I called him Pete

DON PEDRO RIBERA-ORTEGA

Ronald A. Weese | Northern New Mexico College | May 10, 2016
Don Pedro Ribera-Ortega has been referred to as a “walking legend” (Propp, 2003) and a “living treasure” (McCord, 2009). He lived his life in the house in Santa Fe, New Mexico where he was born. He traced his ancestry back 20 generations from there to medieval Spain. The teacher, writer, historian, archivist, linguist, mentor, and fierce protector the cultural richness of the town’s 400-year-old Spanish heritage is as uniquely Santa Fe as the town itself (McCord, 2009). He obtained a Bachelor of Arts degree from the St. Michael’s College in Santa Fe and he taught Spanish, English, Latin, and history at Santa Fe High School. A consummate teacher, he encouraged Hispanics to learn their language and history to better understand their heritage (Brown-Martinez, n.d.). His contribution to our understanding of Santa Fe’s rich history is invaluable. Albeit his lifetime body of work is vast, some of it is examined here.

La Conquistadora is the oldest continuously venerated image of the Virgin Mary in the United States. Whether called Our Lady of Immaculate Conception, Our Lady of Sorrows, Our Lady of San Juan de los Lagos or Our Lady of Lourdes, she was originally carved as an image of Our Lady of Assumption. Pete wrote extensively about her. He led the revival of devotion to her. He helped renew the tradition of carrying her in
processions during Fiesta de Santa Fe. As mayordomo for over thirty years, Pete was charged with honoring, protecting and preserving La Conquistadora.

Her origin remains unknown, so is her maker. Tree-ring dates reveal she was carved sometime between 1148 and 1648. Standing 30 inches tall, she has many titles relating to events in her or Jesus’ life, and numerous miracles associated with her intervention. She arrived in Santa Fe by wagon train with Fray Alonso de Benavides in 1626. During the Pueblo Revolt of 1680, she was taken by settlers to the El Paso del Norte. Thirteen years later she accompanied Don Diego de Vargas, his soldiers, friars, and families on their expedition to resettle Santa Fe. Believing she answered his prayers to retake Santa Fe with limited bloodshed, de Vargas rebuilt the parish church that was destroyed during the revolt to honor her. The Fiesta de Santa Fe was created to give thanks to Nuestra Señora de la Conquista, as de Vargas called her (Santa Fe New Mexican, 2010).

Formed by the 1650s in Spain, La Cofradía del Rosario is a confraternity that adopted Our Lady as their patroness. Earliest known documents relating a confraternity associated with La Conquistadora dates to 1685. Beginning in 1692, Don Diego de Vargas was the first mayordomo of La Cofradía de La Conquistadora (West, 2012). As stated earlier, this is the position that Pete held for over thirty years. According to The Cathedral Basilica of St. Francis of Assisi website, “The current constitution of the confraternity states that the purpose of the organization shall be to “promote devotion to the Mother of God
under the title of La Conquistadora – Our Lady of Peace, and for the upkeep and maintenance of both her chapels at the Cathedral Basilica of St. Francis of Assisi and the Rosario Chapel”. The officers, Mayordomo (meaning ‘manager’), Assistant Mayordomo, Sacristana, Secretary and Treasurer, have the responsibility to protect, preserve and care for the images of La Conquistadora and La Peregrina. Created by Gustave Baumann in 1933, a replica statue, La Peregrina stands in for La Conquistadora during visits to communities around the state (Santa Fe New Mexican, 2010). The Mayordomo and Assistant Mayordomo are responsible for transporting La Peregrina to all requested visitations (The Cathedral Basilica of St. Francis of Assisi, n.d.).

Don Diego de Vargas’ Reconquista of Santa Fe led to the start of the Fiesta de Santa Fe in 1712, which now is the longest continual civic celebration in America (McCord, 2009). Pete was involved with the Santa Fiesta for sixty-six years, since he was five years old. A historical consultant to the Fiesta, he also served as a member of the Fiesta Council, La Cofradía de La Conquistadora and the Los Caballeros de Vargas (Lovato, 2004). Interviewed by Andrew Lovato for the book Santa Fe Hispanic Culture: Preserving Identity in a Tourist Town, Ribera-Ortega said, “The Fiesta is nothing more than saying, thank you Lord God to our Blessed Mother for bringing us home from exile” (Lovato, 2004). According to Pete, the procession to the Cross of the Martyrs and the entrada are the Fiesta’s most important events. He stated, “If anyone really wanted to know what the
Fiesta is all about, all they would have to do was read the Fiesta decree written by Juan Paez Hurtado in 1712.” Pete continues, “The decree is the equivalent to Santa Feans of the Declaration of Independence.” Pete said that the decree should be read by Santa Fe school teachers in class before every Fiesta so students would know what it is all about. He says the decree is the “heart and soul” of the Fiesta and without it, Fiesta “means nothing” (Lovato, 2004).

Pedro founded Los Caballeros de Vargas in 1956, a Hispanic men’s organization. The group’s mission is to honor the historical significance of the relatively “bloodless Reconquista” of Santa Fe by Spanish General Don Diego de Vargas in 1692, at the conclusion of what historians call the 1680 Pueblo Revolt that forced the Spanish from New Mexico (McCord, 2009). The men’s organization was reformed to perpetuate the memory of de Vargas and to honor Nuestra Señora del Rosario, La Conquistadora (often called “Our Lady of Peace”). Also known as La Cofradía de María de Santísima, they honor, protect, and help preserve La Conquistadora. They also help promote the Spanish culture of Santa Fe (West, 2012). The group teaches about and reenacts the Spanish re-entry to Santa Fe and the re-establishment of the Spanish colony under de Vargas (Brown-Martinez, n.d.).

The equestrian statue of Governor Don Pedro de Peralta next to the main post office in Santa Fe, by Dave McGary, is titled “The Founding of Santa Fe”. It portrays Peralta on a horse, wearing a cavalier-like, broad-brimmed
hat, accompanied by his engineer and not as an armored conquistador brandishing a sword (Wilson, 1997). Pete was instrumental in raising the statue of Governor de Peralta at the capitol he founded in 1608 (Brown-Martinez, n.d.). The monument was installed and dedicated during Fiesta Days in September 1992.

Pete not only wrote books about La Conquistadora. He also wrote books on Christmas traditions in Santa Fe. He published articles in the Santa Fe New Mexican, New Mexico Magazine and La Herencia del Norte. He wrote pieces covering a wide range of topics from La Conquistadora, Fiesta de Santa Fe, the Caballeros de Vargas, New Mexico saints, and the Penitentes to name a few (Brown-Martinez, n.d.). Published in 1961, Christmas in Old Santa Fe was Pedro’s first book. It tells of the “beautiful and ancient customs” that make Santa Fe so special during the holidays (McCord, 2009).

He authored other books, but as importantly, he became a collector and preserver of historic books that might have been lost. After retiring from the public schools, he started the Truchas-Ortega Research Center in Truchas, NM. He wanted to establish a center where Scholars could learn the truth about New Mexico history. The Center was said to have housed more than 50,000 of his books (McCord, 2009). However, according to Bernie Ortega, “Pete may have told
people he had that many books and the walls of four or five rooms in the Truchas Center were covered with books, but I don’t think there were 50,000” (B. Ortega). Bernie is not only Pete’s sister-in-law; she is also mine. Two of her children, Ray and Victor Ortega, both confirmed that there were a lot of books. Ray stating “I would guess there to be about 10,000” (R. Ortega). Victor said, “After Pete’s death, a majority of the books were retained by a close life-long friend” (V. Ortega). At this time the Truchas Center book collection is not on public display and unfortunately there are no known plans for them to be in the future.

The Santa Fe Settlers Monument, one of the last projects that Pete worked on, is a monument whose purpose is to maintain in public memory the cultural contributions of the Spanish to New Mexico. “Located in Cathedral Park at the Cathedral Basilica of St. Francis of Assisi in Santa Fe, it is a bronze fountain-like sculpture.” According to René & Peter van der Krogt’s website, Statues – Hither & Thither, the monument, by Donna Quasthoff, “is a stature of Mary La Conquistadora on top of a column. On the sides of the column stands a Franciscan monk, a colonial settler family (man, women and two children), and a Spanish soldier. The column stands on the foot with many of the fruits, vegetables, tools, music instruments etc. brought to New Mexico by the
Spanish colonialists, horse heads and legs are protruding from the column. The whole supported by cattle, pig, sheep, donkey, in between poultry and a goat” (Krogt, n.d.).

**Don Pedro Ribera-Ortega**, or ‘Pete’, as I called him, loved history, especially Santa Fe, New Mexico history. This love and his willingness to share it with others led to many prestigious awards. Among them, he was named Adelantado (the first to lead the way) by the New Mexico Hispanic Culture Preservation League and he was awarded the Governor’s Award for Excellence in the Arts. For his work in documenting Santa Fe’s 400-year history, he was named one of Santa Fe’s Living Treasures in 2001 (Brown-Martinez, n.d.).

Pedro’s obsession with New Mexico Hispanic history revealed some interesting stories about him. One, as Nancy Brown-Martinez of the Center for Southwest Research tells it was, “Once when he was traveling with a friend in Spain he bought so many books he couldn’t fit them all into his suitcase. His friend noticed Pedro throwing out his clothes and asked him what he was doing. Pedro replied, “I don’t have room in my suitcase for my books, and my books are more important” (Brown-Martinez, n.d.). This happens to also be a favorite story of Pete’s nephew, Ray Ortega (R. Ortega).

A story told by Bernie, speaks to the kindheartedness of Pete. As she tells it, “He had his own perspective about things. He and his brother were at his house in Truchas. His brother opened a kitchen cabinet and started yelling “there’s a
dead mouse; Hunta Virus!” Pete took one look at it and said “Pobresito ratonsito “(poor little mouse). He removed it and considered it to be one of God’s creatures” (B. Ortega).

Don Pedro Ribera-Ortega, walking legend, living treasure, and my brother-in-laws brother devoted his life to the teaching of the unique 400-year history of La Villa Real de la Santa Fe de San Francisco de Asís (“The Royal Town of the Holy Faith of St. Francis of Assisi”). I believe that Victor Ortega, nephew to both Pete and I, says it best, “Pete believed that the world was a wondrous place with endless beauty. As a person you owed it to yourself to learn and absorb as much as you could. However, you owed it to the world to share what you have learned” (V. Ortega).
Works Cited


Chevalier, Jaima. "La Conquistadora: Unveiling the History of Santa Fe's Six Hundred Year Old
  Religious Icon." Chevalier, Jaima. La Conquistadora: Unveiling the History of Santa Fe's Six

Krogt, René & Peter van der. Settlers Monument. n.d.

—. The Founding of Santa Fe. n.d.

Lovato, Andrew Leo. "Santa Fe Hispanic Culture: Preserving Identity in a Tourist Town." Lovato,
  Andrew Leo. Santa Fe Hispanic Culture: Preserving Identity in a Tourist Town. University of


<http://www.santafenewmexican.com/news/local_news/history-of-la-
conquistadora/article_ca342910-fe14-5b69-a766-8cb9000ac3d8.html>.


<https://www.cbsfa.org/86>.

West, Elizabeth. "Santa Fe: 400 Years, 400 Questions : Commemorating the 400th Anniversary of Santa Fe, New Mexico, in 1610." West, Elizabeth. *Santa Fe: 400 Years, 400 Questions : Commemorating the 400th Anniversary of Santa Fe, New Mexico, in 1610*. Santa Fe, NM: Sunstone Press, 2012.

Nitrosparpxx. Main Gallery 499 submissions. Housepets! Fanmusic - I'm Gonna Call Him Pete! - by Nitrosparpxx. Submission information: Posted: 7 years ago Category: Music Theme: All Favorites: 2 Comments: 3 Views: 87. More music I wrote for the Housepets! radio drama. This is for when we are first introduced to this blue Gryphon. He seems like a jolly guy. ...or is he? Housepets! is Â© to rickgriffin Music is Â© to me. User comments. Giese. I'm calling him Pete.pic.twitter.com/Ua5G26uNfy. 3:52 PM - 7 Sep 2016. 1,046 Retweets. 5,373 Likes. 405 replies 1,046 retweets 5,373 likes. Reply. Retweet.Â ok, so where does Pete come from? Isn't not something you plucked out of the air? So where does it come from? 0 replies 0 retweets 5 likes. Reply. Retweet. Retweeted.