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Review of Manuel Alvarez, 1794-1856: A Southwestern Biography

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Manuel Alvarez, 1794-1856: A Southwestern Biography. By Thomas E. Chávez. Niwot, Colorado: University Press of Colorado, 1990. Notes, selected bibliography, index. x + 243 pp. \$24.95.

The subject of this lively, well-written book is Manuel Alvarez, an important but neglected figure who played a key role in New Mexican and western affairs under the Mexican and U.S. government. A Spaniard by birth, a Mexican

by expediency, and a trader by inclination, Alvarez was an avid reader, deeply interested in history, who believed that worldly happiness came to the man who thought justly, acted uprightly, and lived usefully.

After emigrating to Mexico in 1818, he left the newly independent republic for Missouri by way of Cuba in 1823. After leaving St. Louis for Santa Fe he opened a store and prospered as a merchant. When the Mexican government expelled Spanish citizens from the country in 1829, however, Alvarez became a fur trapper and a brigade leader for the American Fur Company. The year 1834 saw him back in Santa Fe operating his store, active in the trade between St. Louis and New Mexico, and caught up in events that would culminate in the war with Mexico and the American takeover of the Southwest.

Alvarez's abilities and experiences as traveler, trapper, merchant, stock-raiser, and government official brought him wealth and prominence in New Mexico before and after the American occupation. Trilingual and multifaceted, "an artful dodger and a pragmatist of the highest order" (189), Alvarez combined ambition with integrity. As U.S. consul in New Mexico he claimed dual citizenship and defended American property and persons. Despite being an adversary of the Mexican government, he won the respect of the Hispanic population and led the statehood movement during the military occupation of New Mexico.

As acting governor of New Mexico in 1850,

Alvarez cogently summarized the territory's problems, reiterated his party's justification for state government, and called for "the establishment of a sound and economical system of common schools" (142). Alvarez was a keen observer of life. He was critical of Mexico's government but found Mexicans themselves had only one fault: "They were too gullible, especially to the polished chicanery of American merchants" (189).

Always an advocate of material and intellectual progress, Alvarez sent sheep to California's mines, acted as an "attorney" engaged in debt collection and money changing, and presented twenty-six volumes "by distinguished authors ancient and modern" to the territorial legislature. These works, which Alvarez arranged to have the federal government purchase with the help of his friend Richard Weightman, included a history of the United States in Spanish.

In summary, author Thomas Chávez's valuable biography of Manuel Alvarez places its protagonist in the context of his time. He has made good use of primary and secondary sources to tell the story of a man who helped "prepare a cosmopolitan society for a new political and cultural regime" (187). Students of Southwestern history and the American frontier will enjoy this book.

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