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MANUEL ARMIJO'S FAMILY HISTORY

JANET Lecompte

There is no more persistent or perverse legend than that of the humble birth and infamous youth of Manuel Armijo, New Mexico's last Mexican governor. The story started while Armijo was at the height of his power; it has been printed and reprinted these hundred and thirty years with scarcely a skeptic dissent.¹ The legend seems to have been set down first by George Wilkins Kendall, in sketches written for the *New Orleans Picayune* in 1842. In 1844 Kendall gathered the sketches into a book, his best-selling *Narrative of the Texan Santa Fe Expedition*.² Here Kendall devoted a page and a half to Armijo's beginnings; his birth near Albuquerque of low and disreputable parents, his early pilfering of neighbor's sheep, his later extensive larcenies which, along with good luck at *monte*, led to his considerable wealth and his learning to read and write.

Many years later, James J. Webb, a Santa Fe trader who knew Armijo, described him as a self-made man who had taught himself to read a Catholic primer as he herded sheep, and to do sums with a soft stone on the knees of his buckskin breeches.³ There are other versions of Armijo's early life, some of them different enough to suggest an independent source, but all adhering to the basic story that he was born poor and of obscure family and rose to wealth through stealing sheep.⁴

The story must have had its genesis among the Americans in New Mexico—the Santa Fe traders—and its nonsense must have been so patent that no contemporary native of New Mexico, even Armijo, bothered to refute it. A statement of Kendall's suggests

that Armijo himself propagated the tale, boasting to his friends of the ewe he stole and sold back to "Old Chavez" fourteen times.⁵ Perhaps the story started as Armijo's joke and was swallowed whole by the gullible and fascinated Americans.

In point of fact, Manuel Armijo was a member in good standing of both the Armijo and Chávez families, of which that keen observer George F. Ruxton wrote in 1848, "the families of Armijo, Chávez, Perea and Ortiz are par excellence the *ricos* of New Mexico."⁶ Governor Armijo was born in 1790 according to the 1850 census of New Mexico where, in January 1851, he gave his age as sixty and his wife Trinidad's as forty-five.⁷ His wife's full name was María Trinidad Gabaldón, as is shown in his will of December 1853.⁸ Evidence of his birth, such as baptismal records, is missing, along with other records of the parish of Belen for that period. So we turn to *The Origins of New Mexico Families*, a distinguished piece of research by Fray Angelico Chavez, whose knowledge of parish registers and other archives of New Mexico is unsurpassed. Fray Angelico has located the names of Manuel Armijo's parents in a document dated 1819 in which Manuel Armijo, son of Don Vicente Armijo and Doña María Bárbara Chávez, asked to marry Trinidad Gabaldón, daughter of José Miguel Gabaldón and María Dolores Ortiz. From this starting point and with Fray Angelico's help, we can take Manuel Armijo's ancestors back through the centuries to their arrival in New Mexico.⁹

Manuel Armijo's mother was Bárbara Casilda Durán y Chaves (the "Durán" was dropped by most of the family before the nineteenth century, and the final "s" changed to a "z"). Her great-great-great grandfather was Pedro Gómez Durán y Chaves, native of Spain, province of Estremadura, village of Valverde de Llerena where half the population is still named Chávez. Pedro Durán y Chaves was in New Mexico by 1600, a sergeant with Oñate's troops. He married Doña Isabel de Bohórquez Baca, daughter of Christóbal Baca, a captain in Oñate's troops. Doña Isabel was a lady; she owned a hacienda of her own near San Felipe Pueblo, and she knew how to write. Don Pedro was probably one of the

founders of the villa of Santa Fe in 1610, and by 1626 he was commander of all New Mexico troops.¹⁰

Don Pedro's eldest son was Don Fernando Durán y Chaves who inherited his father's *encomienda* and lost it later when he took the friars' part against the governor and was forced to flee the territory. He returned in 1646 as escort for the new governor. In 1650 and 1663 he was again in trouble for supporting the friars and was imprisoned in the Palace of the Governors. By 1669 he had died, perhaps in an Indian expedition he led in 1668.¹¹

Don Fernando's son, Don Fernando Durán y Chavez II, was a captain who fled to El Paso del Norte during the Indian rebellion of 1680 with his wife, Lucía Hurtado de Salas, and their four small children. He and his now augmented family returned with Vargas in 1693, Don Fernando leading the *entrada* into Santa Fe. He was the only Chávez to return, and thus he became the progenitor of the family in New Mexico. Shortly afterwards, he moved to his lands at Bernalillo where the family seat remained for centuries to come.¹²

Don Fernando's son Pedro was one of the founders of Albuquerque in 1706, and married Juana Montoya by whom he had ten children and five more by a second wife. One of the younger children by his first wife was Diego Antonio Durán y Chaves, who married his third cousin Juana Silva in 1740 and produced the mother of Manuel Armijo in 1755.¹³

In 1769, Bárbara Casilda Durán y Chaves, aged fourteen, was married to her neighbor Vicente Ferrer Armijo, aged thirty-four, the marriage doubtless arranged by their parents. Seven of the groom's eleven brothers and sisters also married members of the Chávez family, several of them Bárbara's brothers and sisters. This extensive intermarrying between the families continued for generations, even though the Armijo family was not quite as rich or prominent.¹⁴

The first of the New Mexico Armijos was Vicente's great-grandfather José de Armijo, who was persuaded to emigrate to New Mexico from his native Zacatecas in May 1695, with his wife Catalina Durán and their four sons, who all added their

mother's name to their patronym. The fourth son was Vicente Ferrer Durán y Armijo who in 1703 married half-Indian María de Apodaca. María's mother, Juana de Apodaca, had been captured as a girl by Indians and had borne María while a captive. When Juana was finally rescued, María was baptized, with Governor Vargas as godfather.¹⁵ The Indian admixture may have accounted for Manuel Armijo's swarthy complexion, described as "a shade or two darker than the dubious and varying Spanish."¹⁶

At his death, Vicente Durán y Armijo left a comfortable estate to his three sons.¹⁷ The second son was Salvador Manuel de Armijo who married Francisca Alfonsa Lucero y Godoy in Santa Fe in 1734. In his will, dated 1764, Salvador Manuel described himself as a poor soldier who by hard work had acquired a plenty of worldly goods at Albuquerque and had raised twelve children. The eldest child, born in 1735, was Vicente Ferrer Armijo, father of Manuel Armijo.¹⁸

By 1790 Vicente Ferrer Armijo and his wife Bárbara were living at the Plaza de San Antonio in Albuquerque where the census described him as a stockman, lieutenant in the militia, and father of seven children. The census does not name the children, but Fray Angelico discovered that one was Juan, married to Rosalía Ortega, another was Manuel, married to Trinidad Gabaldón, and a third was Isadora, married to Jesús María Chávez.¹⁹

Once and for all, Fray Angelico's research has demolished the tradition of Manuel Armijo's "low and disreputable" parents. Instead they were members of two of the great landowning families of the Rio Abajo whose houses were adobe fortresses and whose acres, tended by peons, spread out in irrigated fields along the Rio Grande below Albuquerque. Francisco Xavier Chávez, from whom Armijo was supposed to have stolen sheep, was his distant cousin and related to him by scores of intermarriages.

But, someone will rightfully argue, Manuel Armijo's relationship to the Chávez family does not make it impossible that he would steal sheep from them, if he were that kind of rascal. Nor does his relationship to the Armijos make it impossible that he grew up illiterate in a poverty-stricken household, a stunted twig

on the family tree. Let us investigate Manuel Armijo's status in his youth, as revealed in the records of the county where he grew to manhood.

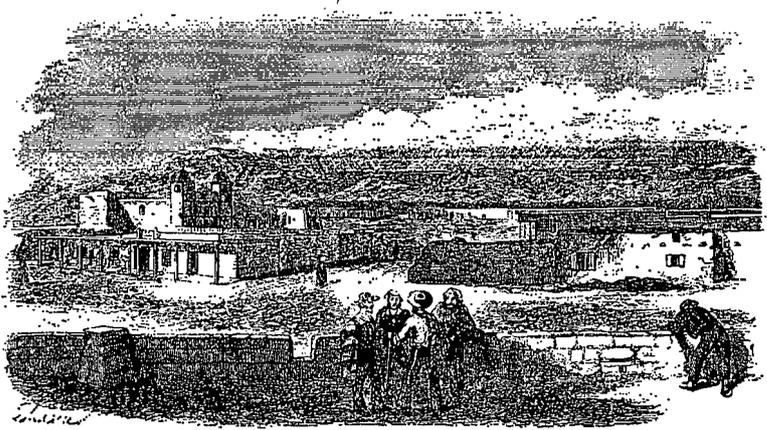
The records of Bernalillo County for the first three decades of the nineteenth century show unequivocally that the sons and daughters of Vicente Ferrer Armijo were far from poverty-stricken. They were all landowners, given the respectful titles of *don* and *doña* which apparently still had significance, for many others in the records were not accorded this honor. On August 23, 1805, don Francisco Armijo bought a fourth part of the land fronting on his Casa de Armijo for a fat cow, a fanega of maize and six pesos. On March 1, 1807, don Manuel Armijo made his first recorded appearance as a landowner selling Cristóbal Pacheco 110 varas of land in the Villa of Albuquerque for 110 pesos. On April 24, 1808, don Francisco Armijo bought a piece of land in Albuquerque measuring 500 varas square for 85 pesos. And on October 15, 1812, don Ambrosio Armijo mortgaged his Rancho San Antonio inherited from his parents to don Francisco Xavier Chávez for three years for the sum of 300 pesos of stamped silver at an annual interest of 15 pesos.²⁰

How do we know these men and the woman Isadora were siblings? On June 21, 1813, don Manuel Armijo and don Ambrosio Armijo appeared before the alcalde stating that they inherited from the estate of their father, don Vicente Armijo, 59 varas of land each, in the place called Jorión in the Villa of Albuquerque, as their part in the distribution made to don Vicente's children, which they now sell to their brother don Francisco Armijo for 38 pesos, 40 reales in stamped silver. The 118 varas of land they sold were bounded on the west by the Rio del Norte, on the east by the mountains, on the north by land of "their brother Juan," and on the south by land of "their sister Isadora."²¹

The public records also show that Manuel Armijo was not an isolated genius born to poverty and illiteracy who taught himself to read and write. His brothers were also literate and distinguished men. The office of alcalde of Albuquerque, which required literacy and brought no salary, was dominated by Manuel Armijo

and his brothers. Francisco held the position in 1820, Juan in 1823, Manuel in 1825, Vicente in 1827, Ambrosio in 1828, Manuel in 1830, Ambrosio in 1831 and again in 1834, and so on.²²

Manuel Armijo was not, therefore, of low and disreputable parents, and if he stole sheep, it must have been as a prank, certainly not to provide the foundation of his fortune. A determination of this fact may lead to better understanding not only of this remarkable governor but of his detractors, mainly Kendall, whose writings have undeservedly been credited as reliable sources for his biography.



NOTES

1. Erna Fergusson, a lone dissenter, said in her *New Mexico: A Pageant of Three Peoples* (New York, 1951), p. 250, that Armijo's father was one of the rich Armijos and his mother one of the even richer Chávez.

2. New York, 1844, vol. 1, pp. 346-48.

3. *Adventures in the Santa Fe Trade, 1844-1847*, ed. Ralph P. Bieber, Southwest Historical Series, vol. 1 (Glendale, Calif., 1931), pp. 87-88.

4. John Taylor Hughes, *Doniphan's Expedition* (1847) reprinted in William E. Connelley, *Doniphan's Expedition and the Conquest of New Mexico and California* (Topeka, 1907), p. 231n; William A. Keleher, *Turmoil in New Mexico, 1846-1868* (Santa Fe, 1952), p. 115; W. W. H. Davis, *El Gringo: or, New Mexico and Her People* (New York, 1857), pp. 362-63; R. E. Twitchell, *The History of the Military Occupation of the Territory of New Mexico from 1846 to 1851 by the Government of the United States* (Denver, 1909), p. 57. Among recent writers who have followed Kendall's biography of Armijo are Paul Horgan, *Great River: The Rio Grande in North American History* (New York, 1954), vol. 2, p. 573; Elliott Arnold, *The Time of the Gringo* (New York, 1953), pp. 9; 13; David Lavender, *Bent's Fort* (New York, 1954), pp. 191-92; and various editors, including Max L. Moorhead, *New Mexico's Royal Road* (Norman, 1958), p. 110n, and Stella M. Drumm, ed., *Down the Santa Fe Trail and Into Mexico: The Diary of Susan Shelby Magoffin 1846-1847* (New Haven, 1926), p. 96.

5. Kendall, vol. 1, p. 347.

6. *Adventures in Mexico and the Rocky Mountains* (New York, 1848), pp. 186-87.

7. U.S. Census, 1850. Valencia Co., N.M., Town of Limitar, #2048.

8. Keleher, pp. 114-15.

9. Chavez, *Origins of New Mexico Families in the Spanish Colonial Period* (Santa Fe, 1954), pp. 318-20.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 19.

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 19-20.

12. *Ibid.*, pp. 20-21, 160-61.

13. *Ibid.*, pp. 161-62.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 137.

15. *Ibid.*, pp. 136-37.
16. Philip St. George Cooke, *The Conquest of New Mexico and California* (Oakland, 1952), p.15.
17. Spanish Archives of New Mexico, Twitchell #26, WPA translation, State Archives and Records Center, Santa Fe.
18. Chavez, pp. 136-37.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 318.
20. Bernalillo County (N.M.) records, Book A., pp. 55-56, 65-66, 66-67, 82-83.
21. *Ibid.*, pp. 76-77.
22. *Ibid.*, Book A., pp. 52, 63, 72, 77, 79, 82, 93; Book D., pp. 207, 224.