

Let's Do History Right

By Pauline Chavez Bent

As genealogists/family historians searching for roots in the Southwest and California, we spend many hours in our quest to verify that next generation, read that almost illegible death record, study the contents of that ancient land grant, or scrutinize thousands of Joses and Marias in census records, hoping to find one that might connect to our pedigree chart. But many times our efforts are as reliable as the seminar we attended a year ago, or the latest article we just read on the history of the Southwest, Mexico and Spain, and in many cases the lists of descendants that appear in some genealogical journals that are generated from computerized, but unverified sources.

In late 1980, I attended a genealogy seminar in Riverside California, sponsored by the Mormon Church and facilitated by George Ryskamp, a well-known Mormon genealogist. One of the speakers on the program was Carlos Cortez, a professor from the University of California at Riverside. The title of his talk escapes me, but the content is very clear in my mind, he stated that the colonists that came with don Juan de Oñate to New Mexico in 1598 were "all mestizos and Mexican Indians." In those days I was a meek and mild person, just doing my research, not asking questions, especially from PhD types. Being a descendant of 26 of the Oñate colonizing families and realizing that the speaker was apparently not well versed on that particular aspect of New Mexico history, I took his statement as a challenge and began a concentrated study of the 1598 colonization to learn more about the Oñate people. In my home library I found a copy of the *Genealogist*, the quarterly journal of the New Mexico Genealogical Society (XIX No. 4. Dec.1980). Pages 99-117 contained an article by Gilberto Espinosa titled, *A Guide to New Mexico Genealogical Study*. Therein, he lists the people that came with Oñate--- colonizers, soldiers, servants and clergy. According to my calculations about two thirds were from the Iberian peninsula, the others were mestizos and Mexican Indians. Mr. Espinosa refers the reader to *Juan de Oñate, Colonizer of New Mexico, Volumes 5 and 6. Coronado Series*, by Hammond and Rey.

Reviewing Espinosa's work, and the talk by Carlos Cortez in Riverside marked the beginning of my serious study into the fascinating history of New Mexico utilizing the tremendous amount of resources that are available for the serious researcher. Magazine and newspaper articles, and letters to the editor responding to articles also need to be evaluated for accuracy. It's amazing at the amount of inaccurate information that appears in print. Following are a few items I gleaned from the *Orange County Register* (Santa Ana California) and the *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, California):

23 January 2000, *The Los Angeles Times*, Southern California Living Section: "ROOTS AND REALITY", by Jose Cardenas, Times Staff Writer. For this extensive article, several genealogists were interviewed. Here is an excerpt of the second paragraph: "Nearly all 'Spanish' (sic) people who were among the earliest settlers of the Southwest came from Mexico, not from Spain. The Spaniards traveled first to Mexico and lived

some 400 years there before moving north to Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California." Simple arithmetic tells us that if that were true, that move would have occurred in 1919-- four hundred years "after" Cortez conquered Mexico! Wilfred Martinez, former president of the Genealogical Society of Hispanic America based in Colorado was interviewed for the article and said, "A lot of people in our chapter will not accept that they are Mexican Americans, they call themselves Hispanics." Again simple arithmetic: New Mexico was part of the Spanish Empire for 223 years (1598-1821), part of the Republic of Mexico for 25 years (1821-1846), and has been part of the United States of America from 1846 to the present. I guess that my question here is "How long does it take a person from New Mexico to become an American?"

11 April 2001, *The Orange County Register*, "Chicano, Hispanic, Latino? There is a difference in a name." By Yvette Cabrera, Register Columnist. She states in part. "The word Mexican is not slang, but an accurate description of a people that hail from the country of Mexico. It is not a term that describes race but national origin." With that I agree. But she loses credibility when she states, "I remember being shocked (sic) when one of my best friends who is from Albuquerque, New Mexico, told me that students there refuse to be called Mexican or Mexican-American. They are of 'Spanish' descent she told me firmly." She goes on to say that David Hayes-Bautista, director of UCLA's Center for the Study of Latino Health & Culture informed her that on the Oñate expedition to New Mexico, the Spanish were outnumbered 10 to 1 by Mestizos, Sephardic Jews, and Africans (not including 500 Indians who came along). So there are inconsistencies in the article. First, Ms. Cabrera states that the term Mexican is an accurate description of people that hail from Mexico and not a term that describes race but national origin, then she says that she is shocked because New Mexicans do not call themselves Mexicans or Mexican-American. What goes on here? If one is not born in Mexico, and whose family has been in this country for over 400 years, why should he/she call him/herself Mexican or Mexican-American? As for the Sephardic Jews that she mentions---no person "living openly" as a Jew was allowed into the New World, let alone the far reaches of the Spanish Empire.

06 November 2001. *The Orange County Register*. Accent, pp. 1 & 3. By Yvette Cabrera. Latino Veterans will get a snappy salute in Santa Ana. Recognition is sought for Latino warriors. Here Ms. Cabrera lists the contributions of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans to the war (WWII, Korean and Vietnam) effort. She again loses credibility when she mentions the Revolutionary War; she states, "Among Galvez' troops were Mexican, Cuban and Dominican soldiers. In 1776 most of the Americas were still part of the Spanish Empire. Yes, Spain helped the American colonists gain their independence, Mexico did not become a Republic until 45 years later. Cuba and the Dominican Republic have had a volatile history that requires more study on my part.

Ms. Cabrera then goes on to say that Civil War hero [Admiral David Farragut](#) (born in Tennessee but his father was from Minorca, Spain) was Latino! I wonder what the Admiral would say to that besides, "Damn the torpedoes full steam head!" or, "Chingen los torpedoes, adelante con el vapor." Of course in



New Mexico we'd have said "Hombre, dale gas!" It's easy to tie into genealogical research done by others, I have done that myself many times. But glaring discrepancies such as I have listed in this essay can give one a false view of history, and in the long run will benefit no one.