

John O. West

Mexican-American Folklore

Legends, Songs, Festivals, Proverbs, Crafts,
Tales of Saints, of Revolutionaries, and More

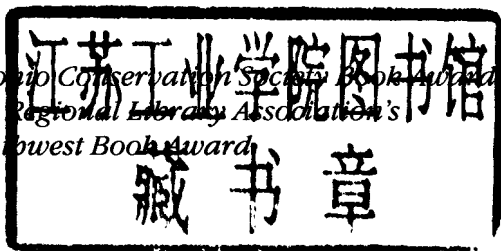


Mexican-American Folklore

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Winner of the San Antonio Conservation Society Book Award
and the Border Regional Library Association's
Southwest Book Award



Mexican-Americans of today are richly nourished by the folkways of three cultures—Indian, Spanish, and Mexican. This comprehensive look at the Mexican-American world includes proverbs, riddles, and folksongs; folk narrative, from Pancho Villa to urban ghosts, saints to revolutionaries; customs, from household shrines to irrigation rituals to *charreadas*, or Mexican-style rodeos; children's games, home remedies, folk foods, crafts, dress, and more. Besides its wide range of folk genres, *Mexican-American Folklore* is also broad-ranging in space—it covers the entire American Southwest—and in time—it includes material from several generations back, as well as very recent adaptations of customs to modern life.

A native of El Paso who has lived near the Mexican-American border for most of his life, John O. West brings to his study the expertise of a scholar and the enthusiasm of one both at home and in love with his subject.



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Compiled and edited by

John O. West

This volume is a part of
The American Folklore Series
W.K. McNeil, General Editor

August House / Little Rock

P U B L I S H E R S

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Published by August House, Inc.,
P.O. Box 3223, Little Rock, Arkansas, 72203,
501-372-5450.

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

West, John O.
Mexican-American folklore.
(The American folklore series)
Includes index.
1. Mexican Americans—Folklore.
I. Title. II. Series
GR111.M49W47 1988 398'.08968073 88-3367
ISBN 0-87483-060-5 (alk. paper)
ISBN 0-87484-059-1 (pbk.:alk. paper)

Cover illustration by José Cisneros
Production artwork by Ira L. Hocut
Typography by Diversified Graphics, Little Rock, Arkansas
Design direction by Ted Parkhurst
Project direction by Hope Coulter

This book is printed on archival-quality paper which meets the
guidelines for performance and durability of the Committee on
Production Guidelines for Book Longevity of the Council on
Library Resources.

The 33 riddles from *Flour from Another Sack* (Edinburg, Texas: Pan
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AUGUST HOUSE, INC. PUBLISHERS LITTLE ROCK

Para Lucy y Lucina, mis estrellas polares en este viaje

(For Lucy and Lucina, my polar stars on this voyage)

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Introduction

THE FOLKLORE OF few ethnic groups in the United States has been so frequently collected as that of the Mexican-American. Most of the significant collections and studies have dealt with the Southwest, and such an emphasis is understandable because the greatest concentration of Mexican-Americans is in that region—California, Texas, and Arizona being the three leading population centers. Yet in a sense the publications distort our view of the culture by suggesting, if only by implication, that there are no substantive Mexican-American traditions outside this five-state area. There are a few authors, however, who have concentrated on other parts of the United States.

Those who have looked outside the Southwest for Mexican-American lore have concentrated on Florida, another state that in recent years has come to be a center of Hispanic-American population. At least some of this work resulted from efforts to change an existing situation regarding folklore scholarship. Traditionally folklorists in both Latin and North America have been more knowledgeable about the development of their field in Europe than in their own hemisphere. Beginning in the late 1930s, some scholars attempted to make folklorists more aware of the work of colleagues in North and South America. Noteworthy among these personalities was Ralph Steele Boggs, a widely respected authority on Pan American and Spanish folklore. In an attempt to build bridges between the two Americas, Boggs initiated the publication in 1937 of an annual bibliography published in *Southern Folklore Quarterly*, which continued through 1972. During the first twenty-two years Boggs himself compiled these bibliographies, emphasizing Latin American and Mexican-American items as did his successors Américo Paredes and Merle Simmons.

Boggs, of course, did much more than just compile bibliographies of publications dealing with Mexican-American folklore. His importance extended far beyond that to include lecturing, writing, and teaching. Beginning in 1929 at the University of North Carolina and continuing later at the University of Miami, Boggs was for years prominent as a professor with a special interest in all aspects of Hispanic-American folklore, a role that has not entirely diminished even though he has been retired now for several years. It was primarily due to his influence that a series of articles on Spanish folklore in

Tampa was written and published in *Southern Folklore Quarterly*.¹ He was also largely responsible for the founding of *Folklore Americas*, a journal he edited from 1941 to 1965, and for the initiation of a number of joint publications involving Latin American and North American scholars. Some of these projects involved Mexican-American traditions.

None of the other people writing on non-Southwest Mexican-American folklore achieved the fame or influence of Boggs, but they did touch upon some important areas of research. Carlota Garfias treated Chicano traditions in New York City.² Norman D. Humphrey discussed dietary and health practices of Mexican-Americans in Detroit, a topic that has received relatively little attention from folklorists.³ Interestingly, most of the research centered on city dwellers rather than rural residents, in other words just the opposite of most American folklore study during the first half of the twentieth century. Finally, the publications are primarily collections, arranged mainly by genre, rather than theoretical works. This situation is understandable because hypothesizing is not very useful until basic collecting has been done.

The difference in quantity between publications on non-Southwestern and Southwestern Mexican-American lore is dramatically illustrated by bibliographies. Except for general compilations like Charles Haywood's *A Bibliography of North American Folklore and Folksong* there are no bibliographies devoted to the non-Southwestern material. On the other hand, there are several devoted to Southwestern items, of which the two most extensive are Marjorie F. Tully and Juan B. Rael's *An Annotated Bibliography of Spanish Folklore in New Mexico and Southern Colorado* (1950) and Michael Heisley's *An Annotated Bibliography of Chicano Folklore from the Southwestern United States* (1977). In addition, there are several more specialized bibliographies, such as Merle Simmons's *A Bibliography of the Romance and Related Forms in Spanish America*, (1963) and there is even Joseph A. Clark Moreno's "A Bibliography of Bibliographies Relating to Studies of Mexican-Americans."⁴ Then there are general articles such as Américo Paredes's "El Folklore de los Grupos de Origen Mexicano en Estados Unidos," which categorizes Mexican-Americans by regional groups and discusses various types of folklore unique to this group.⁵ All of these publications are based primarily, in most cases solely, on Southwestern items.

Publications on Southwestern Mexican-American folklore date from a relatively early age in the history of American folklore studies and cover a wide range of genres. These works treat folk narrative, folk music, folk speech, customs and beliefs, traditional drama, folk games and play, architecture, foodways, clothing, and folk art. In other words, just about the entire spectrum of folklore as currently understood is covered in these writings but, obviously, some genres have received greater attention than others. Games and those topics coming under the heading of what folklorists call material culture (architecture, for example) have had less consideration than nar-

ratives, music, customs, beliefs, and speech. Much the same can be said about American folklore studies generally, for historically traditions such as folk music and narratives are the first to appeal to collectors.

One of the premier personalities in the study of Mexican-American lore is Aurelio Macedonio Espinosa, a native of Colorado who became known as a pioneer in the study of New Mexico's folklore. From 1902 to 1910 he was associated with the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque; the remainder of his academic career was spent at Stanford University. Espinosa's total of over 100 books, articles, and monographs covered many genres, but his main contributions were in the areas of dialect studies and folk narratives. His 1909 dissertation from the University of Chicago, "Studies in New Mexican Spanish," was a pioneering study tracing the development of various strains of Spanish as spoken by New Mexicans. Published in 1909 when originally written, this book was updated and a widely acclaimed Spanish version issued in 1946. One reviewer proclaimed that Espinosa's examination of the Spanish dialect of New Mexico was the most detailed investigation of any regional variety of Spanish.⁶ This volume, in its 1909 form, was the basic source of information on Mexican-American speech used by H.L. Mencken for *The American Language* (1918).

Espinosa considered folklore an integral part of a culture and publicized New Mexico's folklore as part of his campaign to promote the teaching of Spanish language and literature. Thus, in one of his earliest publications, *The Spanish Language in New Mexico and Southern Colorado* (1911), he included a chapter on "New Mexican Spanish Folklore" that contained the texts of some *versos* and proverbs as well as lists of titles of folktales and other forms of oral tradition. A year earlier, in 1910, he started a series of articles on "New Mexican Spanish Folklore" that appeared over a period of six years. Many of these collections dealt with folk narratives; one was even concerned with anecdotes, a type of narrative not commonly published by folklorists of the time.⁷ The initial entry in this series dealt with what Espinosa called myths, although nowadays folklorists would call most of these narratives legends for the simple reason that many of these accounts of witches, dwarves, the Devil, and monsters are set in historic times. Three succeeding issues contained folk narratives while others of the eleven articles treated proverbs, riddles, and various other genres. Espinosa later published an article on Spanish language folktales from California and a 1951 essay in the *Journal of American Folklore* on the same topic. In the latter he attempted to delineate the characteristic groups and types of folktales, collected from Spanish-speaking Americans, that reflect a "civilization that is basically and fundamentally Spanish."

Espinosa's major statement about Mexican-American folk narrative, and all other aspects of what he referred to as folk literature, did not appear until nearly three decades after his death. In the late 1930s he completed a manuscript about Mexican-American folklore that remained unpublished at the

time of his death in 1958. It finally appeared in 1985, as edited by his son, J. Manuel Espinosa, under the title *The Folklore of Spain in the American Southwest: Traditional Spanish Folk Literature in Northern New Mexico and Southern Colorado*. The book, whose orientation is evident from the title, distills Aurelio's views on Mexican-American oral traditions. Two chapters devoted to folk narratives put forth Espinosa's argument that while the Spanish language folktales influenced the traditions of New Mexican Indians, the influence did not go in the other direction. In this way Mexican-American folk narrative traditions differ from those of Mexico.

Espinosa's interest in folk narrative was continued by his son, J. Manuel Espinosa. Not as prolific a writer as Aurelio, the younger Espinosa did produce one major work on folk narrative. His *Spanish Folk-tales from New Mexico* (1937) appeared as Volume 30 in the Memoir Series of the American Folklore Society. This collection of 114 narratives recorded by Espinosa in the summer of 1931 from Spanish-speaking inhabitants of the Rio Grande region of northern New Mexico was, for its time, a model of how a folktale collection should be presented. It included accurately rendered texts with English summaries and brief notes about the individual narrators. Although theoretically the younger Espinosa generally agreed with his father's ideas about Mexican-American folklore, that is implied rather than explicitly stated in the book.

A more prolific writer of J. Manuel Espinosa's generation was Juan B. Rael, who like Aurelio Espinosa was a professor at Stanford University. His academic affiliation was not the only thing Rael shared with the elder Espinosa. Rael also did important work in several areas of Mexican-American folklore including bibliography, folksong, folk drama, and folk speech. His first love, however, was folk narrative; his 1937 Ph.D. dissertation "A Study of the Phonology and Morphology of New Mexican Spanish Based on a Collection of 410 Folk Tales" combined his interests in folk tales and speech.⁹ Later that same year Rael published his first article on folk narrative, a study of thirty-three versions of the international tale type "Theft of butter (honey) by playing godfather," which is Type 15 in Aarne-Thompson's *Types of the Folktale*.¹⁰ Two years later, in 1939, Rael published the first of a two-part collection he compiled while doing fieldwork in Colorado and New Mexico in 1930. Under the title "Cuentos Españoles de Colorado y de Nuevo Méjico" a total of 111 folktale texts are given, the first article being devoted to narratives thought to be of European origin, the second to indigenous items.¹¹ Rael concluded his folk narrative work with a two-volume collection, also titled *Cuentos Españoles de Colorado y de Nuevo Méjico* (1940). This book included some of the items in the *Journal of American Folklore* articles and other texts recorded by Rael. Unfortunately, although, Rael takes some pains to trace the histories of the stories, he tells readers very little about the narrators.

Arthur L. Campa, another significant scholar who worked in many genres of

Mexican-American folklore, is primarily remembered for his contributions to the study of folk narrative and folksong. Born in Mexico to American missionary parents, he grew up in West Texas where his family moved in 1914 after his father was killed by Pancho Villa. In 1930 he submitted an M.A. thesis on "New Mexico Spanish Folk-Tales" to the University of New Mexico and ten years later, in 1940, received the Ph.D. from Columbia University with a dissertation on "Spanish Folksongs in New Mexico." Then he spent twenty-six years as Chairman of the Department of Modern Languages and Literature at the University of Denver. Although Campa worked in the areas of folk speech, customs, foodways, and folk drama, and finished up his career with the important survey volume *Hispanic Culture in the Southwest* (1978), his main interests were revealed by his M.A. thesis and Ph.D. dissertation. His major contribution to Mexican-American folk narrative studies was *Treasure of the Sangre de Cristos: Tales and Traditions of the Spanish Southwest* (1963), a general study dealing with legends of lost treasures, mines, and pioneer life. In his preface Campa speaks at some length about traditional tale tellers he encountered and their method of presenting narratives. Considering such mention one might expect faithful renderings of oral tales, but Campa's book instead offers greatly rewritten accounts derived from the material he collected. Thus, *Treasure of the Sangre de Cristos* adequately presents several themes commonly found in Mexican-American folk narratives but is wholly inadequate as an example of their style of presentation.

Anthropologist Helen Zunser also merits mention here for one publication, the lengthy article "A New Mexican Village," that appeared in the *Journal of American Folklore*. This essay is important because it is one of the first to place Mexican-American traditions in context. Zunser provides an ethnographic account of the town of Hot Springs in northeastern New Mexico. Among the topics covered are customs, beliefs about courtship and marriage, children's games, religious holidays, and, of course, narratives. Among the latter are some widely known tales, several of which are localized versions of stories reported by the Grimm brothers. Zunser also commented on what she considered a curious attitude:

Our friends called themselves Spanish Americans, but called their language Mexican. There was deep antagonism in their attitude towards the people and country of "Old Mexico" and they resented being called Mexicans. "Bad country, old Mexico. Too many bandits. Kill all the time, have long knives. Like to fight." . . . They always spoke of temperamental differences, as if the Mexicans were much more violent than they were. Yet we knew of individual cases where Old and New Mexicans had been friends, and we were told that their language differences were slight.¹²

Writers and collectors associated with the Texas Folklore Society have also made great contributions to the collection and study of Mexican-American folk narrative. Founded in 1909 by John Avery Lomax and Leonidas Warren Payne, Jr., the society is the second oldest active folklore organization in the United States. Its first publication appeared in 1916, and in 1923 the society began issuing its annual book to members. During a period of forty-eight years J. Frank Dobie, Mody C. Boatright, and William M. Hudson produced over thirty volumes. In 1971 the society's office was moved from the University of Texas to the Stephen F. Austin State University campus in Nacogdoches; since that time Francis E. Abernethy has been the secretary-editor. Most of the annual volumes pay some attention to Mexican-American traditions and a few, such as *Puro Mexicano* (1935), are primarily concerned with them. In addition, Dobie published a number of books on his own that deal in varying degrees with Mexican-American folk narrative. *Coronado's Children: Tales of Lost Mines and Buried Treasures of the Southwest* (1930) is typical. This volume contains both Anglo and Mexican-American lore in literary retellings.

Some students of Mexican-American folk narrative got their start as a result of federally funded projects during the Depression of the 1930s. Among the most important of these personalities is Lorin W. Brown, Jr., who recorded a vast amount of material from 1936 to 1941 while a member of the New Mexico Federal Writers' Project. Given the task of collecting Hispanic folklife in northern New Mexico, Brown concentrated on interviewing elderly residents of isolated communities such as Cordova and Truchas. This type of collecting is today often sneeringly dismissed as the gathering of survivals but in the 1930s it was not passé, and, regardless of what one thinks of the motives behind the fieldwork, it cannot honestly be denied that Brown gathered much useful data. Unfortunately, most of the material he recorded remained in manuscript form until shortly before his death in 1978. Then in the last months of his life Brown went through the items collected in the 1930s with the intent of publishing the best texts. This project was brought to completion by Charles L. Briggs and Marta Weigle, being issued as *Hispanic Folklife of New Mexico* (1978).

Brown's book includes several genres of folklore but is especially rich in folk narratives. Enormously increasing its value are numerous notes that often give extensive background on informants and the circumstances of the collection. Moreover, the method of presentation is intended to set materials in context rather than give them as seemingly superorganic texts separated from people and communities. Briggs and Weigle explain how they arranged material in order to bring the folk and their lore together: "These texts have been organized to give an orderly, readable overview of Hispanic history and village life in the region. They are woven together with brief, interspersed editorial remarks. Occasional further editorial matter is bracketed within the reprinted material. Otherwise, all manuscripts appear substantially as Brown submitted them."¹³

One other posthumous publication based on Brown's collection merits mention here. Between 1937 and 1939 he recorded a number of legends from Guadalupe Martínez of Cordova, an old woman who tended the village chapel. Between June 1938 and July 1939 Bright Lynn, a student at New Mexico Normal University (now New Mexico Highlands), collected an extensive body of legends and magic tales from Guadalupe Bara de Gallegos of Las Vegas. Texts recorded by the two collectors were combined to produce *Two Guadalupe: Hispanic Legends and Magic Tales from Northern New Mexico* (1987). This book compares the narratives of the upper-class Gallegos with those told by Martínez, a member of the village working class. Considerable biographical detail is given about both women and texts are presented as recorded. The net result is a volume that reveals a great deal about the way folk narrative functions in the lives of two Mexican-American women. With approximately one-third of its total pages devoted to a discussion of the backgrounds of the two narrators it is safe to say that *Two Guadalupe* is as much concerned with the informants as their texts. That feature virtually makes it unique among American folk narrative publications.

Elaine K. Miller's *Mexican Folk Narrative from the Los Angeles Area* (1973) is another collection that is in several respects exemplary. Eighty-two narratives from twenty-seven informants are given under six headings, each section prefaced by scholarly commentary. While Miller's focus is clearly textual she does not ignore the narrators. She includes a section of informant biographies and tells much about the 1966-67 fieldwork during which she collected the texts. Tales are presented in the colloquial Spanish in which Miller recorded them; English summaries and comparative notes are provided. It is also noteworthy that this material is identified as Mexican rather than Hispanic, as is the case with most previous collections.

Perhaps less well-known but equally significant are *Hispanic Folktales from New Mexico* (1977) and *Hispanic Legends from New Mexico* (1980), selections taken from the extensive files accumulated by Ralph De Loy Jameson at New Mexico Highlands University. Jameson spent much of his career as a teacher and writer in Europe and China, later working for the Library of Congress and the National Red Cross before coming to the Las Vegas school for the last twelve years of his life. The 900 texts in the two books provided an extensive sampling of oral narratives in and around Las Vegas. The legend volume is of special interest because it is the largest compilation of such narratives among Mexican-Americans yet published. A lengthy introduction by Stanley L. Robe, a renowned scholar of Hispanic folk narrative, discusses the major themes found in the collection. Three aspects of traditional belief are of major concern to Jameson's informants—witchcraft, ghostly apparitions, and the presence of the Devil in physical form. Robe also provides comparative notes, making this in a purely textual sense an ideal collection. It shares one flaw with most narrative compilations, namely that it reveals little about the in-

formants and their sources for the tales. Thus, the reader is left without much idea of how the narrators shaped their texts. In other words, one learns about the more mechanical aspects of the tradition but not much about the human aspects.

An equally voluminous body of material has been unearthed on Mexican-American musical traditions, so much in fact that, as in the discussion of folk narrative publications, it is possible to mention here only some of the most significant. One of the most colorful figures involved in the recording of this tradition was also one of the first students of Mexican-American folklore. Charles F. Lummis was a Massachusetts native who first gained fame in 1884 for a five-month walk from Cincinnati to Los Angeles, a feat he recounted in *A Tramp across the Continent* (1892). This was just the sort of flamboyant adventure for which Lummis became known, but it was important in his career because it brought him to the Southwest for the first time. Lummis almost immediately thought of the area as his own special province.

... Once I had reached Spanish America and the hearts of its people, I realized that this was where I belonged.

Though my conscience was Puritan, my whole imagination and sympathy and feeling were Latin. That is, essentially Spanish. Apparently they always had been, for now that I had gotten away from the repressive influence of my birthplace I began to see that the generous and bubbling boyish impulses which had been considerably frosted in New England were, after all, my birthright.¹⁴

It is hardly necessary to say that Lummis spent the remainder of his life in the Southwest.

A man given to colorful dress and colorful, and often unconventional, prose, Lummis relished being a character. He also found folksongs of Spanish origin especially appealing, noting that they had "a peculiar fascination, a naiveté, and yet a vividness and life, a richness of melody with a certain resilience and willfulness which give it a preeminent appeal. It has more music in it, more Rhythm, more Grace. It is more simpatica. It not only joys my hearing and tickles my pulses but cuddles my heart more happily than the songs of any of the score of other nationalities to which I have given friendly ear."¹⁵ He soon came to believe that these songs were the musical record of a vanishing way of life in the Southwest, an idea that spurred him on to record these numbers before they were lost. So, for a reason common in the history of folklore collecting, Lummis gathered nearly 600 songs in the years from 1888 to 1928. A sampling of fourteen pieces appeared in *Spanish Songs of Old California* (1923), a book that has remained in print until the present.

Lummis's brief selection of fourteen songs was in some respects ahead of its time. For example, it included musical transcriptions, a feature relatively