

Being New Mexican

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Living in New Mexico means one is part of a great romance—a squatter in the thoroughfare of highwaymen and scientists, conquistadors and politicians. Most of New Mexico's history is as much entrenched in mystery and intrigue as if it had been buried under the sand. New Mexico has been a safety net (for tuberculosis patients) and a treasure trove (for lucrative land dealers), plundered and praised and always discreet. Recorded history makes this state about four hundred years old (about the time Spain first entered New Mexico) but the discovery of the Folsom and Clovis ruins suggests this land may have been occupied for almost 10,000 years.

Being a New Mexican means living in an area of transience. New Mexico's first residents were nomads, and a feeling of restlessness still seems to haunt the soil. Even those who settled in one area to till the ground were constantly changing the crops they raised. One year a family would grow corn, and the next nothing but squash. New Mexicans instinctively understand that remaining on the same path for too long means wearing it down.

A New Mexican lives in a bloodstained land. Of the four hundred men who ventured with Pánfilo de Narváez in 1536 to what was then "New Spain," only four survived to tell others of their journey. Testimony from these witnesses was the catalyst which sent hundred of Spanish explorers northward into New Mexico, searching for gold. After the Spanish occupation, and especially following New Mexico's absorption into the U.S., Indian raids became enough of a problem that several thousand troops were commanded to erect and operate thirteen new forts in a twenty-two year period. Much of New Mexico's history consists of skirmishes raised and fought in the quest for wealth.

To be a New Mexican is to live in a proud land. Don Juan de Oñate, recognized by most historians as the "settler"—if New Mexico can be said to have been settled—was selected for his mission in part because of his caste. His father was involved in the silver-mining business in New Spain and had acquired a great deal of money. The restless land rebelled against him, too, in all of his wealth and power: the journey north nearly killed his men and his animals, and once they had stopped and seized power, the Acoma rose against them.

To be a New Mexican, therefore, is to be a survivor. Smallpox ravaged New Mexico multiple times before the introduction of the cowpox vaccine in 1804. The so-called "Spanish Flu" took 5,000 lives in a matter of months in 1918. Even now there are still whispers on the wind that the deadly pandemic might return someday.

A New Mexican comes from a line of exceptional minorities. The state's propinquity to Mexico naturally means a more highly concentrated Hispanic and Indian population. New Mexico has always provided much more opportunity for minorities than any other state: as early as the 1700s it was perfectly acceptable for non-whites to own property and hold public office. While other parts of the (soon-to-be) U.S. were puzzled and alarmed by the Indians they encountered in the New World, in New Mexico many Indians chose to live within Hispanic communities and were accepted as free citizens who could work in the same places as Spanish settlers.

Civil rights, however, is not the only area in which New Mexico has proven itself ahead of the times. New Mexico is also the site of one of the New World's first welfare

programs. The Penitentes, a Catholic sect who met mainly in northern mountain villages, provided food and medicine to the sick and the poor. The group also involved themselves in politics, pushing for leaders who were less oppressive and measures that aided the needy.

To be a New Mexican is to live in a land which has time and time again proved itself a turning point. In the heat of the Civil War, the Confederate army attempted to take over then-territory New Mexico in order to gain access to California and Colorado. The Confederates, like the old Union, hoped they might gain dominion over the continent from shore to shore. Taking over New Mexico—and thereby putting itself in a position where it might take New Mexico's neighbors as well—surely would have won distinct recognition for the Confederacy. Other countries would have begun to recognize the Confederacy as a real power. Major John M. Chivington, however, repulsed the Southern army artfully by destroying their supplies at Glorieta Pass in a battle that has come to be known as the Gettysburg of the West.

New Mexico is a land of change and blurred borders: a place where the west stayed wild for years and refused to submit to conventional practices. A New Mexican—whether he has lived here all his life or only recently arrived—sets foot on a land marred by blood and constant transition, but redeemed by opportunity and grandness of purpose. The New Mexican's ancestors traveled here with dreams of glory; they who are left perpetuate that vision.

This land is proud; this land is maverick. This is New Mexico.