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Review of We Fed Them Cactus

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BOOK REVIEWS

We Fed Them Cactus. By Fabiola Cabeza de Baca. 1954; rpt. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989. Illustrations, glossary, index. x + 186 pp. \$10.95.

Concerned about a lack of recorded history of her family's contributions to the settlement of eastern New Mexico, Fabiola Cabeza de Baca in the 1940s began to compile data for a book that would focus on the cultural values of Hispanics who grazed their livestock on the high plains of the Texas Panhandle. Relying on oral traditions of family members, friends, and acquaintances, Doña Fabiola reinforced the narrative with occasional references to archival documents.

With a tinge of nostalgia, the author described the landscape of the Llano Estacado at the end of the American-Mexican War of 1846-1848. She detailed the hardships endured by New Mexican Hispanics who ventured into the region below the Caprock, called *La Ceja*, the eyebrow. Into the uninviting wilderness of the Llano Estacado came armed and determined *nuevo mexicanos*, initially to graze their sheep or cattle and later to settle in primitive sod houses. During these spring-to-autumn excursions,

some Hispanics became *ciboleros* (buffalo hunters) while others engaged in illegal trade with Comanche warriors.

Interlacing the narrative with other facets of Hispanic life, Señorita Cabeza de Baca began and ended the story with chapters about rainfall, either moderately adequate to ensure continuation of the livestock industry or so woefully insufficient as to destroy material achievement. With delicately crafted passages to conjure images of sight, sound, and smell, the author depicted the anxiety and gratitude of her father and elder brothers as they watched the buildup of storm clouds in the evening sky and the family's celebration of rain.

She also described the *cabañuelas* tradition, an inheritance from early Spanish settlers that forecast the weather for the year. Each of the first twelve days in January represented a month; the thirteenth to the twenty-fourth represented the months in reverse order. If the forward and backwards days coincided, an observer of the *cabañuelas* could confidently predict rainfall for each season. To confirm the prediction the forecaster paired the months in the remaining six days, reserving the thirty-first for all the climatic stations of the year. Long before the ad-

vent of scientifically trained meteorologists, the tradition of *las cabañuelas* fulfilled the needs of an Hispanic frontier society.

The title of the book comes from the author's haunting experiences during the severe drought of the 1930s that forced Papa Cabeza de Baca to sell most of his cattle at depressed prices. To save the remaining livestock, the *vaqueros* burned thorns from the cactus to feed the cattle until the animals could be shipped to distant pastures.

We Fed Them Cactus is folk history, replete with sidelights of customs and traditions (rodeos, fiestas, prayer meetings, and politics) of the Hispano culture in the Río Pecos basin of New Mexico as well as a composite of recollections surrounding the Cabeza de Baca family, including a chapter devoted to the author's reminiscences of her first salaried employment as a teacher in a rural school. The lack of conventional footnotes in no way reduces the value of the book. Readers who recall the hardships of the "dust bowl" years of the 1930s will easily relate to the episodes in *We Fed Them Cactus*; for those of later generations the contents of the reprint edition will seem like scenarios script writers create for nostalgic western adventures.

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