

Cultural Tourism and Self-Representation

Ted Jojola

Since the advent of “leisure” as a class activity, New Mexico has been a focus of the itinerant sightseer. “See America First” and the “Southwest Wonder Land” were clichés which resounded in the introductory chapter of *Mesa, Cañon and Pueblo*, a 1925 travel book, written by an adventurer, Charles Fletcher Lummis. The phrases aptly summarized an epoch of early New Mexico tourism and image-building.

Paramount in such imagery were the many American Indian communities that inhabit the region. Although the cultures of the Apache, Navajo and Pueblo peoples are rich and distinctive, outsiders ultimately formulated their own images of American Indians. The dominant Indian stereotype became the war bonneted, face-painted and buckskin-clad “chief,” an image popularized by the paintings commissioned by the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railway in the 1900s. The penetration of this popular stereotype into the Southwest mystified outsiders’ understanding of the local cultures. A Southwest Indian myth was invented, as New Mexico also became populated with benign rattlesnakes, howling coyotes, Indian chiefs and desperados.

Curiously, in this period there were two distinctive but often parallel aspects of “Indian” image-making. One was promulgated by social scientists in the fields of anthropology, ethnography and history. The other was developed by entrepreneurs of the tourism and film industries. Among social scientists, New Mexico became a “living laboratory.” Among entrepreneurs, New Mexico became a “living backdrop.” In both instances, the representations were devised by outsiders whose interests were served by the affirmation of a primitive and exotic human landscape. They drew on their own preconceptions and prejudged experiences to selectively appro-

priate elements of the “Indian.” The resulting image was a subjective interpretation that merely corroborated the outsider’s viewpoint. This process of revisionism more often than not entailed remaking American Indians apart and separate from their own historical and community realities.

The impact of revisionism among American Indians themselves in New Mexico was appreciable. Many Natives catered exclusively to the “Indian Chief” image and, for years, social scientists voiced their concerns about the disappear-



Tourists purchase wares under a portal in Santa Fe.
Photo by Henry Grasso

Ted Jojola, Ph.D., from Isleta Pueblo, New Mexico, is Director of Native American Studies at the University of New Mexico.



Santa Clara Eagle Dancers are ringed by spectators and Harvey cars, ca. 1928. *Photo courtesy Museum of New Mexico*

ance of Native traditions and culture. The Southwest Indian mystification has become so pervasive that an average tourist expects the word “authentic” to indicate that the Native people have used prehistoric techniques to produce their wares.

On the other hand, New Mexico has a complex pluralistic human settlement history characterized by subtle transformations and by the constant adaptation of new cultural traditions among distinct communities. Many of these transformations have emerged from the interaction of diverse Anglo, Hispanic and American Indian communities. The abilities of various communities to adapt creatively to outside traditions has been largely ignored or understated.

These distortions in representation, in the context of Indians’ growing empowerment, has created a challenging issue in New Mexico today: how will tribes themselves regulate their own tourist enterprises, should they choose to do so. This is a relatively new question resulting partially from an attempt by tribal governments to diversify their economies. Both the Pueblos of Zuni and Pojoaque have begun planning for the

development and construction of tribal museums. In addition, cultural programming for a number of new museums across the United States, including the Smithsonian’s new National Museum of the American Indian, causes many tribes to rethink their images.

The central question that remains is whether American Indian communities will defer to the same revisionist images that have been ascribed by the outside. As “insiders,” how much cultural information will they be willing to divulge, and for what reasons? How will they “revise” their own image, while coping with some of the same issues of representation that confront museum curators today? Will they allow communities to continue to be “living museums” or will they choose to stage pageants and reenactments designed to shroud their real community presence and deflect tourism away from their private lives? By addressing these and other important questions, they will undoubtedly be able to demystify the Indian mystique and contribute to the revision of the prevailing stereotypes of the Southwest Indian.