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The first time I saw Magdalena, New Mexico, was in the fall of 1981. I was on sabbatical from my university and had taken a positon as curriculum director of a new school on the Alamo Navajo Indian reservation, located some 30 miles northwest of the town of Magdalena. My reason for taking this position was simple enough: I was in the midst of writing a book on the late-nineteenth-century federal Indian boarding school system and wanted to see Native American education up close in the new era of self-determination.

The Alamo school was two years into its existence, and I thought I might be able to assist the community in its struggle to move forward. As a native Californian I had driven across the Southwest countless times, but west-central New Mexico was new to me. Thus in 1981 I found myself driving 75 miles south out of Albuquerque along the Rio Grande Valley to Socorro, where I turned west on Highway 60 for the 30-mile climb into the high desert country of Magdalena. In its heyday, I was soon to learn, Magdalena was a genuine western boomtown, built on the twin economies of mining and livestock. In 1981, the boom years were long over, but unlike the nearby mining settlement of Kelly, now a ghost town, Magdalena had somehow managed to hold on.

After settling my family, including the dog, in town and acquainting myself with my responsibilities at Alamo, I began asking locals where I might read about the history of the area. Time and again I was referred to No Life for a Lady by Agnes Morley Cleaveland, a classic memoir by a spirited Anglo woman who grew up on the New Mexico frontier. A wonderful book, I concluded, but hardly one that did justice to the larger story of how the three groups in the region—Navajo, Hispanic, and Anglo—had negotiated the complex ethnocultural borderland they inhabited. I decided to write this history, focusing on what it had been like for locals to grow up in the region. I purchased a tape recorder and began interviewing the oldest
people who would talk to me, a few born in the 1890s. By year’s end I had amassed a large collection of oral histories, and after two subsequent sabbaticals, the number of interviewees grew even larger. During this stretch of years, I was working on other projects, including the boarding school book, so I simply shelved the untranscribed recordings, knowing I would return to the Magdalena project at a later date. When I did, I found I had more than 3,000 pages of material.

But beyond the vague theme of coming of age, what was this book to be really about? Eventually, I settled on four questions. First, what has it meant culturally to grow up Navajo, Hispanic, Anglo, and combinations thereof in a region characterized by ongoing and shifting patterns of intergroup contact? Second, how did power relations among the three groups affect the coming-of-age experience? Third, in what ways has the relative influence of identity-shaping institutions and domains of experience shifted over time? Finally, what role did children play in a region marked by both boundary maintenance and border crossings? This book, then, is written at the intersection of borderland and childhood history.

As Jeremy Adelman and Stephen Aron have pointed out, the word “frontier” has suffered much of late in the hands of scholars writing histories of the West. Closely identified with Frederick Jackson Turner, the term has come to denote a “triumphalist and Anglocentric narrative of continental conquest.” Because of these associations, historians in search of a more inclusive story have either broadened the term’s meaning or, more generally, migrated to borderland history as a more fitting lens for explaining what happens when nations or peoples meet in contested landscapes and negotiate each other’s “otherness.” As Brian DeLay observes, borderland history is necessarily about “multi-vocality.”

The Southwest is an ideal region for such studies. As noted above, my study fuses childhood (broadly defined) with borderland history. Although the subject of “growing up” is a prominent theme in both fiction and autobiography, it has received little systematic attention from historians. When they have done so the focus has mostly been on the subject of schooling, and then the narratives have been largely divorced from the larger contextual canvas of children’s lives. An important exception is Steven Mintz’s masterful *Huck’s Raft: A History of American Childhood.* As a regional study, Elliot West’s *Growing Up with the Country: Childhood on the Far Western Frontier* is another standout example and has contributed immensely to the shape of this study.

I offer my own study as
a contribution in the following respects: it is focused on a particular area of the West, it is multicultural in focus, and it is largely based on oral history.

Few subjects in historiography have of late provoked more discussion and debate than the relationship of memory to history. Kerwin Lee Klein writes:

We sometimes use memory as a synonym for history to soften our prose, to humanize it, and make it more accessible. Memory simply sounds less distant, and perhaps for that reason, it often serves to help draw readers into a sense of the relevance of history for their own lives. Memory appeals to us partly because it projects an immediacy we feel has been lost from history. . . . In contrast with history, memory fairly vibrates with the fullness of Being.5

But as Klein and others point out, memory cannot be synonymous with history, and indeed, often the two are at odds. Memory is unstable, selective, contingent, self-serving, and even self-deceiving. Even more problematic for the historian, memory is frequently beyond interrogation. As Richard White writes, “We turn our lives into stories, and, in doing so, we can stop them where we choose. Our stories do in a small way what memoirs and autobiographies do on a grander scale: they allow a self-fashioning that gives remembered lives a coherence that the day-to-day lives of actual experience lack. History, of course, also imposes coherence, but the historian works with less malleable stuff than memory.”6

Still, few would deny that memory offers an invaluable window into the past, especially for cultural historians writing the histories of groups for whom traditional written sources are all too rare. But how to protect against the triumph of memory (or inaccurate memory) over history? In this study I have relied upon several strategies. First, multiple interviews were conducted in each group, male and female, allowing for a considerable range of intragroup accounts on the same or related subjects. This cross-checking was not fool-proof for the simple reason that inaccurate memory can be collective as well as individual, and never more so than in conflict-ridden landscapes. A second evidentiary screen in this undertaking is its multicultural focus, that is to say, its multivocality across groups—in this case three groups. (I remember all too well the look of concern on an interviewee’s face when he realized I was writing a history not just of his group but their groups as well.) Borderland history allows for—indeed calls out for—conflicting group perspectives on encounters with the “other.” (In
that regard, it might be argued that borderland history is ethnohistory writ large.) Third, I have scrutinized the individual interviews for internal consistency. Again, the consistency test is not a guarantee against conscious or unconscious recalibrations of memory, but it still offers another means of ferreting out imagined or exaggerated moments in a personal narrative. Finally, as the endnotes will show, the personal narratives I collected have been supplemented by an extensive investigation of available primary and secondary sources relevant to the project. Census data, newspapers, marriage records, state and federal documents, school records, and memoirs have all been invaluable.

Along the way in this venture I have encountered a number of challenges. The first was convincing individuals that their stories, that is to say their lives, were of historic importance. Time and again, I heard them protest, “Why do you want to talk to me? I’m a nobody.” After I explained what I was up to, they almost always relented. Second, I realized early on that many of those I interviewed did not want to be identified by name. The reason was clear enough. Like any borderland region, west-central New Mexico has had its share of intergroup conflict, and many were hesitant to see their names attached to a particular event on which differing points of view or lingering resentments still exist. In response to this reluctance I struck the following bargain: I would not connect the speaker’s name to any given story but acknowledge his or her contribution by listing their names in a separate section of the book. Thus, unless permission was granted, I have employed any number of pseudonyms throughout the text. In the case of the Alamo Navajos I have scrambled existing surnames (because the distinctiveness of the Alamo surnames is a significant part of this group’s history) and have fashioned pseudo–personal names, again, unless permission was acquired. Third, I soon learned that as a non-Navajo-speaking Anglo male, I needed help interviewing older Navajos. For female Navajos the issue was particularly important—sharing personal stories across gender lines with a biligáana was, culturally speaking, a nonstarter. Thankfully, local interviewers and transcribers stepped forward to aid me in this area.

The preeminent challenge, however, was actually constructing the narrative. Two aspects of this endeavor were particularly difficult. The first was architectural. Historians often struggle with the process of weaving myriad facts, events, and personal accounts into a coherent narrative. Doing borderland history presents its own sort of problems but especially when three groups, not two, are central to the story. The challenge was when to keep the three groups apart and when to pull them together, and in the process,
never lose sight of the larger drama unfolding in this regional “meeting ground.” As Patricia Nelson Limerick writes, in the history of the West, everyone became an actor in everyone else’s play; understanding any part of the play now requires us to take account of the whole. It is perfectly possible to watch a play and keep track of, even identify with, several characters at once, even when those characters are in direct conflict with each other and within themselves. The ethnic diversity of Western history asks only that: pay attention to the parts, and pay attention to the whole.  

Whether the narrative I have constructed measures up to this standard, only the reader can judge. The second issue involves voice. Because this history ends in 1990, I was an observer of some of the events I describe in the last chapter. The reader should be forewarned of a shift from past to present tense and a more subjective tone at this point in the narrative.

A few words on terminology and editing are also in order. Anyone writing New Mexico history is faced with the problem of choosing between referents for a group variously identified as Hispanics, Hispanos, and Spanish Americans. After going back and forth on the issue, I have finally landed on Hispanics as a catchall designation. (As the reader will discover, how this group has come to name itself is a complicated story of its own.) On the matter of editing, the reader will note that many of the quotations from “informants” contain all manner of grammatical errors, and in some cases, missing words as well. I have done very little editing of these “raw” passages in the interest of capturing the speakers’ voices. That is to say, I have rarely employed the bracketed corrections that often speckle narratives of this sort. The only exception to the general rule of not tinkering with quoted matter is when I have patched together, without ellipses, different sections from the same interview on a subject addressed multiple times.

In the midst of one of my several interviews with Candelaria García, she said to me, “Someday you will get all the stories.” Of course, I did not get all of them, but I got a lot of them. Now it is time to share them.

Welcome to west-central New Mexico.
THREE ROADS TO

Magdalena
INTRODUCTION

There are various versions of the legend, but on the essentials there is general agreement. Sometime in the sixteenth century, during one of the Spanish *entradas* into present-day New Mexico, a few mounted soldiers and a priest left the main body of the expedition to explore the high mountain country west of the Rio Grande. After arriving in the high country, the Spaniards were attacked by a party of Apaches, whereupon the soldiers retreated to some nearby mountains to make an effective defense. Arriving at their destination, they immediately noticed the Apaches withdrawing from their pursuit. The reason was soon clear enough. Unknowingly, the Spaniards had chosen for their retreat a location held in awe by the region’s *Indios*. For as the soldiers now observed, on the mountain above them appeared a natural formation of stone and shrubbery in the shape of a woman’s face—the apparent reason for the Apaches’ retreat. Realizing their good fortune, the priest contemplated the image and was reminded of a legend in his native Spain, the story of how St. Mary Magdalene, upon the death of the Lord Jesus, had followed St. James to Spain, where she spent her remaining years devoted to prayer in the mountains. Upon her death, it was said, Mary’s face miraculously appeared on a nearby mountain. How fitting, the soldiers agreed, to christen this mountain before them La Sierra de María Magdalena.¹

So we begin at the outskirts of the Spanish empire, when a band of soldiers gave a holy name to a mountain, and unknowingly, to a town as well, a town that would not spring forth for some 300 years. Meanwhile, three peoples, two of them riding the tides of conquest and empire, would settle the mountains and plains of New Mexico.² To understand this story—or rather stories—of coming of age, one must begin with how each of the three peoples came to know the territory.

Hispanics

In the summer of 1540, under the command of Francisco Vázquez de Coronado, the Spanish made their first *entrada* into the region of New Mexico. The motives underlying the expedition were multiple.³ Over the next two
years Coronado and his forces wrought all manner of cruelties upon the Na-
tive Americans they encountered, but before withdrawing they had learned
something of the territory and peoples who inhabited it—namely that the
center of the region, indeed its very lifeblood, was a 200-mile stretch of
the Rio Grande River along which more than 60,000 Indians, grouped
into four linguistic divisions, lived in some 100 villages—so-called Pueblos.

Over the course of the sixteenth century other *entradas* would follow. The
culmination of these occurred in 1598 when Conquistador Juan de Oñate
entered New Mexico with a colonizing force of more than 600, including
women and children, with the objective of planting a permanent settlement
in the north. Because the southernmost division of the Pueblos, the Piros,
appear to have suffered least from earlier incursions—and no doubt for
pragmatic reasons as well—when Oñate passed through their country the
natives offered up baskets of maize, prompting the conquistador to name
one of the larger villages Socorro, or Succor.4 But the Piros would not escape
Spanish colonizing designs. By 1626 Fray Alonso de Benavides had estab-
lished several missions in the region, announcing at one point that the
Pueblo peoples were all baptized, and in what was clearly an exaggeration,
that they had forsaken their pagan beliefs for Christianity. The Spanish cultural threat aside, the Piros were headed for trouble. By the end of the century, draught, famine, epidemics, and periodic Apache raids had devastatingly reduced their numbers to a fraction of their former levels.3

Meanwhile the more concentrated presence of the Spanish in the north had not gone well for the Pueblos, and by the 1670s most were united in bitter determination to expel their colonizers. The failure of the Spaniards to protect them against nomadic raiders, the continued extortion of labor and food (made all the worse by a spell of draught and famine), the soldiers’ sexual assaults on Pueblo women, the harsh punishments for resistance, and the unrelenting war on their religious rituals—all converged to produce the so-called Great Pueblo Rebellion of 1680. When it was all over, the Spanish were driven out of New Mexico, leaving behind a death toll that included 21 of the province’s 33 priests and some 400 settlers. As the Spanish limped south, the vulnerable Piros either joined the refugees in their march to El Paso or melted into Pueblo villages in the north.4

But Spanish visions of conquest and colonization were not to be denied. Thirteen years later Diego de Vargas marched north and finally established Spanish suzerainty over the upper Rio Grande. The Spanish were soon making two broad distinctions regarding the region: Rio Arriba in the north, which spanned the area between Taos and Bernalillo, and Rio Abajo, which extended south to Socorro. Because Rio Arriba possessed the most arable land, was home to most of the Pueblos, and served as a gateway to the Plains Indian trade, Spanish interest and settlement remained concentrated in this northern zone, and here the shape of Hispanic culture assumed its most pronounced form.5

Recolonization in the Socorro region progressed more slowly. In 1771 the governor of New Mexico proclaimed plans to resettle the old Pueblo of Socorro.6 The announcement failed to entice many Spanish, but the prospect of attaining land was attractive to numbers of Hispanicized Indians, many of them perhaps of Piro lineage. Three years later, Fray Miguel de Menchero reported that some sixty Indian families, six Spanish families, and one priest occupied the village.7 Still, because the settlement was an easy mark for Indian raiders in search of livestock and captives, life on this stretch of the Rio Grande remained a precarious quest for survival. As farmers tilled their fields and herders grazed their sheep, they cocked an eye to the horizon for Apache raiding parties.

Three features of Spanish colonial life merit special attention: religion, race, and social status. Regarding the first, the Holy Catholic Church
shaped much of settlers’ everyday outlook and existence. The seven sacraments marked the days and years of their existence. The priest baptized their children, sanctified their marriages, and sent the dead on their way to a greater glory. As Catholics they believed that the church signified the mystical body of Christ, and throughout the year they ritualistically marked the life, death, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus, born to the Virgin Mary. There were saints to be venerated, fields to be blessed, churches to be plastered, and cemetery crosses to be straightened. To know the catechism, pray the rosary, light candles in darkened chapels, confess one’s sins in the expectation of the Father’s forgiveness, enter into communion with Christ—all these gave shape and meaning to Hispanic communities living on the rim of Christendom.  

On the matter of race, New Mexico society was a complex outgrowth of Iberian conceptions and new world conditions. On the Spanish frontier race and blood lineage served as primary markers in the social hierarchy. At the top of the racial pyramid were those true españoles who prided themselves in their limpieza de sangre, or blood purity, which signified that its possessor was a person of honor, a gente de razón, and defender of the one true faith. Next were the mestizos, a designation that over time became a catchall descriptor for those of mixed Spanish-Indian ancestry. Further down the social scale were Hispanicized Indians, and at the bottom of the racial hierarchy were those indios bárbaros, mostly Apaches, Navajos, and Comanches still outside the bounds of Spanish “civilizing” influence.  

Social status, or calidad, constituted a third defining feature of New Mexico life. During the early colonial period social relations on the frontier were heavily influenced by the Spanish “feudal patriarchal ideology,” which, as Ramón Gutiérrez has argued, was constructed around the masculine ideals of conquest, domination, and protection. These ideals, in turn, reinforced notions of honor and virtue. According to Gutiérrez, “A person without honor was worse than dead in colonial New Mexico.” Moreover, because race, honor, and virtue were interconnected, it followed that the latter two qualities were possessed in declining proportion as one descended the racial hierarchy. Thus, the “most vice-ridden aristocrat always enjoyed more honor-status than the most virtuous peasant.” At the same time, the requirements for honor and status were gender specific. Whereas male status was generally enhanced by success in the game of sexual conquest, female virtue (and ultimately family honor) revolved around a pubescent female’s possession of virginal purity when taken to the marriage bed, that she be sin vergüenza, or without sin.
But the Spanish colonial frontier was hardly a static one. Changes in both social and political realms were in the making. In the first instance, the early and elaborate racial demarcations and correspondence to degrees of *calidad* were difficult to sustain on the outskirts of the frontier where race mixing was common. On the New Mexico frontier, bloodlines melted and melted again, and by the late eighteenth century were mostly blurred, enabling enterprising *mestizos* to take advantage of new opportunities to “whiten” their status. As David Weber observes, “Whitening occurred throughout Spain’s empire, for a person’s social status, or *calidad*, was never fixed solely by race, but rather defined by occupation and wealth as well as parentage and skin color.”

In the political realm, the twin events of Mexican independence in 1821, followed twenty-five years later by a disastrous war with its northern neighbor, were monumental developments, the latter ending with Mexico’s cession of one-third of its territory to the United States. However much *nuevomexicanos* were reluctant to embrace their new status as Americans, as historian Andrés Reséndez notes, the New Mexican northern frontier was a “world of exceedingly fluid identities.” Indeed, for some Hispanics the territory’s remoteness, the perpetual political factionalism in Mexico City, the inability of the Mexican military to protect northern settlements against Indian raids, and finally, the region’s growing trade ties with its northern neighbor, all made hitching the region’s future to the United States a welcome development. The last factor was central. The north-south exchange across the Santa Fe Trail both economically tethered New Mexico to the United States and contributed to concentration of wealth in a few New Mexican families. For this small but influential elite, the future lay with the United States, not the failing Mexican state. Hence, Howard Lamar’s observation that the bloodless 1846 invasion of New Mexico was a “conquest of merchants.”

So it was that without resistance General Stephen Watts Kearney marched into the plaza of Las Vegas, New Mexico, on August 15, 1846, and proclaimed that the Americans had come as friends, not enemies, as protectors, not conquerors. Those who remained “peaceably at home, attending to their crops and their herds” had nothing to fear from the invading army. As for rumors that the Americans posed a threat to their religious faith, Kearney announced, “I am not Catholic myself—I was not brought up in that faith; but at least one-third of my army are Catholics, and I respect a good Catholic as much as a good Protestant.” Only good things would flow from the US Army’s arrival, Kearney assured the crowd. “From
the Mexican government you have never received protection. The Apaches and the Navajhoes [sic] come down from the mountains and carry off your sheep, and even your women, whenever they please. My government will correct all this. It will keep off the Indians, protect you in your persons and property; and, I repeat again, will protect you in your religion.” In any event, **nuevomexicanos** should understand that this new turn in the fortunes of empire could not be reversed. Those who chose the path of resistance would be hanged. “There goes my army—you see but a small portion of it; there are many more behind—resistance is useless.”

**Anglos**

Like the Spanish before them, Anglo Americans were a people bent on empire. Since Jefferson’s time, those who contemplated the nation’s future concluded that time and providence had truly smiled on the young republic. Just as assuredly as the sun rose and set, so the US “empire of liberty” appeared destined to extend all the way to the Pacific. Whether Americans viewed themselves as a chosen people with a providential destiny or secular-minded believers in agrarian idealism, both concurred that the West was a blank slate upon which to write their system. The pioneer settlers would lead the way. Settler colonialism was on the march.

Pioneer settlers were bearers of a uniquely American civilization rooted in the ideological pillars of republicanism, Protestantism, and capitalism. From pulpits, the halls of Congress, newspapers, and schoolbooks, these beliefs provided a coherent definition of what it meant to be an American. From these beliefs flowed a host of ideas about freedom, democracy, individualism, property, and virtue that, bundled together, provided a compelling rationale for the republic’s sweep across time and space. “We will measure our strength by the grandeur of our object,” Horace Bushnell proclaimed in the midst of the war with Mexico. “The wilderness shall bud and blossom as the rose before us; and we shall not cease, till a Christian nation throws up its temples of worship on every hill and plain; till knowledge, virtue, and religion, blending their dignity and their healthful power, have filled our great country with a manly and happy race of people, and the bands of a complete Christian commonwealth are seen to span the continent.”

By the standards of republicanism, Protestantism, and capitalism, supporters of the Mexican war judged both the Spanish legacy and the Mexican regime fundamentally deficient. More than a mere war over territorial
aggrandizement, a US victory over Mexico symbolized the triumph of republicanism over autocratic despotism, Protestantism over Catholicism, and capitalism over feudalism. Thus, in the middle of the war the *New York Sun* offered that Mexicans were “perfectly accustomed to being conquered, and the only new lesson we shall teach is that our victories will give liberty, safety, and prosperity to the vanquished, if they know enough to profit by the appearance of our stars. To *liberate* and *ennoble*—not to *enslave* and *debase*—is our mission.”

The problem with such beneficent professions is that they frequently masked deeper racial justifications for the war. For embedded in references to the nation’s supposed destiny was the lurking assertion that Anglo Americans, by virtue of their racial heritage, were a people apart, biologically and culturally superior to those who stood in the path of westward expansion—namely, Indians and Mexicans. Even before the 1840s many Americans were convinced that Indians, unable to make the transition from “savagism” to “civilization,” were headed for extinction. Savagism might just be in the blood. American colonizers were quick to project assumptions about racial inferiority onto Mexicans as well. Because Mexicans were largely a *mestizo*, or “mongrel,” people, might they also be incapable of becoming fully civilized and embracing republican institutions?

American observers on the scene did little to disabuse skeptics’ suspicions on the question. Josiah Gregg’s account of the Santa Fe trade, published in 1844 under the title *Commerce of the Prairies*, presented a mixed but largely negative picture of the Mexicans he encountered in his travels. A little over a decade later, William Watts Hart Davis, who served as US attorney in New Mexico, published his now classic *El Gringo*, in which he offered an equally uncomplimentary assessment of New Mexicans. Except for a few *ricos* (rich people), who took great pride in their fairness of skin, most of the population was “dark and swarthy” owing to the frequent intermarriage between members of the upper and lower classes, leading to the constant addition of a “new stream of dark blood” into the former’s racial makeup. The purported result: “They possess the cunning and deceit of the Indian, the politeness and spirit of revenge of the Spaniard, and the imaginative temperament and fiery impulse of the Moor.” According to him, although displaying “smartness and quickness of perception,” they lacked the “stability of character and soundness of intellect that give such vast superiority to the Anglo-Saxon race over every other people.” Still, he regarded the prospects for the population’s long-term political integration bright. In fact, the vices of Mexicans were “more the result of habit, example, and
education” than of any natural depravity. In time, they would make good Americans. “We claim that our free institutions make men better, wiser, and happier; then let us endeavor, through their agency, to work out the regeneration of the people of New Mexico, morally, socially, and religiously.”

Before the assimilation of Mexicans could be accomplished, the US military needed to pacify and subjugate the Indians—mainly Navajos and Apaches—who swept down into settlements in search of livestock and captives. General Kearney all but acknowledged the army’s limitations in solving the problem when he issued a proclamation near Socorro granting locals permission to march into “the Country of their enemies, the Navajoes, to recover their Property, to make reprisals and obtain redress for the many insults received from them.” The only restraint: “The Old, the Women and the Children of the Navajoes, must not be injured.” Because Hispanics had a long tradition of conducting raids, Kearney’s restrictions were no doubt dismissed out of hand. By the 1880s, the Apache and Navajo threat to settlers west of Socorro was all but eliminated.

Miners were the first to penetrate the high country. In 1866, Civil War veteran J. S. Hutchason staked claims on three mines—the Graphic, the Juanita, and the Kelly—the latter giving the town its name. Located in the Magdalena Mountains, Kelly commanded a sweeping view of the future town of Magdalena, just 3 miles and 1,000 feet below. By 1881 other miners were sinking shafts in mines with names such as Alhambra, Ambrosia, Hardscrabble, Cimarron, Iron Mask, Legal Tender, and Waldo. In the coming years, the mines of Kelly turned out a little gold and modest quantities of silver and copper. The rich veins of lead and zinc ore, however, drew more highly capitalized mining companies into the area and spawned the town’s real growth. From 1866 to 1904, the Kelly mines produced $8,700,000 in wealth; from 1904 to 1928 the figure rose to nearly $22,000,000. During these years Kelly was a bona fide boomtown. By 1910 it claimed a population of 2,600 with two hotels, several stores, a number of saloons, two dance halls, a schoolhouse, a Catholic church, and a cemetery. But like so many mining towns, Kelly eventually went bust. Following World War II production fell off sharply, and the mountainside town, mostly populated by Hispanics who had moved into the area to work the mines, limped into oblivion.

Livestock growers and homesteaders shaped the region most profoundly. By the 1880s both Hispanics and Anglos grazed thousands of cattle and sheep across the high desert country. Grass and water were the two priorities. As for the former, there was lots of it: on the high tablelands, on
the San Augustine Plains, in mountain pastures, and on secluded canyon floors. At the same time, cattle ranchers were soon cognizant of two stark realities: first, 160 acres (the amount of acreage allowed under the terms of the Homestead Act of 1862) were insufficient to support a family, let alone a thriving stock-raising enterprise; and second, land was worthless without access to water, which in arid New Mexico was scarce. Those who underestimated these realities were in for difficult times. Thus, in the days of the open range, ranchers filed on homesteads with water and then proceeded to graze their livestock over a far greater expanse of land than they actually owned. By 1890, 241,000 cattle were grazing in Socorro County, a good percentage of this number in the western high country.26

Whereas the first settlers mainly consisted of stock companies and ranchers, two pieces of federal legislation sparked an altogether different sort of settlement. The Enlarged Homestead Act of 1909 provided for 350-acre grants of land without water, minerals, and timber. The Stock Raising Homestead Act of 1916 expanded the acreage to 640. Both bills drew settlers into the arid land, many intoxicated with a utopian faith in the possibilities of dry farming. Although the large ranches would be the long-term beneficiaries of this migration (buying up the acreage of dirt-broke homesteaders), for the moment the possibility of acquiring free land, with the only stipulation that it be “proved up,” was an infectious dream. Thus, until the early 1930s a slow but constant trickle of wagons and trucks passed through Magdalena headed for a dry-farming community situated almost atop the Continental Divide—a settlement called Pie Town. By the mid-1930s, Pie Town and the surrounding region were home to some 250 settlers. Others moved still further west toward the small and largely Hispanic settlements of Mangas and Quemado.27

Although some homesteaders raised a few cows, most scratched out a living by farming pinto beans, planting a family garden, harvesting piñon nuts, and supplementing their income by working for local ranchers or a lumber mill. Agnes Morley Cleaveland later recalled having sympathy for the wave of homesteaders passing through Datil in search of their 640 acres. “I watched the homesteaders as they trekked by. They came in family groups, in any sort of conveyance that would roll, their household furnishings piled high and the overflow—washtubs, baby buggies, chicken coops—wired to any anchorage that would hold.” She also recalls the reaction of Ray Morley, her brother and a major rancher in the area, a man who knew something about stock raising in the high desert. When she expressed sympathy for the newcomers, he shot back:
Use your bean. Take this ranch country as it is and not as it ought to be. It’s arid. Rainfall, including snow, averages about thirteen inches a year, and the moisture and the heat don’t come together. When it’s hot, it’s dry; when it’s wet, it’s cold. We’re lucky if we get two months’ growing weather a year. The forage which nature has finally adapted to these conditions will support one cow on fifty acres of land, one sheep on five. It’s not a country for the small farmer. Even if a homesteader with his six hundred and forty acres of dry land can get water at three or four hundred feet depth, he can’t stand the expense of maintaining a deep well. . . . But suppose he does keep his well up. His six hundred and forty acres will not support over sixteen head of cattle. How many people will sixteen head of cattle support? It just naturally can’t be done.  

He was right. The Pie Town settlement held on until the 1940s, when the pull of defense jobs and the push of hardscrabble existence led to a steady abandonment of the dry-farming dream.

Largely against the backdrop of livestock and mining economies the town of Magdalena sprang to life. After 1884, the year the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad ran a 30-mile spur up from Socorro (followed by an extension up to Kelly), Magdalena soon became a vast funnel for shipping
cattle, sheep, wool, and mineral ore. Within a few years it possessed all the earmarks of a bustling frontier town: stockyards, two general stores, two livery stables, two lumberyards, two banks, three or four hotels, several saloons, four brothels, four churches, and a schoolhouse. With a population of 600 in 1893, Magdalena soon acquired the reputation of being the largest shipping point in New Mexico and, some claimed, the entire West. Cattle towns such as Dodge City and Wichita had had their day in the sun. Now the promise of the frontier resided in Magdalena, New Mexico, where a collection of frontier types—cowboys, sheepherders, miners, homesteaders, gamblers, wagon freighters, merchants, pious women, prostitutes, and schoolchildren—joined the boom.29 “Please give us a room that is not directly over the barroom,” Agnes recalls her mother saying to the hotel clerk in 1886, when they passed through Magdalena: “I’m afraid those bullets will come up through the floor.” The Morleys survived the night and struck out the next day across the San Augustine Plains for their new home in the Datil Mountains.30

Alamo Navajos

As Hispanics and Anglos moved into the country northwest of Magdalena they could not help but notice a small band of Navajos living in the area. The Navajos call themselves the Diné (meaning “The People”). In 1890 the population of this group was probably no more than 150. (By 1990, the number would reach nearly 1,300.) Early in the 1900s, when the federal government first took notice of the Navajos, it called them the Puertocito Navajos, after a small Hispanic settlement on the Rio Salado, a mostly dry-bed river that fed into the Rio Grande.31 Later, they would officially be known as the Alamo Navajos. In some respects, the occasional reference to the group as the “Lost Band of the Navajos” is the most fitting one. For if the Alamo Navajos were not lost to themselves, their early history is largely absent from the written record.

There are two theories as to this group’s origins. The first traces their origins to the 1860s when some 8,000 Navajos in the north were rounded up and marched south on the infamous “Long Walk” to Fort Sumner, New Mexico, where they were imprisoned for four years alongside a number of Mescalero Apaches. According to this interpretation the Alamo band began as an “escapee” settlement of Navajos and Apaches who either avoided capture or slipped away from the army after incarceration.32 But other evidence suggests that the settlement predated the 1860s.33 Historian Albert
Schroeder, for instance, has argued that as early as the eighteenth century some Navajos moved south into central New Mexico, bringing them into greater contact with Apaches in the area. This contact, according to Schroeder, “inaugurated an era of confused relations between Navajos and Apaches—war alternating with peace in bewildering succession.” By the early nineteenth century, Schroeder maintains, Navajos, sometimes in concert with Apaches, were raiding along the Rio Grande for livestock and probably captives as well, fueling the ongoing cycle of Hispanic-Indian conflict. One Alamo elder, in fact, contends that prior to the Long Walk the band lived along the Rio Salado much closer to Socorro until the “Spanish people came and kill some men and took the women and children for slaves. The people who got away moved up the Salado River all the way up to Alamo.” Growing up in the 1870s, Casamira Baca always remembered the stories he heard as a child of the period before the Long Walk, when the Alamos were continually threatened by Apache and Mexican raiding. “There was no safe place; the people were continually on the run. They would move about, searching for hiding places, carrying what little possessions they had, including their children. It was a time of fear and unrest.”

Whatever their origins—and both theories might be correct—it is clear that by the 1860s a small band of mostly Navajos was living in the Rio Salado region. In 1863, General Thomas Carlton informed Colonel Edwin Rigg at Fort Craig that some 15 miles west of Lemitar, the “Navajos drive their stolen cattle and ‘jerk’ the flesh at their leisure. Cannot you make arrangements for a party of resolute men from your command to be stationed there, for, say, thirty days, and kill every Navajo and Apache they can find?” The plan apparently came to naught, and the Alamo Navajos held on through the course of the Fort Sumner internment. After the US government removal of the Apaches from the region in the 1880s, the Alamo band settled into a pattern of farming, raising sheep, and living off the land. As William Quinn, who conducted an investigation of the group’s history for the Bureau of Indian Affairs, says of this period, “The sight of a small band of Navajos in an extremely remote, isolated area—assuming they were sighted at all by anyone—would have been as ordinary as the sunrise.” As we shall see, this would all change shortly.

To the outside world, including the “Big Navajos” up north, the Alamo band has always been something of a mystery. One area of confusion has been the assumption that the band was an offshoot of the Diné Anaa’í, or Enemy Navajos, a band of mixed Navajo-Spanish lineage that over the course of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries enriched itself by
collaborating with Hispanic aggressors. Because the Enemy Navajos have historically always been associated with the Cañoncito area of the Navajo reservation, and because the Alamos, like the Cañoncito Navajos, are geographically cut off from the main reservation, many northern Navajos easily assumed that the two groups were one and the same. But the Alamos have never acknowledged the connection. One-time headman Martíniano Apachito recalls, “This is why I almost got into a fight with Al or Hal Gorman. They were calling us the enemy outsiders.”

Another source of confusion concerning the Alamo band’s cultural and historical identity stems from its admixture of Apache bloodlines. The extent of Apache infusion is evident in two respects: clan affiliations and Alamo surnames. A 1949 study, for instance, found that a little over a third of the band identified its primary clan affiliation as Tsisi, an Apache clan and the single largest clan at Alamo. At the same time, two of the prominent surnames are “Apachito” and “Apache.” A third factor calling into question the band’s cultural credentials was the large number of Spanish surnames—such as Ganadonegro, Secatero, Herrera, Vicente, and Monte—names largely absent among the “Big Navajos.” From oral accounts it is clear that the Alamo acquired these surnames around 1900 from local ranchers, or in at least one instance, a Catholic priest, displacing traditional names that translated into the likes of Blue Boy, Curly Hair, Yellow Man, Thin Man, Skinny Lady, Light-Skinned Woman, and Run-Around Shoe. This prevalence of Spanish names lent support to the perception that the Alamo Navajos, if they were not Apaches, surely must be “Mexicans turned into Navajos.”

Finally, the distinctiveness of the Alamo Navajos is revealed by the nickname they acquired from other natives in the region—namely, that they were the Tsé de ałíí, or “Rock-Chewer,” Navajos. When the short-tempered Alamo men were aroused to anger, it was said, they would literally chew rocks. Like so much of the early history of the band, oral accounts differ as to the origins of the sobriquet. Some attribute it to the Mescalero Apaches, others to the Zunis. Whatever the origins of the rock-chewing image, older Alamos can recall numerous instances when they were stung by the term.

Several aspects of the Alamo band’s past—its geographical separateness from the Big Navajos, the mystery surrounding its origins, the Apache admixture, the unusual surnames—all speak to the group’s distinctiveness. Yet this point cannot be emphasized enough: the Alamo Navajos were essentially Navajo in their cultural makeup. Turning the clock back to 1900, one would have found a small band of Indians speaking Navajo, living in
hogan clustered in largely matrilocal “outfits” (residence groups generally composed of the bride’s parents, her maternal grandparents, and her sisters’ families), identifying with mainly Navajo clans, subscribing to long-standing Navajo taboos, and conducting their social relations much like the Navajos in the north. Through ceremonies, prayers, and storytelling, Alamo elders were transmitting to youth the essential elements of the Navajo cosmological and spiritual worldview—how the Diné lived in several worlds below the earth’s surface before their emergence; how First Man and First Woman gave birth to Changing Woman; how Changing Woman created the main clans from parts of her body; how She, impregnated by the Sun, gave birth to the Hero Twins; how the Twins journeyed to the Sun and slew the four monsters who threatened the existence of the Diné; how the trickster Coyote was both holy yet untrustworthy; and how one’s well-being depended on both correct behavior and the avoidance of dangerous and evil forces. At the core of this outlook was the ideal of hózhó, variously translated by scholars as order, harmony, balance, peacefulness, but most often beauty. “In beauty may we dwell, in beauty may we walk,” the traditional Navajo prayer begins. The older Alamos remember this world, and a few still subscribe to it. “I think about it lots of times,” one old man reflects.

But hózhó did not solve the everyday challenge of subsistence. Before 1900, and for many years thereafter, the band’s subsistence economy revolved around farming, livestock raising, hunting, and gathering. Corn, several squashes, and beans were the main crops cultivated but also smaller quantities melons, beets, and chilies were grown. Most families had a few sheep, goats, and horses, although the latter only figured into their diet in times of severe crises. The number of sheep and goats per outfit varied greatly, so in some quarters the decision to butcher an animal was not taken lightly. (A 1948 government study showed that one-third of Alamo families possessed no sheep whatsoever.) Knowledgeable gatherers also searched the banks of the Rio Salado, nearby mountains, and remote canyons for wild potatoes, spinach, celery, berries, cactus fruit, and piñon (nuts). Finally, Navajo hunters periodically relied on wild game—principally deer—to get them through the winter, although turn-of-the-century game laws raised the stakes for excessive hunting. But other game also found its way into Alamo skillets and boiling pots. “We used to eat prairie dog, rabbit,” recalls an old man who came of age in the 1920s. “We used to kill porcupine. Porcupine is good to eat. They don’t eat nothing but trees and weeds. I eat bobcat too. Bobcat don’t eat nothin’ bad.” By tradition and
circumstance, waste was held to a minimum. When killing a deer, “we eat everything. Sheep too. We don’t waste nothin’. We eat head and the brain, tongue, the feet and everything.”

As the world closed in around them, the Alamo Navajos were gradually drawn into a wider circle of economic relationships. During the wet years, some families gathered sacks of piñon nuts that they traded to local ranchers or the trading post for store-bought commodities. Many men and older boys earned income by hiring out to ranchers as herders, cowboys, and fence builders. A most important development came in the late 1880s when Nels and Ida Field settled in the area. Trusted neighbors, the Fields were ranchers and owners of a small trading post, and in these capacities provided some seasonal employment for the men and a reliable outlet for Navajo rugs. Another source of income was Datil rancher Ray Morley. Beyond hiring the Navajos as shepherders and fence builders, around 1920 he opened the Navajo Lodge on the Ocean-to-Ocean Highway (today’s US Highway 60) and, in a scheme to attract tourists, invited several Navajos to set up camp within view of the lodge, where the Navajo women could be observed weaving rugs available for sale at Morley’s establishment.

The Alamo Navajos’ twentieth-century struggle for survival took place against the backdrop of three important developments. In 1912, P. T. Lonergan, superintendent of the Southern Pueblo Agency in Albuquerque, discovered the “Lost Band of the Navajo.” As Lonergan describes it,

I was informed . . . that there was a band of Navajo Indians located near Puertocito, New Mexico, who were being imposed upon by their White neighbors; that their land were being taken from them; that they were forbidden to graze upon the public domain where they had the same right as their White neighbors, and that as a consequence their flocks were diminishing to such an extent that they were not capable of self-support. On April 20, 1912, I visited the vicinity where the Navajos are. . . . I found that the stories that had been told me concerning the injustice done these Indians were true.

Shortly after his visit, Lonergan secured 160-acre allotments for each family, thereby establishing the band’s legal claim to its land. In the coming years the Alamo band’s relationship with the Office of Indian Affairs (later renamed the Bureau of Indian Affairs, or BIA) was uneven because it was bounced from one agency jurisdiction to another, finally ending up at the Eastern Navajo Agency in 1968. But government support made the difference. When the BIA got word in the winter of 1928 that the Alamo
Navajos were butchering their horses to stave off starvation, the agent sent emergency relief rations of flour, sugar, coffee, baking powder, beans, salt pork, and blankets—along with more horses!49

A second development was the Alamo Navajos’ success in holding onto their land base in the face of ranchers’ efforts to remove them from the region. In a statement written years after the episode, Ida Field recalled that in the late 1890s José Chávez, a prominent sheep rancher, circulated a petition calling for the Alamos’ removal. The Fields, who had developed warm relations with the Alamo Navajos, refused to sign. Alamo elder John Guerro recalled years later the Fields’ opposition to the petition. “He said to leave the people alone and not to bother them. . . . During that time the ranchers really did hated the Navajos.” Perhaps because of the Fields’ opposition, but more likely because of Office of Indian Affairs opposition, the petition failed in its design.50 In 1913, shortly after the Alamo Navajos received allotments, ranchers made another attempt to accomplish the band’s removal, this time apparently with the support of US senator Albert B. Fall. Again, the effort failed.51 But this second effort did have one result—a new name for a local geographical feature. According to one Alamo man’s recollection, in the middle of the controversy several ranchers initiated a meeting with Alamo leaders, hoping to convince them to relocate. Surely the government (it was probably argued) would assist them in some sort of beneficial land exchange. Perhaps the Alamos would like to move up north with the Big Navajos? But it was soon evident that the assembled Indians were not budging. At the end of the confrontation, memory has it that one of the disgusted ranchers uttered, “Ah, shit.” So the rocky peak was given a name by one of the Navajos—Ah Shit Mountain.52

A third development brought the Alamos into closer political alignment with the Big Navajos up north. In 1918, the Alamo band formally elected its first chairman, José María Apache. In the 1920s the band became a voting “chapter” of the Navajo Tribal Council, a status reaffirmed in 1938 during Commissioner of Indian Affairs John Collier’s so-called Indian New Deal. In 1943, the Alamo Navajos adopted a formal chapter constitution.53 Indeed, during the New Deal years, the band allowed itself a hopeful feeling about the future. In 1944, speaking at the new day school built by the Alamos under the auspices of the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), Olson Apachito recounted for visiting BIA officials the change in mood. “Up until 1939 we had face the hardest time we ever have to,” Apachito related. “There was no job to earn money to take care our families. The summer season was dry. No crops of any kinds and nowhere to look for help to made
that year. We all come to the end of the road, we thought.” But now, under their new agent, Dr. Sophie Aberle (at the United Pueblo Agency), someone was listening. Perhaps now their checkerboard allotments could be “block together” and more land acquired for a growing population; perhaps now the BIA could help them with water and irrigation; perhaps now the new school and its “good teacher” would lead their children to a better future. One thing was for sure: “We don’t want to stop.”

Calamity’s Dream

By the late 1880s all roads in western Socorro County led to Magdalena. What had once been a raw-boned frontier settlement was now the regional shipping point for cattle, sheep, wool, and mineral ore. The sound of bawling cattle in the stockyard, the sight of evening campfires on the surrounding hills as shepherders and cowboys awaited their turns to bring in their herds, the blast of the locomotive whistle, all bespoke Magdalena’s bright future. After all, this was the West, where all things were possible. The almost daily arrival of homesteaders, the growing number of business establishments, the territory’s transition to statehood in 1912—all these reaffirmed the enthusiasm of the town’s boosters.

The town’s growth was reflected in the region’s population figures. In 1900 Magdalena, with a population of 300, was the fourth-largest settlement in western Socorro County, surpassed by Kelly (616), Santa Rita (536), and Mangas (400). By 1910 Magdalena was the largest of the four at 1,226, followed by Kelly at 1,015. By 1920 Magdalena was still climbing at 1,960, whereas Kelly had slipped to 407.

The 1920 US census figures reveal much about the demographic makeup of the town. First, approximately 60 percent of Magdalena’s population was Hispanic, with Anglos constituting almost all of the balance. Second, the census information on the nativity of Magdalena’s citizenry reflects a general New Mexico pattern. The census taker recorded that of the 1,156 Hispanics, all but 55 were native New Mexicans. On the contrary, although the overwhelming number of Anglos were born in the United States, only one-fourth had been born in New Mexico. By region, the southern plains, followed by the midwestern and southern regions, were the largest contributors to the Anglo population. Texas, the largest single-state contributor, accounted for slightly more than one-fourth of the Anglo population. Some 43 Anglos were born in Europe. Third, nearly half the residents (916) were below twenty years of age, with Hispanics accounting for roughly two-thirds
of this number. Magdalena was mainly a town of families—and of special significance for this study—a town full of children.\textsuperscript{57}

Meanwhile, Magdalena’s cash registers were singing the song of progress. In 1916 a young local poetess, perhaps a high schooler, calling herself Calamity, caught the boom spirit when she sent to the \textit{Magdalena News} a ten-stanza prophetic vision of the town’s future. “The Day When Dreams Come True” begins with:

\begin{quote}
I had a dream the other night
When everything was still,
I dreamed I took a pasear
To the top of Baldy-Hill
\end{quote}

From Baldy, Calamity gazes down upon a Magdalena transformed from a bustling frontier town to a modern community. Electric lights twinkle up and down the main street, lighting up many of the older stores, now grown into major commercial enterprises. Cabarets and movie theaters now bask in the glow of city lights. Magdalena is a cow town no more. When the dreamer finally awakens she is so enthralled with her vision that she “promptly went to sleep again,” hoping to “dream some more.”

\begin{quote}
But my vision had passed away,
But I’ll make a bet with you—
Fifty bones to a doughnut that
This dream will sure come true.\textsuperscript{58}
\end{quote}

But it never did, really. Like so many frontier towns, bust followed boom.

Between drought, overgrazing, market fluxes, played-out mines, and economic depression, Magdalena slipped into slow decline, gaining the reputation as a “has-been” cow town with a violent past.\textsuperscript{59} But through it all, generations of children would go about the business of making sense of the world they were born into, a world where the crosscurrents of race, class, gender, and religion cut in ways both predictable and surprising, a world where the processes of negotiating identity, social space, and power relationships unfolded in an ever-changing social universe.

To this story we now turn.