

Rafael Chacon

1833-1925

Rafael Chacon, witnessed the end of the Mexican Period and was a participant in commercial, military, and political events during the early decades of the American era. His account represents one of the few surviving documents to record the Hispanic point of view. Its publication in English provides an important new source- unique in its detail, anecdotal style, and human interest.

Chacon wrote his memoirs in his seventies to record for his family the drama, adventure, and sorrow he had experienced. As a child in Santa Fe, he observed the execution of the leaders of the Rebellion of 1837; as a thirteen-year-old Mexican military cadet, he served with Manuel Armijo at Glorieta Pass when Stephen Kearny's army marched on Santa Fe. During the 1850s, Chacon was an Indian fighter and trader, surviving several near fatal incidents in the Ute War of 1855 and in trading caravans onto the Great Plains.

During his later service in the Civil War in New Mexico, Chacon repeatedly distinguished himself, even though he never mastered English. He commanded volunteer companies, including one at the Battle of Valverde, fought Indians under Kit Carson, escorted the first officials to the newly established territory of Arizona, and as one of the few Hispanics to attain the rank of major, commanded Fort Stanton at the end of the war. Following discharge, Chacon served several terms in the territorial legislature before homesteading near Trinidad, Colorado.

"Rafael Chacon was a caballero (a Knight, cavalier, gentleman, horseman, horse- soldier.) in the fullest sense of the Spanish word, with all its implications of honesty, decency, kindness, concern for others, gallantry, dedication, and patriotism. An intensely devout and God-loving man, he built his life upon Christian principles. His word was his bond; he honored all commitments and obligations, whether made in war or peace, never veering from his path of righteousness regardless of the moral lapses he might have observed in some of those around him. Intelligent and educated, he passionately loved learning yet never disparaged those less erudite. Chacon accorded respect not only to his elders but also to his peers and to children, withholding it only from those who flagrantly violated ethical standards. His courage was truly

impressive and was exhibited innumerable times with a valor sustained by his religious convictions that his destiny was held firmly in God's hands.

It would be simple and convenient to characterize Rafael Chacon as a special man for a special time, and then merely dismiss the matter. But this is not true. During the nineteenth century, and even before, there were many Rafael Chacon in New Mexico and throughout the rest of the Hispanic world, men steeped in the tradition of courtesy, integrity, responsibility for those less strong or fortunate, and scrupulous concern about upholding the moral standards so dear to their culture. It is indeed unfortunate that their quiet dignity was not more clearly discerned and appreciated by those Americans who emigrated to the area from the East and allowed their own vision to be clouded by the supercilious attitudes they brought with them.

Many of us are fascinated by the world that Rafael Chacon knew, and rightly so. The nineteenth century in New Mexico was colorful, tumultuous, and exciting. It was a time of man against nature, without the buffer of technology to soften life's blows, an era romantically enhanced by the knowledge that it has been irrevocably lost to progress. Never again will Americans struggle for survival like Rafael Chacon did, with so few of the tools which give today's man superiority over his environment. There was a great sense of immediacy to life in New Mexico in the last century which is missing in the present day. It was a time when even the essential act of food-gathering could be fraught with mortal danger, when one's very life depended upon having the skill to find the next waterhole or to discover the correct route through the solitude of a great wilderness. Today, the great plains, where Rafael Chacon observed the majesty of vast buffalo herds peacefully grazing, has been turned into enormous irrigated farms controlled by agribusiness corporations; miles of concrete highways decorated sporadically with garish neon signs extolling the delights of motels and fast-food chains; and sprawling cities blanketed under gray palls of noxious auto-emission fumes. Gone too is the society in which Chacon lived, where the rigors of survival fostered an essential climate of mutual help, generosity, and sharing.

It is most gratifying that Chacon expended so much time and effort in recording the myriad anecdotes and details of his long life. He believed that he was bequeathing a legacy only to his children, little knowing that someday his story would appear in print and thus humanize for us his small portion of recorded history."

Courtesy of New Mexico CultureNet

http://www.nmculturenet.org/heritage/civil_war/sketches/chacon.html