

10-1-1949

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Recommended Citation

Ayers, John. "A Soldier's Experience in New Mexico." *New Mexico Historical Review* 24, 4 ().
<https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmhr/vol24/iss4/2>

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NEW MEXICO HISTORICAL REVIEW

VOL. XXIV

OCTOBER, 1949

No. 4

A SOLDIER'S EXPERIENCE IN NEW MEXICO

By JOHN AYERS

Santa Fe, 1884

MAJOR JOHN AYERS was born in New York City, 1827, spent his boyhood in Boston, and went to sea at 13 years of age, round Cape Horn in the sailing vessel, *Chile*, Capt. Knowles; was with him five years trading on the coast of Peru— Followed the sea until 1849, then went to California in May 1849— Grass valley, northern mines, until the war broke out in 1861. Enlisted as a common soldier in 1861, in Company D. 1st Cav. Cal. Vol.— went down to Lower California, Los Angeles & San Bernardino. There we had skirmishes and put down the rebellion there; then were ordered to Tucson, Arizona; we fortified at Pimo villages and waited for the main column to come up. Our first engagement was at Capache Pass with Hunter's rebel pickets. There we took 4 prisoners, and from them we got information how to advance. From there we were ordered to New Mexico. Gen. Sibley, a rebel, had possession of Las Cruces, of southern N. M. From there was in skirmishes and scouts till I was told to report to Gen. Carleton in person. I acted as courier and express rider; was promoted by Gen. Carleton to 1st

The treaty negotiated with the Southern Ute Indians related to the San Juan country in southwestern Colorado, not in northwestern New Mexico. A detailed account of this affair can be found in the *NEW MEXICO HISTORICAL REVIEW*, XIII, 146ff.

The secretary of interior was Columbus Delano, not Dillnow. There is a marked discrepancy in the dates of the first two-story house in Santa Fe.—Ed.

The original of the John Ayers manuscript is in the Bancroft Library, Berkeley, Calif.—Ed.

Lt. of Co. I N. M. volunteers and attached as commander of Gen. C's escort, composed of a company stationed at Fort Marcy, Santa Fé. I was then made quartermaster and commissary and com. of. [ficer] of the post of Ft. Marcy.

When we first came the people were all dressed like those in old Mexico. They wore long hair. The business was principally done by Jews; there were but few Americans here. The foreigners were mostly gamblers and adventurers, or men of that class, and thoroughly in sympathy with the south.

The Plaza was then an open market place, an open square, where they sold wood or held market and corralled burros. The old Palace was dilapidated, and the west end broken down. Governor Conley [Connelly] lived there; he was married to a Mexican. The place was also used for the meeting of the Legislature, Assembly, Superior Court etc.

Santa Fé was the headquarters of the army; many troops at different times rendezvoused here. I got permission from Gen. Carleton to open up Capitol St. and set out trees. There were then but eight trees, (cottonwood) in the place. After opening the street, I conceived the idea of beautifying the town, and of enclosing the Plaza and planting trees there; so I employed troops to get trees and do the work, and got up a subscription from the citizens to fence it in. I was the instigator of it all. This was in 1866.

Old Fort Marcy, built by Gen. Kearney was here; which made the place army headquarters. The war was a great blessing for these natives. The people were then a great deal like the present Pueblos; they raised sheep and goat, the lower class, in Santa Fé, then as they do to-day; they would have perhaps half an acre of land, and raise corn and chili, and ponchee;(?) [punche] (their tobacco). Their goats would provide them with milk and cheese; they would grind their corn on a tenati(?) [metate], sometimes boiling it in goats milk, other times using it without milk, the same as the Indians; the lower classes were all peons to the higher. There were probably not more than 500 or 700 rich Mexicans in the territory. They were able to read and write; some were educated in the east; their hair was short, their

dress and appearance that of the Spanish gentleman. The lower class, and in fact all, more or less were intermixed with Indian blood.

I look upon Lincoln as a second Christ almost; his proclamation freeing the slaves was a greater boon to these enslaved Mexicans, than even to the negroes. Our troops were here and the people gave up their peons; the courts were open and the law enforced when necessary. As soon as they were emancipated, they were enlisted into three regiments of New Mexico volunteers. There were about 4500 in all; their hair was cut and dress Americanized. The Secretary of the Interior has all the particulars concerning the Mexican militia.

This was the principle upon which peonage was conducted. For instance if a peon wanted shoes worth \$2.00 he would be peoned for debt; the wealthier class always looking out to keep him in debt. From the natural lay of the land people held ranches of great extent. The lower classes made little villages around the ground of the lord of these estates, for protection from Indians, the raising of cattle and sheep etc. They made their money by selling the hides of the steers, and the wool of the sheep which was of very coarse quality. These peons, when liberated, had no idea what to charge for anything; they would generally say "pay what you please"; even now they will put an extravagant price on their merchan[di]se or charge, if in need of a little money, ridiculously little.

By their laws, in earlier days, their peons could be bought [brought?] back, if they ran away. They could punish them in any way; it was worse than slavery, for slaves had a mercantile value, while if a peon died his place was at once filled with no loss but the small debt he was working out; slaves too, were generally clothed by their masters, while these peons wore little or nothing; their masters cared for nothing but the work got out of them.

When we came, the northern troops, we paid money for what we took and gave receipts, but the Texans took all they could get and gave nothing in return; naturally the Mexicans preferred the party that should protect them.

When I first came, the lower class were married generally by the alcalde, and married for three or six months if they so desired. The Mexican clergy of course could not marry, but lived openly with their mistresses. They had all the superstitions of the Indians; had their penatentes or scourgings etc.

Within three weeks, a woman was beaten to death as a witch in Rio Riva [Arriba] county.

War was the principle cause of the start in the progression of the people; another was the Catholic church sending Bishop Lamy here; he displaced the Mexican with priests of his own selection. In this way he did a great deal of good. The priests were so corrupt when he came that the people were naturally very immoral; the bishops went through the penatente business, stripping themselves and beating themselves with thongs; superstitions had so worked themselves for generations with their religion. Since Bishop Lamy's rule the Mexicans through the territory are very much changed and wonderfully improved; he has made an immense change for the better.

The mails were brought in at intervals of five or six months; in 1866 they came in monthly. We put the country under martial law, and had a provost marshal until 1865; then the civil authorities appointed in Washington, took control.

The 1st Regiment was commanded by Kit Carson. He was quiet and unassuming; of medium height and weight; he could scarcely read or write but had wonderful influence over the men. He was a genuine frontiersman and a splendid Indian commander. The troops sometimes accused him of cowardice because he was so cautious. His experience enabled him to read character readily; on the march he would never build fires if he wanted to surprise the enemy; he would creep up cautiously; he whipped the Navajoes; he was a long time in New Mexico.

Most of the California troops were mustered out here, and a great many settled here and married Mexicans; especially in Grant county. The Californians were the first to commence mining here; the Mexicans and Indians had tra-

ditions against mining. Long ago the Jesuits and Mexicans had enslaved all Indians; then there had been a revolt and they had driven all Spaniards out of the country. The result of it all was that most of our men who settled on the Gila river, were murdered by degrees, in isolated spots.

I have been in many Indian skirmishes; generally they were surprises. After the war I was made the first agent of the southern Apaches in 1867. Later I was made agent of the Capote and Wimminoche Utes of Northern [New] Mexico.

The American people like humbug as a duck does water. They won't believe the truth. There is so much interest used in Washington to get big appropriations, and the estimates needed are greatly exaggerated; the Indians meanwhile are decreasing at the rate of 10 per ct. annually. The school business and all is mere humbug; to use money for other purposes than that designated. They, the Indians, take all our vices and none of our virtues. The Board of Presbyterians make out wonderful stories of conversions, when there are in reality no conversions. The Catholics are the only ones who impress them with their ceremonials etc. This appeals to the eye; it is something they can understand; it reminds them of their medicine man when they see the priests dressed in their robes. Among the Navajoes there are many Catholics; they are found now with beads and crosses. They have degenerated through the use of whiskey and disease.

I was agent when the treaty was made to buy San Juan Country. The Indians they were to treat with didn't live there, but some 300, perhaps merely hunted in that territory. They were reported as numbering 700. The treaty of selling the San Juan Country was made without one Indian being present, unless I except one renegade; not one of my men were present. The compensation was to be, one cow valued at not less than \$30.00, and one bull valued at not less than \$20.00 for each family. These animals were in truth bought in Texas at \$3.00 a head; cattle then was very cheap there; then they were driven to Colorado and issued on paper. There were none of my Indians present at that issue. I came

to Santa Fé to the Superintendent of Indian Affairs, Gallegos. He gave me authority to call together all the Ute chiefs to Santa Fé; we held council in the hall of legislature. Gen. Geo. Getty was in command of the department at that time and all federal officers stationed here understood the whole thing. By order of the department, all communications have to go through the regular channel, or they will not be noticed; that is through the agent to the Superintendent, through the Supt. to the Commissioner of Indian affairs in Washington. The report was received in Washington and pigeon-holed, and I was told I would be better known by my masterly inactivity. In 1868 I was removed by Gov. Hunt.

I found afterward that this same Governor Hunt and Secretary of the Interior Dillnow and all of these men were in this fraud, which laid the foundation of their present fortune.

I have seen old letters and documents 300 years old, used to put up tea in; and this is how it happened. After the rebellion, Governor Pyle was appointed to that position. He had been a former chaplain in the army; came in with Bond as Secretary. Of course all the archives were in his charge. Secretary Bond was made librarian; he found everything upside down; seeing many old papers lying around he thought it would be a good idea to sell this waste paper to the grocers and butchers. Thousands of these documents were sold before it was realized what was being done. Then as one after another began to notice the wrappers about their groceries and meat, public indignation was excited and every effort was made to collect and restore these papers; but of course much more was lost than recovered. Probably many of the fraudulent grants were gotten up on these papers. After this more care was observed, and the papers were filed; what are left are in care of the Librarian, Mr. Ellison. As soon as this great mistake was discovered the governor hastened to retrieve his blunder; he dismissed Secretary Bond, though Bond protested that what he did was under authority from the governor.

By the Guadalupe Treaty, Mexicans were accepted as American citizens; they were to be protected in all their

rights. There had been no survey of property; the alcaldes were generally ignorant, and they had given the people pieces of paper on which they stated that such and such a person being good and poor and wanting a piece of land to support his wife and family, the alcalde had given him a piece of land, commencing at a certain hill and running down to a certain ravine. In years after as the shrewd Americans came here, he bought papers for little or nothing from different heirs, and then would change those boundaries from the original small figures to immense grants from 15 to 30 miles square, as his conscience would allow him to stretch it.

Some of these grants have been confirmed by Congress, but thousands are not confirmed. All the testimony has to be oral as the people are unable to read and write; they are gradually dying off and these grants, in consequence, more easily confirmed. This difficulty about titles has been and is a great curse to New Mexico.

As an illustration: I took up a piece of land 3 miles from Santa Fé; after improving it, I was informed that it was on the Gonzales grant. Knowing that it was bought from Gonzales by a Jew for a grocery bill, I knew it had been enlarged to a 30 miles fraud, I took means to have it reported to Washington in 1879. The surveyor general called a court of enquiry and found the grant was enlarged; pronounced it open; and now is; has not been surveyed since.

The first two-story house built in Santa Fé, was built by Mr. Johnson in 1875; he was in the overland freight business. This freight company had large ox teams called schooners; they had sometimes 8 or 10 yoke of oxen, sometimes more; would take six months to make the trip from here to St. Louis and Kansas City; the latter was a grand trading point. They had here adobe ware-houses. The streets were filled with ox-teams loaded; the people made a mistake in not insisting upon the main road of the railroad coming through here; they thought the branch road would give us preferred rates. Freight was then 10 cts a lb; sometimes more, never less. The Jews had the trade; goods out of date in the east and so sold cheap, were very fashionable here

and brought extravagant prices. Labor was cheap—from \$1.00 to \$1.50 per day.

I say, most emphatically, that the general progression of New Mexico commenced from the war of the rebellion. It was a curse to many but a blessing to the Mexican people. It degenerated our soldiers, but elevated the Mexicans.

Prior to 1867 all the houses were built of adobe and dirt roofs which were nice and cool in pleasant weather, but in any continuous rain or storm leaked badly. The first modern houses with pitched roofs were built at the post of Fort Marcy, by government, for officers quarter in 1868.

To show how isolated these people were even as late as 1864 and 1865, there were hardly any glass windows. Even in Santa Fé among the natives only the rich had small windows, or openings for windows were made and in the summer left open and in winter a piece of cotton cloth or what they call manta was nailed up or pegged in them; the more wealthy classes in the pueblos had mica windows which some still have to this day.

The first two-story house was built by James H. Johnson in 1868. That building is now the present post-office building. Most of the other improvements have been made since the advent of the Railroad. All the history prior to the rebellion can be got from Mr. Ellison, from whom Judge Prince and Mr. Ritch who have written up some history since they have been here, got from him.