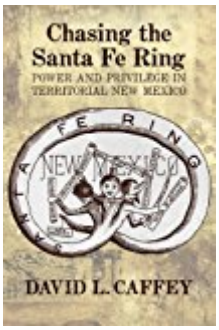
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



David L. Caffey. *Chasing the Santa Fe Ring: Power and Privilege in Territorial New Mexico.* Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2014. 336 pp. $34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8263-5442-6.

Reviewed by Johnny Boggs

Published on H-NewMexico (December, 2015)

Commissioned by Tomas Jaehn (Special Collections/Center for Southwest Research)

History buffs, students, and scholars of the fabled Lincoln County War and other events in New Mexico's wild territorial years likely are familiar with that mysterious Santa Fe Ring. Descriptions of this "loose-knit" group of men that allegedly controlled politics and the law in New Mexico include words like "shadowy," "corrupt," "ruthless," "powerful," and "a systemized organization of rascality" (p. xiv). But what exactly was the Santa Fe Ring, and, more importantly, who were members?

Those are the questions David L. Caffey, longtime New Mexico resident, historian, and author of *Frank Springer and New Mexico: From the Colfax County War to the Emergence of Modern Santa Fe* (2007), tackles in *Chasing the Santa Fe Ring: Power and Privilege in Territorial New Mexico*. Caffey spent roughly ten years researching the Ring, but where other historians could merely allude to this behind-the-scenes group with little more than hearsay and gossip, Caffey seeks the facts—which are almost impossible to find. As he writes: "I now understand the evident reluctance of historians to tackle this subject.... The Santa Fe Ring turns out to be a slippery topic, fraught with controversy from the first appearance of the phrase in the territorial press" (p. ix).

It is unlikely that there were "card-carrying members" of the Ring with secret handshakes, but there were powerful, perhaps even unscrupulous, men sometimes behind the scenes, or taking center stage, in New Mexico's often violent, sometimes corrupt, frontier period. "The Ring," Joel Jacobsen wrote, "is best understood as an informal confederation of businessmen/politicians swapping favors and telling no tales" (quoted, p. 17). Caffey examines the alleged members of the Ring, including Stephen B. Elkins, a political figure and founder of the Santa Fe National Bank, and Thomas B. Catron, a lawyer and major voice in territorial--and even statehood--politics. Caffey also looks at other suspected Ring figures: Samuel Axtell, removed as governor during the Lincoln County War only to come back as chief justice a few years later and again be accused of partisanship; William Rynerson, a member of the legisla-

tive council--and future district attorney--who shot to death the territory's chief justice in 1867, and was acquitted; and many others.

The Ring's rumored actions in events such as the Colfax County War, the Lincoln County War (which sent Billy the Kid to fame), and even the territory's push for statehood are also studied. The Ring was often linked to mining, livestock, and railroad enterprises, as well as the acquisition of land grants, public lands, and government contracts. Anywhere a buck could be made, chances were somebody in the press or public would be pointing to the Santa Fe Ring. Caffey also analyzes the Ring's place in fiction, film, and histories. New Mexico, of course, did not hold a monopoly on powerful, mysterious rings in the nineteenth century. Rings were referred to in Denver and Tucson, and, of course, there was Tammany Hall in New York. A list of "Who was in the Santa Fe Ring" and profiles of those associated with the group are found in appendices.

"You have spoken of a 'Ring,'" federal investigator Frank Warner Angel said to an attorney in the 1870s. "What do you know of its existence?" (p. xiii). Caffey does his best to answer that question, presenting his case with facts. He might not be able to name names and convict anyone (posthumously, of course), but he has given historians a solid examination of an elusive group of ringleaders.