

*The San Diego World's Fairs  
and  
Southwestern Memory,  
1880–1940*

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*University of New Mexico Press  
Albuquerque*



*Published in cooperation with the San Diego Historical Society*

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Printed in the United States of America

11 10 09 08 07 06 05                    1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Bokovoy, Matthew F., 1969–

The San Diego World's Fairs and southwestern memory, 1880–1940 /

Matthew F. Bokovoy.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-8263-3642-6 (cloth : alk. paper)

1. Panama-California Exposition (1915 : San Diego, Calif.)
2. Panama-California International Exposition (1916 : San Diego, Calif.)
3. California Pacific International Exposition (1935–1936 : San Diego, Calif.)
4. San Diego (Calif.)—History—20th century. I. Title.

T872.B1B65 2005

907'.4794'985—dc22

2005012546



All illustrations provided courtesy of the San Diego Historical Society Research Archives (SDHS) and the San Diego Public Library, California Room Research Archives (SDPL).

DESIGN AND COMPOSITION: *Mina Yamashita*

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## Preface

### THE SPANISH HERITAGE

“AN INTEREST IN MISSION RUINS AND INDIAN RELICS has been known to lead to an interest in Mexicans and Indians,” wrote Carey McWilliams with optimism in *North from Mexico: The Spanish-Speaking People of the United States*, his 1949 book about the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. Although he despaired it would never be, McWilliams believed a more critical southwestern cultural history could become an agent for national civil rights and cultural pluralism. The war against the spread of fascism had ended, and the cold-war anticommunist crusade was flourishing throughout America. A prominent Los Angeles attorney, social justice activist, and prolific writer, McWilliams lamented the lost possibilities of a domestic, antifascist movement during the Depression and war that could have been led by labor radicals in the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), affluent white liberals, and socialists. He had spent the entire decade writing four books about racial and cultural relations in California, the Southwest, and the United States. In Los Angeles, McWilliams assisted the eventual acquittal of seventeen young Mexican American men in the Sleepy Lagoon Case; the men had been wrongly convicted of second-degree murder and lesser offenses in the death of José Díaz in 1942. McWilliams also joined his friend Louis Adamic and other civil-rights activists in the journal *Common Ground*, pushing his idea of social democracy, citizenship rights, and interracial cooperation during the fight against fascism. The *Common Ground* writers did not espouse an uncritical nationalism on the home front. Rather, their perspective was one of radical, legal-based pluralism and federal intervention on race problems. McWilliams hoped remnants of colonial southwestern heritage could promote greater intercultural understanding. His pronouncement also expressed mourning for the demise of the Popular Front and its vision of social democracy.<sup>1</sup>

In this intriguing statement, McWilliams referred to the public culture in Southern California and the Southwest, a regional tradition he

defined as the Spanish “fantasy heritage.” The fantasy heritage was the invented tradition created by white Californians to interpret the historical legacy of Indians, Spaniards, and Mexicans in the Southwest. Mostly inaccurate, ahistorical, and suffused with excessive sentimentality and romanticism, the fantasy heritage was the cultural gloss for the economic development and promotion of Southern California. The story of the fantasy heritage resembled a harmonious family reunion of benevolent Franciscan Fathers, ignorant but grateful Indians, cruel military governors, deceitful Mexican liberals, and indolent rancheros all united under the thrum of guitars and the click of the castanet at a grandee’s ranch fiesta. Then a productive, enterprising, and confidently superior race of white Protestants turned the milk and honey of the Mexican era into a dynamic capitalist society after 1848. All members of Spanish society lived under a presumed religious egalitarianism. And all citizens lived without disagreement and want. Villainous Mexican liberals and Anglo Americans, with their lust for extravagance and natural resources, had destroyed an ecclesiastical Eden where the scientific revolution and secular individualism swayed few minds. Spanish society was supposedly one of paternal obligation held together by the holy faith.<sup>2</sup>

Carefully reading between the lines of the fantasy heritage, McWilliams believed the early commercial origins of “modern Spanish heritage” also had been influenced by the progressive ethos of the early twentieth century and deeper strands of Christian humanism.<sup>3</sup> Cultural awareness could be redemptive in a society riddled with racial and social divisions. He hoped California citizens, tourists, seekers of exotica, and curio collectors would move beyond the romantic commercialism of the fantasy heritage into real history with an egalitarian social politics. For McWilliams, the word “fantasy” in the Spanish heritage perhaps represented deeper longings for the way race relations should have been improved through better intercultural understanding. In his earlier book, *Southern California Country: An Island on the Land* (1946), McWilliams argued the very newness of California appeared “in fact, to have compelled, to have demanded, the evocation of a mythology which could give people a sense of continuity in a region long characterized by rapid social dislocations.” He initially understood how social-reform

politics and lyrical romance defined the origins of the modern Spanish heritage. Both sentiments literally flowed from the same wellspring.<sup>4</sup> By 1949, McWilliams despaired that the Spanish heritage had become something entirely different. Commercial interests had created social distance between Anglos, ethnic Mexicans, and Indians. The sale of Spanish colonial mystery and romance had not inflamed the social compassion of Anglos for their Indian and Mexican contemporaries. With much insight, he felt “the people of the borderlands will either face the future ‘one and together’ or they are likely to find themselves siftings on siftings in oblivion.” McWilliams believed the power of culture to be ineffective if the “Anglo problem,” or white entitlement fed by racism, could not be overcome.<sup>5</sup> His words were the requiem for southwestern cultural history to bring greater interracial understanding and the important civil-rights requisite for social democracy.

I open with McWilliams’s musings to understand better how the dynamics of imagination and power shaped the Southwest’s most enduring invented tradition. In Southern California and the Southwest, no two events shaped the modern Spanish heritage more profoundly than the San Diego Exposition of 1915–16 and of 1935–36. Both San Diego fairs outlined a comprehensive portrait of the American Southwest, its peoples, and cultures for the American public. The Panama-California Exposition of 1915–16 celebrated southwestern pluralism and bound ever more tightly regional and national institutions that gave birth to future promotional events like the Long Beach Pacific Southwest Exposition of 1928, the Santa Fe Fiesta of the 1920s, and John Steven McGroarty’s *The Mission Play*. The California-Pacific International Exposition of 1935–36 promoted the future industrial might of the Pacific Slope and the consumer-oriented society in the making during the 1930s. These San Diego fairs distributed national images of Southern California and the Southwest unsurpassed in the early twentieth century.<sup>6</sup> Studies of southwestern memory have developed without serious consideration of the fairs. Much recent scholarship on this phenomenon argues that the modern Spanish heritage was a tradition of “false consciousness,” nothing more than public imagery used by Anglos to denigrate and erase the contemporary presence of ethnic Mexicans and American Indians.<sup>7</sup> The historical and critical

literature, however, offers some fresh reevaluations of southwestern cultural promoters, who imagined anew the obvious cultural pluralism of the region. And when cultural promoters reenvisioned with sympathy the history and culture of Indians and ethnic Mexicans, an important set of political understandings emerged in southwestern cultural history that contributed to the realization of legal, civil rights. Invented traditions are not categorically forms of “false consciousness” and can reveal submerged histories previously unconsidered. The grand visions of southwestern cultural promoters and world’s fair organizers rarely resounded in unison.<sup>8</sup>

A highly visible public heritage need not emanate from racial fears and hatreds. The Spanish heritage represented a new way to imagine ethnic Mexicans and Indians as worthy citizens of the Southwest. Democratic ideals that embraced social equality in progressive reform movements influenced the content and meaning of public heritage. Regional identity in Southern California and the Southwest emerged from growing sentiments of nationalism as well, despite the white racial worldview at the foundation of the new American empire. Public symbols and commemoration must radiate a sense of belonging-ness and sentiment of national love to be myths worth believing. Benedict Anderson has noted this phenomenon well. He writes, “It is useful to remind ourselves that nations inspire love, and often profoundly self-sacrificing love. The cultural products of nationalism—poetry, prose fiction, music, plastic arts—show this love very clearly in thousands of different forms and styles. On the other hand, how truly rare it is to find *analogous* nationalist products expressing fear and loathing.”<sup>9</sup> The modern Spanish heritage enthusiastically portrayed Southern California as a land of worthy “American” traditions. All the history and memories of Southern California and its Indian, Spanish, and Mexican legacy existed together in the social imagination between 1880 and 1940. The cultural and racial assumptions undergirding the images were often hurtful, insensitive, and untrue for Indians and ethnic Mexicans, since they were rarely invited to participate directly in the elaboration of the myths.<sup>10</sup> However, Anglo Americans held the privilege and power to shape the process of recollection. And from these efforts of Anglos, the modern Spanish heritage came into existence.<sup>11</sup>

Early twentieth-century efforts to create modern Spanish heritage embraced a wide variety of sentiments and representations of the Southwest and its peoples, from the fuzzy, often racist, romanticism of real-estate and tourist promotion to critical and egalitarian social criticism of historical conquests in the region. Let us not forget that ethnic Mexicans and Indians brought their experiences to shape and offer criticism of the modern Spanish heritage. In public celebration, Anglos hired people from both groups, who sometimes refused to participate, as actors in the fashioning of public history, commemoration, and cultural tourism. Building on the ethnic consciousness of the 1960s civil rights movement, Mexican American and Indian communities throughout the Southwest now control more than ever their public history. These communities also manage the content of their participation in public historical commemoration. Therefore, the modern Spanish heritage shows considerable flexibility with changing political and social trends over time. Spanish and Indian heritage emerged upon many fronts throughout the Southwest, in architecture, cultural institutions, historic preservation, public commemoration, real-estate promotion, tourism, and, of course, world's fairs. The only cultural thread to connect the institutions of modern Spanish heritage was a willingness to depict the past in a glowing and selective light. From 1880 to 1940 contemporary Indians and ethnic Mexicans, presumed descendants of the past, appeared noble and worthy but hidden from new settlers and tourists to the region. The public heritage of Spanish history and Indian folklore came to symbolize the promise of the present and future through the inevitable progression of past.<sup>12</sup>

Other cities in the American Southwest, such as Santa Fe, Tucson, Phoenix, Los Angeles, and Santa Barbara, created modern Spanish heritage. As the urban Southwest underwent rapid growth, city leaders searched for unique cultural styles to promote their commercial interests.<sup>13</sup> The story about the San Diego expositions shows this phenomenon in only one city, but it reveals similar patterns with others. The modern Spanish heritage accommodated different interests in all southwestern cities. The white majority in Southern California, unlike in other regions of the Southwest, had no need for modern Spanish heritage to achieve the unity of ethnic and racial groups.<sup>14</sup> From 1880 to

1940, Arizona, Texas, and especially New Mexico maintained larger Indian and ethnic Mexican populations than Southern California. The Spanish-descent population of New Mexico ranged from 40 and 60 percent with a significant population of Indians. The Spanish heritage symbolically unified New Mexico's Anglos, Hispanos, and Indians with a common history to assuage political and economic competition. In San Diego and Los Angeles, ethnic Mexican populations ranged from 5 to 10 percent during the era with small numbers of Indians. The San Diego expositions portrayal of the Southwest served different local interests.<sup>15</sup>

The San Diego expositions belonged to a confident and progressive generation that wholeheartedly believed in the promise of American institutions and life. The social compassion found in Christian ethics and the theory of cultural pluralism from 1880 to 1940 influenced the invention of tradition in Southern California and the United States.<sup>16</sup> Public commemoration often united immigrant and native cultures with social reform. The people who promoted modern Spanish heritage in San Diego supported the Mission Indians of Southern California during land battles, saw trade unionism as important for expanding democracy, and viewed the fair treatment of immigrants in America as an ethical and legal obligation. Public commemoration revealed possible worlds of the imagination but presented real limitations to the practice of democracy in everyday life. Sentiments expressed in public heritage and social reform obviously appear insensitive and misguided from our point of view today. I have presented the worldview of cultural promoters through what was thought, said, and done to capture their inspirations and motives to lead the heritage crusade in Southern California. A reader should have the luxury to consider actions, gestures, and words seriously. ∞