miguel county and who had been a most determined opponent of Larrazolo since the first statehood election. Larrazolo was elected, but his illness had made such progress that he spent only a short time at the national capital. He came home for the Christmas holidays in 1929, greatly weakened. Over the protest of his physician he made his way back to Washington early in 1930 in advocacy of his measure for a federal appropriation and a grant to found a military-industrial school in New Mexico for Spanish-American youths. It was a futile gesture and he returned to Albuquerque, a dying man. He passed away on April 7, 1930, and three days later was buried in Santa Barbara cemetery in the Duke City.

Larrazolo was twice married. His first wife was Rosalia Cobos, their marriage taking place in 1881. She died in 1891, and the year following he married María García of San Elizario, Texas. Two sons of his first marriage and four sons and a daughter from his second union comprised his family. Practically all of his mature years, Larrazolo struggled to secure financial competence. He was devoted to his family, a devout Roman Catholic, and earnest in his admonition to the young to lead exemplary lives. He was an agreeable orator, hardly profound, but with an admirable command of both English and Spanish. In later years his

voice, which had been musically sonorous, failed him often, growing husky when he attempted any lengthy flights of oratory. Larrazolo was of imposing appearance, handsome, dark eyed and black haired until advancing years turned his abundant hair snow-white. Typical of the Latin race, he was as courtly as a Spanish grandee, suave as a diplomat accustomed to the ways and wiles of the world, but always generous in his impulses and gentle in his manner. He had a certain magnetism that swayed men, especially those whom he called his own people. To others, at times, he appeared to wear a mask beneath which he successfully hid his thoughts and dissimulated his real intentions, although seeking to convey an impression of frankness and sincerity. No matter how one views it, Larrazolo made himself a place in New Mexico history which posterity cannot deny him and his influence during the plastic final territorial days and the first twenty years after the granting of statehood will be felt for some time to come.

Born in a foreign country, citizen of two other states before New Mexico adopted him as her son, he struggled through adversity and against bitter prejudices and opposition, attaining the highest political gifts in the keeping of the commonwealth. That in itself assures him a niche in New Mexico's Hall of Fame.