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Arch Napier

A PIKA ON THE GRASS, ALAS

We chose the yucca as our official New Mexico flower in 1927 and the roadrunner and piñon as state bird and tree in 1949. After these momentous decisions, we rested until 1955 when we selected the cut-throat trout for state fish.

This left one spot vacant in the state pantheon. A few states have official mammals, and we were prodded into a search for a suitable candidate for this post in the summer of 1962. What followed was scarcely noted at the time and is probably one of the least important chapters in New Mexico history. However, the search for a state mammal may have revealed more about our state psyche than we intended.

Choosing a totem is a very old custom, of course. When our ancestors lived fearfully in caves, they tried to ally themselves with birds and beasts of great ferocity and cunning. The development of civilization did not change this. Tribes and nations chose fierce symbols: England flaunted the lion and unicorn on its banners, and the newly-independent United States of America—after a minority vote for the turkey—selected the eagle.

Circumstances have changed since then, but the symbol remains. As our nation grows in strength, we seek to project a friendlier image around the world. Perhaps instead of a bird of prey, we should decorate our embassies with a symbol of wealth and generosity. A roast turkey, probably. This would radically change our Thanksgiving dinners, of course. We could not eat our national symbol and might have to resort to cranberry sauce and roast eagle.

One might expect that national growth would ease the need for predatory totems, but this was not the case in 1913 when the New Mexico Legislature chose a coat of arms. Its design has two eagles, and they still appear on the Great Seal (not the mammal variety) of the State of New Mexico. One is a small Mexican eagle grasping a serpent in its beak and a cactus plant in its talons. This busy, though apparently uncomfortable bird, is shown shielded by the American eagle which has outspread wings and a clutch of arrows.

Other states started with fearsome menageries on their escutcheons, too, and yet have felt in recent years that they must adopt additional critters as state symbols. Most have official flowers, birds, and even fish, but the adoption of animals is less prevalent. When the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish surveyed other states, only six official mammals were found in the forty-three states that responded to the questionnaire.

California has the grizzly bear; Colorado, the bighorn sheep; Kansas, the American buffalo; Pennsylvania, the white-tailed deer; South Dakota, the coyote; and Wisconsin, the badger.

Some states admitted unofficial symbols. Michigan wrote: "Have been called the Wolverine State but not by legislative act. No conclusive evidence that we ever had a wolverine in the state." Nevada wrote: "We have adopted the Bighorn Sheep (Desert) but it has never been named by the Legislature."

North Dakota reported "no officially designated state mammal," but added, "However, this state has the nickname of the Flickertail state, from the Richardson's Ground Squirrel or Flickertail gopher." Oregon's flag depicts the beaver, but it replied: "This animal has never been officially designated."

Some states did not take this question entirely seriously. One wrote: "Here in dear old Missouri, our favorite mammal is MAN!" However, Missouri has not adopted this species officially. Florida wrote: "There have been suggestions regarding the alligator as a state mammal, but the critter is a reptile; therefore, it cannot be the state mammal."

Meanwhile, back at the ranch, our New Mexico Game Department asked the citizens of the state for suggestions. Anabel Haas, who made the appeal in the Department's bimonthly *New Mexico Wildlife*, did not explain why the project was started or how the official mammal would be employed. So there was understandable confusion in the replies.

No one ever seems to analyze the role of a state totem. Should the creature be something ferocious to symbolize power (and perhaps scare away litterbugs and speeders) or something clever and industrious to represent growth? Should the totem be a rare beast found in few other states, or should it be a universal favorite beloved by tourists everywhere?

One citizen felt we should select a mammal on the basis of its accomplishments. Richard Vann of Albuquerque nominated the bat—which is a mammal, despite tourists who think it is a bird—and wrote: “Insect-eating bats have done their share in contributing to the development of the state. They have provided valuable guano deposits, and have aided greatly in the retardation of insect pests, and they helped the discovery of the Carlsbad Caverns.”

Another respondent favored individualism. He nominated the javelina because this “ugly little pig would fit in with the roadrunner and the yucca.” A second vote for distinctiveness and local color came from a resident who named the coatimundi with the comment: “He’s the only Mexican-speaking animal we’ve got around here.”

The horned toad got a vote, but he was rejected as a reptile.

Nominations came in for such non-natives as the camel and the aoudad or Barbary sheep. “This is the only state in which the Barbary sheep is offered to the sportsman,” the reason stated, “and he is as native to New Mexico as many hunters are.”

Squirrels were suggested as “enchanted little animals” and the mountain lion as “a fascinating creature to watch.”

In the final tally, the antelope ranked second; the mule deer and Barbary sheep close behind; then, the prairie dog, the mountain lion, and a long line of animals that included the chipmunk, elk, and wild mustang.

In first place, with fifty percent of the vote, was the black bear. Miss Haas attributed the bear’s popularity to the favorable image created by Smokey the Bear and his mate Goldie. Both are natives of the state.

The survey received most attention among hunters and the results were slanted in favor of game animals as one might expect. Yet I believe that extensive sampling of New Mexico residents might have chosen the black bear, too.

Bears have enjoyed a good press. Even in our nursery books, we are told how loveable they are. When the Game Department held this survey, a letter arrived from Sussex, England, with two votes for “the

little bear." No doubt the writer was influenced by *Winnie the Pooh* or the bears who were victimized by that young trespasser and vandal, Goldilocks.

Smokey has become a legend in his time. Rescued from a forest fire near Capitan, he was treated for burned feet in Santa Fe and sent on to Washington where he poses for fire-prevention posters, comic strips, and animated cartoons. He is dressed in a Forest Service hat and generally carries a shovel and dispenses advice in English, French, Spanish and several other non-Bear languages. Little wonder that the people of Capitan have built a museum in his honor, equipped at times with fire tools and a live bear hostess named Smokeena.

Despite this popularity, I did not feel at the time—nor do I feel now—that the bear is the proper symbol for New Mexico. The difficulty lies in the fact that when most people in the nation think about bears in the West they recall those in Yellowstone Park who sit by the side of the roads begging for handouts. Now, most of New Mexico's bears are not beggars. They are, as far as we can tell, self-reliant and noble creatures in the finest tradition of free enterprise. Yet the nation does not know this: to most people, the bear is a lazy creature looking for public handouts.

In the voting, I favored the pika or coney, a rarely seen little rock rabbit that lives on our highest mountains. It is notable for the fact that in summer it harvests grass and spreads it out on rocks to cure before it stores it away for the winter. This is the thrifty little animal that should symbolize our state.

However, the pika never received any support, not even from the New Mexico Grain and Feed Dealers Association. Perhaps any creature whose name sounds like the way a Texan pronounces "piker" has no chance.

When Representative Bill Shrecengost introduced a bill in the 1963 Legislature to name the black bear as state mammal, there was little opposition. The lawmakers avoided discussion, recalling that lesser animal topics had created greater embarrassments in the past. A decade ago, when they passed a bill to prohibit goats from wandering loose in villages—and accomplished little else that pleased the public—the session went into history as the "Goat Bill Legislature" and the members were presented with little goat-head lapel pins.

The election campaign of 1962 had been enlivened by a controversy about the angle of the state bird's tail. Governor Edwin L. Mechem had accepted a painting of a roadrunner with a tail pointed upwards.


The opposition party said that the state bird should be depicted in a running stance—with tail pointed straight back—to symbolize New Mexico's fast progress. It was one of the few interesting issues of the campaign, and Governor Mechem was defeated by Jack Campbell.

When the Legislature met, the politicians decided to treat the "black bear bill" carefully. Senators voted alternately yes and no on the matter so that Lieutenant Governor Mack Easley would have to break the tie. But before he could make it official, Senator Fabian Chavez moved to make the black bear our state mammal by unanimous vote.

Possibly the same result would have taken place if there had been more analysis of state symbols and more public discussion. In our modern society, I feel that we call on totems less and less to scare our enemies, but we need them to express our yearnings in an all-too-mechanical world. *Playboy* magazine chooses a rabbit as its totem, and cars are named after falcons, jaguars and mustangs. The advertising industry is now in a tiger phase, sensing that in our effete society consumers long for tiger qualities when buying slacks, cars, and tires. A gasoline company urges you to "Put a Tiger in Your Tank" and actually sells thousands of synthetic tiger tails that can hang out of the gas tank. One rival station had a sign that said: "We'll strain tiger hairs out of your gasoline."

What then does the black bear really symbolize? Dependent as New Mexico is on federal appropriations and out-of-state tourists, are we like the Yellowstone Park bears secretly yearning for more handouts from the rest of the nation? Or are we envious of Smokey, who is, after all, the classic example of a poor boy who got burned in his home state and found a soft job working for the government in Washington? Has anyone ever seen him really using that shovel?

Anyway, I favor the industrious pika. I voted for him, and I'm a poor loser.

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