



A PERIPATETIC
PHOTOGRAPHER
IN AN
ENCHANTED LAND

BY MARC SIMMONS



A PERIPATETIC PHOTOGRAPHER

For a century or more, artists, writers and photographers have been mining the cultural and natural riches of New Mexico and using them to make lasting contributions. In this wide and sunlit land of mesas and mountains, history lies close to the surface. Pueblo Indians dance to songs and drumming already ancient when Columbus was a boy. And elderly Hispanos speak a lilting Spanish, so archaic that Miguel de Cervantes would have found it pleasantly familiar.

As a lifelong student and writer of New Mexico history, I have come to appreciate the contributions of hardy pioneer photographers who, in spite of hardship and danger, managed to capture images of scenes and people now gone from this earth.

Photography first came into use during the 1840s, just as the American frontier began its final push toward the Far West. Daguerreotyping was the process initially employed to make pictures on copper plate.

The oldest daguerreotype in New Mexico is a splendid image of the famous Taos priest, Padre Antonio José Martínez. It was probably taken in 1847 and is now owned by the Albuquerque Museum.

In the 1850s ambrotypes on glass plate and tintypes on iron plate were introduced. But the first New Mexican photographer of record was Siegmund Seligman who opened a daguerreotype studio at Santa Fe about 1851.

For the next couple of decades, photographers of the several types wandered up and down the Rio Grande Valley, setting up temporary studios in small adobe towns. After a few days or a week of portrait making, they moved on.

By the 1880s photography had become more sophisticated and men increasingly began to turn their cameras on outdoor scenes that highlighted New Mexico's exotic qualities.

One was young Joseph Edward Smith, a Midwesterner who had worked as a photographer's assistant before relocating in the Socorro area. After a brief stint as a cowboy and a miner, he bought out the Bass Studio in 1884 and served for many years as Socorro's town photographer.

Another youth who entered New Mexico in the mid 1880s was Charles F. Lummis. He became captivated by history and archeology and developed skill as an amateur photographer to provide illustrations for his writings.

Lummis sometimes used the cyanotype process, a quick and easy method for making photographic prints in blue. He favored images of Indians and Hispano village scenes. In my collection, I have several of Lummis's original blue cyanotypes.

Among the earliest landscape photographers in the Territory was Harry W. Lucas who settled at Silver City in 1882. The local press reported that he ranged over a wide section of the country "making elegant views of the scenery."

And then we have Ben Wittick to whom all historians of the Southwest are indebted. He reached Santa Fe in 1878 and soon headed for the back country to snap peerless pictures of Pueblo Indians, Apaches, and frontier life. The Museum of New Mexico Photo Archives has an excellent collection of his work.

Poor Wittick died in 1903 from a rattlesnake bite, near Ft. Wingate. He had snared the snake intending to give it to his Hopi friends for a ceremonial dance.

In the twentieth century, New Mexico has seen many famous names in the field of photography. Among them are Ansel Adams, Eliot Porter, Laura Gilpin, Paul Strand, and Willard Van Dyke.

This southwestern country, at once both fair and harsh, also provides the subject matter for acclaimed photographer Craig Varjabedian's large format camera. "My pictures are about light that

dances across distant mountain peaks and the light that illuminates the human spirit,” he has declared. Those words help us view his photographs of New Mexico with new clarity and understanding.

By pure chance, Varjabedian at age fifteen met and came under the influence of the renowned Ansel Adams, who was installing an exhibit of his photographs at a gallery in Birmingham, Michigan. “This was my first real connection to the world of the lens,” he wrote later. Upon graduation from the University of Michigan in 1979 (Bachelor of Fine Arts in Photography), he headed to California to study with Adams. Returning east, he passed through New Mexico, spent a night sleeping in his car on the Santa Fe plaza, and at dawn watched the sunrise over the Sangre de Cristo mountains behind the city. At that moment, he says, “New Mexico became hallowed ground for me.”

Several years elapsed, however, before Varjabedian could take advantage of that personal revelation. He spent a brief time in New York City until he was admitted in 1983 into the Master of Fine Arts Photography program at the Rochester Institute of Technology. While there, the viewing of an exhibition from New Mexico, *The Wise Silence: Photographs of Paul Caponigro*, proved to be something of a turning point, inasmuch as it solidified the growing conviction that his destiny lay in the Southwest. Soon he was headed back to New Mexico and the authentic beginning of his fine art professional career.

Varjabedian’s first large project, extending over several years, came to be called The Morada Photographic Survey. It involved extensive travel throughout northern New Mexico and southern Colorado, finding and documenting with the camera *moradas* or chapel/chapter houses of the very old Penitente Brotherhood. With roots deep in the Spanish Middle Ages, the Penitentes had evolved as a fraternal religious body to fill the vacuum created by the

scarcity of Catholic priests during the late colonial period. Their distinctive moradas, some in ruins, seemed to be waiting for a skilled photographer to capture them on film.

This protracted project resulted in a published book titled, *En Divina Luz: The Penitente Moradas of New Mexico* (University of New Mexico Press, 1994), in a traveling fifty-print exhibition, and in an Emmy Award winning public television documentary film, shown more than 350 times around the country. Success of the endeavor led the photographer into a new work: *By the Grace of Light: Images of Faith from Catholic New Mexico*. In this he explored the impact of the 400th anniversary of the bringing of Christianity to New Mexico. Both projects established Craig Varjabedian as a major American photographer.

The late Beaumont Newhall, the preeminent photography historian, once stated that Varjabedian's images were "not only beautiful but also valuable documents of architecture, culture and history." That perfectly sums up why photographers and historians are natural allies. As a writer on the subject of the New Mexican past, I am constantly reminded of the debt owed to those who, like Craig Varjabedian, have dedicated themselves to "the world of the lens," yesterday and today.



Marc Simmons, Ph.D., is a native of Dallas and an independent historian living in Cerrillos, N.M. Internationally known, he is considered New Mexico's Historian Laureate and has published thirty-five books on New Mexican history. In 1993 the King of Spain granted him membership in the knightly Order of Isabel la Católica for his contributions to Spanish colonial history.