

## **El Cuartelejo: The Outlier**

Elizabeth Dodd

The high plains of western Kansas are famously flat, so much so that several years ago a couple of geographers, irreverent graduate students, I think, took an IHOP pancake back to campus and, using something called a confocal laser microscope, measured the macro-pancake topography, compared it to the USGS digital elevation model of Kansas' topography and determined, and I quote precisely, that the "degree of flatness" for my state "might be described, mathematically, as 'damn flat.'"

Still, there are pockets. A few sedimentary spires and outcrops rise like pale versions of hoodoos from Utah. The headwaters of one particularly lovely stream—Ladder Creek—lie in the flattest part of eastern Colorado, and the waterway meanders and twists, flowing into Kansas with sudden doglegs like a gerrymandered congressional district. You can be moving along past un-cut lines of corn in their regimented standstill, or skimming past the buzz stubble of a wheat field already harvested, and then suddenly you're at the rim, looking down at a crenelated canyon land. "It looks like New Mexico," says a friend of mine when I say I want to go there to camp. That it does. And it's the place where at least one, probably two, and maybe more groups of emigrants from the ancient pueblos along the Rio Grande, went to escape Spanish colonial tyranny more than two hundred years ago.

There's so much history and nuance beneath, and behind, the horizontal/tabular aspect. And who doesn't love the story of a human outpost, a holdout, a last bastion beyond the reach of distant power?

In this story, the written record appears in fragments. In the eighteenth century, Franciscan priest Silvestre Vélez de Escalante—famous for his journey through the west in the year 1776 and memorialized in the National Monument, which, even after whittling away by the Trump administration, still bears his name—Fray Escalante recounted stories from a hundred years before. “In the Middle of the last century,” he wrote, “some families of Christian Indians of the nation and pueblo of Taos rebelled, withdrew to the buffalo plains and fortified themselves at a place which afterwards on this account was called *El Cuartelejo*.”

By the 1600s the Spaniards had figured out they weren't going to be able to loot whole cities of gold in what is today the American Southwest, and it would be centuries more before the frackable wealth underground would be discovered. So the primary pretext for their occupation was to minister to the indigenous, embedding Franciscan missions in the heart of each pueblo, and, not infrequently, calling on the military to forcibly pacify the Indians' resistance to those ministrations. Thereby, of course, the Spanish also were sticking it to the French, denying *ces gens-la* any *prise de pied* for colonial exploration. Thereby, too, they were comforting the younger Spanish sons, those resentful left-outs and also-rans, chafing under their non-inheritance of patriarchal wealth through primogeniture. Here was a way to allow these not-privileged-enough men to have their ships come in, in that land of dry rivers. *Encomienda*: the slavery-system the conquerers dragged along with them from their bloody Crusades across the sea, allowed the *encomendero* and his descendants to pry out wealth-of-a-sort, labor or tribute, from the surrounding nations they had invaded. This gave rise to the administrator class dedicated to striking it rich or richer through their seats of government in the New World.

Somehow I had always vaguely thought *ecomienda*-the-word derived from *comer*, to eat, dressing the practice in Anglo-style Thanksgiving decoration, the “tribute” being maize and

beans and continentally ubiquitous turkeys. But that's not so—the irony is bedrock deep. It actually comes from the *ar*-verb “to trust”: *encomendar*. Note the adjective in Fray Escalante's account above: *Christian* Indians. Part of the “deal” of *encomienda* was winning souls for God through instruction and conversion to the Catholic faith—so much winning! Thus protection of what Christian tribute the Indians owed to God was much of that with which the *encomendero* was supposed to be entrusted.

But back to El Cuartelejo. That name is often said to be a mash-up of *cuarto*, room and *lejos*, distant. But one scholar I read, a recent translator of the eighteenth century texts, has a different view. “*Cuartel* is a fortified place or outpost or barracks,” he writes. “The *-ejo* suffix usually should be translated as a pejorative diminutive, especially in colonial or Old Spanish. For example, *lugarejo* (*lugar* meaning place or town) when given the *-ejo* suffix can be translated as a ‘podunk town.’ I translate ‘El Cuartelejo,’” he says, “as ‘stinking little fort.’”

In the middle of the 1600s, resistance to the Franciscans peppered the Rio Grande valley, and the priests stepped up with punishments, some of them creative in their brutality. Friars at Zuni, Taos, Jemez, and Hopi were killed, and the Puebloans withdrew to traditional refuge locations the people had relied on in times of inter-tribal war—the high buttes of Corn Mountain, Old Kotyiti, and Black Mesa, for example. By 1639 or 1640, the Spanish thug-lords were particularly energetic in hanging men from Jemez Pueblo, claiming they had collaborated with Apache and Navajo enemies of the Spaniards. It was a good time for people to leave their homes for sanctuary far from the barbarism of the priests and soldiers. In Taos, too, the depraved depredations of the resident priest incited a revolt followed by an exodus to some place safer.

Those refugees left the territory of New Mexico altogether, traveling some three hundred miles from their ancestral mountains and buttes, canyons and arroyos. Yet the caravan of

emigrants, fleeing north and east, would have known exactly where they were headed. In that part of the world, permanent water sources are still both painterly beautiful and cartographically renowned, and they would have been a clear destination on any traveler's mental map. The migrants settled along the banks of a stream that still flows year round, even after decades of aquifer-mining—center pivot irrigation—in the high plains. Nineteenth century Euro-American immigrants called the waterway Beaver Creek or Ladder Creek; I have no idea what names it held in other languages throughout the centuries prior. Apache people already lived there, but the groups had economic ties, including their cooperative acquisition, throughout the 1600s, of Spanish horses. The trading partners apparently settled into a sociable life together: Centuries later the contemporaneous Apaches's teepee rings and roasting pits still lay less than a hundred yards from the stone-and-adobe ruins of the pueblo. Many of that first wave of refugees were captured and dragged back to New Mexico by one Capitan Juan de Archuleta, probably in 1642 or '43, before he was executed in the power struggle between the corrupt Spanish governor and the religiously-insistent Franciscans. But some of the emigrants from Taos escaped that violence and stayed on.

Later, people from Picuris pueblo lit out for El Cuartelejo, too. This part of the story emerges from the 1690s, the decade after the pan-pueblo Revolt planned by a shaman named Popé with heavy involvement by people from the Tiwa pueblos of Taos and Picuris. The revolt's success had resulted in a dozen years of freedom from genocide and economic austerity for the Puebloan people along the Rio Grande valley. A dozen years, and then Governor Diego de Vargas returned from the south. Through threat followed by acquiescence, and then by terrorism and execution, Vargas launched his reconquest of that portion of New Spain. Once again people

from the northern pueblos fled the violence at home, taking refuge in the little fort on the buffalo plains.

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The little fort, when excavated by H. T. Martin, in 1898, measured fifty-three by thirty-five feet and contained seven rooms, none of which were seen to have had exterior doors, so the archaeologists concluded that all access was through the roof, via ladders that had left telltale posthole marks in the soil. And though Martin and his co-author S.W. Williston insisted the proper name for the nearby stream was Beaver Creek, not Ladder Creek, it is the latter name that locals used at the time, and which persists on current maps. The creek is said to have been so called because Euro-American immigrants to the territory, a little more than a century after the fort's abandonment, found submerged in the channel an old wooden ladder made of sticks, rungs bound to posts by strips of leather.

“Perhaps no stream in the western part of the state offers more favorable conditions for irrigation... in the driest years there is always an abundance of water in the stream, and in the deep pools along its course there are always many fish,” wrote my turn of the century sources, Martin and Williston. In fact, an artesian spring still flows year round from the west rim of the canyon. It's known today as the only place in the state where Virginia Rails overwinter—the spring ensures there's always open water. My partner, Dave, has been there in December for a Christmas Bird Count (a kind of citizen-scientist pilgrimage in the dark part of the year), and he can testify that it's true.

The little fort was positioned, wrote Martin, “as nearly due east and west in its greater measurement as would be possible to locate it with an ordinary compass.”

Over the years I've read a lot about sun-watching and the sacred calendar of ancient Puebloan people. I've watched sun- and moon-rises that align perfectly with the ancient architecture, the multi-story great houses or half-underground kivas—most of these little pilgrimages to alignment have taken place at the winter solstice, at high enough altitude to make dawn a shivering experience in both asceticism and exhilaration. I've visited rock art sites all over the southwest which constellate the places people lived and planted and prayed to the procession of the sun from solstice to solstice, so in my quest for a place-based parable of resistance, I take heart, too, at the thought of the exiles building in their familiar customs. Not a squalid shelter; not a refugee camp of slap-dash lean-tos and tents of despair. They laid out the walls of their distant rooms in calibration with the known cosmos; the sun moving, despite whatever catastrophe raged below, in its timeless migrations from summer home to winter home. The migrants must have had the time, and sense of purpose, to turn the architectural practices they'd brought from home towards protecting their cultural institutions.

We had to go to El Cuartelejo, and see for ourselves...



*Elizabeth Dodd reads at the 2019 Sowell Conference.*

