**Archaeology and History in Your Backyard**

**Mabel Sibley Jones First Teacher in Tajique**

Hello Everyone! This is Archaeology and History in Your Back Yard and my name is Dixie. X 88.7 FM and the Torrance County Archaeological Society are pleased to bring you a series of programs designed to acquaint you, our listening audience with little known people, places and events that took place in the past, right here in your own back yard. For the most part, we will be covering interesting facts, stories and legends about the past, and people that lived right here in the Estancia Valley and surrounding areas in central New Mexico. Our goal is to inform, educate and possibly enlist your help in preserving and protecting our past.

Our show today will focus on Mabel Sibley Jones and her experience as the first teacher in the one-room schoolhouse at Tajique in 1890.

This program was written by Dixie Boyle and produced by Bill Simms. Thank you for joining us today.

In 1890, Mabel Sibley Jones became the first teacher in the small, frontier town of Tajique in New Mexico Territory. She rode the train from Wilmington, Delaware and Tajique mercantile owner Elisha Dow met her in Santa Fe. He had publicized for a teacher through the Presbyterian Home Missions Society and other teacher agencies and Mabel agreed to teach in Tajique’s first school.

They traveled between Santa Fe and Tajjique in Elisha Dow’s covered wagon. It took two days to reach Tajique and Mr. Dow stopped along the way and cooked their lunch and dinner, and they spent one night en-route. Mabel described the experience in a short story she sent Elisha Dow in 1952. She wrote, “We stopped at a roadhouse that evening and spent the night without disrobing and slept in a room where others were resting.”

The next day they drove along the eastern slopes of the Manzano Mountains reaching Tajique after midnight. “We were glad to relax in a bed. Tajique, a village east of El Bosque, built of adobe houses around a plaza, had a population of less than five hundred,” she stated.

According to Mabel’s story, the town’s water supply was acquired from one well and a fresh water stream running through the town. Most of the homes kept their drinking water in a vessel with a gourd for drinking. The majority of the homes had dirt floors with only a few possessing windows and doors. She wrote, “The Dow house had two residential sections with a general store occupying the center. There was ample window space in the structure.” Mabel lived with the Dow family, and her room faced the plaza so she was able to observe many of the local traditions and customs.

During this era in New Mexico’s history membership in the religious society known as the Hermanos Penitentes was prevalent throughout the villages east of the Sandia and Manzano Mountains. This religious group felt they needed to give penitence for their sins by hurting themselves by wearing cactus on their backs or in their feet so they could feel the pain Jesus had felt upon the cross.

Mabel wrote about the religious activities of the Penitentes, “This section of the Manzanos was a fastness especially suited to the age-old rites of the Hermanos Penitentes. The death of a prominent Penitente being announced in the village, I called upon the family. The body of the dead man was neatly attired and laying upon a table.”

On a bitterly, cold night a few evenings later, Mabel walked with the women to the small, cemetery nearby. She wrote, “I joined the women. We marched to the tune of their songs: Penitence, Penitence, sin no more unfortunate man. The shrill notes sounded by their fife or pito were in a minor key, which caused its frequent, repetition to become monotonous and eerie. We carried lighted candles.”

She described how members of the group lashed the body of a man numerous times over the grave of the deceased Penitente. She saw blood trickling from the body onto the grave. She explained how the evening ended, “The ceremony over the grave, in that isolated country, was impressive and reverent. We reached home at two o’clock in the morning.”

Weddings, funerals and fiestas were events to look forward to throughout the year for those living in Tajique. Dancing was a favorite form of entertainment for those living in the isolated mountain settlements. Dances normally started at sunset and lasted until sunrise. It was felt that it was safer to travel during the daylight hours. Mabel explains, “There was always wandering antelope, wild horses, coyotes, cattle, sheep and the redundant prairie dog.”

Jones describes some of the rules and regulations upheld at these dances, “The dances were held in the larger homes or in the schoolhouse. The dancers were rather conventional as the dancers were not permitted to converse while dancing and were banned from the floor it they violated the dancing rules,” she wrote. “If there was too much drinking by the men, the dance sometimes ended boisterously.”

In the weeks leading to New Mexico’s rainy season, those living in Tajique as well as along the Manzano Range would meet to pray for rain. Mabel wrote, “A statue of the Virgin Mary was carried through the streets and whenever sufficient funds were available, she was carried into a home and set upon some resting place, and before this alter, prayers were offered, asking for blessings and protection for this house.”

Countless teachers left the comforts of home and family behind in order to open schools and provide educational opportunities for children throughout the American frontier. These first teachers often boarded-around, taught in primitive conditions and encountered customs and traditions much different from what they had ever experienced before.

There were few opportunities available for women living on the frontier and teaching was often a way they could independent and help children at the same time.

This has been Archaeology and History in Your Back Yard, a series that will take you through our area’s history in future episodes.

The Torrance County Archaeological Society meets at 7 PM the first Tuesday of every month from March through November. We meet at the East Torrance Soil and Water Education Building at 700 S. 10th Street in Estancia. Please come and join us.

You can listen to Archaeology and History in Your Own Backyard Monday at 1 PM, Tuesday at 7 PM, Friday at 10 AM and Saturday at 4 PM. Thanks for listening!

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