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NEW MEXICO: SALUBRIOUS EL DORADO

KAREN D. SHANE

NEW MEXICO HAS OFTEN BEEN a focal point in the continuing search for El Dorado, the land of opportunity at the end of the rainbow. New Mexico's invaders, from the Spanish conquistadores and padres to the sunbelt immigrants four centuries later, have proclaimed it a desert of promise. None, however, has perpetuated the idea more than the health seeker. This image of New Mexico as a salubrious El Dorado has been an important determinant of the state's development throughout its history and deserves more careful attention than historians have given the subject.

New Mexico's reputation as a health seeker's paradise had significant impact on its economy and population growth only in comparatively recent times, but throughout its history visitors commented on its healthy environment. Antonio Espejo's narrative of his 1582-83 expedition to New Mexico, ostensibly to rescue Franciscan friars, noted that the people "are healthy, for no illness was heard of among them."¹

New Mexico in particular and the West in general were considered much healthier than the older, more intensively settled parts of the country.² From the post-Revolutionary movement over the Appalachians to the early nineteenth-century sweep into the Rocky Mountains, frontiersmen spread the word of the salubrity of the West.³

Brevet Captain John C. Frémont's July 1842 journal entry of his exploring expedition to the Rocky Mountains indicates "this climate has been found very favorable to the restoration of health, particularly in cases of consumption; and possibly the respiration of air so highly impregnated by aromatic plants may have some influence."⁴ The pathfinder's exploits received wide publicity and focused attention on the West.

By this time, reports of traders on the Santa Fe Trail further added to the region's image as a health seeker's paradise.⁵ Entrepreneurs and adventurers were joined at western termini by invalids eager to seek health rather than fortune. In despair over the failure of formal medicine, physicians began recommending a westward journey and health resort for their patients.

One such valetudinarian was Josiah Gregg. Although near death when he set out on the Santa Fe Trail in 1831, within a week Gregg was on his way to recovery. In fact, it turned out to be the first of eight trips the pioneer trader and early journalist of the West made to New Mexico. In his *Commerce of the Prairies*, a classic of early plains travel that did much to stimulate eastern interest in the West, he observed that "persons withered almost to mummies, are to be encountered occasionally, whose extraordinary age is only to be inferred from their recollection of certain notable events which have taken place in times far remote."⁶

W. W. H. Davis, a circuit United States Attorney for New Mexico,⁷ echoed Gregg in 1856 and noted "health seems to be the natural condition of man instead of disease, and a larger number of persons live to a great old age than in any other part of our country. . . ."⁸ Although some readers probably dismissed Davis's enthusiasm as provincial boosterism, writings like his and Gregg's helped spread the idea of New Mexico's special salubriousness through the consciousness of the literate East.⁹

It was not until the railroads reached New Mexico in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, however, that the territory could do much more than pound its chest. The coming of the railroads insured New Mexico's subsequent development. The railroad not only allowed settlement and provided markets for its minerals, crops, and livestock; it also lent legitimacy to the territory, opening the way for the influx of large numbers of Anglos to the alien land. For example, Charles P. Clever, New Mexico's delegate to Congress, was quick to include his territory's salubrity in his 1868 petition for railroad development.¹⁰

The coming of the railroad stimulated New Mexico to create in 1880 a Bureau of Immigration. The Bureau was charged with preparing and disseminating information to attract development of the territory. William G. Ritch assumed the presidency of the

Bureau in 1882 and typified its commissioners. He had been the owner-editor of a Wisconsin newspaper before his failing health forced him to New Mexico in search of a change in climate. Under the Bureau's mandate, Ritch and his compeers issued reams of propaganda designed to attract railroads, immigrants, and industries.

The Bureau's most florid exhortations dealt with the state's healthy climate. Grant County reported that "for all pulmonary complaints there is not a more congenial spot on the top of the green earth. Here you inhale the pure, fresh, lifegiving and invigorating air."¹¹ And another account boasted that Las Vegas Hot Springs, the best known of the territory's health resorts, "contains the great natural laboratory, that sends gushing from its side those hot and healing waters, limpid and pure, a nectar fit for the Gods themselves. There the halt and the infirm can come and quaff this innocent beverage."¹²

The Bureau and the railroads cooperated for their mutual gain. For example, an 1883 Bureau publication—dedicated "to those in search of health, wealth and homes"¹³—provided a map of the territory supplied by the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railway, information on railway service for mining districts, and a list of railway stations.¹⁴ And at the 1881 Territorial Fair promoted by the Bureau, blanket half fares were charged for passengers and produce.¹⁵

By the end of the nineteenth century, attempts at scientific explanation of New Mexico's salubrity were added to the generalized, and often exaggerated, claims of its boosters. New Mexico's climate, clear air, clean water, and remote location were regarded as critically important prerequisites for regaining health. The specific hypotheses set forth for New Mexico's salubrity were many and varied: an "electric atmosphere";¹⁶ the "utterly dry air keeps the skin so clear and free that the kidneys are relieved from excessive strain";¹⁷ and soil porosity.¹⁸

For these reasons and others, all at least ostensibly "scientific," New Mexico was regarded at the end of the century as a potential refuge for victims of varied diseases. But the state's reputation as a salubrious El Dorado is especially associated with one of the major disease scourges of nineteenth-century America—tuberculosis,



Patient at a cottage at Valmora, N. Mex. Photo courtesy of Dr. Carl Gellenthien.

known as the Captain of the Men of Death. This special relationship began with the American occupation in 1846. Army reports indicated virtual freedom of the soldiers from consumption or tuberculosis. In the 1870s, an Arkansas physician writing in a national journal made the sweeping conclusion that New Mexico combined "more general advantages and better climatic inducements for consumptives than any other State or Territory upon the Continent of North America."¹⁹

Added to these comments in national publications were scientific investigations carried on at the local level. John Weinzirl, a University of New Mexico bacteriologist, considered New Mexico's altitude, sunshine, and aridity essential to the cure of tuberculosis. He was convinced that the daily temperature change in the region produced a beneficial physiological stimulation.²⁰

By the end of the nineteenth century New Mexicans had set about in earnest to attract the health seekers. From the governor's office²¹ to newspaper advertisements for health resorts²² and patent medicines for cure of consumption,²³ residents promoted their territory's salubrity. When Toronto physician J. F. Danter visited the territory in 1891 as a special commissioner of the American Health Resort Association to investigate New Mexico's claim as a health resort for consumptives, he was royally entertained. The efforts of New Mexicans were not in vain, for in his report to the Association, Danter hymned the praises of the territory, claiming that New Mexico was superior to any other part of the United States or the world in helping to cure the consumptive.²⁴

In addition to the numerous camps, institutions, and undeveloped hot springs scattered over the territory, the government had established sanatoria for veterans at Fts. Stanton and Bayard.²⁵ The railroad also promoted New Mexico's best-known health resort, the Montezuma, outside Las Vegas.²⁶ But not until the turn of the century did development take place on a large scale.

Valmora Industrial Sanatorium was founded by a collective of big corporations (e.g., Marshall Field, International Harvester, American Telephone and Telegraph, Western Union, and Sears, Roebuck) in Chicago, Illinois, and St. Louis, Missouri.²⁷ Their tubercular employees were packed off to the mountain retreat twenty miles northeast of Las Vegas. The site was selected on the

basis of (1) accessibility by railroad, (2) isolation from nearby settlements, yet reasonable proximity to an established community, and (3) availability of a good water supply.

Carl H. Gellenthien was an early Valmora patient who had contracted tuberculosis while a student at the University of Illinois School of Medicine. Young Gellenthien not only recovered, but graduated from medical school and returned to Valmora in 1927 to take up practice. Dr. Gellenthien has been at Valmora for more than half a century. He is today, at eighty, in charge of the Valmora Medical Clinic, successor to the sanatorium.²⁸

A large map of the United States, which covers one wall of the clinic, is filled with red dots representing homes of the many patients Valmora has had through the years. Although Dr. Gellenthien says the map has not been kept up for thirty years, nearly every state is represented, in addition to South American and European countries.

Extant records of Valmora's early years are also sketchy. But they clearly reveal that Valmora's health seekers made a substantial impact on New Mexico's economy. Not only did Las Vegas merchants supply Valmora, but, as the following table shows, admittances for the six-year period of available records reveal the influx of out-of-state patients. Although it is impossible to determine the states of residence of the nonmembers, it may confidently be assumed that at least all employees of members were non-New Mexico residents since the member corporations were in Chicago and St. Louis.

Patients Admitted at Valmora Industrial Sanatorium²⁹

<i>Year Ending</i>	<i>Employees of Members</i>	<i>Nonmembers</i>	<i>War Risk Insurance Bureau *</i>	<i>Total</i>
3/31/18	37	68	—	105
3/31/19	52	49	6	107
3/31/20	73	52	29	154
3/31/21	61	43	30	134
3/31/22	33	41	25	99
3/31/27	20	104	—	124

*World War I veterans.

Albuquerque was also attracting its share of the health industry. St. Joseph Sanatorium, which was established in May 1902, retains admittance records covering a 10-year period, beginning with its opening. After 5 months, however, their record keeping became more lax, and they ceased listing the reason for admittance. But in the 5-month period, there were 99 admittances. The reason for admittance was listed in 64 of those cases. Of this figure, 24 (38 percent), were admitted for respiratory ailments. The "lungers" ranged in age from 19 to 53. Four were from Albuquerque, 4 did not give a residence, and the remaining 16 were out-of-state residents. All the non-New Mexicans, save one, were from states of the Mississippi River drainage and east.³⁰

Other indications of the importance attached to the health seekers' industry can be seen in an examination of Albuquerque Chamber of Commerce records. In 1917 Dr. Leroy S. Peters, head of the Publicity and Health Bureau, received approval for \$800 in Chamber funds for a year's advertising in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*.³¹

In November 1917 the Southern Baptist Tuberculosis Sanatorium Commission added to New Mexico's importance as a "health resort" when it notified the Chamber of plans to establish a sanatorium in the Southwest.³² The commission was seeking financial inducements by the city to encourage locating in Albuquerque. It was estimated that the proposed sanatorium would involve an expenditure of one million dollars in five years.³³

Although the sanatorium was not built in Albuquerque, the negotiations continued for several months and are noteworthy for the light they shed on the ends to which the city would go to acquire such an institution. At a special membership meeting of the Chamber three types of inducements were proposed: a several thousand-dollar cash bonus, land, and civic improvements (parks and better sanitation). One Chamber member estimated that 90 percent of Albuquerque families were there either directly or indirectly for health. Another estimated that the sanatorium would be a stronger asset than a factory employing 500 persons. He estimated that 200 patients at the sanatorium would spend \$75 per month each and that the monthly payroll would be \$15,000.³⁴

A review of the city directories for Albuquerque in the period 1908–1917 gives an indication why the city so eagerly sought the health seekers' industry. In addition to sanatoria and hospitals, spin-off businesses included funeral homes for those less fortunate, moving and storage companies, hotels and boarding houses, real estate agencies, and physicians and nurses. While it is true these professions would be represented in any thriving city, the figures are disproportionately high. For example, during this nine-year period, hospitals and sanatoria increased from two to nine, while today, with a population twenty-five times greater, the city has only six general hospitals, and no sanatoria.³⁵

Albuquerque was most accommodating to sanatoria. For example, the city council waived a sewer connection fee for the new Methodist Sanatorium.³⁶ And Captain Clark M. Carr who had made a trip to Washington in an attempt to secure the establishment of a recuperation camp for veterans reported that Albuquerque's chances would be materially improved if Central Avenue were made dustless and grass and flowers were grown around the camp.³⁷

The actions of the Albuquerque City Council illustrate this growing interest in health seekers. During a meeting on 5 April 1915, the council immediately and unanimously granted permission for the establishment of the Albuquerque and Cipes Sanatoria. When yet another sanatorium was proposed, Highland Park residents protested. But the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America, Plumbers' Union No. 412, and Painters' Union No. 823 joined forces in support of the sanatorium. Economics overrode the neighbors' objections, and permission was granted to erect a sanatorium provided that not less than \$9,000 be expended in the construction of the main building and that it be completed within one year.³⁸

The alacrity with which the city council acted on these requests is to be contrasted with a request the following year to establish the Booker T. Washington Memorial [*sic*] Sanatorium at Mesa Park. The city manager was charged with investigating and reporting at the next meeting.³⁹ There is no record of any follow-up. The implication is that a city that sent representatives out-of-state

recruiting health seekers⁴⁰ did not welcome enthusiastically a colony of black valetudinarians.

Although New Mexico promoted the health seekers' industry, those in this promotion effort soon realized that the majority of tuberculars could ill afford leaves of absence from earning a living to seek a climatic cure. In fact, a *Scientific American* editorial cited the frequently prohibitive expense associated with a change of climate to argue for a national health insurance program in 1915.⁴¹ Health seekers were advised not to seek a climatic cure unless they were financially able to sustain themselves for a minimum period of several months,⁴² but many came regardless of circumstances. With private care beyond the means of many invalids, church institutions frequently filled the gap.

Founded in 1912, the Methodist Sanatorium was established primarily to provide minimum cost care for tuberculosis patients. The following year, with a capacity of 14, the sanatorium was valued at \$5,000. In 1919 the sanatorium had 191 patients registered. Income from these patients, including 19 who were either treated free or at reduced rates, totaled \$35,061.42. During its twenty-fifth anniversary celebration, registered patients represented 24 states and 1 foreign country.⁴³

New Mexicans continued to welcome consumptives after the fear of contagion tempered their welcome in other areas of the Southwest.⁴⁴ In 1932 the civic council still was billing Albuquerque as "the heart of the health country," claiming its residents did not fear tuberculosis. "Every citizen knows how rarely it develops here; knows that our sunshine has an antiseptic value in the destruction of tuberculosis germs far more powerful than that of any commercial germicide."⁴⁵ And as late as 1940, a leading writer declared wryly that "for a steady, dependable income nothing quite equals TB."⁴⁶

New Mexicans were not to be disappointed in their endorsement of the health industry. For belying their motto, "a short life and a merry one,"⁴⁷ health seekers who came to "chase the cure" often remained, making significant contributions to their adopted state. Frequently well-educated, monied individuals, they included academicians, writers, politicians, and persons in the arts, profes-

sions, and businesses.⁴⁸ Others recovered quickly and returned to their homes, reinforcing New Mexico's reputation. And what of those health seekers who immigrated to New Mexico, only to die after they arrived? Boosters claimed they had not sought the state's salubrity early enough.⁴⁹

In short, attempts to meet the health seekers' needs ranged from well organized sanatoria and first-rate resorts to ad hoc individual responses. Although it is impossible to determine exactly the impact of the health seekers, clearly they were important in the development of New Mexico. Piecemeal business figures and reports reveal a far more extensive role than is associated with a state whose reputation has been often one of violent deaths rather than long lives. For a sizeable portion of the period under consideration, New Mexico, unlike other western health centers, was still looked upon with suspicion as an alien land. A poor cousin to other resort areas shrouded under the mantle of the United States, New Mexico had to scramble for recognition and development. The state lacked the diversity of California industries, for example, and was reluctant to relinquish the health business. But what New Mexicans lacked in development they more than made up for in enthusiastically perpetuating the state's image as a salubrious El Dorado.

NOTES

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2. For a survey, see John E. Baur, "The Health Seeker in the Westward Movement, 1830-1900," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 46 (June 1959): 91-110. For regional backgrounds, see Billy M. Jones, *Health-seekers in the Southwest, 1817-1900* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1967) and John E. Baur, *The Health Seekers of Southern California, 1870-1900* (San Marino, Calif.: Huntington Library, 1959).

3. John Filson, *The Discovery, Settlement, and Present State of Kentucke* (1784; reprint ed., New York: Burt Franklin, 1972), p. 21; George Frederick Augustus Ruxton, *Ruxton of the Rockies*, collected by Clyde and Mae Reed Porter, ed. LeRoy R. Hafen (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 1950), pp. 268-70.

4. J. C. Frémont, *Report of the Exploring Expeditions to the Rocky Mountains in the Year 1842, and to Oregon and North California in the Years 1843-'44* (Washington, D.C.: Blair and Rives, 1845), p. 49.

5. Daniel Drake, *Malaria in the Interior Valley of North America; a Selection by Norman D. Levine from A Systematic Treatise, Historical, Etiological, and Practical, on the Principal Diseases of the Interior Valley of North America, as They Appear in the Caucasian, African, Indian, and Esquimaux Varieties of its Population, by Daniel Drake*, ed. Norman D. Levine (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1964), p. 704.

6. Josiah Gregg, *Commerce of the Prairies*, ed. Max L. Moorhead (1844; reprint ed., Norman: University of Oklahoma, 1954), p. 105.

7. During his two and one-half-year stint in New Mexico, Davis at various times also served as secretary of the territory, acting governor, superintendent of Indian affairs, and superintendent of public buildings (Robert D. Hepler, "William Watts Hart Davis in New Mexico" [Master's thesis, University of New Mexico, 1941], p. 4).

8. W. W. H. Davis, *El Gringo; or, New Mexico and Her People* (1857; reprint ed., New York: Arno Press, 1973), p. 296.

9. Drake, *Malaria in the Interior Valley of North America*, p. 704.

10. Charles P. Clever, *New Mexico: Her Resources; Her Necessities for Railroad Communication with the Atlantic and Pacific States; Her Great Future* (Washington, D.C.: McGill and Witherow, 1868), p. 47.

11. W. H. Lawrence, *New Mexico Territorial Bureau of Immigration, Report as to Grant County* (Silver City, N. Mex.: W. Cardnell, 1881), p. 9, Territorial Archives of New Mexico (TANM), State Records Center and Archives, Santa Fe, roll 96.

12. G. W. Prichard, *Bureau of Immigration of the Territory of New Mexico, Report of San Miguel County* (Santa Fe: New Mexican Print., 1882), p. 15, TANM, roll 96.

13. William G. Ritch, *Illustrated New Mexico* (Santa Fe: New Mexican Printing and Publishing, 1883), p. iv.

14. Ritch, *Illustrated New Mexico, passim*.

15. Bureau of Immigration, *The Resources of New Mexico* (Santa Fe: New Mexican Book and Job Printing Department, 1881), p. 4.

16. Jos. S. Wilson, *Report of the Commissioner of General Land Office for the Year 1868* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1868), p. 53.

17. H. C. Burnett, ed., 1889. *New Mexico* (Las Vegas, N. Mex.: J. A. Carruth, 1889), pp. 20-21.

18. C. Edw. Magnusson, "Observations on Soil Moisture in New Mexico from the Hygienic Viewpoint," *Bulletin of the Hadley Climatological Laboratory of the University of New Mexico* 2 (December 1902): 7.

19. J. J. Jones, "New Mexico as a Health Resort for Consumptives," *Medical and Surgical Reporter* 37 (15 September 1877): 203.

20. John Weinzirl, "The Action of a High Dry Climate in the Cure of Tubercu-

losis," *Bulletin of the University of New Mexico*, biological series 2 (June 1908): 14.

21. Edmund G. Ross to Hon. Wilson Waddingham, 7 June 1888, TANM, roll 102.

22. *New Mexico News and Press*, 29 April 1882.

23. *Las Vegas Daily Optic*, 24 December 1879; *Deming Headlight*, 5 October 1888; *Albuquerque Morning Democrat*, 9 November 1889.

24. American Health Resort Association, *The South-West and New Mexico for phthisis, weak lungs, asthma, bronchitis, etc.* (Chicago: Vandercook, 1891), pp. 10-11.

25. For an account of daily sanatorium routines, see D. M. Appel, "The Army Hospital and Sanatorium for the Treatment of Pulmonary Tuberculosis, at Fort Bayard, New Mexico," *Journal of the American Medical Association* 39 (November 1902): 1373.

26. Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railway Company, *Las Vegas Hot Springs, New Mexico* (Chicago: Passenger Dept., Santa Fe Route, 1887).

27. Interview with Carl H. Gellenthien, Valmora, N. Mex., January 1979.

28. Dr. Gellenthien, a pioneer in pulmonary disease research and aviation medicine, knows more firsthand than any other living person about New Mexico's heritage as a tuberculosis haven. Gellenthien is a past state and national president of the tuberculosis association and has held high posts, including vice president, in the American Medical Association.

29. Valmora Industrial Sanatorium, untitled ledger covering 1918-1927, Valmora Medical Clinic, Valmora.

30. St. Joseph Sanatorium, *Patients' Records, May 19, 1902 to Sept. 4, 1907*, pp. 1-34, St. Joseph Hospital, Albuquerque.

31. Albuquerque Chamber of Commerce, *Minutes, July 21, 1917 to December 17, 1919*, p. 58, Albuquerque Chamber of Commerce (ACC), Albuquerque.

32. ACC, *Minutes*, p. 60.

33. ACC, *Minutes*, p. 86.

34. ACC, *Minutes*, p. 92.

35. John F. Worley, comp., *Worley's Directory of Albuquerque, New Mexico, 1908-1909* (Dallas: John F. Worley Directory, 1908), pp. 285, 301; John F. Worley, comp., *Albuquerque City Directory, 1917* (Dallas: John F. Worley Directory, 1917), pp. 434, 460.

36. City of Albuquerque, *Record, April 12, 1917 to December 3, 1917*, p. 98, City Hall, Albuquerque.

37. ACC, *Minutes*, p. 76.

38. City of Albuquerque, *Record, April 27, 1914 to April 17, 1916*, 5 April 1915 Meeting, p. 7, City Hall, Albuquerque.

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41. "The Cost of Health-seeking," *Scientific American* 112 (January 1915): 78.

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44. "Consumptives Unwelcome in Texas," *Journal of the American Medical Association* 52 (April 1909): 1118.

45. *Sunshine and Health in Albuquerque*, pp. 3, 16.

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47. Ross Calvin, "The People of New Mexico," in *The Population of New Mexico*, Division of Research, Department of Government, No. 10 (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1947), p. 29.

48. Calvin, "The People of New Mexico," p. 36; Carey Holbrook, "Johnson Jackson Jones Plays Important Part in New Mexico Affairs," *Health City Sun*, 17 August 1934.

49. *Albuquerque Morning Journal*, 17 January 1882.