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BOOK REVIEWS

The Public Domain in New Mexico 1854-1891

By

VICTOR WESTPHALL

Albuquerque: The University of New Mexico Press. 1965.

Pp. xv, 212, \$5.00

The Public Domain in New Mexico begins with the operation of the public land surveys in the state, includes chapters on the history of the various land laws, and closes with a brief chapter on the prosecutions for fraud in the eighteen-eighties and nineties. The appendix and bibliography make up nearly one-half of the book. This may be an asset with some readers (although, frankly, I doubt it) but it is also an indication of a grave lack of editorial supervision. The book bears all the markings of a virtually unrevised doctoral dissertation, including footnotes for every sentence as well as the inappropriately undigested appendix and bibliography. It is very thoroughly researched. Throughout it there is evidence of exhaustive labors and tedious search. The prose is generally clear. The organization of the book leads to some repetition, but on the whole Mr. Westphall has skillfully treaded his way through a complicated maze of material.

We hear often of the presumed need for local studies of narrowly defined topics to provide puzzle pieces to complete the greatest utopian goal ever conceived by historians, the big picture. This book is a local study with a vengeance. There is some irony then in reporting that it draws heavily on the conclusions of an honorable line of scholars, from John Wesley Powell to Walter Prescott Webb, who chose to map-in the big picture in broad brush strokes without waiting. Perhaps there is some value in documenting many of these conclusions in the New Mexico context. Certainly there will be more than a little value in the book for antiquarian buffs of the state's history. Probably law students will have cause to be grateful for the gleaning of such a storehouse of material.

There is some serious question in my mind whether it is historically viable to end a study of the public domain in New Mexico in 1891. There is nothing in the logic of the book to increase the plausibility of such a terminal point, and there are some strong reasons for viewing it as manifestly implausible. Perhaps the most

important of these is that it ends just when things are getting interesting. There is a good deal of material in this book to demonstrate how the cattleman became a potent political power in New Mexico in the nineteenth century. It would have added dimension to delve into the manner in which this power has been exercised in the twentieth century. For instance, there is some reason to believe that the progressive conservation movement which began under Theodore Roosevelt was an effort to coordinate resource use by setting priorities, which were arrived at by the technical federal administrator with the cooperation of the dominant economic groups of a given region. To what extent did the large cattleman support the new federal management of the public domain, and to what extent was it opposed by the less influential grazer? This is only one of many questions which could be asked of the relationship between the cattle companies and the public domain in the twentieth century.

Perhaps it is ungracious to criticize a different book than the one the author wrote. But the fact is, I was unable to consider this as much more than the rump of what should have been a broader study.

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