

Book reveals how Chavez family played key role in state's history

One recent autumn day, I was walking through the open courtyard of Santa Fe's El Dorado Hotel, 80-year-old Fray Angelico Chavez called my name. He was sitting at a wrought-iron table, wearing a black beret and smoking a cigar.

"Sit down," he said. "I have something for you." And he handed me an inscribed copy of his latest book, just released by William Gannon, Publisher, of Santa Fe. Titled "Chavez, A Distinctive American Clan of New Mexico," it is a combination genealogical and anecdotal history of his family.

Accomplished author of novels, shot stories, poetry and histories, Fray Angelico, a retired Franciscan, has long been something of a New Mexico institution. Any new work of his is an event of some importance.

The book is a distillation of what the author has been able to learn about his family tree during a lifetime of study. Usually, such a subject will put a reader to sleep. But that's not the case with Fray Angelico's offering, which, like all his books, is rich in historical detail, soundly researched, well written and lightened with personal observations. In short, he has produced what promises to become another classic of New Mexicana.

Of course, the writer's task was eased by the fact that the Chavez clan was nothing short of fascinating, its members through many generations playing key roles in the development of New Mexico.

It is to Fray Angelico's credit, and a measure of his historical honesty, that he makes no attempt to feather over the careers of several of his ancestors who show up a rascals and schemers. Most students of genealogy have no wish to mention the few black sheep in their family flock, and so the story is



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New Mexico Scrapbook

left incomplete and less interesting.

The Chavez men originally came from the province of Extremadura in southwestern Spain, the birthplace of the conqueror Cortez. One branch of the family had claims to nobility.

Several Chavezes were associated with the earliest years of the New Mexico colony. Diego Chavez, for instance, entered with the founder Juan de Oñate in 1598. But he was killed later that year with the party of Spaniards massacred at Acoma Pueblo.

Then there was Don Pedro Duran y Chaves who arrived on the Rio Grande with reinforcements in 1600. Apparently he participated in the founding of Santa Fe 10 years later.

Don Pedro and his wife, Dona Isabel, had two sons, Fernando and Pedro Jr. In the early 1640s they were part of a plot that resulted in the assassination of Governor Luis de Rosas. He was a first-rate scoundrel who dishonored a young woman who was related to the Chavezes.

The two brothers escaped execution, probably through the intervention of powerful friends. But they were forced to watch the beheading of eight other conspirators, including their uncle.

Pedro Jr. was 70 years old in 1680 when the Pueblo Revolt swept across New Mexico. He

was among the lucky ones to escape south to El Paso, which became a refugee center.

There, Pedro Jr. was accused by other colonists of hogging an unfair share of rations sent them by the viceroy and also of engaging in profiteering. He and most of the other family survivors eventually moved south into Chihuahua where the Chavez name is conspicuous to this day.

It was left to Fernando Chavez II to return to upper New Mexico from El Paso in the 1690s and re-establish the family there. He became a major actor in the events surrounding the reconquest by Diego de Vargas.

Down through the colonial years, Chavezes continued to perform remarkable feats and get entangled in bizarre episodes. Their stories, long buried in dusty archives, have been patiently dug out and skillfully told by Fray Angelico.

He notes that some years ago the duchess of Noblejas — head of the noble Chavez branch in Spain — was visiting Washington, D.C., and decided to fly to Santa Fe and see what she could learn about the New Mexico Chavezes.

At the airport, she greeted Fray Angelico like a long lost cousin. Later, she gave him a hand-painted copy of the handsome Chavez family crest.

That heraldic crest is reproduced on the cover of Fray Angelico's book, which also contains illustrations by El Paso's peerless historical artist, Jose Cisneros.

Perhaps this volume will inspire the writing of others dealing with the many notable families of Spain who colonized the arid lands along the Rio Grande.

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