

# New Mexico Historical Review

---

Volume 18 | Number 4

Article 4

---

10-1-1943

## Punche: Tobacco in New Mexico History

Leslie A. White

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

---

### Recommended Citation

White, Leslie A.. "Punche: Tobacco in New Mexico History." *New Mexico Historical Review* 18, 4 (2021).  
<https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmhr/vol18/iss4/4>

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 [amywinter@unm.edu](mailto:amywinter@unm.edu), [lsloane@salud.unm.edu](mailto:lsloane@salud.unm.edu), [sarahrk@unm.edu](mailto:sarahrk@unm.edu).

## PUNCHE: TOBACCO IN NEW MEXICO HISTORY\*

By LESLIE A. WHITE

THE distinguished anthropologist and documentary historian, Adolph F. Bandelier, declared in his *Final Report of Investigations among the Indians of the Southwestern United States*<sup>1</sup> that "tobacco was not known to the Pueblos until Spanish rule became established." Some species of *Nicotiana*, *attenuata* and *trigonophylla* particularly, are indigenous in the Pueblo country. We know from archaeological evidence<sup>2</sup> that pipes were used for smoking by the Pueblo Indians before 1540. But we do not know what was smoked in these pipes. We know from ethnographic sources that the Pueblo Indians have, in recent decades, smoked a number of wild plants, including tobacco, and it is reasonable to suppose that their ancestors in pre-Spanish times might have done likewise. Thus our evidence indicates that the Pueblo Indians smoked pipes in prehistoric times, and they *may* have smoked wild tobacco in them along with various other wild plants.<sup>3</sup> But no evidence whatever points to a prehistoric cultivation of tobacco. It is significant that the chronicles of the Coronado expedition make no mention either of tobacco or of smoking among the Pueblos. But let us turn now to the "other end" of the history of tobacco in the Southwest, i.e., to recent times.

In 1934, I collected a specimen of tobacco under cultivation at Ranchitos, the farming settlement of the Santa Ana

---

\*I am greatly obliged to Professor Arthur S. Aiton and Professor Irving A. Leonard, both of the University of Michigan, for reading this paper in manuscript and for helpful suggestions.

1. Papers of the Archaeological Institute of America, p. 37 (Amer. Series III, 1890).

2. Mr. Volney H. Jones, of the Museum of Anthropology, University of Michigan, summarizes the evidence of smoking in prehistoric times in the Southwest in "Was Tobacco Smoked in the Pueblo Region in Pre-Spanish Times?" which will appear shortly in *American Antiquity*.

3. Cf. Professor Edward F. Castetter's "Early Tobacco Utilization and Cultivation in the American Southwest," in *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 45, pp. 320-325, April-June, 1943.

Pueblo Indians, a few miles north of Bernalillo, New Mexico.<sup>4</sup> This, as far as I know, is the first scientific specimen of cultivated tobacco from a New Mexico Indian pueblo. It was identified by a competent botanist and deposited in the Museum of Anthropology, University of Michigan (Cat. No. 14698).

But, when this specimen was identified, it turned out to be a species of *Nicotiana* that had not previously been reported for this region. It was *N. rustica*. According to Wm. A. Setchell,<sup>5</sup> the aboriginal distribution of *N. rustica* was confined to the eastern United States, its western boundary being only a short distance west of the Mississippi River. After publishing a brief report of this specimen,<sup>6</sup> I learned that between 1925 and 1931, at least two experiments in the cultivation of *N. rustica* had been conducted near Albuquerque.<sup>7</sup> Seeds were given freely to Indian and Mexican farmers, so that this species could have been introduced among the Pueblos in this way.

But tobacco was cultivated in the Pueblo region in New Mexico long before 1925. How long before? When was the cultivation of tobacco begun? And what species was, or were, cultivated prior to the twentieth century? In short, what is the history of tobacco culture in New Mexico?

The journals of the Coronado expedition do not, as previously noted, speak of smoking or of tobacco among the Pueblos. This is rather curious. If smoking was practiced by the Pueblo Indians at this time, as archeological evidence suggests, one wonders why the Spanish chroniclers did not mention it since they recorded such a wealth of observations of customs already familiar to them from tribes in Old

4. Cf. White, Leslie A., *The Pueblo of Santa Ana, New Mexico*, p. 40ff., Figs. 1, 3 (Memoir 60, Amer. Anthropol. Assn., 1942).

5. "Aboriginal Tobaccos," (Amer. Anthropologist, Vol. 23, pp. 397-414; 1921). See, also, Wootton, E. O. and Standley, P. C., *Flora of New Mexico* (Contributions from the U. S. National Herbarium, 1915).

6. "Nicotiana Rustica Cultivated by Pueblo Indians," (Science, Vol. 94, pp. 64-65, July 18, 1941).

7. E. G. Beinhart, "Nicotiana Rustica in New Mexico," (Science, Vol. 94, pp. 538-39, Dec. 5, 1941).

Mexico as well as new customs. The absence of a reference to smoking in these journals does not, of course, prove that the Pueblo Indians did not smoke in 1540.

But what of the men in Coronado's party: Had they acquired the habit of smoking before they came to New Mexico? One might infer from their journals that they had not, for, had they been addicted to tobacco, we would almost certainly find mention of it in the *Relaciones*. Thus the evidence would seem to indicate that the first party of white men to enter the Pueblo country did not introduce tobacco.

Before the first quarter of the seventeenth century had expired, however, the Spanish colonists in New Mexico were cultivating tobacco, according to the *Relación* of Fray Gerónimo de Zárate Salmerón:<sup>8</sup>

At all this the Spaniards who are there [i.e., in New Mexico] laugh; as they have a good crop of tobacco to smoke, they are very content, and wish no more riches.

Another early reference to the use of tobacco in the Southwest is found in the *Memorial* of Fray Alonso de Benavides,<sup>9</sup> (1630):

They [Spaniards] gave him [an Indian] the embassy of peace according to their usage. This was an arrow with a feather of colors in place of the flint and a reed full of tobacco (un *cañuto lleno de tobacco*) [already]<sup>10</sup> begun to be smoked.

Cane, or reed, cigarettes, so-called, are known to us from recent ethnographic accounts and also from excavations of prehistoric sites.<sup>11</sup> But they were not really cigarettes, nor were they "smoked," as a rule. In the first place, they were stuffed with such materials as feathers, wild plants of

8. In *The Land of Sunshine*, Vol. 12, p. 44, Dec., 1899; Los Angeles.

9. Pp. 46, 48; Spanish text, p. 140 (translated by Mrs. Edw. E. Ayer, Chicago, 1916).

10. Of the bracketed words in this quotation, "already" appears in the published translation; the others have been inserted by me.

11. Jones, *op. cit.*

different kinds, unspun cotton, etc., which is hardly a mixture suitable for smoking. And in the second place, the nodes of the cane were not pierced so one could draw smoke through them. Their use was a ritual one. One end of the "cigarette" would be burned a bit in a flame, and then it would be deposited somewhere as an offering to the spirits. This, no doubt, explains the phrase "had already begun to be smoked" in the passage of Benavides. But we have no assurance that the reed mentioned in that passage contained tobacco unless the Spaniards themselves provided it.

Our next reference to tobacco is dated 1767. In that year the governor of New Mexico

objected to the viceroy's proposition to enforce the tobacco *estanco*, as very little real tobacco was used in New Mexico, only *punche*, and by the Indians a leaf called *mata*; yet in '76 the *estanco* was ordered to be enforced and the planting of *punche* prohibited, (from a Ms. of the Pinart Col.)<sup>12</sup>

The significant thing here is the distinction between "real tobacco" and "*punche*." *Mata*—Sp. plant, sprig—appears to be a generic name for wild plants smoked by the Indians. *Punche*, we are told, was "an inferior species of tobacco."<sup>13</sup>

In 1803,

Tobacco [was] raised for home consumption [in New Mexico] even by the padres and but for the *estanco* on cigars, snuff, etc., the product might be vastly increased. (Fernando Chacón, *Informe del gobernador sobre Industrias del N. Mex.*, Arch. Sta. Fe.)<sup>14</sup>

12. Bancroft, H. H., *History of Arizona and New Mexico*, p. 276, fn. 41 (1889).

13. Bancroft, *op. cit.*, p. 276.

14. Bancroft, *op. cit.*, p. 302, fn. 38. In a letter to the present writer, Professor Bloom identifies this document as No. 1670a, in Twitchell, *The Spanish Archives of New Mexico*, Vol. II, p. 440. The only portion of this document dealing with tobacco reads as follows:

"El Tauaco se cultiva por todo el Vecindario en general con Superior contentimiento, y sin embargo de no Veneficiarse bien, lo fuman y toman en Polvo la mayor parte de los Religiosos."

According to Professor Bloom, there is no mention in this document of an *estanco*

Early in the nineteenth century, Pino protests against the government tobacco monopoly in New Mexico, but "this last [i.e., the monopoly] did not prevent the people of New Mexico from raising a poor grade of tobacco known as *punche*."<sup>15</sup> In the absence of money, rolls of *punche* were used occasionally, along with other commodities, as a medium of exchange in commercial transactions.<sup>16</sup> Captain John G. Bourke, who visited the Taos Indians in 1881, says:<sup>17</sup>

They smoked bunchi—called To-je, a plant gathered on top of the mountains. They are likewise very fond of tobacco.

Thus we find *punche* defined as "an inferior species of tobacco," distinguished from "real" tobacco, and also as a wild plant gathered in the mountains and used by the Indians for smoking. From the facts (1) that the government had a monopoly on the sale of tobacco, (2) that the planting of *punche* was prohibited, and (3) that *punche* was grown despite this governmental prohibition, we might conclude (a) that the "real tobacco" was imported to New Mexico for sale but was not grown there, and (b) that *punche* was a tobacco grown locally by the colonists.

Today, tobacco is grown in a number of Indian pueblos and Mexican villages in the Rio Grande valley north of Albuquerque, where it is called, by the Indians and Mexicans

---

on tobacco, or of *puros*. Nor is there any reference to the cultivation of tobacco by the padres.

Professor Bloom has also called my attention to two further references to tobacco in Twitchell, *The Spanish Archives*: (1) No. 884, a letter from De Neve to Governor Anza, March 13, 1784, "ordering the extirpation of the herb known as *Oja de Mata* which was being used as a substitute for tobacco and in this manner reducing the revenues," (Vol. II, p. 294); and (2) No. 893, De Neve to the governor of New Mexico, April 27, 1784, "countermanning the order for the destruction of the native tobacco," (Vol. II, p. 295). Professor Bloom observes that "both these documents seem to have come up from Chihuahua by the same courier!"

15. Bloom, L. B., "New Mexico under Mexican Administration, 1821-46," p. 40, (*Old Santa Fé*, Vol. I; 1913).

16. Warner, Louis H., "Conveyance of Property, the Spanish and Mexican Way," p. 350 (*NEW MEXICO HISTORICAL REVIEW*, Vol. VI; 1931). Warner states that "*punche* was the native tobacco."

17. Bloom, L. B., "Bourke on the Southwest," p. 49 (*NEW MEXICO HISTORICAL REVIEW*; Vol. XII; 1937).

alike, *punche*. In 1941 I obtained specimens from a number of these communities; they were identified as *N. rustica*.<sup>18</sup>

What is the history of *punche*? Was the plant called *punche* introduced by the Spaniards? Or was it some indigenous species of *Nicotiana* brought under cultivation by the early Spanish colonists to escape the government *estanco* on "real tobacco?" When did the Pueblo Indians begin the cultivation of *punche*?

It is highly improbable that we shall ever obtain specimens of *punche*, grown a century or more ago, for botanical identification. Consequently, we must rely chiefly upon other sources of information. One of the most promising clues at present is linguistic. What is the origin and history of the word *punche*?

José Agustín de Escudero, writing in 1849, speaks of "a kind of tobacco which the Indians call *punche*,"<sup>19</sup> indicating that he thought the word to be Indian. Dr. J. P. Harrington, linguist and anthropologist of the Bureau of American Ethnology, says that *punche* is "New Mexican Spanish."<sup>20</sup> I have not found *punche* in the *Catálogo Alfabético de Nombres Vulgares y Científicos de Plantas que existen en México*, published by the *Secretaría de Agricultura y Fomento*, A. L. Herrera, Director; Maximino Martínez author of the Introduction (and perhaps the monograph also), in Mexico City in 1923.

It seems quite clear that *punche* is not an Indian word. Among the languages of the Pueblos, *hami* is the Keresan word for tobacco, *ana* the Zuni, *sa* the Tewa, *lane* or *le* the Tigua, and *piva* the Hopi. In Navajo and Apache, tobacco

18. White, Leslie A., "Further Data on the Cultivation of Tobacco among the Pueblo Indians," (*Science*, Vol. 96, pp. 59-60, July 17, 1942).

19. *Three New Mexico Chronicles*, p. 120 (H. Bailey Carroll and J. Villasana Haggard, eds., The Quivira Society Publications, Vol. XI; 1942).

20. Robbins, W. W., Harrington, J. P. and Freire-Marreco, B., *Ethnobotany of the Tewa Indians*, p. 103 (Bulletin 55, Bureau of American Ethnology; Washington 1916).

is *natoh*. In fact, no American Indian word for tobacco resembles *punche* so far as we know.<sup>21</sup>

Since the word *punche* appears not to be used in Old Mexico, we might assume that it is a local, New Mexico, term as Harrington states. But what is its origin?

Nowadays *punche* occurs colloquially in Mexico and Central America as the equivalent of the English *punch*, to strike, or poke. Dr. Walter W. Taylor, Jr., of the University of Texas, informs me that on the Texas-Mexico border pugilists are occasionally known as "keed [Kid] poonche." Professor Robert Redfield, of the University of Chicago, tells me that he has encountered "*punchi*" in Central America as the name of a drink made from bananas. We find "*ponche*, a drink, or liquor," in some Spanish dictionaries. But there is no reason to believe that either of these usages has any connection with *punche* as it is used in New Mexico.

We find "*punches*, m.pl., Honduras<sup>22</sup> *rosetas de maíz*," popcorn, in Heath's *Pequeño Larousse*<sup>22</sup> and in Augusto Malarret's *Diccionario de Americanismos*.<sup>23</sup> In *Novísimo Diccionario Enciclopédico de la Lengua Castellana*,<sup>24</sup> by D. Delfín Donadín y Buignan, we find *punche* defined as "m. Amer., especie de manjar blanco." Another dictionary defines *manjar blanco* as "a dish made of the breast of fowl mixed with sugar, milk, and rice flour." But none of these uses seems to have any bearing upon our problem in New Mexico.

Professor Aurelio M. Espinosa has suggested, in a personal communication, that *punche* has been derived from *pumila*.<sup>25</sup> *pumila* > *pumla*, > *pumbra* or *pumpla*; *pumpla* > *puncha* > *punche*.

21. See Roland B. Dixon's exhaustive article, "Words for Tobacco in American Indian Languages," (*American Anthropologist*, Vol. 23, pp. 19-49, Jan.-March, 1921).

22. Paris and New York, 1912.

23. Mayaguez, Puerto Rico; 1925.

24. Barcelona (n.d.).

25. In "Speech Mixture in New Mexico: the Influence of the English Language on New Mexico Spanish," p. 426 (*The Pacific Ocean in History*, H. Morse Stephens and H. E. Bolton, eds., New York, 1917), Professor Espinosa states that *ponchi*, in New Mexico Spanish, has been derived from the English "punch," as *bonchi* is derived from "bunch," and *lonchi* from "lunch." But, if I interpret Espinosa's *Estudios Sobre*



Our first question here would be, Is this derivation of *punche* merely a surmise, a reasonably valid hypothesis, or an established fact? If it could be shown that *punche* has indeed evolved from *pumila*, we would still have essentially the same problem on our hands: What is the history of *pumila* (L. "low, little") in New Mexico? When did it come to be applied to a plant used for smoking in New Mexico, and what were the circumstances of its introduction into colloquial use?

Professor T. H. Goodspeed, an authority on tobaccos, calls one of the varieties of *N. rustica* "*pumila*," which is the only other instance of the association of this term with tobacco that I know of.

To close with a summary of our problem: Were the Pueblo Indians smoking when Coronado visited them in 1540, and if so, what plant or plants were they using? What kind of tobacco was grown by the Spaniards in New Mexico prior to 1626 (Zárate Salmerón)? What kind of tobacco was called *punche* in the eighteenth century? Was it an indigenous plant or one introduced by the Spaniards? Did the Indians learn to grow *punche* from the Spanish colonists? What is the history of the word *punche* in New Mexico?

The history of tobacco cultivation in New Mexico is at present a riddle, one which the anthropologist would like very much to see solved. If documentary historians, linguists, and other scholars interested in the culture history of the Southwest could throw some light on this problem, they would render Pueblo ethnology a great service.

*Department of Anthropology*  
*University of Michigan*

---

el Español de Nuevo México (Biblioteca de Dialectología Hispano-americana I, Instituto de Filología; Buenos Aires, 1930) correctly, he regards *punshé* as an English word from which the New Mexico term *punshi* is derived (p. 95).