

ESCAPE TO RUIDOSO • MEET THE NEW GOVERNOR

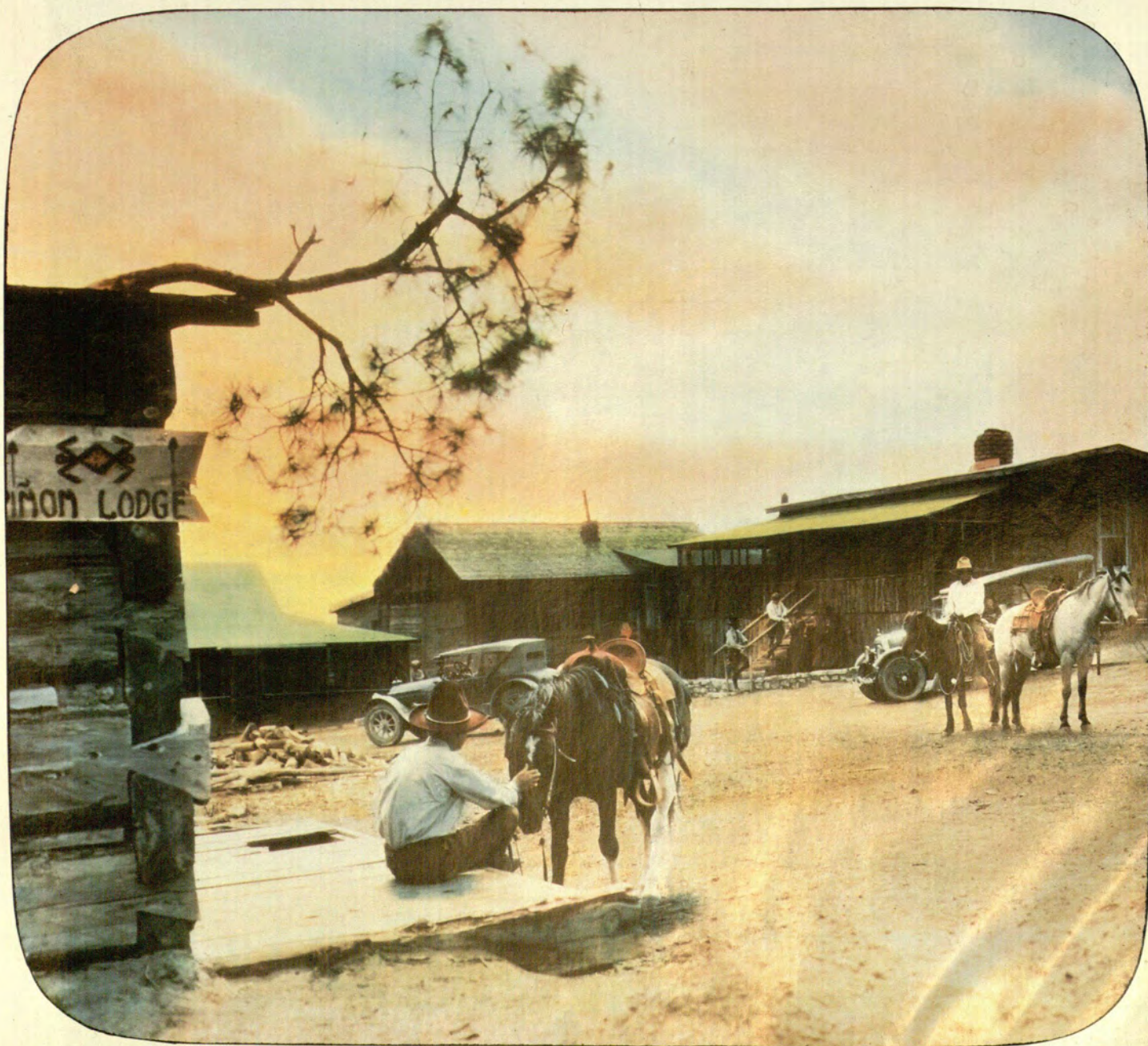
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Stories by Tony Hillerman, Marc Simmons
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Dana B. Chase, courtesy of Museum of New Mexico, Neg. No. 56987



A religious procession on San Francisco Street in Santa Fe, circa 1890.

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COVER—The hand-painted "lantern slide" was taken by Edward H. Kemp and is part of the William E. Kopplin Collection of photographs. Depicted is the Crystal Trading Post in Crystal on the Navajo Reservation near the Arizona border. The photograph appears in T.C. McLuhan's book *Dream Tracks: The Railroad and the American Indian, 1890-1930*.

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Rainbow Near Galisteo by Doug Keats[©]

THE MYSTIQUE OF THE LAND



Tree and Cloud, Rancho San Sebastian, by Paul Caponigro®

by Tony Hillerman

At this place the San Juan River has not sunk between the towering stone battlements that wall it in through much of its journey through New Mexico, Arizona and Utah. Here its valley is broader and the river has built a mile of tree-shaded sandbars along a low cliff of sandstone. Once, perhaps 900 years ago, a few Anasazi families built a tiny stone settlement here. There is nothing to see of that now except those weedy humps that centuries of blowing dust form over ruins. But in the cliff above these fallen walls are footholds the Anasazi cut to link them to the world above the river, and a dim gallery of petroglyphs to link them to a world we still try to understand.

I found this place in August. (Not the first visitor, surely. A Navajo had come along perhaps a hundred years ago and added a pictograph of a horse low on the cliff. More recently, someone picked up broken bits of pottery and left them lined on a boulder.) It was one of those hot and breathless afternoons with occasional thunder echoing from somewhere and great clouds towering over the river. As petroglyphs go, these were nothing remarkable. The concentric circles were there, the symbol Hopi clans still use to mark humanity's evolution from the womb of earth and their migrations toward civilization and the middle place of the universe. A line of dots led from one circle to one of those broad-shouldered figures that anthropologists tell us represent kachina spirits. This one had elongated feet with three long toes—like a wading bird. There were many other figures. Where the desert varnish had broken away, there were parts of figures. I looked at them a long time before I noticed, cut through the layered manganese oxide stain a bit above all the rest, the profile outline of a great blue heron.

I have fished the San Juan for years—winter and

summer. I am a cautious wader, moving carefully and quietly. Therefore I see a lot of the San Juan's waterfowl, startling grebe, mudhen, mallard, Canada goose, even cranes, from their dinners, and being startled in turn by them. But I never had seen a heron on the river. Snowy egrets, yes. Perhaps the artist had drawn an egret. But it looked like a blue heron. And just a little later and a little downstream, a great blue heron rose soundlessly from the seep willows at the edge of an eddy and flew slowly and majestically away.

I make absolutely nothing of that. Nothing at all. I had only confirmed with my own eyes that great blue heron (one, at least) inhabit the San Juan River canyon—a fact the bird book on my shelf already had noted. The incident has no significance. But I will remember it—the slow-moving wings, the same shape etched through the dark varnish into the stone, the kachina spirit with feet of a bird; the quiet heat, the thunder, the place.

Once Conrad Richter visited the Plains of San Agustin. "... The beauty, the mystery, the immensity of the grassland got into my blood," Richter tells us in an article he wrote for this magazine 30 years ago. It inspired Richter's classic novel *The Sea of Grass*. It seems strange but it is true, Richter told us, that something as inanimate as a place can inspire love in a human being.

We have other such testimony. Haniel Long never could forget a certain twilight at Cienega. In one of his most beautiful essays he wrote: "I see it all again; and yet, can these houses be so red? And the dogs the children play with, can they be so white? And the Cerrillos hills seen through an arroyo leading skyward, can they be so blue? And when one goes to it between the walls of blue rock, one may really not be going to it at all, but rather dreaming a dream he has dreamt before. Surely



Peñasco Valley at Dusk by Alex Harris©

no one can be sure he has visited Cienega; people say to themselves, do they not: 'Was it a vision; or have I, some time or other, seen dusk in a valley like this?'"

D.H. Lawrence said his brief experience with the view from the Taos Mountains "changed me forever," liberating him from modern civilization. "... The moment I saw the brilliant, proud morning shine high up over the deserts of Santa Fe, something stood still in my soul, and I attended."

Mary Austin herself, the grande dame of New Mexico letters, warned us we can't adequately discuss a country, any more than we can a woman, without considering "the inexplicable effect produced by it on the people who live there." Such a country as New Mexico, she said, "calls its own from the four world quarters," because in this unusual and unprosperous landscape they "felt the nameless content of the creative spirit in the presence of its proper instrument."

Let us then consider our country by considering the inexplicable effect it has on the people it has called—from the Anasazi artist who summoned the spirit of the great blue heron to his canyon farm to men who live in the modern civilization from which Lawrence claimed to be liberated. Places, indeed, seem to call creative people. I think of Peter Hurd. I think of the places he loved to paint along the Río Hondo and in the shortgrass hills of Lincoln and Roosevelt counties. I think of Norman Zollinger. He saw the Tularosa Basin as a bombing range, flew his missions over Europe and came back to use it as the setting for his novels. I think of John Nichols' love affair with the Taos plateau and of Frank Waters with Black Mesa over his shoulder. I think of the late Ross Calvin, whose memory of a desert waterhole in New Mexico's "dry corner" enriches everyone who has read *Sky Determines*.

Whether or not we write, or paint or play the flute, I think all of us have places that speak to us. N. Scott Momaday says something of that in *The Man Made of Words*, telling us that each of us should have a piece of remembered earth, a place we should examine, wonder about, dwell upon, until we can imagine every sound that is made upon it and reproduce in our mind "the glare of noon and all the colors of dawn and dusk."

New Mexico has given me a rosary of such places. A lot of them are lonely corners.

White Sands on a night deep in winter when no one is there. Far back in the dunes, away from the tracks, the starlight gives the wind-carved gypsum shapes an existence as unreal and dreamlike as Haniel Long's memory of that Cienega twilight.

The hundreds of acres of fire-killed timber below Mount Taylor's Mosca Peak on a rainy day. When that old mountain is inside a cloud, the wilderness of fallen fir trunks around you loses its edges in the fog. It becomes a sort of vague infinity of tumbled vertical lines. The Navajo *yai*, First Man, built this sacred mountain on a blue blanket, pinned it to Mother Earth with a magic knife, decorated it with morning mist and decreed that here the bluebirds would nest, and here Turquoise Girl and Blue Corn Boy would live forever.

To me, no place can make the great poetry of the Navajo creation story become as real.

Toltec Gorge, somewhere south of Broke Off Mountain, summer evening, the smell of ozone lingering after a thunderstorm, the very last of the sunset's reflection tinting the blue spruce, and everything else, an unlikely color. Then the eerie call of a saw-whet owl comes to you from deep in the canyon, the sound of an ogre sawing off the chains that hold him down in the darkness.

The last hill on the long dirt road north from Navajo 9 to Chaco Canyon. In the late afternoon, a long black shadow slants away from Fajada Butte and the sandstone cliffs of Chaco Mesa turn pink and salmon. Something about this great dry emptiness always reminds me of the story Navajos have about this awesome place in their account of how The People came to live in Dinétah. It seems that when the Holy People found Chaco, the Old Ones who lived there were slaves of Never Loses. The Chacoans had bet everything they possessed on games with this supernatural gambler. Losing everything, they bet their freedom and lost that, too. So the Navajo spirits—Wind Boy, Darkness Boy, Growling God, First Man, Coyote, Corn Beetle and the rest of them—devised their own games, full of deceit and trickery. They won the Chacoans their freedom and sent the angry Never Loses into perpetual exile. The Navajo explanation of what happened next to those who built the 13 apartment cities in this stony place is shorter. They went away. A thousand anthropologists have compiled the same answer, which raises a thousand other questions. From this hill, you look down the slope into an insignificant valley where civilization flourished briefly and was lost. I like to sit here and consider such imponderables as Never Loses' greed and what the last man to leave might have seen from his third-story window in the echoing emptiness of Pueblo Bonito.

I could lengthen this list. So could most New Mexicans. I have not mentioned the crazy sculpture gardens of the Bisti Badlands, nor Shiprock—rising like an out-of-scale rococo cathedral above the San Juan County prairie, nor the odd sense of total isolation that driving the road over Johnson Mesa always gives me, nor a dozen other such places which—as Mary Austin said—call to their own.

All of them have made a mark on my memory as indelible as the Anasazi artist's great blue heron. ❖

Tony Hillerman, who lives in Albuquerque, is an award-winning author who has written 13 books based in the Southwest. He is best known for his mystery novels, many of them bestsellers, set on the Navajo Reservation. His latest book, *Skinwalkers*, was just published by Harper and Row. Hillerman has spent many years in New Mexico working as a journalist and editor. He also is a former professor of journalism at the University of New Mexico.

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