

## Southwest Talks

The *New Mexico Historical Review* Interview Series



RICK HENDRICKS

Interviewed by Candolin Cook

Q: How did you become interested in the history of the Southwest and Latin America?

When I was a very young reader, my grandmother gave me a book about Latin America. I recall being fascinated by the idea of Mexico City originally being built on a lake, and as I tried to imagine and investigate how that could be possible, I found the region to be a wonderland that was new and different to a boy from the mountains of western North Carolina.

As an undergraduate at the University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill, I read Samuel Shellabarger’s 1945 historical novel, *Captain from Castile*. It is not a great book as historical novels go, but it fired my curiosity and really made me want to know more about the history of Spain and colonial Mexico in the sixteenth century. The book also fueled a lifelong exploration of historical fiction as a way to study and teach history. The main character in the novel is the fictional Pedro de Vargas, a nineteen-year-old soldier in Hernán Cortés’s army during the conquest of Tenochtitlan. I find it a curious coincidence that I spent my early career working with a real life Vargas, New Mexico governor Diego de Vargas.

I turned my attention to the Southwest in a serious way when I came to UNM [the University of New Mexico] in 1979, largely because Peter Bakewell covered the northern expansion into the Southwest in his class on the history

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Dr. Rick Hendricks is the State Historian of New Mexico and an award-winning author. His most recent books are *The Casads: A Pioneer Family of the Mesilla Valley* (Rio Grande Books, 2012); and *Four Square Leagues: Pueblo Indian Land in New Mexico* (University of New Mexico Press, 2014), co-authored with Malcolm Ebright and Richard W. Hughs.

of Mexico in the colonial period. I would say that I came to the history of the area from the perspective of a Latin Americanist, and I have always considered the U.S. Southwest as the northern extension of Latin America, which has interesting implications given the demographic changes we are witnessing in the region today.

Q: You studied history at the University of North Carolina, the University of New Mexico, and the Universidad de Sevilla in Spain. Who were/are your biggest educational influences?

At Chapel Hill I was most strongly influenced by three individuals. Roberto Etchepareborda was an Argentine diplomat and historian who impressed upon me the need to be able to read primary sources in their original language. Enrique Baloyra was a Cuban exile, a political scientist who taught a memorable course on revolutionary Cuba. He cared about his students, and that meant a lot to me. It is an experience that many of my fellow students had with him.

By singling out Professors Etchepareborda and Baloyra, I in no way want to minimize the influence of the other professors of Latin American studies at Chapel Hill in the 1970s when I was there. Federico G. Gil, Joseph S. Tulchin, and John D. Martz are other leading figures I recall from that period. Only Dr. Tulchin survives from this “golden age” of Latin American studies at UNC. Finally, Anthony G. Lo Ré was a Spanish professor, friend, and mentor. He persuaded me to study at the Universidad de Sevilla, which proved a transformative experience for a variety of reasons, not least because it gave me the proficiency in Spanish that has made the work I do possible. In Sevilla I met and studied with Luis Navarro García, one of the leading Spanish historians of Spain in the New World, who was at the time Catedrático [professor] in the Sección de Historia de América. I have had occasion to visit with him there since my student days, most notably on the occasion of a visit with tribal dignitaries from Sandia Pueblo some years ago.

When I returned to Chapel Hill from Spain and finished my undergraduate degree in history, Dr. Lo Ré suggested that I attend UNM to study with Marshall Nason for my PhD. Dr. Nason and Dr. Lo Ré were old friends from their days at Louisiana State University after World War II. Dr. Nason, a distinguished professor of Spanish literature, was very important to my formation as a scholar, principally because he insisted that I know every word in every text we studied. This attention to detail has served me well in the study and translation of historical documents. He also stressed the importance of taking pride in my scholarly production if I expected anyone to take my work seriously. This is an important lesson I incorporated into my teaching and advising.

Dr. Nason directed the Ibero-American Studies PhD program, which was a very demanding interdisciplinary program combining the history of the colonial and national periods in Latin America with Spanish and Portuguese language and literature. In my mind this was the ideal preparation for the career path I chose. The biggest influence at UNM, however, was unquestionably Peter Bakewell, an exemplary researcher and writer. Dr. Bakewell sent me off to Bolivia in the summer of 1980 where I earned my stripes as a budding Latin Americanist by following in his footsteps in the archives and surviving a bloody military coup.

I would be remiss if I did not add that my colleagues at the Vargas Project, John L. Kessell and Meredith D. Dodge, taught me as much or more than any professors I studied with over the years.

Q: Your career as a historian has taken many forms: archivist, professor, author, editor, historical consultant, and, currently, State Historian of New Mexico. Do you have any advice for someone attempting to become a professional historian, particularly beyond the professoriate?

This will sound trite, but I have some rather simple suggestions. I find useful the quote attributed to the Roman philosopher Seneca: "Luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity." I always advise people to prepare as thoroughly as possible so that when opportunities present themselves, they will be ready to seize them. In my case, years of language study and practice with paleography were necessary for me to function as a competent historian of colonial Latin America. Such technical skills are a necessary complement to knowledge of the period. My first opportunity to work as a professional historian was as a paleographer and translator with the Vargas Project. As it turned out, the job was a perfect fit, but had I not been adequately prepared, I would not have been able to join that historical editing project, and the long, unorthodox trajectory of my career might have taken a very different course or gone nowhere.

I have been extremely fortunate, but I do not recommend sitting around waiting for opportunity to knock. Often times it is necessary to manufacture a chance at a job. Historic preservation is a field that requires historians, often highly specialized ones. Writing successful historical contexts for nominations to state and national registers requires considerable knowledge of federal and state regulations, highly developed research skills, careful attention to detail, and excellent writing. Getting involved in a community project to nominate historic structures is one good way to get a start in the profession. Archaeological firms contracted to do cultural resource management and mitigation work routinely need historians. Here in New Mexico, lawyers rely on historians for expert witness testimony in legal cases, particularly those relating to land

grants. Museums also require historians. Volunteering as a docent is a good way to learn about that kind of work.

Irrespective of the type of work, I believe it is crucial for historians to write well, and the only way to accomplish that is to work at it, every day if possible. I embrace the kernel of truth in two clichés: great writers are not born, they are edited, and great writers are great readers. I am not a great writer, but I work at it daily, and I am always reading books. I enjoy reviewing manuscripts for university presses and academic journals and usually have one or two going.

Q: What have you read recently that you would recommend to scholars of Southwest history?

John L. Kessel's new book, *Miera y Pacheco: A Renaissance Spaniard in Eighteenth-Century New Mexico* (University of Oklahoma Press, 2013), is perhaps his best writing. Danna A. Levin Rojo's *Return to Aztlan: Indians, Spaniards, and the Invention of Nuevo México* (University of Oklahoma Press, 2014) challenges long-held notions about the inspiration for the Spanish advance into the Southwest. David L. Caffey's *Chasing the Santa Fe Ring: Power and Privilege in Territorial New Mexico* (University of New Mexico Press, 2014) is the first book-length study of the Ring. As is so often the case, no one has tackled this controversial subject before, and now we have this book and at least two more on the same subject are in progress. Finally, Carlos Herrera, another former colleague on the Vargas Project, has a new study on Governor Juan Bautista de Anza called *Juan Bautista de Anza: The King's Governor in New Mexico*, which the University of Oklahoma Press will be publishing very soon.

Q: What do you think about the state of history focused on the U.S. Southwest/Borderlands today? Where do you see the field headed?

I am in contact with many young students of the history of the Southwest/Borderlands, and I think the field is in robust health and in very good hands indeed. The Historical Society of New Mexico, the Center for Regional Studies at UNM, and my office (Office of the State Historian) support what we call the Scholars' Program, which provides stipends for research in New Mexico archival repositories. Although not limited to young scholars, I have been heartened by the fact that dozens of students pursuing advanced degrees are focusing on practically every imaginable aspect of the history of the region. We have students from the top universities in the country doing historical research and writing on New Mexico topics all through the year, every year.

Although I have no idea where the field is headed, I can say that I have noted some trends in the way recent historiography has developed. Most of the pioneers

in New Mexico history focused on the earliest periods, the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which seems eminently logical to me. In recent years, with the notable exception of the astounding and prolific work of Richard Flint and Shirley Cushing Flint on all things related to the Coronado Expedition, there seems to me to be more of an interest in exploring the eighteenth century. The works I mentioned above by Kessell and Herrera are but two examples of this trend. This has been accompanied by renewed interest in what Pekka Hämäläinen has felicitously called the Comanche Empire. Severin Fowles, an archaeological anthropologist, is working on a study of what he refers to as Comanche imperialism in eighteenth-century New Mexico.

Q: Your most recent book, *The Casads: A Pioneer Family of the Mesilla Valley*, details the extraordinary life of Thomas Casad and his family as they made their way from Ohio to Mesilla, New Mexico. Casad eventually became one of the most powerful agriculturalists and land-owners in southern New Mexico. What did you find most surprising or intriguing about Casad's story?

I have always been something of a skeptic when it comes to the reliability of oral history and family lore. I think this is a result of being a documentary editor for almost two decades. What I found remarkable in researching and writing this book was how accurate the stories provided to me about Tom Casad by members of the extended family could be. This was a confirmation for me of the value of this kind of information. At the same time, I was also able to see how historical memory faded and mutated as the generations passed and the facts became altered in subtle but meaningful ways as the tale was told and retold. So, as a historian I would say that I have a new appreciation for such sources but retain a degree of skepticism after writing this book.

I would also say that the availability of primary source material on the Internet has truly revolutionized the way I do research. I traveled to Ohio, Illinois, Kansas, and California to gather material for this book, but I was able to do more work than I dreamed possible at my personal computer. After decades spent in front of a microfilm reader, this was a most pleasing development.

Q: What are you working on next?

Malcolm Ebright, Richard Hughes, and I completed *Four Square Leagues: Pueblo Indian Land in New Mexico*, which UNM Press has just published. Assistant State Historian Robert D. Martínez and I have a book of prenuptial investigations from the colonial period in the El Paso del Norte area that is in press. Rob and I are beginning a study of the clergy in late colonial New Mexico, which will

probably occupy us for a few years. Steve Baker, an archeologist from southwestern Colorado, and I have a book in press, a study of Juan Antonio María Rivera's two 1765 expeditions into southern Colorado. Steve has done an extensive trail and ethnographic study, and I have transcribed and translated the journals of the trips. I am also finally finishing a life-and-times study of a Spanish priest, Antonio Severo Borrajo, who lived in the U.S.-Mexico border region during the second half of the nineteenth century.

Q: Although you are a North Carolina native, you decided to make New Mexico your home. What do you love about it?

I grew up in one of the most beautiful places on earth, in the Smokey and Blue Ridge Mountains. As a youth I spent most of my time in the woods and learned the name of every tree and rock. My hometown was near the Qualla Boundary, home of the Eastern Band of the Cherokee Indians. I never expected to live anywhere else, but during college I lived in Spain and learned to love the language, people, and culture. So, even though the physical environment of New Mexico is about as different from where I came from as is possible, there were many things about my new home that were familiar. To that I would add that the tacos my mother made when I was a kid were so hot that they brought tears to my eyes, which was good preparation for the world of red and green chile. And when I needed to experience a southeastern forest, I hiked up into the Sandias, and that was close enough.

Since my arrival in New Mexico in the summer of 1979, I have been privileged to live and work in Albuquerque, Las Cruces, and now Santa Fe. I have worked at UNM and at NMSU [New Mexico State University]. I believe this gives me a different perspective on the history of the state than folks who have stayed close to home, to their *patria chica*, whether in the north, center, or south of the state. My permanent home with my family and dogs is in Las Cruces, and one day I will retire there. From my house, I have a clear view of the Organ Mountains. I know the light of Northern New Mexico is special and has attracted artists from all over the world, but the light play and rapidly changing hues on the Organs can be so stunning, so painfully beautiful that it will take your breath away. The Rio Grande is close by, and I often walk for miles and miles along the river. Even when there is no water, which has been the case for most months for the last few years, there is a stark beauty in that river as there is in much of the desert south. I have been in a thirty-five-year love affair with the history of this place, and I do not expect that to change.