

Protecting a Diverse Heritage: Engaging Communities in Preserving and Interpreting That Which They Value

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In spite of our claim as preservers and interpreters of our nation's heritage that our parks, preserves, protected areas and cultural properties relay a comprehensive and accurate picture of our nation's diverse heritage, the fact remains that we do a very poor job in some respects. In some cases we have a very poor record in conducting accurate and thorough research of some of the periods of history in our country, or in some cases, of a history of a people within a specific geographical area. Although the National Park Service (NPS) is not directly responsible for the preservation and interpretation of all heritage sites throughout the country, it is this writer's opinion that we, too, fall short in relating some historical periods accurately. We, too, fall prey to these general misrepresentations.

During the period of 1996–1998 in New Mexico, Hispanic folks in the area were engaged in planning and undertaking activities through which they could commemorate the arrival of the Spanish in July 1598. These commemorative activities, referred to as the *Cuarto Centenario*, all but fizzled. Those commemorative activities that were held could best be compared with a laser-light exposition under a bushel basket. This writer attributes “fizzled commemoration” to the “Oñate Syndrome”—a general lambasting of all the Spanish settlers who established the first Spanish capital in what is now the United States. The lambasting came about because of the alleged atrocities that Don Juan de Oñate, the *adelantado y gobernador*, had committed against the Acoma Indians.

However, this is not the only period in these people's history about which inaccuracies and slanted interpretations have been presented by anthropologists, historians, or simply by folks who dabble in history and literature. This is best reflected by Charles F. Lummis in his book, *Land of Poco Tiempo*, in which he wrote in 1928:

The first public penance in New Mexico (as it then was) was by Juan de Oñate and his men, in 1594 [sic]. By slow degrees the once godly order [referring to *Los Hermanos Penitentes* of Spain] shrank and grew deformed among the brave but isolated and ingrown people

of that lonely land; until the monstrosity of the present fanaticism had developed.

Moreover, his biases and inaccuracies were not limited to the *penitentes*, as is reflected in his opening chapter:

Then the ten thousand Navajo Indians—whose other ten thousand are in Arizona—sullen, nomad, horse-loving, horse-stealing, horse-living vagrants of the saddle; pagans first, last, and all the time.... Last of all, the Mexicans; in-bred and isolation-shrunken descendants of the Castilian world-finders; living almost as much against the house as in it; ignorant as slaves, and more courteous than kings; poor as Lazarus and more hospitable than Croesus [ancient king of Lydia]; Catholics from A to Izzard, except when they take occasion to be penitentes....

The slanted and biased perspectives of some authors are evident as recently as 1987, when Lorayne Ann Horka Follick, in her book, *Los Hermanos Penitentes*, states:

These Spanish colonials became isolated in the mountains during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Their only recollections of civilization were those brought with the *conquistadores*

from Spain. Until modern man contacted them again in the nineteenth century and especially in the twentieth century, they lived a life of a sixteenth century Spanish peasant.... That the *Penitentes* present a bizarre note in the American landscape cannot be denied.... As this work is read, let the reader bear in mind that he is dealing with a sixteenth century people....

And she proceeds to state: "Therefore, judge these men and women within their own context, not yours, as they are not a part of it."

Amongst native New Mexicans, specifically Hispanics and American Indians, there has always existed a concern as to how the history of peoples from northern New Mexico had been presented and how this history had been perceived by those unacquainted with this rich heritage. More importantly, there was a deeper concern about how the history of this area was being understood by the peoples themselves, especially by younger folks. Some native New Mexico historians are trying to rectify the erosion and distortion of the region's history—their heritage, and the legacy left by their ancestors. One such author is Andy Lovato, an administrator at the College of Santa Fe. During an interview published March 31, 2003, for the *Journal North* of the *Albuquerque Journal*, Lovato stated:

Most of what's been written about us has been by and for outsiders. But as a local Hispanic, I've always felt conflicted about other people appropriating our way of life for tourist use. Sure, it's helped us economically. But we always need to distinguish between what's authentic and what's manufactured. I'm very intrigued by the question of what happens when stereotypes become reality.

Lovato's concern has resulted in a book, *Santa Fe Hispanic Culture: Preserving Identity in a Tourist Town*, which will be published by the University of New Mexico Press later this year. During the interview, Lovato further stated, "To what extent are we defined

by ourselves or by others?"

Unfortunately, most of the history books that have been utilized in our schools, and in units of the National Park System for that matter, are replete with inaccuracies—inaccuracies that keep being repeated over and over as new textbooks are printed. These same books of history and these same textbooks become the sources for the interpretive material used by our interpreters in the units of the National Park System to the point that erroneous information becomes fact.

During the past three decades, NPS employees in the Santa Fe office, including historians and archeologists, have been wrestling with the dilemma of how to pursue the preservation of northern New Mexico's rich history without compromising those very values that make this one of the richest places to our nation's heritage. In other words, how can an area's living heritage be interpreted and preserved through means that leave the ways of life intact, or even enhance and encourage the perpetuation of the same? In 1988, Congress requested that NPS undertake a feasibility study of how the state of New Mexico, and communities therein, could commemorate and interpret Spanish colonization sites throughout the state. The study concluded that this period of our nation's history deserved appropriate treatment and recognition. Seven alternatives, without an identified preferred one, were forwarded with the study. The alternatives ranged from having communities working with communities in the commemoration of these sites, to having a state agency work with communities towards the same end, and even having communities pursue the establishment of a national monument or a national historic site in some of the more important sites of Spanish colonization. Although some interest was raised as a result of the public meetings, discussions and consultation with many folks in the state, little action was taken with regard to any of the seven alternatives. The more traditional approach of creating a national monument or national historic site would not lead to the desired end, for the mere establishment of a national monument or historic site would

result in acquisition of property and the “expulsion” of the very people whose lifeways were the focus of preservation and interpretation in these traditional communities.

The interest in, and concern for, the preservation and interpretation of this rich heritage continued among some of us in the NPS office in Santa Fe. In 1998, folks in NPS nominated the Hispanic culture—the tangible and the intangible, including the language spoken in northern New Mexico—to the New Mexico Heritage Preservation Alliance’s list of endangered cultural resources. The nomination was accepted and the fragility of the area’s Hispanic heritage was highlighted during the course of the year. But the struggle for a more sustained effort to preserve and interpret this geographic region’s heritage continued.

In early 1999, NPS historians and management in Santa Fe started investigating the national heritage area program as a possible vehicle for such an undertaking. After preliminary research into the national heritage area concept, and through some deliberation, the decision was made to pursue the idea and to share it with key folks in northern New Mexico. However, the scope of the undertaking was modified to include the broader heritage of the area—that of the American Indian, whose presence is still vibrant in eight pueblos within the area of consideration. This area of consideration included the cities of Santa Fe, Española, and Taos, tens of traditional Hispanic communities, and the eight pueblos. The heritage of this area is multi-dimensional and intertwined with co-mingled traditions, customs, and values of American Indians and Hispanics due to four centuries of co-existence—peaceful and otherwise.

During the period of July through September 1999, contact was made with the mayors of Española and Taos as well as several key New Mexico state government officials in the departments of Economic Development, Tourism, Energy, Minerals, and Natural Resources; with the state historian; and with the Office of Cultural Affairs where the museums, monuments, and historic preservation divisions reside. Discussions were also held with Hispanic and American

Indian historians and people of these cultural groups who are engaged in various walks of life. The response to the national heritage area concept as a means of preserving and interpreting the region’s heritage was extremely positive. The principal reason for this response was due to the principle espoused by heritage areas: local control and local determination. This principle—coupled with that of communities working with communities, communities working with the various governmental entities, governmental entities working with other governmental entities, as well as non-governmental preservation groups working with all of the above—led to the pursuit of a national heritage area by these diverse groups. Thus, the folks in the NPS Santa Fe office began a systematic public information process regarding the national heritage area idea. Contact was then made with officials from other federal agencies, as well as with members and/or staff of the state’s congressional delegation to discuss the national heritage area idea.

During the next eleven months, four NPS employees took to the roads of northern New Mexico—with support and assistance from key people from communities in the area under consideration—to visit informally with individuals in the communities within nine “districts” identified in the informal public information strategy. The reception to the idea of a national heritage area in the region was positive, although there was some trepidation, given the long-standing distrust of the federal government by these traditional communities. The strongest concern that was voiced came with regard to tourism and what that would mean to the privacy and ways of life of these peoples. However, there was a realization that tourism had existed in the region for almost a century and that the tourism infrastructure within the state—in the form of the Department of Tourism, tourism organizations, as well as chambers of commerce and convention and visitors bureaus—was seeking and employing means through which this industry could be expanded. There also came a realization that the principle of local control and management of a heritage area could lead

to forms of tourism that take the people's interests into account.

After having completed an informal circuit-riding to introduce the concept of heritage areas, the mayor of the city of Española hosted a forum on the national heritage area idea in September 2000. Representatives from the nine "districts," including representatives from some of the pueblos, came to a consensus that there was sufficient interest in the idea of a national heritage area to proceed. Each "district" then selected a representative to serve on a steering committee to work with NPS to pursue the concept in earnest. The steering committee began its work on a dual track: becoming more deeply informed and educated on heritage areas, and pursuing support for the idea from local and county councils and commissions. At the same time, the steering committee began outreach efforts to their neighbors: the eight American Indian pueblos and their collaborative entity, the Eight Northern Indian Pueblo Council. Letters of support were solicited from individuals, non-profit organizations, and state government officials, as well as state senators and representatives. Resolutions of support were sought and acquired from county commissions and municipal councils. All of these documents were secured by early 2002, before the state's U.S. senators and the U.S. representative from the 3rd congressional district introduced legislation in their respective chambers. During the waning days of the 107th Congress, the legislation to designate the Northern Rio Grande National Heritage Area, encompassing the counties of Santa Fe, Taos and Rio Arriba, passed the Senate but met an untimely death when the House of Representatives chose not to take any action on legislative matters, other than homeland security, on the last day that they convened in mid-November.

In the meantime, the steering committee formalized itself into the board of the Northern Rio Grande National Heritage Area, Inc., and is presently seeking to enlarge its

membership to a 25-member board as prescribed in its by-laws. The board has begun another round of contacts with governmental officials, county commissions, municipal councils, and non-governmental organizations to seek their renewed support for designating legislation. Once again, the two U.S. senators and the representative of the 3rd congressional district have introduced legislation—S. 211 and H.R. 505, respectively—for the designation of the Northern Rio Grande National Heritage Area.

To summarize, these descendants of the pueblo Indians and the Spanish settlers in the vicinity of north-central New Mexico are serious about pursuing the congressional designation of a national heritage area. They are committed to the concept because:

- They can preserve that which they value;
- They are the most qualified to relate their respective histories;
- Management of their national heritage area is in their hands;
- They can engage local, state, and federal agencies in a collaborative implementation of a management plan for the national heritage area;
- They can employ the principles of tourism management; and
- They can realize a level of respect and national recognition of their rich heritage—a recognition and respect long-awaited and deserved.

This undertaking—a people in control of the preservation and interpretation of their heritage—serves as an excellent case study for the theme of this conference: protecting a diverse heritage. Moreover, this undertaking serves as an excellent case study because *diverse* peoples are pursuing the protection, preservation, and interpretation of their *diverse* heritage! Of the existing twenty-three national heritage areas, very few, if any, focus on the heritage of diverse peoples, thus making this an even greater undertaking.

