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Southwest Talks: The *New Mexico Historical Review* Interview Series

A Ninety-Year Bloom: Dr. John Porter Bloom and the Twentieth Century

JOHN PORTER BLOOM



John P. Bloom

Photograph courtesy John P. Bloom.

Interview by Darren A. Raspa, *New Mexico Historical Review* Associate Editor

The *New Mexico Historical Review* is happy to celebrate two very special ninetieth birthdays. This is our ninetieth year publishing groundbreaking scholarship on the history of New Mexico, the West, the Southwest, and the Borderlands. It is also special for another reason: this year marks the ninetieth birthday of Dr. John Porter Bloom. The son of *Review* founding editor Lansing Bloom, Dr.

John Bloom is a native New Mexican who grew up in Albuquerque and Santa Fe, but with deep family roots in Las Cruces. His grandfather, John R. McFie, was a founder of NMSU, from which his mother graduated (in 1903), attended also by many other family members. As a “public historian”—i.e., not devoted to classroom teaching—he has been involved in museum planning, editing, organizing, and archives work. At the National Archives in Washington, D.C., he was Senior Specialist for Western History for 17 years, retiring in 1981. As a co-founder of the Western History Association, he served as its Secretary-Treasurer and later President; and more recently as Secretary of the Doña Ana County Historical Society and also of the Historical Society of New Mexico. As founder of CARTA (El Camino Real Trail Association), but a reluctant leader, he recently completed two terms as CARTA Vice-President. With his wife, also a professional historian, Dr. Jo Tice Bloom, he has lived in Las Cruces since 1995.

Bloom quite literally grew up with our journal. Dr. Bloom's life is the story of a career dedicated to our shared history, spanning a majority of a century and rooted in all aspects and forms of history as a profession. Editor, professor, public historian, veteran, Dr. Bloom is one of our field's foundational figures. I had the opportunity to sit down with Bloom at last October's Western History Association (WHA) meeting in Portland, Oregon. In this, continuation of the *NMHR*'s "Southwest Talks" feature, Dr. Bloom offers a snapshot of a humble life devoted to history.

NMHR: Thank you for joining us today. To start, what was your early experience with the *Review* and what, in your opinion, has changed over the years?

BLOOM: Well, my voice has changed! Oh, boy! Going backwards! My father was a very quiet man and I had very little insight into what he was doing as I was growing up. However, one of my striking memories of my early life is going with him several times to see where the *Review* was actually printed at the print shop at the University of New Mexico (UNM). I saw them running the linotype, and it was pretty neat. A man named Fred Harvey ran the print shop. The old gym is long gone, and the print shop also—it was adjacent to the old gym. We moved near campus to 612 North University, right behind the Pike House, in 1936, so my dad's office, the whole campus, really, was in walking distance—a great advantage to the neighborhood kids and me with access to the swimming pool and tennis courts! It was very cool, and I think even for the neighborhood kids it was very cool; it was just a great location growing up. But anyway, how has it changed? In the old days it was very much a one-person operation under my father, and I'm sure under Frank Reeve, who succeeded him. Now there's a whole team. But I left for military duty during World War II, and when I returned in October 1945 my father was on his deathbed. I didn't realize this when I signed up for classes at UNM immediately when I was discharged. I had hardly unpacked my bags when a new semester started at UNM. He died at the end of that semester, in February of 1946. I did not realize how ill he really was.

NMHR: Tell us about your time during the War.

BLOOM: I was sixteen when Pearl Harbor took place—my seventeenth birthday was later that month. I didn't turn eighteen until December 30, 1942.

I volunteered for induction into the Army with a view to entering the Army Air Corps meteorology program, and it worked. So I trained, but by the time we finished, the Army decided they had more meteorologists than they could ever

have a need for, and I was shipped off to ASTP, the Army Specialized Training Program—and then that folded! So I was shipped off to the infantry. Well, I had thick glasses, I was skinny, and it was not easy for me to make friends. I didn't fit in very well . . . so they shipped me back to the Air Corps! And I wound up briefly in a cryptology unit at Elmendorf Field in Alaska, and then was assigned to be a weather observer on Annette Island near Ketchikan. I actually returned there eleven years ago to visit by float plane. So that's my Army story . . . and I ended my military career with the very high rank of corporal!

NMHR: Would you mind sharing with us how you began your academic career?

BLOOM: Well, I graduated from UNM in '47 with my B.A. degree, then went on to get my masters at George Washington University in D.C. I had gone to Washington thinking to pursue a career in the Foreign Service. We had traveled quite a bit as a family and I was intrigued by a drive to explore this possible career. I took the Foreign Service exam, passed it, took the oral exam, and I was honest with them: the crucial question they asked was what would I do if I was not offered a career in the Foreign Service. I said, "Well, I'll go off and get a Ph.D. at Emory University." Well, let's just say they didn't give me a choice! I went on to get my doctorate at Emory University with much credit to my mentor, [American Civil War historian] Bell I. Wiley. I then taught for four years at what has now become the University of Texas at El Paso. During this time I became good friends with Robert M. Utley. He was among several other special people who formed the museum design planning team at Jefferson National Expansion Memorial in St. Louis, Missouri. I joined this team and it was very interesting. The Archway had been committed and the design was completed, and there was no funding for the museum. Now, this was exactly the time when we were getting along in establishing the WHA and holding the first meeting in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

NMHR: To that end, tell us about your early role in the Western History Association.

BLOOM: Well, the WHA did not exist in 1960–61 except in our ideas and our plans. We called a conference in Santa Fe in '61, which was a great success. The WHA was formally established at our conference next year in Denver, Colorado. Regarding my National Park Service career, I was transferred back to Washington, D.C., to edit a series of historical books. And then an opening came at the National Archives to edit the *Territorial Papers of the United States*. That was too much to turn down. I ended up putting in seventeen years at the Archives.

NMHR: The Territorial Papers are absolutely monumental. Would you share with us a little about your work?

BLOOM: Clarence Carter was the originator and first editor of the series, and he was a driven man, very prominent in the field, a devil for work. He had died a couple years before. They finally decided to hire a new editor because the work was deemed very important. When I was hired there was only one other person available to assist, Harold Ryan, who was very good. We jumped right into work on Wisconsin Territory. There was some worry about the rapidly enlarged volume of records of the later territories. For Florida Territory there had been five volumes, and I was never going to get to New Mexico. Anyway, it was determined that it was not fiscally sound to continue with the program with letterpress volumes and so I took early retirement in 1980 at the age of fifty-five: I've been longer on the federal "dole" as a retiree than during my years of military and civil service!

NMHR: And all the while you were involved in the WHA?

BLOOM: Oh, yes. It started out as a small group. Naming just a few—John Alexander Carroll, Bob Utley, Oscar Winther, Ray Billington, the Jesuit priest, (John Francis) Bannon—a particular friend and a wonderful man. I think it was he who particularly promoted my election to the presidency of the WHA on the basis of my work for the first seven years as secretary treasurer. I did the work of accepting memberships, depositing the checks, keeping the records. But one of the most fun things was in planning WHA conferences! We had a local arrangements committee in every case, but everything was brand new, and a lot depended on the particulars, making arrangements with hotels, publishing the programs, and so on. For the meeting in Denver in '62, the hotel we were signed up for had a fire and at the last minute we were all transferred to another hotel! I think it was the year we went to Helena, Montana, I shared not just a room but a bed with Jack Carroll! One of the main geniuses of the WHA, Jack was. I was WHA president for 1973–1974 when we met in Rapid City, South Dakota. It was still a small organization. We'd met at Yale already, the only time we have met east of the Mississippi. That was a wonderful meeting in many ways. The historic hotel at Rapid City was very small. My wife and I had the presidential suite. The only access to the committee meeting room was through our bedroom. She expostulated on this for years. A troop of people walking through all day! But yes, I've been to every single meeting, and this is my 55th. There was one meeting where my attendance was tangential. We were living in Stockton, California. After I left the National Archives

I took a position at the University of the Pacific as the university archivist and editor of the *Pacific Historian*, which is what I was really interested in, and also headed special collections at the library. So, we were living in Stockton and the meeting was in Los Angeles. I drove down, but my wife wasn't feeling well. I went to the motel, registered, and bought tickets. That night late she called that she had to go to the hospital. The next morning I loaded up the car, took my tickets, went by the hotel, and gave my tickets to a guy from Oklahoma and explained I had to go. So my only attendance there was the opening reception and that was all. But, I registered! And that's important!

NMHR: Being involved in the organization for so long, how have you seen the WHA change over the years?

BLOOM: Well, it used to be a small group that included quite a number of people who were members of and who were interested in Westerners International. We were also intent on welcoming and involving women from the beginning where other organizations were not. This was essential. The big change I've seen is academic predominance in all aspects of WHA activities with much less participation by avocational or amateur historians. Almost the only thing that is a holdover from the early days is the tradition of providing history-related tours, the idea being to travel around to get acquainted with each conference's locale. It's good for professors to actually get out and explore the West. I think compared to other association conferences the WHA conferences are certainly one of the more welcoming.

NMHR: We see current employment trends for historians changing in recent years and the role of public history increasing. What do you see as the role of public history?

BLOOM: I think it's a growing role. And in many different areas historians are being recognized more than they were thirty, forty, fifty years ago. At the National Archives I wasn't an archivist. I was a historian. I tried to reach out to as many people and organizations as I could. I joined the Society of American Archivists and went to their meetings, I joined the American Association for State and Local History. I joined the Society for Historical Archaeology that encouraged joint endeavors between fields.

NMHR: As someone who's been in the field for decades, what avenues of research in your opinion deserve more attention?

BLOOM: There is one thing based on my experience at the National Archives for seventeen years: the neglect of post office records in the West. Some have used them, but not many. I think there's an opportunity for lots more work in the development of communities in the West. The establishment of a post office was absolutely critical. Church was first, and the stage company station second, but to get a post office . . . this gave your town status! The requirements of the US Post Office to get a post office were significant. The local citizens had to get together all types of data on their community, who lived there, the economic development, how successful the stores were, an annual gross income and so forth, their relationship with all the towns around. There is just all kinds of data in these papers where they were establishing new communities in the West. This source can feed into many different projects.

NMHR: What are some of your favorite works on the West, Southwest, or New Mexico?

BLOOM: My reading habits are very eclectic. As a matter of fact, I have a handicap as a historian because I'm a very slow reader! My wife whips through books, but I take a long time. I enjoyed David Caffey's recent *Chasing the Santa Fe Ring* (University of New Mexico Press, 2014). I really appreciated David Holtby's *Forty-Seventh Star* (University of Oklahoma Press, 2012). I loved it.

NMHR: As a resident of the state for many years, what are your thoughts on New Mexico as a place?

BLOOM: Well, it's home. And you have to love home. It's easy to love New Mexico. One thing I don't like: winds! Winds, winds, and more winds in the spring. But there's a tremendous variety of everything you could want here, and it's largely been neglected in American history, although that's thankfully changing and there's a lot of great work being done now. You spoke of me as "foundational," early on, and that was very nice, perhaps harking to my interest in historic trails. While residing in California I joined and was active in OCTA (Oregon-California Trail Association). Anticipating retirement back in New Mexico I joined SFTA (Santa Fe Trail Association) when it was founded, and soon afterwards OSTA (Old Spanish Trail Association). CARTA has filled out our New Mexican triumvirate of great historic trails—Camino Real Trail Association. With crucial support from the Historical Society of New Mexico (I was then Secretary) I was proud to be able to organize and preside over meetings leading up to CARTA's founding in 2003.

NMHR: Based on your lifetime of experience in the world of history, do you have any advice for young historians coming up in the field?

BLOOM: Follow your dreams. Find your passion. And then follow that passion.

NMHR: What's your passion right now?

BLOOM: Living! Aside from trails history, of course. You know, when you get to be in your nineties, living every day brings on new challenges.

NMHR: As the son of our founding editor, Lansing Bloom, do you have any advice for the staff of the *New Mexico Historical Review*?

BLOOM: The variety we've had in articles in the journal in recent years is very good. And we've had very good editors following my father to maintain his high standards. I think the *Review* is in truly excellent hands with Durwood Ball.

