

10-1-1994

In Passing: Dan L. Thrapp, 1913-1994

Lynda A. Sanchez

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmhr>

Recommended Citation

Sanchez, Lynda A.. "In Passing: Dan L. Thrapp, 1913-1994." *New Mexico Historical Review* 69, 4 (1994).
<https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmhr/vol69/iss4/10>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in *New Mexico Historical Review* by an authorized editor of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact disc@unm.edu.



Dan L. Thrapp, 1913–1994. Photo courtesy of Linda Nicholl.

In Passing: Dan L. Thrapp, 1913–1994

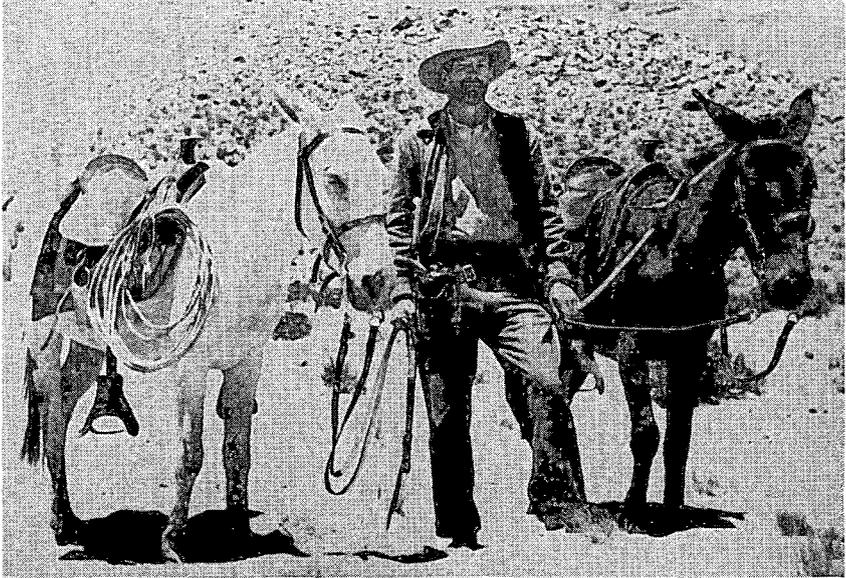
LYNDA A. SÁNCHEZ

For many readers of the *New Mexico Historical Review*, the name Dan L. Thrapp, has special meaning. He was one of the foremost authors and historians of the Southwest. He was also a friend and inspiration to innumerable authors and fans of history. Few really knew this quiet, gentle man however, and the incredible experiences he had leading up to his avocation, that of writing and researching many unknown facets of the West.

With the recent D-Day celebrations just completed, perhaps it is of interest to some that Dan was in Argentina when the news of Pearl Harbor came screaming across radio and via newspaper headlines. He had been sent by the United Press to Buenos Aires in 1940. As the horrible news of the attack came across the wires, he and an associate resigned their posts and crossed the Andes by mule to La Paz, Bolivia. From there they traveled by train and boat to the United States.

Dan immediately enlisted in the army and graduated from Officer Candidate School. He became a pack mule specialist and served with a special task force in China, India and Burma. As a result of his experiences with mules, Dan became an ardent admirer of the animal and often commented that he would take a mule over a horse any day of the week, including Sunday! Perhaps this is one reason he understood the value of the mule and the frustrations of the U. S. Cavalry during the closing days of the infamous

Lynda A. Sánchez is professor of Spanish and history at Eastern New Mexico University at Ruidoso. She has served with the Peace Corps in South America, been special assistant to the Director of the Woodrow Wilson International Center, worked as an historian at Ford's Theater in Washington, D.C., and is past president of the Lincoln County Historical Society in Lincoln, New Mexico. Professor Sánchez has co-authored one book and written more than thirty journal and magazine articles. She is currently completing a book on the Lost Apaches of Mexico.



Dan Thrapp crossing the Andes, 1941. Photo courtesy of Linda Nicholl

Apache Wars. It should be remembered that without mules, and the Apache Scouts trailing their own people, those wars would have continued long after 1886.

Born in West Chicago, his love of adventure and travel took him to many unusual locations. The summer of 1930, against the wishes of his family and with only \$30.00 in his pocket, Dan traveled by foot across the South Dakota Badlands, fought forest fires in Washington state, traveled to San Diego by hopping a train, and hiked across the Grand Canyon, rim to rim.

Thrapp began his college career at the University of Wisconsin. Fascinated with geology, history and nature, he did not really have a clear direction to a specific career. After some college, he struck out again, determined to travel through every western state. Though some undoubtedly thought he was just "bumming around," he explained that he was obtaining on-the-job-experience. During this time, he worked for a sheep ranch near Big Sandy, Montana, and on a cattle ranch near Lordsburg, New Mexico.

From 1933 to 1935 he worked for the American Museum of Natural History in vertebrate paleontology. That culminated in a five month fossil collecting expedition in 1934 in Big Horn Basin, Wyoming. He took leave from the Museum in 1935. With two pack horses he headed out into the isolated Dark Canyon country of Utah. All of this "experience" finally convinced Dan that he wanted to be a journalist. His more than a decade with United Press saw him travel to Greece to cover their bloody civil war, then

on to Italy. He freelanced into the heart of Africa, where he traveled up the Nile to Uganda, over into Kenya, Ethiopia, Tanganyika, and into the heart of an untamed Congo. He also worked in such intriguing world capitals as New York, London, Buenos Aires, Athens, and Rome.

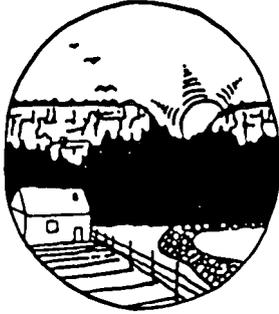
Thrapp was the Religion Editor for the *Los Angeles Times* for more than 20 years. He was deeply interested in religion and was honored many times for his unbiased reporting of this topic. He rarely spoke freely about his own life, believing it was his purpose to tell of other, more remarkable lives. The end result was more than fourteen books and innumerable articles and book reviews. Many associates, including Eve Ball and Doc Sonnichsen, regarded him as the world's foremost authority on the Apache wars of the Southwest. He wrote six books on the subject.

Among some of his classics were: *Juh: An Incredible Indian*; *Al Sieber: Chief of Scouts*; *The Conquest of Apacheria*; *General Crook and the Sierra Madre Adventure*; and *Victorio and the Mimbres Apaches*. His last major work was the monumental *Encyclopedia of Frontier Biography* published by the University of Nebraska Press. The four volume set comprises a wealth of information that profiles more than 5,500 characters.

Dan Thrapp will be sorely missed. But somehow, I can just imagine that Dan, and Eve, along with Doc Sonnichsen, Don Lavash, Ace Daklugie, Ma'am Jones, Victorio, Geronimo, Al Sieber and a variety of colorful and fascinating characters who gained immortality through their writing, are having one hell of a grand time in that special land across the shining mountains.

According to his daughter, Linda Nicholl, Dan's papers and over 4,000 books will be donated to the Haley Library in Midland, Texas. She anticipates having the collection in place within a year. At that time, the family will be hosting a reception in memory of this great historian.

The Center for Land Grant Studies Press



Announces:

Due to the enthusiastic response to our
Books and Manuscripts Catalog no. 1

1. We are extending through September the sale of books and manuscripts on New Mexico and Southwest history with an emphasis on land and water.
2. We are adding new items, including recent manuscripts and genealogies, to the catalog.
3. We are modifying our policy towards institutions such as libraries, high schools and universities. We are now accepting purchase orders.

For a free Catalog please write:

Center for Land Grant Studies Press
P. O. Box 342
Guadalupita, New Mexico 87722