

New Mexico Quarterly

Volume 34 | Issue 4

Article 5

1964

Pecos Dedication

Margaret Inman Meaders

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

Recommended Citation

Inman Meaders, Margaret. "Pecos Dedication." *New Mexico Quarterly* 34, 4 (1964). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq/vol34/iss4/5>

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

Margaret Inman Meaders
PECOS DEDICATION

Now it can be told. The answer to that what-is-so-rare-as-a-day-in-June bit is easy: one October day in a tiny Spanish-American village in New Mexico in 1961.

To have reported the occasion earlier would have introduced a flaw into the pristine quality of a day which remained unexploited, commercially untainted, although it was a four-star "natural" for ballyhoo and bell ringing, for luring tourists and looting purses, albeit in fairly painless and legitimate ways.

The scene lay twenty-five miles from Santa Fe, the state's tourist mecca. Only six miles away run U. S. 84 and 85 and the tracks of the Atchison, Topeka, and the Santa Fe. The honor guest was an internationally famous actress with two Oscars in her trophy cabinet and a look-alike among Marie Tussaud's waxworks elite, with a rich oilman-rancher husband and five residences—among them, a Land-of-Enchantment spread covering 20,000 acres in one of the nation's most beautiful mountain valleys in a region famous for its huge ranches and, earlier, the exploits of Apaches, padres, conquistadores, and Santa Fe-Trail wagon-masters.

What chamber of commerce could ask for more? What Entice-the-Tourist-to-Our-Local-Listings League could dream up a better mouse trap or lion pitfall? In the hours immediately preceding the event, I fully expected every hair in so golden a forelock to be seized, curled, and offered for sale to the highest bidder. Yet the event was not blemished in even the least offensive manner by either the principals or the community.

That is what made the day they dedicated the Pecos Village Greer Garson Municipal Building a day for the books, a day to be recorded on the credit side of at least one small segment of the human race, in this dog-eat-dog era of the fast buck and the blatant ulterior motive.

Consider the miracle which I witnessed and could not otherwise have believed. No banners anywhere proclaimed Pecos "The Biggest Little Burg on the Ball." No person or group tried to sell anyone anything at any price whatsoever—neither chili dogs, parking space, souvenir autographed photographs of the honored guest, reserved seats, deluxe programs, votes to cast in a beauty contest, chances in a turkey raffle, or a drawing for a lot in some Buena Vista housing development.

No marching band strutted; no floats bore the names of local emporia, spelled out in asters and chamisa plumes. There wasn't a barbecue or a church-circle lunch stand or so much as a truckload of Rocky Fords. No carnival clanked and jangled across the road or down the street toward the Forked Lighting. No rodeo erupted in dust and shrillness and jangling spurs and burnished leather. No loudspeaker coaxed us to come one, come all, and have our pockets picked and our brains bemused.

The truth is that parking space was ample—behind the small, proud, new building, between little houses, along the sides of the main (and almost the only) village street. All seats were simple folding chairs. The programs were not even printed, but mimeographed, and uncluttered by so much as one-column-inch of advertising. Although the local maidens had engaged in a precelebration hassle for certain titles of community esteem, the contest had not included either a swimsuit slither or a ramp routine in "formals."

Not so much as a six-inch platform raised the dignitaries a fraction of a cubit above the rest of us. The Lady of the day, His Honor the Mayor, the Emcee, and six or seven other Pecos personages sat on other folding chairs facing us, with only the bare, windswept, sun-baked New Mexico earth underneath. Furthermore, no one—not His Honor's señora or *chiquita*, not the tenor in a local choir, not a high-school coloratura—no one sang a solo. And, if there was a simon-pure turista there, I could not spot him or her.

Perhaps it sounds stuffy as all get-out. UnAmerican. Square. Old Hat. Hick stuff. But never anywhere else at any time have I experienced a more memorable occasion.

English was the alien language along the rambling roadways of

ancient Pecos that day. Ristras of scarlet chilies hung from vigas on outside walls of old adobe houses and were spread on rooftops and hillsides. Fall flowers and tumbleweed filled fence corners. As the day wore on, the air grew spicy with piñon smoke—surely this world's most fragrant incense. Pecos is a quiet, a serene, a tucked-away pocket of the earth, inhabited by a beautifully civilized but unsophisticated people. Therein lies the explanation of what happened (and what did not happen) on that wonderful day.

Surely, the only Pecosenos to stay away were those kept abed by something dire. All the others were certainly there, many a treasured black-lace mantilla gracing a silver-white head and framing a proud and smiling old face; many a carefully trimmed iron-gray goatee or shining black moustache lending gallantry and dash to the atmosphere; and every *chiquillo y chiquilla* looking like the best-loved item in somebody's doll collection. The smells of shoe polish and soap and hair dressings and freshly pressed pants were strong. Every eye shone with village pride and personal bliss to such an exceptional degree that now when I think of really happy people I think of the people of Pecos on that October afternoon. For me, happiness now has a locality and a particular tone—that of soft voices speaking Spanish like water flowing or speaking English with a charming *acento de España*; and it wears fiesta clothes or bargain-priced Sunday dresses and well-worn Sunday suits or lovely ancient things out of leather-bound, brass-studded chests.

The principals and the audience were still assembling when I reached the grounds and took a seat, third row center, and immediately found many things to contemplate, chief among them the rare, refreshing absence of all the whoopla and hullabaloo I had feared to find. Alongside the little building (three rooms and a garage) was drawn up a scarlet fire truck (with which Miss Garson was, in a manner of speaking, sharing top billing). Nearby were the Jailhouse Five, a local string-and-trumpet ensemble appropriately striped and capped. The truck was flanked by the eager pupils and the smiling Sisters from St. Anthony's School; behind the row of VIP chairs the narrow front door of the civic center was decorated with a very wide, very bright ribbon to be cut by Miss Garson. Before the chairs stood an unadorned lectern. Not a yard of bunting flapped anywhere. The front of the little building proudly bore—but barely accommodated—its imposing name.

I was scarcely seated when the honoree arrived—fifteen minutes

early. The manner of her coming was in complete accord with everything else that day. So easy it would have been to arrive a la Hollywood; so difficult, really, not to play the Grand Lady of the Manor. But Mr. and Mrs. E. E. ("Buddy") Fogelson drove quietly up in a dark, American-made automobile of average size. Directed by madly gesticulating, joyously functioning pro tem traffic cops, Mr. Fogelson parked. The two alighted; she walked directly to her chair and picked up her program; he joined the audience. Not a flourish. Not a glance of appraisal at anything or anyone. The lady wore a white fiesta costume trimmed in black and set off by short black beads and black earrings. No hat. Undoubtedly, many a *fond madre* thought the lady beautiful but not nearly so elegantly attired as that mother's own entrant in the contests (for "Miss Spark," the small girls; "Miss Flicker," the pre-teenagers; "Miss Flame," the debutantes).

Suddenly, the row of seats before us filled. Alcalde Paul Martínez and Emcee Canuto Meléndez (two singularly handsome and well-poised young men), a clergyman, Fire Chief Cipriano Gonzales (in his fireman's hat), a young man from the office of the State Fire Marshall, and other town officials (among them, a spare, handsome old judge)—and the ceremony was on.

St. Anthony's students raised the flag; we all sang (in varying renditions of the language in which Francis Scott Key had written it) the national anthem, with at least one of us feeling that it really should be *La Golondrina*. The clergyman addressed himself briefly to El Señor Dios. His Honor welcomed us. Señor Meléndez introduced the VIPs. Chief Gonzales, in the finest introduction I ever heard (simply, "I give you—"), presented the Fire Marshall's young man, who in turn outdid all other speakers of my experience by being seated in three minutes.

In honor of the lady, the Spanish Americans spoke English—with the help of manuscripts. Occasionally, someone lost his place; whereupon the simpatico assemblage leaned forward in unanimous and simultaneous concern until the lost was found. Thereupon, friend nodded happily to friend; soft voices murmured, "Bueno!" and "Bien!" And the interrupted remarks were resumed in that "foreign tongue" which many persons there understood almost not at all.

Then the young contestants were summoned by the lady, the winners to receive trophies (specially flown from Hollywood and as impressive as Oscars) and gifts in black-velvet boxes. First came the little Sparks, as solemn as any magistrate who sat behind them; next, the

middle-sized Flickers, giggling behind their hands; finally, the Misses Flames, painfully self-conscious, aware of everybody and everything, including their high heels and their elbow-length gloves (or lack of them), the adored lady, friends and relatives, the Jailhouse Five, and the one remaining trophy and the last black-velvet box. The guest of honor employed simple graciousness in speaking of the day, somehow making herself only the instrument through which pride in the shining truck and the spanking new civic center and all the contestants and the Village of Pecos, New Mexico, and *Dios en cielo* was expressed for every-man-Pedro of them there.

After that, Alcalde Martínez presented Miss Garson with the Village Key, hidden under an enormous bow. He, in turn, praised both Fogelsons as good neighbors and loyal and civic-minded citizens of the Valley. He did not expound; he did not wave his arms; and he did not lose his place.

Then the lady, again—this time all but outdoing Fire Chief Gonzales in brevity, yet leaving no doubt that nothing else so nice had ever happened to her. Nothing so nice, so genuine, so honestly meant and deeply felt ever happens to most of us.

Two more items before Miss Garson could cut the ribbon: "Special Mention of Thanks" (quite the most engagingly courteous phrase I ever heard or read) and a "surprise" (obviously, only so to the Fogelsons) in two acts. First, "Happy Birthday, Dear Greer," sung by St. Anthony's beaming scholars in honor of the previous day; second, the delivery of a community greeting card via a most reluctant dark-eyed *niña*, who was urged forward by all the hands that could reach her and by a chorus of soft encouragements, but who stopped with finality more than an arm's-length away from the lady and then leaned far forward in a desperate effort to deliver the mail from that point. Miss Garson herself, doing a nice spot of reaching, took the card and invited the toddler to come near enough to be kissed. Only in this one small detail were the Program Committee and the guest of honor denied complete cooperation.


When the time came to cut the ribbon, a delightful, unscheduled episode was introduced: the lady found that she had forgotten her scissors. But she was rescued from her dismaying dilemma by a proud and an eager Sister, who miraculously produced (from heaven knows where!) her own pair. The wide ribbon was cut and the narrow door was unlocked, while the audience held its breath as if a mighty feat were being accomplished. Then, with a "Bienvenidos!" the smiling

lady officially opened the Center. It was a moment of great triumph for everyone.

Inside the building, all the villagers filed by to shake hands with the Fogelsons. Often the greetings were first-name. Sometimes a family of seven or eight crowded around Miss Garson to be presented and then to have every hand shaken and every name repeated in the friendliest fashion. At one point the tall, fair actress was surrounded by very small, very young, very black-haired and black-eyed, very beautiful *muchachos*, all of whom gazed up at her raptly and silently. For the only time that day one could wish for a professional photographer.

That afternoon Greer Garson was—perhaps for the one time in her career—celebrated as a human being rather than as an Actress, or a Beauty, or a Famous Woman, or All Three at once. For a few hours (from the moment of the flag-raising through the “Dancing and Other Merriment” to music furnished *entusiásticamente* by the Jailhouse Five), she was a person instead of a personality.

An Anglo community would be hard put to it to offer such single-minded tribute, because its purpose would be less pure. But not so with the people of Pecos Village on that day in 1961. As the sweet and simple event drew to a close in the late afternoon, unblemished by any detectable human frailty, Edna Millay’s line written after hearing a Beethoven symphony seemed completely fitting: “This moment is the best the world can give.” To be sure, it was the finest that Pecos could give. And that was very fine, indeed.

 MARGARET INMAN MEADERS, currently editor for the UNM Bureau of Business Research, has published travel and feature articles in many magazines and newspapers, among them *Woman’s Day*, *Travel*, *Georgia Historical Review*, the *New York Herald Tribune*, *Colorado Quarterly* and *NMQ*. Her book, *The Indian Situation in New Mexico*, was published by the UNM Bureau of Business Research in 1963. Recipient of the New Mexico Press Women’s Annual Zia Award for distinguished writing, she also in the same year was awarded, by the National Federation of Press Women, first place for specialized magazine editing by a woman.