

7-1-1970

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Robert W. Larson

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Recommended Citation

Larson, Robert W.. "The Profile of a New Mexico Progressive." *New Mexico Historical Review* 45, 3 ().
<https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmhr/vol45/iss3/5>

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THE PROFILE OF A NEW MEXICO PROGRESSIVE

ROBERT W. LARSON

IN HIS HISTORY of New Mexico, Professor Warren Beck wrote that the state "may be in the United States but is not of the United States."¹ He employed this familiar but appropriate expression to underscore a belief widely held by students of New Mexico's rich history that the political development of this state is unlike that of any other. Its unparalleled nature is primarily the result of a large Hispano population, which even now comprises about twenty-eight per cent of the total.² The cultural composition of New Mexico's people is not only highly relevant to the state's history in general, but also will have a bearing on this analysis of New Mexico's progressive leaders in an attempt to ascertain whether their prime motivations were ideological, political, or generational.

The lively politics of the Progressive Movement in New Mexico were played out against a most interesting background. The combination of an imposing Hispano majority and the complications of territorial government, when added to the environment existing in a frontier society, provide compelling reasons why New Mexico was so slow in its achievement of basic progressive reforms.

The Spanish-speaking people of the Territory were faced from the very beginning with new and confusing institutions imported into New Mexico and imposed upon them by their American conquerors. Handicapped by a lack of language skills in English and unfamiliar with the new Anglo ways, New Mexico's native element was extremely vulnerable to economic and political exploitation by shrewd and ambitious newcomers. The acquisition of immense Spanish and Mexican land grants by clever Anglo attorneys,

during the late nineteenth century, ultimately led to the creation of the militant Alianza and to the now famous courthouse raid at Tierra Amarilla by Reies Lopez Tijerina, in 1967, in the "other June War."

The loyalty of most of these Hispanos was won by the Republican party in the post-Civil War years, resulting in a domination of New Mexico politics by a determined Old Guard leadership. Kenneth N. Owens, in a fascinating study of Western territorial politics, has called New Mexico's political structure a "no-party" system, in which party government was managed by a "coalition of local interests that cut across party lines."³ The power of these local interest groups culminated in the remarkably potent Santa Fe Ring, in which leaders of both the Republican and Democratic organizations worked together at systematically gobbling up countless acres of land originally granted to influential Hispanos. But, within the Ring itself, powerful Republicans, such as the always durable Thomas B. Catron, had the dominant influence. Because they had access to federal patronage during most of the late nineteenth century, Republicans of Catron's ilk, more frequently than Democrats, were able to distribute the political prizes so eagerly sought by native leaders for themselves and their families. Even today, the Hispano's enjoyment of local politics makes a school board election the occasion for a titanic struggle. The deeply entrenched Republican party continued to orchestrate politics in New Mexico by taking full advantage of the patronage system inherent in the territorial form of government.

A frontier environment prevailed in New Mexico well into the twentieth century. George Curry once said of another prominent leader, the genteel, Cornell-educated Herbert J. Hagerman, that he was "wholly without experience in practical politics, especially the rough-and-ready, and no-holds-barred kind prevalent in the New Mexico of the period."⁴ During the 1910 constitutional convention the colorful anti-progressive, Albert Bacon Fall, carried a gun, which in view of his quick temper so worried his wife and daughter that they sat every other day in the House Chamber in Santa Fe, where the state constitution was being written, in order

to keep an eye on him.⁵ Corruption was rampant enough to be a ready-made issue for progressive politicians.

The territorial status of New Mexico during the early years of the Progressive Movement is also a vital factor in assessing the nature of New Mexico's progressivism. Because officeholders of the Territory were appointed by the President, and territorial laws were subject to congressional review, the political independence of New Mexico was clearly limited. Governor Hagerman was more answerable to President Theodore Roosevelt and his Secretary of the Interior than to those he was supposedly serving, the people of the Territory. During the constitutional convention of 1910, President William Howard Taft effectively intervened by urging New Mexicans to adopt a "safe and sane constitution,"⁶ meaning one without provisions for direct legislation. Although ex-President Roosevelt vigorously agitated for a progressive instrument, conservatives dominated the constitutional convention and New Mexico presented to the Congress a very traditional state constitution, except for its rigid safeguards of the political rights of Spanish-speaking citizens. Arizona's liberal constitution with its provisions for initiative, referendum and recall, and even recall of judges, stood in sharp contrast to New Mexico's.⁷

It was only natural that the ideas of the Progressive Movement first appeared in New Mexico as a reaction to Republican dominance. Politicians of a progressive stripe were almost always opponents of "bossism," and they often devoted their campaigns to an assault on the Republican Old Guard. Attention was also given to the evils of corruption, albeit with more wariness because of its apparent acceptance by many New Mexicans. The purchase of votes by small sums of money, usually used for liquor, was so open and widespread that even the shrewd progressive leader, Bronson M. Cutting, felt he could arouse no public outcry against it.⁸

WITHIN this setting of a frontier territory inhabited by so many citizens of Spanish extraction, the careers of four leading Republican progressives will be examined. Miguel A. Otero, Herbert J.

Hagerman, George Curry, and Bronson M. Cutting were among the most prominent Republican reformers in New Mexico. There were, of course, progressive leaders among the Democrats, Harvey B. Fergusson, former Territorial Delegate and two-term congressman, being one of the purest, most ideologically committed progressives in the state's history. But the study undertaken here will purposely limit itself to Roosevelt-type Republican progressives.

Otero was the first Republican politician to openly challenge the power of the Old Guard. Appointed the first Hispano governor of the territory in 1897, the proud, thirty-eight-year-old native of San Miguel County led a generational struggle against the Republican leaders, being particularly determined to free himself from Catron's dominating influence. In the course of his struggle against the party establishment, Otero and his supporters soon acquired the appropriate nickname "Colts." It must be noted, however, that a good many of the prominent Colts became conservative party leaders once Otero had established himself as the new Republican leader.⁹ Holm O. Bursum, a friend of Otero and the Republican leader of Socorro County, eventually assumed Catron's role as the spokesman for party conservatism in New Mexico.¹⁰

As governor, Otero warred so vigorously against politicians he considered corrupt and prone to bossism that even President Roosevelt, the national progressive leader, became alarmed at the growth of party disharmony in New Mexico. Otero's removal of Frank A. Hubbell, wealthy sheep owner and assessor of Bernalillo County, who was besieged by charges of favoring certain Albuquerque merchants in his assessments, triggered a major political crisis in the Territory which compelled the pragmatic Roosevelt to force Otero's resignation.¹¹ Although the self-righteous Otero resented the President's action, he later supported him in his 1912 Bull Moose campaign to regain the presidency. Otero and Curry signed the call for the formation of a Progressive party in New Mexico,¹² and Otero was subsequently elected state chairman of the party.¹³ The slightly-built native leader had hoped several months earlier to be nominated as candidate for the new state's first governorship,¹⁴ but

a new crop of conservatives now dominated the Republican party and Bursum was nominated instead.

Otero was certainly far from being a radical in his thinking. Indeed, he prided himself on the many good friends he had made in big business during his governorship.¹⁵ But then Roosevelt progressivism had always attempted to maintain friendly contacts with the business community. Otero's strength was, rather, an unusual commitment to upright and efficient government for a politician from frontier New Mexico. And, of course, it was Roosevelt's concern with the consequences of Otero's divisive actions and their possible effect on the national party situation that caused the President to call a halt to Otero's determined political house cleaning. In the Territory, however, the numerous detractors of the "little Governor," as Otero was often called, could only see self-serving political motives in his actions. "Oteroism" to them was bossism in reverse, to borrow an overworked term from the civil rights controversy of the 1960's.¹⁶

Herbert J. Hagerman, a well educated, white Anglo-Saxon Protestant, fits the mold of the progressive leader outlined in George E. Mowry's *The California Progressives*¹⁷ more easily than does Otero. Although his father, J. J. Hagerman, was an acquisitive Western empire builder who was responsible for railroad building and irrigation development in the Pecos Valley, young Hagerman's interests were in public service, as is often the case with second-generation wealth. In 1906, Roosevelt appointed him governor of the Territory and told him to clean house, an order which Hagerman had every intention of following religiously. In the process of rooting out corruption the idealistic new governor removed Bursum as Superintendent of Prisons for an alleged mishandling of funds. This move immediately threw the Republican party of New Mexico into such disarray that Roosevelt, who had also hoped that the young governor would restore political peace in the Territory, saw no solution but to compel Hagerman's resignation on the basis of mistakes made during his short tenure.¹⁸ By this time Hagerman was so determined to vindicate himself, that he did not return to

the diplomatic service where he had had previous governmental experience, but remained in New Mexico to do battle with Bursum and the other Old Guard Republicans.

Hagerman's progressivism extended beyond the purely political issues of reform. He and Santa Fe attorney Richard H. Hanna, a progressive Republican who later ran unsuccessfully as a Democrat for the governorship and the United States Senate,¹⁹ both opposed the 1910 constitution with its weak provisions for corporate regulation and difficult amending procedure. Hagerman and Hanna joined progressive Democrats such as Fergusson in lobbying in Congress against the conservative constitution.²⁰ When the newly admitted state held its first elections, Hagerman and Hanna fused with the Democrats, calling themselves "Progressive Republicans," and brought about the defeat of Holm Bursum in his bid for the governorship.

The progressivism of Governor Hagerman appears to have had a broader ideological base than did Otero's but like the "little Governor" he too was motivated by strong generational factors, being only thirty-four years old at the time of his appointment as governor. Moreover his ego was as big as Otero's, even if his aspirations for political power were not quite as evident. After President Roosevelt forced him to resign he had a book privately printed to present his side of the case, particularly as it concerned his conduct in the land fraud case involving the controversial Pennsylvania Development Company.²¹

George Curry was older than Otero and Hagerman when he was appointed territorial governor by Theodore Roosevelt in 1907. The forty-six-year-old former Rough Rider, a great pal of Roosevelt's, never became anti-establishment and had lifelong friendships with Bursum and Fall. Yet, largely because of his admiration for Roosevelt, Curry became a good progressive governor. Following a dispute with Gifford Pinchot, Roosevelt's Chief Forester, he was converted to the administration's conservation program and established a conservation record quite remarkable for a Western governor.²² A strong believer in direct democracy, Curry, nineteen months after he left the governorship, had the courage to break with his friends,

in 1911, and support the controversial Blue Ballot amendment, which would have liberalized the amending procedure for the new state constitution, even though it very nearly cost him his nomination for the House of Representatives. When Roosevelt bolted the Republican party in 1912, Curry, who was serving in the House along with Fergusson, became the first member of Congress to come out openly in favor of the ex-President.²³

Governor Curry was a different breed of progressive than Otero, Hagerman, and Cutting. Older, lacking in formal education, and very much a product of the frontier, Curry was never too concerned about corruption and bossism, because his friends allegedly were the corrupted politicians and bosses themselves. He was like his idol, President Roosevelt, in his pragmatic approach to politics, even agitating in the tradition of the tireless T. R. for military preparedness on the eve of World War I.²⁴

Of the four Republican progressives being considered here Bronson Cutting emerges as the most interesting and complex. Born into a wealthy, aristocratic New York family, the scholarly Cutting arrived in New Mexico in 1910 at the age of twenty-four. A tubercular, the idealistic and strong-willed New Yorker had to lead a retiring life at first, but in 1912 he purchased the *Santa Fe New Mexican* and quickly his editorial policies became an important force in New Mexico politics. Liberal in his views, he was a quiet member of the Progressive Republican League, but became publicly identified with the reform cause when he was elected treasurer of the state Progressive party in 1912 and later served as chairman from 1914 to 1916.²⁵

Cutting was an uncompromising foe of bossism and corruption and conducted an almost uninterrupted crusade against the Old Guard, even employing the William J. Burns Detective Agency which secretly placed a dictaphone in Bursum's room to gather information about Republican "gang activities."²⁶ He refused to support Bursum and Frank Hubbell in their bids for the governorship and the United States Senate, in 1916, and his refusal led to a break with Roosevelt, despite the fact that Cutting had only recently backed his friend for the presidential nomination of the national

Progressive party. Earlier, when Roosevelt was campaigning in New Mexico for Charles Evans Hughes, the Republican standard-bearer, he had wanted party unity from the state on up, but Cutting would only support the national ticket.²⁷ Cutting's willingness to break with his party with very little hesitation, the most distinct characteristic of his twenty-three-year political career, accomplished not only the eventual undoing of the Republican Old Guard, but probably brought about, as much as anything else, the end of the party's dominant role in New Mexico during the thirties.²⁸

Cutting is vulnerable to the charge that he thirsted for political power; his party switching and his inability to work with progressive-minded associates for any length of time seem to connote a strong personal ambition. His refusal to support the election code of Governor Arthur J. Hannett, in 1926, even though it was in harmony with the progressive emphasis on clean, honest electoral procedure, is revealing, especially when one considers that his main support was from Spanish-speaking people who opposed the code.²⁹ Nevertheless, this youthful political renegade remained liberal as he advanced into middle age, being among those progressive leaders who supported the New Deal, a definite minority according to Otis L. Graham's detailed study.³⁰

The political careers of the four leaders provide some intriguing insights into the motivations of the New Mexico progressive. Three of the four were relatively young men, but youth is traditionally more willing to accept new and progressive ideas. Even so several of Governor Otero's Colts rather predictably went on to become leaders of the party's Old Guard. Each of the four was a personally motivated political animal; George Curry, the most pragmatic and typically New Mexican in a political sense, was an almost perpetual officeseeker.³¹

Their ideological beliefs strongly centered around the political aspects of progressivism. Corruption in government and bossism dwarfed the other burning concerns associated with national progressivism. Otero, Hagerman, and Cutting broke with Roosevelt over how to best cope with these two serious and, unfortunately, all too typical New Mexican problems. The old political bosses were

men schooled in the tough post-Civil War generation of laissez-faire economics and politics. Many of the younger men who came to New Mexico around the turn of the century regarded as reprehensible the loose ethics they saw in business and government, and the shrewd manipulation of native New Mexicans for selfish political goals. To strike hard at boss rule became the great passion of progressive politicians in New Mexico, leaving direct legislation and conservation for secondary consideration. Business monopoly and consumer and worker welfare, the really "gut issues" of the movement, which were so important to urban America, were given almost cursory attention in New Mexico.

It is possible that in attempting to reform government, the four leaders examined, Cutting and Hagerman in particular, were exhibiting a keener political sense than the Catrons and Bursums of New Mexico. Around the turn of the century the composition of the Territory's population was changing. By 1900, twenty per cent of the inhabitants claimed birth in another state, this figure rising to thirty-nine per cent in 1910.³² New Mexico was becoming increasingly Americanized, and shrewd politicians did not have to exercise much imagination to see that a distinctly Anglo political morality was rising proportionately. The isolation of a frontier society no longer protected the Territory from outside influences. New ideas were continually coming into New Mexico along with new citizens, a process only accelerated when statehood was achieved in 1912.

The New Mexico progressive, thus, appears to have had strong personal and political reasons for being a reformer. The happy combination, so characteristic of American politics, of a good cause united with personal ambition in the hoary tradition of enlightened self-interest seems to have worked well in boss-ridden New Mexico. Although the Old Guard did cling tenaciously to its power, the progressive was able to use political reform to slowly, but forcefully, intrude himself into positions where he could better the political environment to at least a modest degree.

NOTES

1. Warren A. Beck, *New Mexico: A History of Four Centuries* (Albuquerque, 1962), p. 296.
2. According to the 1960 census, 28.3 per cent of the population was composed of people with Spanish surnames. U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Population Characteristics of Selected Ethnic Groups in Five Southwestern States*, 1968, p. 11. For an analysis of population characteristics, growth, and shifts within the state since 1900, and the political impact of these factors, see Jack E. Holmes, *Politics in New Mexico* (Albuquerque, 1967), pp. 9-16 and *passim*.
3. Professor Owens expounded this thesis in a paper entitled "Pattern and Structure in Western Territorial Politics," which was delivered before the Conference on the History of the Territories held in Washington, D.C., November 3-4, 1969.
4. George Curry, *George Curry, 1861-1947: An Autobiography*, ed. H. B. Hening (Albuquerque, 1958), p. 193.
5. Robert W. Larson, *New Mexico's Quest for Statehood, 1846-1912* (Albuquerque, 1968), p. 278.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 274.
7. Arizona, *Constitution*, art. iv, secs. 2 and 3; art. viii, secs. 1 and 5 as cited in *Arizona Code* (Indianapolis, 1939), vol. 1, p. 153. For an analysis of the Taft-Roosevelt feud as it involved the statehood question see Robert W. Larson, "Taft, Roosevelt, and New Mexico Statehood," *Mid-America: An Historical Review*, vol. 45 (1963), pp. 99-114.
8. Patricia Cadigan Armstrong, *A Portrait of Bronson Cutting Through His Papers, 1910-1927*. Publications of the Division of Government Research, No. 57, University of New Mexico (Albuquerque, 1959), p. 13.
9. Miguel A. Otero, *My Nine Years as Governor of the Territory of New Mexico*, ed. Marion Dargan (Albuquerque, 1940), vol. 2, pp. 146-49, 194. Otero lists his friends and his enemies, most of whom were supporters of Catron, in this interesting autobiography. Among the Colts named by Otero are such prominent New Mexico politicians as Holm O. Bursum, Solomon Luna, William H. H. Llewellyn, and Charles A. Spiess, men who became leaders of the party's Old Guard during the twentieth century.
10. Howard R. Lamar regards Bursum as the head of a new Santa Fe Ring reconstituted for a new century. *The Far Southwest, 1846-1912: A Territorial History* (New Haven, 1966), p. 496.
11. Curry, pp. 191-92.
12. Theodore Roosevelt to Alford Warren Cooley, July 10, 1912. Elting Morison, ed., *The Letters of Theodore Roosevelt* (Cambridge, Mass., 1952), vol. 7, p. 575. Roosevelt, in this letter, was particularly happy that

Curry's name would go on the call, undoubtedly aware of the former governor's great popularity in New Mexico politics.

13. Curry, p. 270.

14. Armstrong, p. 4.

15. Larson, *New Mexico's Quest for Statehood*, pp. 198, 346.

16. Catron accused the "little Governor" of heading his own ring. See Otero, p. 197. The term Oteroism was used to characterize the governor's administration in a pamphlet entitled "Cogent Reasons for Statehood," which was enclosed in a letter from Albert J. Beveridge to Miguel A. Otero, December 19, 1902, located in the Miguel A. Otero Papers, Special Collections Division, University of New Mexico Library, Albuquerque.

17. George E. Mowry, *The California Progressives* (Berkeley, 1952).

18. Larson, *New Mexico's Quest for Statehood*, p. 292.

19. Curry, pp. 288, 293; Holmes, pp. 158, 179.

20. Larson, *New Mexico's Quest for Statehood*, p. 292.

21. Copies of this especially interesting book, entitled *A Statement in Regard to Certain Matters Concerning the Governorship and Political Affairs in New Mexico in 1906-1907* and printed privately in 1908, are found in the Herbert J. Hagerman Papers, State Records Center and Archives, Santa Fe; Special Collections Division, University of New Mexico Library, Albuquerque; and Private Papers Given to the National Archives, Social and Economic Branch, National Archives, Records Group 316, Washington, D.C.

22. A detailed analysis of Curry's conservation record is included in a paper, "George Curry of New Mexico: Territorial Governor in a Changing Era," delivered by the writer at the Conference on the History of the Territories held in Washington, D.C., November 3-4, 1969.

23. Curry, pp. 257-59, 269-70.

24. *Ibid.*, pp. 272-75. Interestingly enough, Curry told Roosevelt that he was utterly disgusted with Bursum's nomination for the governorship in 1911, even though he later became Bursum's private secretary, and his autobiography is full of praise for him. Probably Curry made the unfavorable remark about his friend in order to please Roosevelt, being well aware of the former President's suspicions regarding Old Guard Republican politicians. See Roosevelt to Cutting, June 14, 1912, as quoted in Morison, vol. 7, pp. 561-62.

25. Armstrong, pp. 9, 11.

26. *Ibid.*, pp. 12-13, 17. Cutting had a very low opinion of the leaders of the Republican Old Guard. In a December 11, 1911, letter to James Roger Addison found in the Bronson Cutting Papers, Division of Manuscripts, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., Cutting called Catron the "most unscrupulous man in the Southwest" and Fall the most dangerous one.

27. Cutting explained his position to Roosevelt in two telegrams, one dated November 4, 1916, the other undated, both of which are quoted in Armstrong, pp. 24-25.

28. Curry claims that Cutting "virtually controlled every New Mexico election result from 1916 to his death in 1935." Curry, p. 272. One eminent New Mexico historian has compared the years just prior to Cutting's death in an air crash with the turbulent decade of the 1850's in New Mexico, because of the sharp divisiveness caused by Cutting's unpredictable political maneuvers. Frank D. Reeve, *History of New Mexico* (New York, 1961), vol. 2, p. 362.

29. Provisions of the code, which called for personal re-registration every six years and uniform ballot boxes, are listed and discussed in G. L. Seligmann, Jr., "The Political Career of Senator Bronson M. Cutting" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Dept. of History, University of Arizona, 1967), pp. 59-60.

30. Otis L. Graham, Jr., *An Encore for Reform: The Old Progressives and the New Deal* (New York, 1967). Unfortunately, of the 105 progressive leaders selected by Graham for an analysis of their views on the New Deal, none of the four New Mexico leaders studied in this paper, including the very prominent Cutting, were examined. The omission provides yet another example of the neglect of Western political themes by historians studying national movements. Many New Mexico progressives deserted Cutting when he became a supporter of the much more fundamental reforms of the New Deal. Otero, however, continued his support, probably because Cutting was subsidizing him in the writing of his autobiography. See Seligmann, pp. 63-64.

31. Prior to being appointed governor, Curry's friend, Major William H. H. Llewellyn, was seeking two minor government posts in New Mexico for him, a rather familiar pattern in Curry's political career. See Robert W. Larson, "Ballinger Vs. Rough Rider George Curry: The Other Feud," *New Mexico Historical Review*, vol. 43 (1968), pp. 276, 288.

32. Holmes, p. 9.