

H-Net Reviews

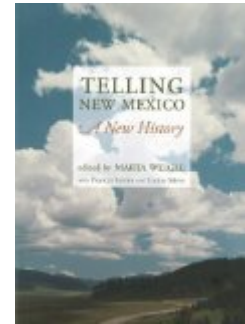
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Marta Weigle, ed., with Frances Levine and Louise Stiver. *Telling New Mexico: A New History*. Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, 2009. 483 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-89013-552-5; \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-89013-556-3.

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Commissioned by Tomas Jaehn



New Mexico for the 21st Century: Diverse Voices and History

Long-term teachers of New Mexico history will recall the years when textbook adoption was clear cut. One book, Warren Beck's *New Mexico: A History of Four Centuries* (1962), was about the only choice. Richard Ellis's selection of readings often provided a useful supplement. For several decades, choices remained slim. Even then, the situation stood in marked contrast to the rapidly expanding textbook market for elementary and middle schools. The recent publication of *Nuevo Mexico: An Anthology of History* (2009) primarily designed for schools marks a new era—textbooks that can be used at the secondary and college level. Today, in contrast to the earlier era, we have a variety of fine supplemental readers to bolster assigned texts. Excellent compilations now exist beginning with Judy DeMark's collection *Essays in 20th Century New Mexico History* published in 1994. Coming closer to the present are Richard W. Etulain's edited volume *New Mexican Lives: Profiles and Historical Stories* (2002) and Ferenc M. Szasz's new edition of *Larger Than Life: New Mexico in the Twentieth Century* (2006). However, now comes *Telling New Mexico*, subtitled "A New History" from the Museum of New Mexico Press—easily the finest collection of readings on New Mexico ever assembled.

Telling New Mexico is an ambitious undertaking. Numbering more than 480 pages, it is edited by the renowned folklorist and cultural historian Marta Weigle. Most important, it reinforces the educational impact of the blockbuster exhibit celebrating the centennial of the

founding of the Museum of New Mexico and anticipating the hundred years anniversary of New Mexico statehood coming in 2012. The relationship of the book to the New Mexico History Museum's exhibit is not indelible. However, the seven parts of *Telling New Mexico* roughly coincide to the exhibit's main themes and scope. The result is at once a tribute to the incredible depth and breadth of the museum's holdings as well as a testament to the inevitable limitations of the artifactual and archival record.

The seven sections follow an innovative progression that is roughly chronological but demonstrates, within the groupings, internal thematic coherence. "Part One: Light, Land, Water, Wind" provides a geographic and place-based context for the six sections that follow. "Part Two: Beyond History's Records" gives an overview of the history and culture of New Mexico's major groupings of native peoples. The Spanish presence is covered in "Part Three: The Northern Province." Readings on the Mexican period and the overland trails show up in "Part Four: Linking Nations." The next three sections are more diverse. "Part Five: Becoming the Southwest" includes nine readings covering in a broad sweep military history; native-Anglo encounters; Billy the Kid and the Lincoln County War; land grants; the founding of Blackdom, an African American community; and early promotion and tourism. The section concludes with an overview of the 150 years history of the Historical Society of New Mexico. Here, as in the final two sections of the book, Weigle provides more extensive introductions. These, like the

readings themselves, make connections and demonstrate linkages between the selections not always apparent in the less conventional later sections. “Part Six: The New ‘New Mexico’” concentrates on post-statehood and extends a creative arc from the state constitution and flag through Buddy Holly’s hejira to the Clovis recording studio of Norm Petty.

In fact, the sequencing of the readings themselves demonstrates a congruency and creative juxtaposition often missed in other discussions of the state’s cultural richness. Imagine, if you will, this progression: from the New Mexico home front during WWII; to the bizarre events of the Roswell Incident in 1947; followed by the opening of the gates at Los Alamos to tourists, media, and families in 1955; and then to the signal event in Rock and Roll in history a year later when Holly begins recording with Petty in Clovis. Weigle delights in these organizational gems, concluding “Part Seven: ‘My New Mexico’” with Herman Agoyo’s essay on Pópay taking us back to the early period covered in the second section.

The editor also provides enormously useful appendices. The acknowledgment of sources provides the citations to the original sources from which the readings are taken but also frequently directs us to related material on the same subject. There is also a fine (but by no means comprehensive) bibliography that could easily serve as a springboard to further explorations of New Mexico’s past. The volume concludes with contributors notes and the standard lists of credits.

The end result of so useful a book is a product of a successful collaboration between Weigle, Francis Levine (director of the New Mexico History Museum), and Louise Stiver (the senior curator at the museum). Stiver selected the illustrations from the museum’s collection, and Kay Hagan (interestingly titled the infrastructure editor) secured permissions and wrote captions for each illustration—about one per essay, drawn almost exclusively from the museum’s collections. Nearly twenty writers contributed original essays, while the remaining thirty-two selections are from previously published sources.

Initially in early 2006, twenty authors were contacted to write original essays in what was intended to be a separate collection. The intent was to provide an overall demonstration of the state of New Mexico history at the time of the opening of the exhibition. Along the way, things changed. Weigle and Levine decided to adopt a different guiding principle. Afraid that a collection of

scholarly essays would be the kiss of death, they decided, in Weigle’s words, to eschew “constipated prose” and insist on an engaging narrative that would captivate students and the museum-going public. Levine and Weigle shared the material they had successfully used in their classes. They worked with the original authors to pare things down, to expand coverage, and to create readable prose. The result is a set of voices that reflects the state’s multicultural past through the narrative structure of story. History as a story becomes the theoretical undergirding of the entire collection. The original essays sparkle, providing the best introductions to complex issues currently in print. The reprinted essays are engaging and well crafted. Some, like Roland Dickey’s essay on windscapes or Haniel Long’s on Carlsbad Caverns, hearken back to an era in the last century and may lead students to explore further the work of these gifted writers. All the sections reflect the editor’s flair and discernment. The volume succeeds as engaged writing that will make accessible to a diverse audience the excitement of the New Mexico past.

Attractive as *Telling New Mexico* is, there are also several things it is not. It is not comprehensive. Can a collection of readings ever be? Buffs and aficionados will complain that their favorite topics are missing—railroad history, Route 66, and the coming of the automobile age are absent. Sports history, the history of education, religion, and natural history will not be found. Most telling of all is the almost complete absence of art history. The book includes nothing on New Mexico’s rich architectural heritage, the evolution of the art colonies, the special niche New Mexico occupies in the history of visual arts, and photography. Is this any more surprising given Weigle’s interdisciplinary expertise and previous work on some of these same subjects? I would say to all: remind yourself that *Telling New Mexico* is sponsored by the New Mexico History Museum, and that it reflects their holdings and is congruent with its major exhibits in the new history museum. In Santa Fe’s amazing collection of cultural resources, the visual arts are to be found in other museums.

It is well to remember the original subtitle for *Telling New Mexico* was not “A New History” but the less ambitious “History, Memory, Museum.” While I am not in love with that title, it comes closer to the intent and purpose of the book. However, let us celebrate this publication for what it is: the finest compilation yet of New Mexico’s diverse voices and history, a fitting demonstration that through story we can be delighted and educated at the same time.

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