

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

1990

The Hispanic Presence on The Great Plains: An Introduction

Miguel A. Carranza

University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

Carranza, Miguel A., "The Hispanic Presence on The Great Plains: An Introduction" (1990). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 412.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/412>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

THE HISPANIC PRESENCE ON THE GREAT PLAINS

AN INTRODUCTION

In April 1989, the Center for Great Plains Studies at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln sponsored its thirteenth annual symposium on the topic "The Hispanic Presence on the Great Plains." Scholars from across the United States and Mexico presented papers on a wide variety of topics covering the history, culture, politics, and images of people of Spanish origin on the Great Plains. These presentations focused on the Hispanic presence from the early Spanish explorers who entered the southern fringes of the Great Plains, to the vast migrations of *Mexicans* coming to "El Norte" beginning in the early 1900s, to the creation and maintenance of *Chicano* communities up to the present day. This unique combination of Spanish, Mexican, and Chicano influences has resulted in the establishment of a "Hispanic presence" on the Great Plains. Additionally, the symposium focused on *both* the southern and northern regions of the Great Plains. The northern Plains is often overlooked as a valuable source of knowledge about Hispanics, so its inclusion should provide a valuable tool for future comparative research among Hispanic groups as well as between Hispanics and non-Hispanics.

The symposium examined the interfaces between Hispanics and other peoples of the Plains.

And it focused on the vital role Hispanics have played throughout the Americas since Christopher Columbus and his fellow navigators set foot on what was to become to Europeans and Africans, in truth, a New World, five hundred years ago.

The four papers in this issue of the *Great Plains Quarterly* were picked to illustrate the diversity of roles Hispanics and their culture have assumed over the centuries. Viewed from the perspective of the Thirteen Colonies that became the United States of America, an English-speaking nation expanding westward, the Great Plains was the last frontier, but from the viewpoint of New Spain, the Great Plains has been many frontiers, some of which caused significant alterations in the way the Spanish viewed their empire and approached life in their new world.

Because the movement of Spanish-speaking peoples onto the Great Plains has not been marked by the steady progression of a "frontier line" such as many scholars have discerned in the English-speaking people's settlement pattern, we can perhaps understand the Hispanic presence if we regard it thematically. Across nearly five hundred years, Spanish speakers on the Great Plains have possessed a world view

that tied them to Old Mexico, to Europe, and to all the world beyond.

Thomas E. Chávez explores intricate international relationships in a story that stretches from the early eighteenth century to the present—and continues into the future—in his article, “The Segesser Hide Paintings: History,

then he goes on to trace the paintings themselves and to detail their return from Switzerland to New Mexico more than two centuries after Father Segesser had packed them off.

In his study of “The Mexican Immigrant Press Beyond the Borderlands: The Case of *El Cosmopolita*, 1914-19,” Michael M. Smith looks at

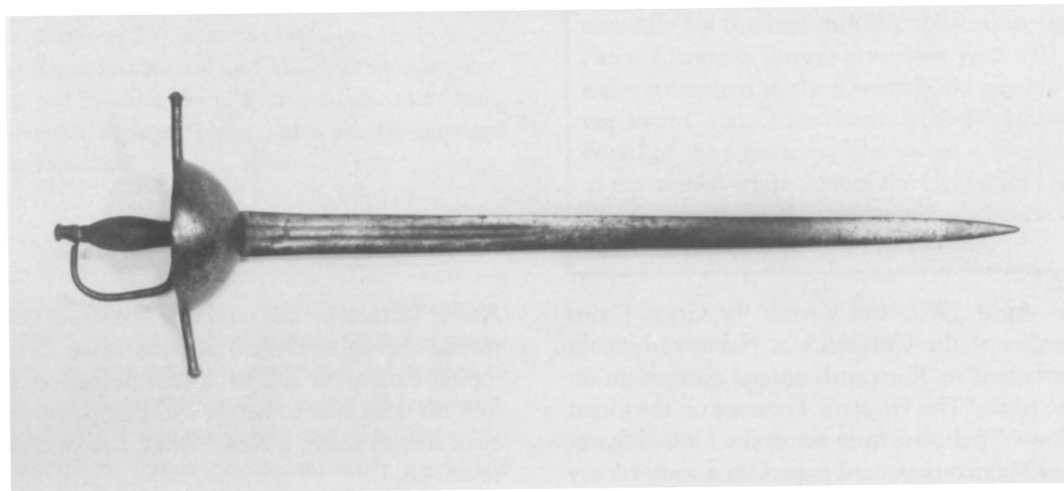


FIG. 1. Cup-hilt broadsword (*espada ancha*) of the type depicted in the hide painting referred to as Segesser I. MNM #147832, Palace of the Governors Collections 9985/45, Santa Fe.

Discovery, Art.” One of the earliest artistic renderings of the central Great Plains is of an expedition launched from Santa Fe in 1720 to discover and halt French incursions onto the Plains from the northeast. At the confluence of the Loup and Platte rivers in what is now Nebraska, Pawnees armed with French muskets attacked and defeated a column of one hundred Spaniards, Pueblo Indians, and a few other allies. Only thirteen of the troop from Santa Fe survived, and their accounts formed the basis of a large and detailed hide painting of the battle. In 1758, Father Philipp von Segesser von Brunegg, a Jesuit priest, shipped the painting and two companion pieces home to his brother in Switzerland. Chávez explains the politics of the expedition that saw European powers fighting by proxy in the middle of the Plains, and

a Spanish language newspaper that flourished in Kansas City, on the eastern edges of the Plains, during the years of the First World War. Though in many ways a typical Spanish language newspaper, *El Cosmopolita* was unusual in two aspects: it operated outside the Spanish Borderlands of the Southwest, and its proprietor for most of its existence was an Anglo. While *El Cosmopolita* did serve the local needs of the Hispanic community in Kansas City, its main function was to carry the news of the day from Mexico and to push the agenda of the Constitutionalist faction in the Mexican Revolution. This focus reflected both the community desire to stay Mexican and the proprietor’s need to expand and protect his commercial operations in Mexico, operations in which leading constitutionalists were involved. The brief life of



FIG. 2. Detail of the attacking cavalry in Segesser I. With the exception of some of the headdresses, all the clothing, armor, and weapons are Spanish, but the pronghorns indicate that the site may have been the Great Plains. Segesser File, Palace of the Governors, Santa Fe.

El Cosmopolita thus illustrates the complex interactions between Hispanic peoples and the dominant society on the Great Plains within the context of their strong connections to the world beyond the United States border.

If one theme of the Hispanic presence on the Great Plains is its international context another, paradoxically, is marginalization. Russell M. Magnaghi describes a kind of marginalization in "Plains Indians in New Mexico: The Genízaro Experience." As Spanish settlements moved out onto the southern fringes of the Great Plains in the sixteenth century, the Spaniards encountered many different groups of Indians. Some Plains Indians who had been taken captive by other tribes were ransomed by the Spaniards, who then proceeded to assimilate them into a colonial society already marked by a variety of racial mixtures. While these people, the *genízaros*, could move up through marriage or personal prowess, as a class they were near the bottom of the society. Their background, however, enabled them to play an important role both in defending the New Mexican settlements against Plains neighbors and in trading with them. Thus the Plains had a strong human impact on Hispanics on its fringe even before they moved onto the Plains.

In "Settlers, Sojourners, and Proletarians: Social Formation in the Great Plains Sugar Beet Industry, 1890-1940," Dennis Nodín Valdés de-

scribes the ways the sugar industry deliberately chose to encourage Euro-American farmers, especially Germans from Russia, to settle and own their own farms. The same industry adopted strategies for finding workers that brought Mexicans to the beet fields first as sojourners and finally as settled or migratory stoop laborers. The economic structure of the industry as well as the racism that united Euro-Americans against Hispanics emphasized the marginal nature of the Mexican beet workers on the Great Plains. Nonetheless, a viable proletarian culture emerged from the beet fields, not a replication of the old villages of the Spanish "hearth" in New Mexico but a new culture that was part of the recently formed, rural industrial world of the Great Plains.

These four articles only begin to suggest the scope of the papers presented at the symposium and of other current research on the Hispanic presence in the United States. We hope they will serve as a valuable introduction to those readers unfamiliar with the subject and as a significant new source of information for those knowledgeable in the field of Mexican/Chicano Studies.

MIGUEL A. CARRANZA
Department of Sociology
Institute for Ethnic Studies
University of Nebraska-Lincoln