

1-1-1992

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Recommended Citation

Nash, Gerald D.. "New Mexico in the Otero Era: Some Historical Perspectives." *New Mexico Historical Review* 67, 1 (1992). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmhr/vol67/iss1/2>

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New Mexico in the Otero Era: Some Historical Perspectives

GERALD D. NASH

It is one of the paradoxes in the history of New Mexico during the twentieth century that while the state's historical experience during these years has been incredibly rich, the historical literature about that experience, as of 1991, is incredibly sparse. In fact, at present it is virtually nonexistent. Yet in the ninety years since 1900 the state's population has grown faster than in any other comparable period, even more so than in the last 400 years. Its economy has developed in a far more complex manner than during the more than 300 years of Spanish and Mexican rule. Its society has become more diversified than it was at any previous time. Its cultural life has become more varied than in any earlier period or in any equivalent time span of ninety years. Indeed, it could be argued that in the entire span of New Mexico's rich history, the last ninety years were among the most significant in the state's total experience. But, if that point is arguable, it is clear that the history of the state in the twentieth century is important enough to be

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duly recorded by historians and by those who seek to preserve its heritage.¹

But why, it may be asked, has New Mexico's history in the twentieth century been so shamefully neglected? That is a question that does not have easy or precise answers. Yet one can make conjectures. In the first place, a lack of historical consciousness may be at work. Many New Mexicans have a clear awareness of the state's Hispanic heritage; they are reminded often of the old Native American cultures that dwell within its borders; but they do not have a very clear image of the pluralistic, multicultural and rather complex society of New Mexico in the last one hundred years. Is not the whole, however, larger than its parts?

Many New Mexicans have also held to a romantic perception of the Land of Enchantment. After all, the majority of New Mexicans in the twentieth century have been recent arrivals, immigrants from somewhere who came to New Mexico to better their situation in some way. For many of them the state represented the Great Escape, a realization of some of their dreams. They came expecting to find realization of what they hoped to find. Their perceptions of New Mexico thus embraced as much a land envisaged in their imaginations as in reality.

Such a romantic image embraced various components. At times it has included a decided anti-urban bias. Some of the migrants who came were fleeing from the large industrial cities of the East or the Pacific Coast. Their preferences were for less heavily urbanized areas not wedded directly to industry. New Mexico seemed to incorporate such a vision. At times their image also embodied guilt feelings about past treatment of natives—whether Indians or Hispanics. That often led to a rather romanticized view of their cultures that served to expiate doubts of newcomers about their own migration and reassured them that they had made the right choice in pulling up roots elsewhere. Such feelings led New Mexicans to look to the more distant rather than

1. This paper was first presented at the Conference on "New Mexico Entering the Twentieth Century," sponsored by the Maxwell Museum at the University of New Mexico, September 1989. I wish especially to thank Elaine H. Price, who organized the conference.

The exhibit featured the life and works of Miguel Antonio Otero that Cynthia Secor Welsh helped to prepare. Otero's own writings include *My Nine Years as Governor of the Territory of New Mexico, 1897-1906* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1940), and *My Life on the Frontier, 1864-1882*, 2 vols. (New York: Press of the Pioneers, 1935-1939).

more recent past because it allowed for the enshrinement of romantic views.

In addition, it must be remembered that New Mexico was also one of the last territories to be admitted to statehood. As one of the youngest states in the Union, it was understandable that its history since statehood was underdeveloped in the early years of the century because it was so new and recent. But the passage of time has placed it in a very different perspective. A hundred years of history loom large. In short, a lack of historical consciousness, a romantic tradition, and the newness of statehood have contributed to the benign neglect of New Mexico's twentieth-century experience. But the closing years of that century do afford a new opportunity for reflection, a new appreciation of New Mexico's growth during the last 100 years.

Thus, the time may be ripe to end the period of neglect and to underscore our need for knowing more about the state's history in the twentieth century. In the first place, such a history is important for what it can contribute to a sense of identity for the people of the state. To be sure, they may be aware of their own particular ethnic or cultural heritage. But the broader, collective image of the state in the twentieth century is still blurred. Such an image is needed to provide an overarching sense of identity if, indeed, the whole is larger than the parts. Such an identity can serve them well not only within the state, but can project an image to people elsewhere, whether in the United States or abroad.

A more fully developed history of New Mexico in the twentieth century would also serve to aid the policy-makers in the state. Legislators engaged in the formulation of new laws, governors planning public policy initiatives, judges engaged in handing down legal opinions, and administrators involved in the day-to-day execution of statutes and administrative regulations could find useful context and guidance in books and articles dealing with the state's development in the last 100 years.

A more fully developed historical knowledge of New Mexico in more recent times would have still other functions. It would do much to strengthen the sense of community of the people in the state. That has always been one of the primary functions of local and state history, and it is a vital one. But if at least a century of experience is undeveloped, and popular consciousness of it only dim, how can Clio perform this important service?

The prime purpose of this essay is to provide a broad context for New Mexico history in the first two decades of the twentieth century, broadly designated as the Otero era. One goal is to focus on the Big

Picture rather than on detail, in the hope that future historians will give the subject the attention it deserves. Many New Mexico writers have lavished loving attention on details to satisfy perfectly legitimate antiquarian interests. But historians also have a responsibility to provide the people of New Mexico with a sense of their historic heritage, from its beginnings to the present day.

The Otero era was significant in many ways, for New Mexico entered the twentieth century in more ways than one. These years saw a blending of the old and the new, a merging of peoples and time periods. The blending of peoples was important, of Native Americans, Hispanics, and the increasing flow of Americans. The Otero era also witnessed a confluence of the old agrarian economy of the nineteenth century with the beginnings of industry and service industries more characteristic of the years after 1900. These years also were a time of amalgamation for political institutions and styles—of the traditional *patron* system and legal institutions of the Spanish and Mexican periods with those the Americans brought. Presiding over this complex interaction of diverse cultures was Miguel Antonio Otero, the genial territorial governor of New Mexico and long-time political arbiter in the state. In his own person, part Hispanic, part American, he personified the sweeping changes that were affecting New Mexico in the twentieth century. More than most other individuals, he symbolized the old New Mexico and the new.

The people who came to New Mexico and to the West during this period were a special breed. In contrast to earlier settlers, they were middle-aged rather than young, and they were reasonably affluent rather than poor men seeking fortunes. Although their backgrounds varied, a high percentage had middle-western origins. One segment of migrants was composed of health seekers, particularly those suffering from tuberculosis or respiratory diseases. Others were retired farmers or residents of small towns who had attained some measure of success. The point to be made is that many were not just starting out in life. Hence they brought with them capital for investment and a range of entrepreneurial and other skills to build the new country to which they came. A similar type of settler went to California, Colorado, and Arizona during these same years. People like Henry L. Huntington in California, the Goldwaters in Arizona, and John Evans in Colorado personified the migration. In New Mexico the Springer family in the northern part of the state, the Ilfelds of Albuquerque, and the Hunings were among the better-known representatives of the newcomers.²

2. Gerald D. Nash, *The American West in the Twentieth Century* (Albuquerque: Uni-

This influx left an imprint on many aspects of New Mexico life. In New Mexico, they developed Albuquerque not as a central city so much as a conglomeration of suburbs reminiscent of small middle-western towns. These came to be designated as New City—as distinct from Old Town in Albuquerque. Not until 1949 were these two areas joined. The backgrounds of these new settlers led them to develop a horizontal rather than a vertical city in Albuquerque. Preferring detached homes with gardens—characteristic of middle-western towns—they eschewed the town houses and apartment complexes of older eastern cities such as Boston, New York, or Philadelphia. The architecture of these homes was decidedly eclectic Victorian or Gothic—an imitation of middle-western styles then current. Even a casual survey of neighborhoods built during these years in Albuquerque or Las Vegas, and other New Mexico towns, reflects this middle-western influence. The grid pattern they used to plan new neighborhoods they imported directly from the Middle West as well—based on patterns first stipulated by the Northwest Ordinance of 1787. This grid system—with its regular streets divided into North, South, East, and West—contrasted with the towns founded by Hispanic settlers, towns like Santa Fe, Taos, or Las Vegas, with their town squares and irregular curving streets.

The middle-western migrants also brought their cultural values with them. To a large extent, these were the values of small middle-western towns that they hoped to recreate. Being health conscious, they placed much emphasis on the establishment of hospitals—most of which were built during these years (like Presbyterian Hospital in Albuquerque). This period also was one of church building and the organizing of lodges and fraternal groups and chambers of commerce. The newcomers also emphasized the importance of education. Not only did they support creation of private schools, but they laid the foundations for a public system such as had not existed before their coming. And their concern for higher education was reflected in the establishment of a system of higher education in 1889 when the legislature approved creation of the University of New Mexico and New Mexico State University, both along middle-western models. In short, the middle-western migration of the Otero era left a deep imprint on

versity of New Mexico Press, 1977), 11–18; F. Stanley (pseud.), *The Springer, New Mexico Story* (Pantex, Texas: n.p., 1962); William J. Parish, *The Charles Ilfeld Company: A Study of the Rise and Fall of Mercantile Capitalism in New Mexico* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1961).

the mosaic of cultural influences that became a blend in New Mexico's colorful history.³

In addition, the newcomers did much to boost the economic development of New Mexico. The Otero years saw substantial expansion of business and commerce. Merchants like the Ifelds or Spiegelbergs of Santa Fe established general mercantile houses. Soon they expanded into many varied lines of business and became involved with banking and the wool trade. Construction companies such as that of Charles Lembke (founded in 1911) added to the dynamism of the building boom of these years—in building homes and tracts like the Huning addition in Albuquerque, as well as in constructing extensive new roads. Major new retailing establishments such as Kistler-Collister and Stromberg's were founded just before the First World War. This was a significant period for the flowering of business and commerce.⁴

The first two decades of the century were also notable for the rise of a tourist industry in New Mexico. In Las Vegas the Montezuma Hotel (completed in 1886) did not emerge as a major luxury hostelry as its builders hoped—perhaps to rival a hotel like the Broadmoor in Colorado Springs. But a Fred Harvey house in Las Vegas did have a reputation for many years as one of the finest eating establishments in that part of the state and drew eastern visitors. On the other hand, the Alvarado in Albuquerque (built in 1903) became the city's pride. Fred Harvey management and cuisine made it a showcase for the state and led to plans for the La Fonda in Santa Fe a few years later. There the Bishop's Lodge opened as a dude ranch in the World War I period, also providing luxury accommodations for affluent tourists. Its reputation was such that by 1922 Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover convened the Colorado River Compact Conference there at which representatives from western states signed the famous agreement to divide the waters of the Colorado River.

The Fred Harvey organization also encouraged New Mexico arts and crafts. In their newly established gift shops—located in their hotels and restaurants—they featured distinctive southwestern wares such as Indian blankets, pottery, and jewelry. Harvey was known to pay fair prices to his Indian suppliers for products of good quality and did a great deal to stimulate Native American arts and crafts as well as to provide cash income. Vacationers were also attracted by Fred Harvey

3. Marc Simmons, *Albuquerque: A Narrative History* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982).

4. The extensive Spiegelberg Papers are located in Special Collections, Zimmerman Library, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque. See also Parish, *Ifeld*.

Tours. Utilizing open luxury automobiles and Harvey guides—including at one time the well-known writer Erna Fergusson—they conducted visitors to Indian pueblos and archeological sites. The newly created Museum of New Mexico (1911) cooperated in these events. Tourists were also attracted by the hot springs of New Mexico—in Las Vegas or in Hot Springs, which were widely advertised in an age when many Americans “took the baths” for a variety of ailments.

Historic sites became another favorite destination for the increasing flow of tourists during the era. Las Vegas, after all, had been the recruiting ground for Theodore Roosevelt when he organized the Rough Riders in 1898. A few years later (1906) while visiting New Mexico and southern Colorado, he examined the ruins at Mesa Verde and was shocked to find decay and vandalism. As a result of this experience Roosevelt urged Congress to protect such sites by establishing national monuments. Congress responded in 1906, and ten years later established the National Park system that helped to make New Mexico even more attractive as a tourist haven. By 1920 tourism had developed to a degree where it provided the state with a major source of its annual income.⁵

It should be recognized that the Otero period was one of tremendous expansion of New Mexico’s agriculture. From 1880 to 1910 the value of farm products of the state grew from \$5 millions annually to \$44 millions! Most of the new farms were established in the valleys of the Rio Grande, Pecos, Canadian, and San Juan Rivers. In addition, extensive irrigation works in the southern part of the state made arid lands fruitful there. Irrigation projects in the Carlsbad area created new farmlands as early as 1887. Once the federal government began to spend large amounts of money for irrigation projects in the state they became a reality. The Newlands Act of 1902 and appropriations for the U.S. Army Engineers boosted such construction. In fact, one of the first major projects to be completed was Elephant Butte in 1915. By the time of World War I lands in southern New Mexico were producing cotton, hay, corn, and wheat. These years saw the emergence of com-

5. The story of National Monuments and National Parks is detailed in John Ise, *Our National Park Policy: A Critical History* (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1961); Fred Harvey, *The Indian and Mexican Building: Albuquerque* (n.p., n.d.); Fred Harvey, *The Indian Detour* (Chicago, Illinois: Rand McNally, 1926); Alice Marriott, *Maria, the Potter of San Ildefonso* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1948), xviii–xix; Edward B. Mann and Fred E. Harvey, *New Mexico: Land of Enchantment* (Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1955).

mercial agriculture to supplement the self-sufficient farming more characteristic of the nineteenth century.⁶

New Mexico's economy in the early twentieth century continued to be bolstered by the livestock industry. The semiarid lands of the state were well-suited for cattle raising. But between 1890 and 1910 New Mexico became the largest sheep raiser. Wool became a major export of the state. By 1920 sheep grazing declined because of problems similar to those of other western states. Preeminent were conflicts between sheep and cattle growers since sheep tended to exhaust grazing lands quickly, leaving little for cattle. If New Mexico's range wars were not as violent as those in Wyoming, the tensions between sheep and cattle men were nonetheless sufficient to lead to the demise of sheepherders.⁷

Certainly the mining industries were another major component of the state's economy during the Otero era. Most important were the Santa Rita open pit copper mines near Silver City. It should not be forgotten that with the exception of the Santa Fe Railroad, the copper mines were the state's largest employer for many decades. Along with copper, production of silver was substantial. These metals were far more valuable than coal, which was mined on a small scale near Cerrillos and especially near Raton in the northern part of the state. Altogether, commerce, tourism, agriculture, and mining grew more rapidly during the Otero years than in any previous period and tied New Mexico's economy to the nation.⁸

6. Statistics are taken from United States Census tables as collated in Leonard J. Arrington, *The Changing Structure of the Mountain West, 1850-1950* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1963), 28-63; Ira G. Clark, *Water in New Mexico: A History of Its Management and Use* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987), a masterly work. See also Julia T. Lee, Darlis Miller, and Ira G. Clark, *A Guide to Water Records of New Mexico, 1897-1983* (Las Cruces: New Mexico State University, 1986); John W. Grassham, Darlis Miller, and Ira G. Clark, *A Guide to the Elephant Butte Irrigation District Records* (Las Cruces: New Mexico State University, 1985), and Michael E. Welsh, *A Mission in the Desert: Albuquerque District, 1935-1985* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, 1985).

7. Frank H. Grubbs, "Frank Bond: Gentleman Sheepherder of Northern New Mexico 1883-1915," *New Mexico Historical Review* 35 (October 1967), 293-308; *ibid.*, 36 (April 1961), 138-58; *ibid.*, 36 (July 1961), 230-43; *ibid.*, 36 (October 1961), 274-345; *ibid.*, 37 (January 1962), 43-71. William J. Parish, ed., "Sheep Husbandry in New Mexico, 1902-1903," *ibid.*, 37 (July 1962), 201-13; *ibid.*, 37 (October 1962), 260-309; *ibid.*, 38 (January 1963), 56-77. On cattle, see Lowell H. Harrison, "Thomas Simpson Carson, New Mexico Rancher," *ibid.*, 42 (April 1967), 127-43 and Harwood P. Hinton, Jr., "John Simpson Chisum, 1877-84," 31 (July 1956), 177-205; *ibid.*, 31 (October 1956), 310-37; *ibid.*, 32 (January 1957), 53-65.

8. Clark C. Spence, "British Investment and the American Mining Frontier, 1860-

The first two decades of the twentieth century also ushered in a period of diversity in New Mexico's cultural life. Many of the newcomers were entranced by the older Indian and Hispanic cultures that they found here. Some had left the East because of dissatisfactions with urban life and industrialism. They felt alienated from the new industrial order arising in the United States and romanticized the seemingly simpler pre-industrial civilization of the Southwest. This mood was reflected by many writers of the period who pictured the region as idyllic, overlooking many of its real problems such as rural poverty, cultural conflicts, and poor health. Such was the case of Charles Lummis, a New Englander who founded a booster magazine, *The Land of Sunshine*, in Los Angeles at the turn of the century and dedicated his life to embellishment of the romantic image. Entranced with New Mexico, he wrote several glowing books about the Land of Enchantment. One of his close friends was Mary Austin who acquainted her wide audience in the United States with *The Land of Little Rain* (1903) and who later came to live in Santa Fe. New Mexico's own Erna Fergusson wrote a succession of widely read books in a similar vein. In the Otero era, she was a student at the University of New Mexico.⁹

Cultural life was enriched as well by innovations in the architecture of New Mexico. These years saw the emergence of what became known as the Pueblo Style. It was a blend of Spanish Territorial architecture with Indian Pueblo designs, modified to include American amenities such as electricity and indoor plumbing. Much of the inspiration came from Bertram Goodhue, the outstanding exponent of the Spanish Territorial style during these years, but it was John Gaw Meem in New Mexico who adopted it in New Mexico and created many distinctive structures such as the campus of the University of New Mexico.¹⁰

The Otero years are also remembered for the expansion of schools in New Mexico. With the influx of Americans the demands for edu-

1914," *ibid.*, 36 (April 1961), 121-37. Richard H. Kessel, "The Raton Coal Field: An Evolving Landscape," *ibid.*, 41 (July 1966), 231-50. See also Jim B. Pearson, *The Maxwell Land Grant* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1961), and Jim F. Heath, "A Study of the Influence of the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad Upon the Economy of New Mexico, 1878 to 1900" (master's thesis, University of New Mexico, 1955).

9. Nash, *American West*, 49-62; Edwin R. Bingham, *Charles F. Lummis* (San Marino, California: Huntington Library, 1955); Charles F. Lummis, *The Land of Poco Tiempo* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1893).

10. The standard study is Bainbridge Bunting, *John Gaw Meem: Southwestern Architect* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1983); Beatrice Chauvenet, *John Gaw Meem: Pioneer in Historic Preservation* (Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, 1985); *John Gaw Meem: Tradition and the Individual Talent* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico General Library, 1976), brochure of exhibition at Albuquerque Public Library.



Inaugural parade of Governor Miguel A. Otero, shown at San Francisco Street along the Plaza in Santa Fe, 1896. Photograph courtesy of Museum of New Mexico, negative no. 14089.

cation grew. Archbishop Lamy did much to establish a network of Catholic parochial schools while Presbyterian missionaries founded dozens of institutions such as Menaul School in Albuquerque. As noted, the bases of a system of public education were also laid during these years.¹¹

New Mexico's cultural life took on rather new dimensions with the establishment of art colonies in Taos and Santa Fe. The painters who came during the first two decades of the twentieth century—men like Robert Henri, John Sloan, Mardsden Hartley, and Andrew Dasburg—were enthralled not only by the magnificent scenery and coloration that they found, but also by the native cultures. Like the writers, they viewed these scenes and people not necessarily as they were—with a sense of realism—but through a romantic lens in which they idealized traditional societies. They painted in part what they wanted to see—a stark contrast to urban industrial America from which they had just fled.¹²

The blending of cultures so evident in the Otero period was also reflected in the state's politics. For many years New Mexico had been ruled largely by autonomous local bosses, the *patrones*. When Bronson Cutting came from the East in 1911 and bought the Santa Fe *New Mexican*, he quickly adapted to local ways and blended them with his own style, that of an American state party boss. The delegates to the convention that framed the Constitution of 1912 further blended the diverse cultures of the state in that document, for it provided for a measure of bilingualism. Moreover, they devised the state's legal system so that it incorporated the civil (Spanish) and the common (English) law and allowed for Indian legal practices as well, particularly pertaining to communal property, land, and water issues.¹³

11. Clyde R. Hardisty, "The History of Public Secondary Education in New Mexico" (master's thesis, University of New Mexico, 1949); Louis Avant, "The History of Catholic Education in New Mexico Since the American Occupation" (master's thesis, University of New Mexico, 1940); Lucius E. Buck, "An Inquiry into the History of Presbyterian Education Missions in New Mexico" (master's thesis, University of Southern California, 1949); Fred M. Bacon, "Contributions of Catholic Religious Orders to Public Education in New Mexico Since the American Occupation" (master's thesis, University of New Mexico, 1947).

12. Arrell M. Gibson, *The Santa Fe and Taos Colonies: Age of the Muses, 1900–1942* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1983); Van Deren Coke, *Taos and Santa Fe: The Artist Environment, 1882–1942* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1963); Blanche C. Grant, *When Old Trails Were New: The Story of Taos* (New York: Press of the Pioneers, 1934). See also James M. Gaither, "A Return to the Village: A Study of Santa Fe and Taos as Cultural Centers, 1900–1934" (doctoral dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1958).

13. Patricia C. Armstrong, *A Portrait of Bronson Cutting Through His Papers, 1910–*

The Otero era thus was significant in the interaction of cultures that were important in the evolution of New Mexico. These years saw the mixing of peoples, rapid economic growth, cultural development, and the fusion of Hispanic, Indian, and American political and legal systems. It could be argued that this was one of the most pivotal periods in New Mexico's long history, extending over more than three centuries. Indeed, even if viewed solely in the context of the twentieth century, it deserves recognition as one of the crucial eras in the state's development. Perhaps historians will give it the attention it deserves.

1927 (Albuquerque: Department of Government, University of New Mexico, 1959); Richard Lowitt is currently at work on a full-scale biography of Bronson M. Cutting. See also Gustav L. Seligman, "The Political Career of Senator Bronson M. Cutting" (doctoral dissertation, University of Arizona, 1967); Frank D. Reeve, *History of New Mexico*, 3 vols. (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Company, 1961), 2:362; Robert W. Larson, "The Profile of a New Mexico Progressive," *New Mexico Historical Review* 45 (July 1970), 233-44; Howard R. Lamar, *The Far Southwest, 1846-1912: A Territorial History* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1966), 495-96. See also an older study by Ernest B. Fincher, "The Spanish-Americans as a Political Factor in New Mexico, 1912-1950" (doctoral dissertation, New York University, 1950).