Living in a State of Enchantment

It’s ironic that the very things that make New Mexico marvelous and unique—dramatic climate, sere country, a sharp diversity of peoples—were the very things that so many bewhiskered windbags in Washington found loufthsome when they were pondering statehood candidates in the late 1800s. To many back East, this place seemed a crazy-quilt of weird religions, unintelligible languages, and warring tribes, all set in a forbidding moonscape. Some politicians vowed that New Mexico should remain a Territory forever; others contended that the U.S. should just give it all back to Mexico and be done with the place.

But New Mexico is rather like cholla cactus: It has a way of sticking to people. It worked its way into the national imagination and eventually won over those politicians back East. On January 6, 1912, America welcomed her 47th member of the Union.

Yet even with statehood, I’m not sure New Mexico was ever fully conquered or assimilated, and that’s something I’ve always loved about this place. It’s still very much its own land, at the crossroads of myriad cultures, where the desert meets the mountains meet the plains. Living here is probably the closest one can come to an expat experience in the Lower 48. We’re in the United States, but not entirely of it.

So, happy 100th birthday, New Mexico. There is nowhere else quite like you. You offer a sense of space and possibility stretching to the horizons. And you keep reminding me, whenever I leave you: I live in the right place.
An Eventful Debut

1912–1922

New Mexicans celebrated the long-awaited news of statehood with great fanfare on January 6, 1912. Drivers honked their horns, people danced in the streets, and patriotic parades were held in communities across the state. Nine days later, seven thousand New Mexicans cheered when William C. McDonald took the oath of office as the state’s first governor.

Filled with enthusiasm, state leaders promoted New Mexico at the Panama-California Exposition in San Diego—and won the prize for the best state exhibit. Silent movies filmed here, with stars like Mary Pickford and Tom Mix, also drew attention to the state.

The jubilation suddenly ended in 1916, when the Mexican Revolution spilled over the border and Pancho Villa destroyed much of Columbus, New Mexico. “Black Jack” Pershing and his Punitive Expedition chased Villa in Mexico for nearly a year, but never caught him.

When the United States entered the Great War in 1917, more than 15,000 New Mexicans served in the armed forces; 501 men lost their lives. More than 15,000 New Mexicans served in the Great War in 1917, more than any other state.

1918: The Art Gallery of the Museum of New Mexico (now the New Mexico Museum of Art) opens in Santa Fe. Carlos Viera helped design the Museum, using the 1630 San Esteban mission at Acoma Pueblo as his model. Viera’s creation and others like it contributed to the design aesthetic now internationally known as Santa Fe Style.

1912: Los Cinco Pintores (The Five Painters)—José Roybal, WJ Shute, Walter Mruk, Willard Nash, and Fremont Ellis—hold their first exhibit in Santa Fe.

1921: Los Cien Pintores (The Hundred Painters) exhibit at the Balloon Fiesta in Albuquerque.

1922: The Inter-Tribal Indian Ceremonial begins in Gallup. The event includes a parade through town, Native dances, and an art fair. Navajos, Comanches, Kiowas, Apaches, Zunis, and Taos Puebloans, among many other U.S. tribes and first nations from other countries, attended the event then and continue to do so. The 50th annual event will be held in August.

1912: The Santa Fe County Assessor records some 200 burros on the tax rolls. These creatures are highly valued as tourist attractions, described by the Santa Fe New Mexican in 1915 as the “saints of the desert.”

1916: Elephant Butte Dam, the second largest irrigation dam in the world, opens creating one of the largest bodies of water in the state. The lake becomes a destination for fishing and boating. Other popular water-recreation areas in the state include Eagle Nest Lake, Navajo Lake, and the San Juan River; the last provides some of North America’s best fly-fishing.

1915: Ernest L. Blumenschein (right) and Bert G. Phillips decided to stay in Taos after having their wagon wheel ripped from them in 1898. They went on to form the Taos Society of Artists, one of the most influential in the history of New Mexican art.

1913: The official state seal is adapted from the territorial seal, which featured a Mexican brown eagle with a snake in its mouth, perching on a cactus plant. In the new seal, an American eagle spreads its wings and clutches an arrow, representing the change in sovereignty from Mexico to the U.S. The seal bears the Latin phrase “Crescit eundo” (It grows as it goes), the phrase “Crescit eundo” (It grows as it goes), now the state motto.

1919: New Mexico becomes the first state to introduce public health insurance to its citizens.

1920: The U.S. census shows 5,733 African Americans living in the state. At the time, several hundred African Americans living in the state. By 1920, African Americans were living in the state. By 1920, African Americans in the state were living in the state.

1917: American citizens lived in a community near Roswell that grew thanks to the Homestead Act of 1862, which encouraged people to move west, claim land, and settle.

1915: Howard Taft signs a proclamation making New Mexico the 47th state in the Union.

1912: Governor William M. Blackdom (right) with Artist W. H. Jackson (left) in Taos.

1918: New Yorker Mabel Dodge Luhan lures other writers and artists, including D. H. Lawrence and Anais Nin, to join her salons, at which she promoted modern art, bohemian culture, and Native American rights. Taos has drawn artists and literatures from diverse as Helena Millicent Rogers (whose museum you can see in Taos today), and actor-director Dennis Hopper.

1917: The U.S. Census shows 5,733 African Americans living in the state. At the time, several hundred African American citizens lived in Blackdom, a community near Roswell that grew thanks to the Homestead Act of 1862, which encouraged people to move west, claim land, and settle.

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1922: The School of American Research and the Museum of New Mexico host the Southwest Indian Market. Today, the August market celebrates excellence in Native art and is one of the largest events in the state, drawing more than 100,000 attendees each year.
1923–1932
Like most Americans, New Mexicans entered the 1920s with great optimism. The Great War had ended, women had won the right to vote (New Mexico voted in favor of the amendment in 1920), and the country experienced unprecedented prosperity, which was shared by several sectors of the state’s economy.

Roads, led by the Santa Fe and the Southern Pacific, brought countless tourists. The famous Southwestern Indian Detours carried tourists (“dudes”) by car to distant pueblos and natural wonders, such as Carlsbad Caverns. A growing number of artists and authors, including Georgia O’Keeffe and D. H. Lawrence, were drawn to the state. Meanwhile, authors like Witter Bynner and artists like Will Shuster hosted fellow members of Santa Fe’s art colony, often serving lunch in a decade of poorly enforced prohibition.

A lucrative new industry was created with the discovery of oil in the Permian basin of southeastern New Mexico in 1924. Oil-field workers arrived by the hundreds, making Hobbs one of the fastest-growing boomtowns in the U.S. Cans, often fueled with New Mexico gasoline, now challenged railroads as the nation’s primary form of transportation, especially along modern highways like Route 66, commissioned in 1926.

But while many prospered, large numbers of rural farmers and ranchers barely survived. It was said that when the Great Depression began in 1929, most New Mexicans were already so poor that they barely noticed.—R.M.

1923: The El Navajo Hotel, designed by Mary Colter, opens in Gallup as a Harvey House. Fred Harvey hotels and restaurants for rail travelers also included the Alvarado in Albuquerque, the Castañeda in Las Vegas, and La Fonda in Santa Fe. See Harvey House history in Harvey House Museum in Belén.

1924: Artist Will Shuster’s giant marionette puppet, “Zozobra,” or “Old Man Gloom,” debuts. The 50-foot-tall puppet is burned in effigy as part of the Santa Fe Fiesta celebrations, which has been revived in 1919 and is now the oldest continuously held celebration in the U.S. Shuster and Santa Fe New Mexican newspaper editor E. Dana Johnson came up with the moniker of Zozobra, Spanish for “black smoke.” Annually, more than 25,000 revelers attend the torching and chant “Amen! Amen!”

1925: Between 1923 and 1929, the Southern Pacific brought countless tourists. The famous Southwestern Indian Detours carried tourists (“dudes”) by car to distant pueblos and natural wonders, such as Carlsbad Caverns.

1927: Santa Fe the chief way

1929: Blackwater Draw, near Clovis, is first recognized as an important site of early human occupation. It is now considered one of the most significant archaeological sites in North America.

1930: Robert Goddard arrives in Roswell from Massachusetts. He experiments in rocketry and begins New Mexico’s connection to the Space Age. Goddard launches the first liquid-fuel rocket that travels faster than the speed of sound, and is considered the father of modern rocket propulsion.

1931: Southwest Indian Detours, in which students (especially trained young women) guided visitors of the beaten path, appear in the national press.

1932: The El Rincon Hotel, designed by Mary Colter, opens in Gallup as a Harvey House. Fred Harvey hotels and restaurants for rail travelers also included the Alvarado in Albuquerque, the Castañeda in Las Vegas, and La Fonda in Santa Fe. See Harvey House history in Harvey House Museum in Belén.

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NEW DEAL TO THE RESCUE

1933–1942

The Great Depression hit the U.S. like an economic tsunami after 1929. By 1933, the worst year of the prolonged crisis, 25 percent of New Mexico’s skilled workers were unemployed, as were more than half of unskilled workers in many rural parts of the state. Drought made conditions even worse, especially for farmers and ranchers living in northeastern New Mexico. Windswept fine dust everywhere, burying crops, choking livestock, and obstructing travelers’ vision. In scenes like those that inspired John Steinbeck’s The Grapes of Wrath, thousands in New Mexico’s Dust Bowl region abandoned their homes and migrated west.

Eager for bold solutions to the economic crisis, New Mexicans helped elect Franklin D. Roosevelt to the presidency in 1932. Roosevelt offered a New Deal to spark the economy. Led by such skilled local politicians as Governor Clyde Tingley and Senator Dennis Chavez, New Mexico drew more New Deal money per capita than any other state. The Works Progress Administration (WPA) hired unemployed workers to build roads, schools, post offices, etc. The Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) worked to conserve natural resources. Without the New Deal, it would have taken New Mexico decades to achieve these improvements on its own.—R.M.

1938: The New Mexico State Fair reopens in a new location in Albuquerque after being shut down since 1937. Territorial fairs were first hosted in the Duke City in 1881, but ended some 30 years later. WPA funds revived the celebration of farming and ranching. (The Main Gate from 1947 is pictured here.) Today, Expo New Mexico hosts 600,000 visitors at the State Fair each year.

1940: Georgia O’Keeffe purchases a home at Ghost Ranch, near Abiquiu. Although O’Keeffe first visited the state in 1929 to stay with her friend Mabel Dodge Luhan, purchasing the property at Ghost Ranch marked her long-term connection with these lands. The landscapes here influence her work, as seen in My Front Yard, Summer (above). Today, Ghost Ranch is a destination for artist workshops and spiritual retreats.

1942: Secretary of War Henry Stimson informs the Los Alamos Ranch School that the government will acquire the property. The land near the Jemez Mountains is then used for a nuclear research effort code-named the Manhattan Project. For security, scientists check in with Dorothy McKibben (painted with Project Director Robert Oppenheimer and scientist Victor Weisskopf) at 109 East Palace in Santa Fe. The project site becomes Los Alamos National Laboratory, August 19, 1941: New Mexico newspapers announce that the National Guard’s 200th Coast Artillery is leaving Fort Bliss, headed for a secret destination. Within months, after a valiant defense, the 200th, which includes many New Mexico soldiers, is captured by Japanese forces in the Philippines. Half of the 1,800 New Mexicans captured die in the Bataan Death March and during years of internment before the end of the war.
A MIGHTY WAR EFFORT

1943–1952

Nearly 50,000 New Mexicans served in the armed services during World War II, suffering 2,256 casualties; New Mexicans received seven Medals of Honor during the war. Navajo Code Talkers developed a secret military code that was used to help win key battles in the Pacific. New Mexico native Bill Mauldin and Albuquerque resident Ernie Pyle won Pulitzer Prizes for their war coverage. On the home front, Army air bases were built in Hobbs, Carlsbad, Clovis, Roswell, Alamogordo, Albuquerque, and other towns.

In New Mexico’s most spectacular contribution to World War II, a secret scientific community was organized on the remote Pajarito Plateau to develop the world’s first atomic weapons. Led by physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer and General Leslie Groves, scientists of the Manhattan Project worked day and night to perfect a bomb that was first tested at the Trinity Test Site, southeast of Socorro, in mid-July 1945. Similar bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan, causing mass destruction, but leading to Japan’s surrender one month after the Trinity blast.

It is possible to argue that New Mexico proudly contributed to the United States’ final victory in World War II more than any other state of its size in the Union. After the War, both the U.S. and New Mexico experienced a boom period, thanks to returning service men who sought college educations and purchased homes. Naturally, New Mexico residents also contributed to the post-war baby boom.—R.M.

July 16, 1945: Manhattan Project scientists detonate the world’s first nuclear device at the Trinity Test Site, beginning the atomic age. The White Sands Missile Range now hosts twelve-yearly tours of the site on the first Saturday of April and October.

1943: Co-founder of the Boy Scouts of America and conservation writer Ernest Thompson Seton dies at his home in Seton Village, New Mexico. Today, the Seton Memorial Library at Philmont Scout Reservation, near Cimarron, houses many of his papers and artifacts.

1945: New Mexican Bill Mauldin wins his first Pulitzer Prize for World War II cartoons and reporting.

1947: An excavation at Ghost Ranch, led by Dr. Edwin Colbert and crew member George Witteker, uncover the 205-million-year-old dinosaur known as Coelophysis. This fossil has been found only in New Mexico. It was named the official state fossil in 1981.

1949: Sandia National Laboratories opens in Albuquerque. Together, Sandia and Los Alamos National Laboratory make New Mexico a hotbed of research and development for energy and military technology.

July 9, 1949: The roadrunner is named the New Mexico State Bird. By the 1950s, the Warner Bros. iteration of the bird is immortalized in Looney Tunes—even if the roadrunner looks nothing like the real deal.

1950: At the on-air prompting of television game-show host Ralph Edwards, the town of Hot Springs changes its name to Truth or Consequences in honor of the show’s tenth anniversary. Today, the town, which does have its fair share of hot springs, is an enclave of big-city escapees and artists.

May 9, 1950: A fire crew battling the 17,000-acre Capitan Gap Fire in Lincoln National Forest rescues an abandoned black bear cub with burned paws. He lives at the Washington National Zoo for 26 years and becomes the official mascot of the Fire Prevention program of the U.S. Forest Service. Smokey’s stature as an icon continues after his 1976 death. Today, visit his grave at Smokey Bear Historical Park in Capitan.

July 9, 1952: Blake’s Lotaburger opens in Albuquerque and becomes one of the first restaurants to add green chile to cheeseburgers. Today, get your fix by traveling the official New Mexico Green-Chile Cheeseburger Trail.

July 9, 1952: Ralph Edwards hosts his show’s tenth anniversary. Today, or Consequences in honor of the show’s tenth anniversary, today, or attend the Roswell UFO Festival, held every Fourth of July weekend. Don’t miss the animatronic aliens at the museum, or the alien photo by julien mcroberts.

1950s: Although U.S. 66 was officially commissioned as the Chicago-to-Los Angeles route in 1926, the Mother Road’s heyday was the 1950s, when travelers cruised the open road in search of adventure. You can still grab a malt at the 66 Diner, on Central Avenue in Albuquerque.
1953–1962

New Mexico played a key role in the Cold War, which led to ever-greater federal involvement in the state. Eager to keep pace with the Soviet Union militarily, the U.S. government converted four World War II army air bases into Air Force bases (Cannon, Holloman, Walker, and Kirtland) that continued to train crews and test new planes and weapons. The White Sands Missile Range, on 3,200 square miles of southern New Mexico, tested advanced weapons and rockets. The U.S. created new nuclear weapons, including the hydrogen bomb, at Los Alamos National Laboratory and Sandia National Laboratories. Grants became known as the “uranium capital” of the nation.

The Cold War erupted into actual combat with the Korean conflict of 1950 to 1952. Nearly 200 New Mexicans lost their lives in this “forgotten war.” Many newcomers arrived to work in Cold War industries; Albuquerque’s population skyrocketed from 35,449 in 1940 to 262,199 in 1960. Smaller towns, like Los Alamos, Alamogordo, and Grants, experienced similar growth. New, modern highways, trains, and commercial airlines brought tourists to the state in record numbers. Construction of homes, businesses, motels, and restaurants boomed.—R.M.

1953: Cartoonist Chuck Jones popularizes Bugs Bunny’s phrase, “I knew I shoulda tooke that left toin at Albakoikie,” sparking a pop-culture onslaught of references to getting lost near the Duke City. Looney Tunes and Merrie Melodies creator Chuck Jones lived in California, but traveled frequently to New Mexico. Reflecting his attachment to the state, a gallery of his work operates in Santa Fe today.

1956: With the help of a mule and 16 men from Taos Pueblo, Ernie Blake installs a Bridger-Boseman J-Bar lift. Taos Ski Valley is born.

1954: La Conquistadora, the oldest statue of the Virgin Mary in the U.S., is crowned by Cardinal Francis Spellman, and in 1960 receives papal coronation. See the historic figure today at the Cathedral Basilica of Saint Francis of Assisi in Santa Fe.

1956: Norman Petty records hit at his Clovis studio. Music greats such as Buddy Holly, Waylon Jennings, and Roy Orbison have recorded there. Today, Norman Petty Studios or attend the Clovis Music Festival, held each September.

1957: Founded by John Crosby, the Santa Fe Opera opens, bringing international singing talent to the Capital. While raising funds for the SFO, Crosby met composer Igor Stravinsky and later asked him to perform at the opening night the opera. Today, the Santa Fe Opera’s season at its open-air theater is one of the highlights of the summer in Santa Fe.

1957: Santa Fe’s Historic Design Ordinance passes. It limits the height of downtown buildings and mandates the appearance of adobe to keep the city’s distinctive style intact for generations to come.

1953: Museum of International Folk Art opens in Santa Fe, thanks to major donations of funds and collections by founder Florence Dibell Bartlett. Today, the collection includes more than 135,000 artifacts, including this Bolivian altar (left). Don’t miss the Alexander Girard wing, named after the famous designer, who donated his collection, and which showcases folk art, toys, miniatures, and textiles from more than 100 nations.

1956: Environmentalist, cornmeal, and author Edward Abbey publishes The Brave Cowboy, one of his two novels set in New Mexico.

1955: Founded by Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were put to death for espionage. The two were convicted of conspiring with Ethel’s brother, David Greenglass, an Albuquerque resident who worked on the Manhattan Project, to pass sketches of the atomic bomb and the names of individuals working on the project to a Soviet agent.

1953: Cartoonist Chuck Jones popularizes Bugs Bunny’s phrase, “I knew I shoulda tooke that left toin at Albakoikie,” sparking a pop-culture onslaught of references to getting lost near the Duke City. Looney Tunes and Merrie Melodies creator Chuck Jones lived in California, but traveled frequently to New Mexico. Reflecting his attachment to the state, a gallery of his work operates in Santa Fe today.

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Out of Time

As these black-and-white images remind us, great factors in New Mexico’s enduring allure are its sense of timelessness and its cultural mix. The Martinez family, pictured below, looks as if they could have ridden that wagon straight out the 19th century—but this was 1939, a mere five years and 40 miles from Georgia O’Keeffe’s ride on the back of that motorcycle. The cowboy picture at left is undated—which is somehow fitting for such a classic slice of Western imagery. On the following page, Lee Marmon’s White Man’s Moccasins, from 1954, shily and succinctly expresses the confluence (or was it a collision?) of traditional Native culture and modernity. And if you drove out to Ship Rock today, chances are you’d see road-trippers pulled over to take photos of the epic formation, just as the family pictured here did in 1953.

Left: Cowboys on the Bell Ranch, near Tucumcari, wrangle a calf in preparation for branding.

Below: The Martinez family moves a wagonload of their belongings through Córdova in September 1939.

Georgia O’Keeffe Hitching a Ride to Abiquiu, by Maria Chabois. The photographer’s handwritten note on the back of the picture identifies the driver as artist Maurice Grosser. © GEORGIA O’KEEFFE MUSEUM

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Left: Lee Marmon’s famous White Man’s Moccasins was taken in his Laguna Pueblo homeland, where “Old Man Jeff” Souse was caretaker of the Laguna Mission.

Opposite: The monumental and photogenic Ship Rock Peak, in the Navajo Nation, west of Farmington.

PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN, NEW MEXICO MAGAZINE ARCHIVAL COLLECTION.
Cultures Clashing

1963–1972

The 1960s will be remembered as a decade of growth and conflict in the U.S. and New Mexico.

The state continued to grow as an integral part of what President Eisenhower had called the military-industrial complex, which included the space race. Whole new communities, such as Rio Rancho, welcomed their first residents, and hippie communes added countercultural elements to an already diverse state.

But New Mexico also experienced turmoil. Frustrated by the loss of their land grants, many Hispanics turned to Reis López Tijerina and his originally peaceful Alianza Federal de Mercedes, resorting to increasingly violent measures that ultimately doomed his movement. Too Pueblo residents non-voluntarily defended their sacred Blue Lake in the Carson National Forest.

The Vietnam war divided the state: Abroad, New Mexicans served in the military. At home, anti-war protests sometimes turned violent, as when opposing factions clashed on Albuquerque’s Central Avenue and National Guard troops were sent to the University of New Mexico. Peace was restored in New Mexico only when peace was restored in the nation and in Southeast Asia—R.M.

1963: Reverend R. C. Gorman (seen here working in his Taos studio) shows his first one-man exhibition in New Mexico, at the Manchester Gallery in Taos. Throughout his life, this famed Native artist became synonymous with Taos. He died in 2005, but his work is still on display in his adopted town at the R. C. Gorman Navajo Gallery.

1966: The first state film commission in the U.S. is created in New Mexico, galvanizing the local film industry. More than 500 movies and television shows have been filmed in the state; the granddaddy of all stock car races a total of four times; Ali Unser Jr. won twice, cementing his family’s claim to racing fame. All hail from Albuquerque.

1967: Bobby Unser wins the Indianapolis 500 car race, the first of his three victories there. His brother Al won the granddaddy of all stock car races a total of four times; Ali Unser Jr. won twice, cementing the family’s claim to racing fame. All hail from Albuquerque.

1965: The Rio Grande Gorge Bridge is completed in Taos, towering 610 feet above the river.

December 8, 1966: The renovated Capitol building for the state of New Mexico is dedicated. It is dubbed “the Roundhouse” for its design, which resembles the shape of a Zia symbol when viewed from above. The building’s art collection, which is open to the public and includes works from a wide selection of prominent living local artists, is one of the best-kept secrets in Santa Fe.

June 5, 1967: Reis López Tijerina leads a raid on the courthouse in Tierra Amaña, wounding a papal and deputy and kidnapping two people. The group, part of the Chicano Rights Movement, was fighting to restore New Mexico land grants to the descendants of their Spanish Colonial and Mexican owners.

1969: The New Mexico Department of Game and Fish introduces the ory, an African antelope species, to White Sands Missile Range to establish a habitable, big-game animal population. Although the ory is certainly one of the more unusual species hunted in the state, sport hunters have enjoyed pursuing elk, deer, pronghorn antelope, and even cougars and bears here.

1970: President Nixon signs Congressional legislation returning Blue Lake and 48,000 acres of surrounding land to Taos Pueblo. The lake is sacred to the Pueblo and is closed to visitors.

1971: The state of New Mexico and Colorado begin operating the Cumbres & Toltec Scenic Railroad—the nation’s longest and highest narrow-gauge railroad. The 64 miles of track cross the New Mexico–Colorado state line 11 times between Chama and Antonito.

1972: The Albuquerque Dukes baseball team joins the Triple-A Pacific Coast League. The Dukes team formed originally in 1915, as part of the Class-D Rio Grande Association. They were among the minor-leagues, like the Madrid Miners, that flourished here in the 1920s and 30s. The Dukes formed and disbanded several times while earning their status as a major league farm team. Sing it with us: “Those Dukes are comin’ out Comin’ out swingin’!” Come on Dukes, play ball!” (Shoutout to Washington’s collectible 1978 card is seen here.)

1972: The Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta begins with a modest 13 hot-air balloons in a mall parking lot. Today, with more than 600 balloons taking flight each October, the Fiesta is the largest ballooning event on earth. Held at the 365-acre Balloon Fiesta Park, the event includes mass ascensions, night glows, and special-shapes rodeos. Explore ballooning history anytime at the Anderson-Abrazzo International Balloon Museum.

April 8, 1972: Spearheaded by Sid Cutter, the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta begins with a modest 13 hot-air balloons in a mall parking lot. Today, with more than 600 balloons taking flight each October, the Fiesta is the largest ballooning event on earth. Held at the 365-acre Balloon Fiesta Park, the event includes mass ascensions, night glows, and special-shapes rodeos. Explore ballooning history anytime at the Anderson-Abrazzo International Balloon Museum.

1971: The city of Hatch hosts the first Match Chile Festival, celebrating the good ol’ red and green in the self-proclaimed Chile Capital of the World. With the Mesilla Valley’s abundant crop, the city lives up to its sobriquet. In 2010, New Mexico farmers harvested more than 66,600 tons of chile. The festival is held during the harvest season, usually in September.
1973—1982

In a decade not known as a national golden era, New Mexico experienced a surge of creativity and bold achievements.

Rudolfo Anaya’s Bless Me, Ultima (1972) is perhaps the most famous and admired novel ever written about Hispanic culture in the Southwest. John Nichols’s Milagro Beanfield War (1974) described the struggle to preserve Hispanic life against modern development and personal greed. R. C. Cormier’s paintings made him one of the most celebrated young Indian artists in the country.

Members of the famous Unser racing family have won no fewer than nine Indianapolis 500 races, including four in the 1970s alone. In 1978, three New Mexicans—Ben Abruzzo, Maxie Anderson, and Larry Newman—became the first team to fly across the Atlantic in a gas balloon.

On the downside, the Watergate scandal rocked the nation; President Nixon’s resignation. Closer to home, a scandal involving the recruitment of basketball players at the University of New Mexico led to four in the 1970s alone. In 1978, three New Mexicans—Ben Abruzzo, Maxie Anderson, and Larry Newman—became the first team to fly across the Atlantic in a gas balloon.

1973: The Albuquerque Museum of Art and History opens its current facility near Old Town. The Museum hosts national touring exhibitions and those with works by the finest artists in the state, such as this one by T or C painter Delmas House.

1974: The Navajo community holds a largely peaceful protest in Farmington as part of the war’s ongoing Native Rights movement. They marched until several teenagers were sentenced for savagely beating three Navajo men.

1975: Bill Gates and Paul Allen begin Microsoft in Albuquerque, launching the personal-computing revolution and establish- ing the Duke City in the annals of geek history. Gates left the city in 1978, but not before getting in trouble with the law—OK, OK, it was just for a traffic violation.

1976: The Indian Pueblo Cultural Center opens in Albuquerque, celebrating the history and culture of the state’s 19 Pueblos. In addition to its exhibits, the center hosts Native dancing throughout the year.

1977: The Very Large Array is dedicated on the Plains of San Agustín, 60 miles west of Socorro. Astronomers from around the world travel to New Mexico to use the array to study the universe. It has been seen in several Hollywood films, most notably Contact (1997), starring Jodie Foster.

1978: Las Cruces hosts the first Whole Enchilada Fiesta, a three-day celebration of southern New Mexico’s traditions, people, and food. The September festival is topped off with the creation of the largest enchilada around—the massive dish includes 75 gallons of red-chile sauce and 175 pounds of grated cheese.

1979: Two hikers in the BLM Wilderness Study Area near Ojito (San Ysidro/Isidro) discover protruding vertebrae of a previously unknown dinosaur, the Seismosaurus (Earth Shaker or earthquake lizard). It is one of the biggest dinosaurs ever to call New Mexico home, at an estimated weight of 190,000 pounds and a length of 120 feet. The partial skeleton (dating from 150 million years ago) is on view at the New Mexico Museum of Natural History and Science, in Albuquerque.

1980: Intel, the world’s most profitable manufacturer of computer chips, opens a plant in Rio Ranch, spurring an influx of new residents and helping the city become the third most populous in the state today.


1982: The first Great American Duck Race is held as a city fundraiser in Deming. Still held annually, this carnival is your chance to borrow a duck to race in both swimming and running competitions.


1986: Mesilla Plaza is designated a National Historic Landmark. The Plaza was built during the early 1800s to protect area residents from raiding Apaches; many of the existing build- ings date to that era. The Gadsden Purchase was celebrated here in 1853 when troops from Fort Fillmore raised the flag over the Plaza to celebrate the transfer of some 49,000 square miles of land from Mexico to the U.S.

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Détente, disarmament treaties, and a democratic movement in Eastern Europe caused the fall of one communist regime after another, including the Soviet Union itself. These distant events had a deep, lasting impact on New Mexico.

The reduction in nuclear weapons, coupled with the 1979 disaster at the Three Mile Island nuclear plant, cut demand for uranium mined in New Mexico. Grants faced a sudden bust. The need for new weapons developed at the Los Alamos and Sandia national labs was questioned. Rumors flew that air bases might close. New Mexico’s over dependence on federal government projects and spending became increasingly evident.

New Mexico’s reliance on its oil and gas industry was also clear. Competition with foreign oil producers and fluctuations in the world market caused economic instability in towns like Hobbs and Farmington. The state government suffered whenever oil and gas production declined. —R.M.

1983–1992

The Museum of Indian Arts & Culture, which feature Native works from the Southwest, opens in Santa Fe.

1984: The Santa Fe Institute, specializing in the interdisciplinary study of the most compelling and complex problems of our time, is founded as a private nonprofit research and education center.

1985: New Mexico native Kathy Whitworth, who started playing golf at 15 at age 15, wins her 88th career win in the Ladies Professional Golf Association, more than anyone in the LPGA or the PGA has ever accomplished.

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1993—2002

Although the U.S. was building fewer nuclear weapons in the wake of the Cold War, the need to securely store the country’s existing arsenal persisted—a concern that was tragically reinforced by the rising terrorist threat and the events of September 11, 2001.

For many years the military had stored much of its material at installations in the Manzano Mountains. The need for more advanced security led the Air Force to construct the Kirtland Underground Munitions Storage Complex, which opened in 1994. Years of nuclear research and usage had also produced tons of high- and low-level nuclear waste that had long been stockpiled in dangerously exposed locations. With the help of Sandia National Laboratories’ scientists and engineers, a Waste Isolation Pilot Plan was built 2,150 feet below ground east of Carlsbad, and opened in 1999.

1993: A group of Taos residents report hearing a low sound—soon known as the “hum”—and ask the state to investigate. No conclusive causes were discovered.

1994: Fray Angelico Chávez dies. Born in Wagon Wheel, he was ordained as a Franciscan priest, and achieved acclaim as one of the greatest religious poets of U.S. Hispanic origin.

1996: “Rod or Green?” is adopted as the official state question. In 2007, the Legislature added “Christmas” as the answer.

1996: The state marks the Cuatro Centenario, marking 400 years of European presence in New Mexico and the settlement at La Villa de San Gabriel by Don Juan de Oñate in 1998.

1997: The Georgia O’Keeffe Museum opens in Santa Fe, making it the first art museum in the world dedicated to an American woman artist. It becomes the most-visited art museum in New Mexico.

1998: The Chicago Bears draft Brian Urlacher out of UH-D as the ninth pick in the NFL draft. Since then he has been a Pro Bowl middle line- backer. Lovington honors him with a 20-foot-tall mural.

1998: The historic Baca Ranch is protected as the Valles Caldera National Preserve. The 89,000-acre public-land preserve, which sits in a volcanic caldera in the Jemez Mountains, is a destination for hunting, hiking, cross-country skiing, and snowshoeing.

1999: A meteorite explodes over Portales, scattering 143 pounds of debris. More than 200 meteorites are known to have landed in New Mexico; about half have been found in Roosevelt County.

1999: Governor Gary Johnson signs gaming compacts with 11 tribes, allowing casinos to begin operations. Today, luxury accommodations with large performance venues, spas, and golf courses make tribal resorts sure-fire destinations.

2000: The National Hispanic Cultural Center opens in Albuquerque and becomes a destination for performing and visual arts. The center also boasts Mundos de Mestizaje (Worlds of the Mixed Races). Created by Frederico Vigil, the mural is the largest concave fresco in North America. It adorns the cylindrical Torreón at the entrance.

1999: Media mogul Ted Turner purchases the approximately 590,000-acre Jemez Park Ranch from Pennzoil Corporation. His land stewardship includes maintaining bison herds. Both Jemez Park and Ladder Ranch, another Turner property near T or C, are working to conserve the cutthroat trout, which the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has listed as endangered. Previously, in 1982, Pennzoil had deeded 190 square miles of the Ranch to the U.S. Forest Service; these lands became the Valle Vidal (pictures).

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2003—2012

Shortly before New Mexico achieved statehood, in 1912, the senior class at the University of New Mexico buried a time capsule that has recently been excavated and opened with some fanfare. Items included a newspaper, a yearbook, and a curious parking permit (for horse-drawn buggies?).

What would the current generation of New Mexicans bury in a time capsule to define their state as the first decade of the 21st century?

• A ticket for the Rail Runner, the commuter train connecting Belen to Albuquerque to Santa Fe, which opened in stages during this decade.

• A Richard Branson—autographed photo of futuristic planes flying over New Mexico’s new Spaceport, along with a ticket costing $200,000 for a half-hour space flight.

• A bobble-head version of Orbit, the mascot of the Albuquerque Isotopes Triple-A baseball team, created in 2003.

• The final issue (February 23, 2008) of the 86-year-old Albuquerque Tribune, marking the team’s return to bat. The name for the team came from the TV series The Simpsons. In the episode “Hungry, Hungry Homers,” Homer goes on a hunger strike to protest attempts to move his beloved Springfield Isotopes to Albuquerque. The team now plays ball in Isotopes Park every summer.

• A DVD of True Grit, once again roots for a minor-league baseball team when the Isotopes come up to bat. The name for the team came from the TV series The Simpsons. In the episode “Hungry, Hungry Homers,” Homer goes on a hunger strike to protest attempts to move his beloved Springfield Isotopes to Albuquerque. The team now plays ball in Isotopes Park every summer.

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2003: New Mexico buries a time capsule. It is opened 10 years later.

2004: The International Folk Art Museum hosts the first International Folk Art Market in Santa Fe, bringing artists from around the world to the Capital City. In 2010, the Market, which is held annually in July, featured 132 artists from 50 countries.

2005: The State of New Mexico and Virgin Galactic, headed by Richard Branson (right), announce a joint agreement to build Spaceport America, continuing New Mexico’s role as a leader in the aerospace industry. Today, the Visitors Center, 20 miles south of T or C, is open to the public.

2006: The New Mexico Rail Runner Express begins train service between Albuquerque and Belen, making rail travel in the state popular once again. The Rail Runner later expands its service to Santa Fe.

2007: The St. Francis of Assisi Cathedral in Santa Fe is elevated to the status of a Basilica by the Vatican in recognition of its historical and regional importance.

2008: Timothy McGinn commissions the 30-foot-tall World’s Largest Pistachio outside Alamogordo to celebrate Otero County’s most abundant crop and as a tribute to his father, Thomas Michael McGinn, who founded the Pistachio Tree Ranch.

2009: Mine That Bird, trained by New Mexican Bennie Woolley Jr., wins the Kentucky Derby. New Mexico has a long and successful history of horse breeding. The All-American Futurity, held every Labor Day weekend at Ruidoso Downs, is racing’s richest war for two-year-olds—$2.2 million in purse money.

2010: Santa Fe celebrates its 400th anniversary, making it the nation’s oldest capital city.

2011: Judy Chicago wins the New Mexico Governor’s Award for Excellence in the Arts in recognition of the Belen resident’s five decades as a multidisciplinary artist (best known for her installation The Dinner Party), author, feminist, educator, and intellectual.

2012: The Postal Service releases the official Centennial stamp. Taos artist Doug West’s view of the Río Puerco and Cabezon Peak is titled Sanctuary. Happy birthday, New Mexico!