

[Interview with Mrs. Clara Fergusson]

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About [?] words

INTERVIEW WITH MRS. CLARA FERGUSSON

When I asked Mrs. Fergusson to tell me of her pioneer life in New Mexico, she answered, "I'm not a pioneer in the exact sense of the word. I'm a native born New Mexican. I have spent most of my life here, and all four of my children were born her in New Mexico."

Mrs. Fergusson's father, Franz Huning, came to New Mexico over the old Santa Fe Trail, by ox team in 1849.

Her husband, Harvey B. Fergusson, was the first New Mexican Congressman.

Two of her children have loved and understood New Mexico so well that they have been able to describe and interpret the country and its people in several sidely widely read volumes. Harvey Fergusson has written a number of novels, among them *Blood of the Conquerors*, *Wolf Song*, and *Footloose McGarnigal*, in which he has dealt with various types of New Mexicans and periods of New Mexican life,—the Spanish American in his relation to a superimposed Anglo civilization, the mountain men in contact with the old Spanish culture, glimpses of Indian life, and somewhat caustic descriptions of the comparatively recent art colonies. Always the background, the feel of the country, is splendidly and convincingly done. Rio Grande, with the Rio Grande basin for its central

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scene, is, in the words of the author, an attempt to “portray a region” and to “comprehend the present in terms of the forces that made it.” C18 - N. Mex.

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[?] lush fact

I asked Mrs. Fergusson how she accounted for this quality in their writing, and she smiled and said that she was sure at any rate that all of their writing was well substantiated and authenticated, that neither of them spared any effort to add a significant detail or track down a source.

Mrs. Fergusson is a charming white haired woman. She has a keen way of looking at one, and smiles unexpectedly with her eyes. We sat talking on the porch of her modern adobe house at [?] Orchard Road. Orchard Road [?] one street that has been allowed to lag a bit in Albuquerque's effort for an efficient, eastern air. A huge old bottonwood cottonwood stands not far from the middle of the unpaved road. At the side of Mrs. Fergusson's home are three old cottonwoods. “Ithink it was the trees that drew me to the place”, she [?] said.

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Mrs. Fergusson told me that her father came to America from Germany in 1848. The port of New York was closed at the time, so he landed at New Orleans and went up the Mississippi to St Louis. In 1849 he went west and lived for some time in Santa Fe. He learned Spanish and interpreted for the soldiers, who had come with the American occupation of New Mexico. “I believe he always liked languages better than business,” Mrs. Fergusson said. In 1863 he located at Albuquerque where he ser set up a general merchandise store. Ten years later hebrought to Albuquerque his bride, Ernestina Franke. She too had come from Germany to St Louis by way of New Orleans.

Mrs. Fergusson talked a little about her childhood whichwas spent in an adobe house in Old Town. The house, now known as the Calkins' House stands on the north side of West Central Avenue at 1801. It is separated from the street by a high adobe wall, and

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approached through a wooden agate gate and a pathway arched by trees. Seen from the front the house is long and low and beautifully proportioned. An open portal extends entirely across it. Upon entering one discovers that the house is built [?] completely around a large square patio. In the centre of the patio is a cottonwood, so large and old that it is now supported by massive chains. The rooms are long and narrow and the walls are over two feet thick. The windows are small and the fireplaces huge. "Of-course there was no grass in the patio or in front of the house in those days", Mrs. Fergusson explained, but one can [?] imagine that it must have been a delightful place for a child to grow up in.

Mrs. Fergusson [?] [?] Mexican girls passing by dressed in bright calico and of [?] "slat" sunbonnets, the some kind the covered wagon women wore.

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Their mothers were always wrapped in black shawls. She remembers hearing her father tell of seeing the Penitentes whipping themselves with cactus whips, in the Old Town plaza, though she herself never saw them until years later, and then with more difficulty, in an out of the way Mexican village.

In the middle of [ta?] plaza stood an octagonal adobe house. In it dwelt the barber, a big fat man named Brown. Barber Brown was also the town's one dentist. Whenever anyone suffered from toothache, the barber called and pulled the tooth. On top of the octagonal house was a flag pole, and in the yard a cannon. It was the barber's duty to raise the flag and shoot off the cannon every Fourth of July.

The funereal funeral processions of children are among the strangest of Mrs. Fergusson's remembrances of this period. The box containing the small body was always placed in the middle of [?] a wagon. It was covered with a piece of gay pink cambric. Around it sat the relatives, and in their midst a fiddler played bright and carefree tunes. The child's death was considered an occasion for rejoicing as the soul of a child who had not yet been

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touched by sin would surely go straight to heaven, thus escaping the trouble and sorrow of a longer earthly life.

She remembers [toon?] too processions of Mexicans carrying the virgin through the fields and around the plaza, praying for rain. Later they would sit up all night in their houses praying and singing for the rain to come.

The problem of securing a variety of food was a real one in those days. The Huning family did its own slaughtering. Her father built an ice house, and ice was hauled from the river. Water too was brought from the river every morning on a wagon loaded with big barrels. It was then 5 poured into other barrels and allowed to settle. There were no oranges or lemons, and lemonade was made from a canned preparation. "Terrible stuff", Mrs. Fergusson said, "but we thought it was good." Her mother learned from the Mexican women how to dry and preserve the native fruits. Everybody made wine. Mr. Huning built the first steam flour mill, and the natives would come [?] with their wheat and corn in exchange for flour. "Very little money was used," Mrs. Fergusson told me. "It was mostly a matter of trading. The people brought what they had raised to the store and received things that they could not produce themselves in return. A general merchandise store in those days had everything. Twice a year my father went to St Louis over the Santa Fe Trail, with ten or twelve wagons drawn by mule teams and returned with all kinds of merchandise. There is in one of the rooms of Castle Huning now a Steinway piano my father brought out by mule team."

I asked Mrs. Fergusson about her early schooling. She replied that "the Brothers" had schools for the boys, but it was evidently not thought worth while to teach a girl in those days. When she was nine her father sent her to Santa Fe, an overnight trip by stage, to spend a year at Loretto Convent. Her greatest treat there was to be allowed to go into the garden of Archbishop Lamy. She remembers him as a tall, handsome man with a kind smile—she does not think that Willa Cather portrayed the real archbishop at all. Later

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Mrs. Fergusson's father brought her a governess from St Louis, and still later she was sent there to school.

Mrs. Fergusson remembers the time the Rio Grande flooded over its banks, she believes it was in '74 or '75. The water came down as far as the point 6 that later became Twelfth Street. The people in Old Town, which was then all there was of Albuquerque, withdrew to the sand hills, where they lived in tents until the water subsided.

"It was the railroad," Mrs. Fergusson said, "which finally changed Albuquerque and the pattern of life here." She remembers when the first train came in 1881. Everybody turned out for a big celebration, speeches and a dance in the evening.

"Soon after that I went to Germany for two years," Mrs. Fergusson told me. "When I left there was only the railway station about a mile from the houses in Old Town and a dusty lonely road stretching between. A man named Cromwell built a track between the two towns and a mule pulled the car. Later the line was electrified. When I returned from Germany the single street reaching toward old Town was built up as far as Sixth Street. Another street ran along by the tracks. New Town was shaped like a big cross."

"The new town was different from the old. Instead of quiet, low adobe houses shaded by cottonwoods, it was built of wood. There were stores, some of them with two story fronts, and nearly every other building was a saloon or a gambling house. The sidewalks were rickety board walks. There was a sense of [?] excitement and feverishness and noise.

"Before the coming of the railroad," Mrs. Fergusson said, "there was nothing very effective in the way of law or law enforcement. There was a great deal of stealing, especially horse thieving, and sometimes shooting. People had to take the law into their own hands, and thieves were strung up on the tree nearest to the place where they were caught more often than not.

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After the coming of the railroad there was even more lawlessness for awhile, but within a few years things quieted down / here, and the outlaws moved on to wilder places.”

With the railroad come sober solid business men, interested first of all in making money. They intended to have safe respectable homes for their wives and children, and an environment that would appeal to home builders, and before many years Albuquerque had become a comparatively peaceful place.

Sometime before the first train came, men had started work on the great, white house, surrounded with tress add coolness, known as Castle Huning. In a country where [????] the houses were sprawling and earth colored and [?] casually built, a white house with a tower and plumb lines, that took three years to build must have been a cause for conversation. The walls of the house were made of “terrons”, cut from the sod, and larger than “adobe” bricks. Cement [?] for the foundation was imported from England. Lumber was brought in from Illinois. The house was patterned from houses which Franz Huning remembered in Hanover Germany, and it was named Castle Huning. In 1883 it was finished. Apart from the slow Spanish life of the Old Town, it stood equally remote from the wooden shanties and hectic life which was rapidly gathering about the railroad station to the east. [???] In its solemn interior one of the rooms is today preserved in the style in which it was originally furnished—heavy draperies, a patterned carpet on the floor, gilt framed enclosing serious faced family portraits, be-tasselled furniture.

The year after the coming of the railroad Harvey B. Fergusson, a 8 young attorney from Wheeling, W. Va., came to New Mexico as attorney for the North Homestake Mining Company. He decided to remain permanently in the territory, locating at Albuquerque.

In 1887 Harvey Fergusson and Clara Huning were married. For awhile Mr. and Mrs. Fergusson lived in the Castle, and their first child, Lina, was born there. Later they moved to the beautiful old adobe house in old Town where Mrs. Fergusson had spent her childhood. There three other children Harvey, Francis, and Erna were born.

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“Most people don't know I have more than two children,” Mrs. Fergusson said, “because Lina and Francis left Albuquerque when they were rather young and don't come back very frequently. Lina is married and lives in California, and Francis is head of the dramatic department at Bennington College. I am going there to visit him and his family this month.”

I asked Mrs. Fergusson if she would tell me a little about the two children who are so well known for their portrayals of the New Mexican scene.

“Harvey”, she said, “was always a dreamy, imaginative child, too much so to suit his teachers. They used to say he was forever gazing out of the window instead of paying attention to his lessons. He was never very interested in competitive sports, football or even tennis, but he loved to go away by himself, hunting or just wandering with his dog and his horse—still does in fact. His father wanted him to study law, but Harvey wasn't interested. He studied at the University of New Mexico, where he majored in English. During the summers he worked in the Forestry Service. He used that material in parts of *Footloose McGarnigal* years later.

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I think Harvey always had the idea that he wanted to write. Later he continued studying at Washington and Lee, his father's university. I guess his father decided finally that there was no use trying to push him into the law business, and Harvey took a job in a newspaper office in Washington when his father was in Congress there. Later he was connected with the Haskins Syndicate. He gave up steady positions to try fiction, and he has been writing books ever since.

“Erna graduated from the University of New Mexico and got her MA at Columbia. She used to write a little for the newspapers in Albuquerque, going about talking to people about old times and writing up their stories. Harvey always encouraged her to write, but she was not very sure she could do it until she had her first book published.”

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I asked Mrs. Fergusson whether Harvey and Erna Fergusson were at present working on books. "Harvey," she said, "agreed to write two books on the Guggenheim fellowship, one non-fiction, which was Modern Man, and the other, fiction. He is engaged on the novel now. Erna is writing a book on Guatemala. There", she finished with a smile, "don't you think that's enough about the Fergusson family?"