

Acoma Pueblo, New Mexico

my friends

As I have indicated [^]Phyllis and Reuben, residents of Albuquerque, are very knowle^dgeable about Indian culture in the area. Phyllis, in fact, for a while was a dealer in jewel[^]ry and has written on the topic. When I suggested a visit to a pueblo, Reuben said he would take me to Acoma. How far off was it, I asked. He answered that it was about eighty miles, an easy ride. My Eastern scale of distances prodded me, and I asked him if there weren't any pueblos closer to Albuquerque. He said that there were, in fact,

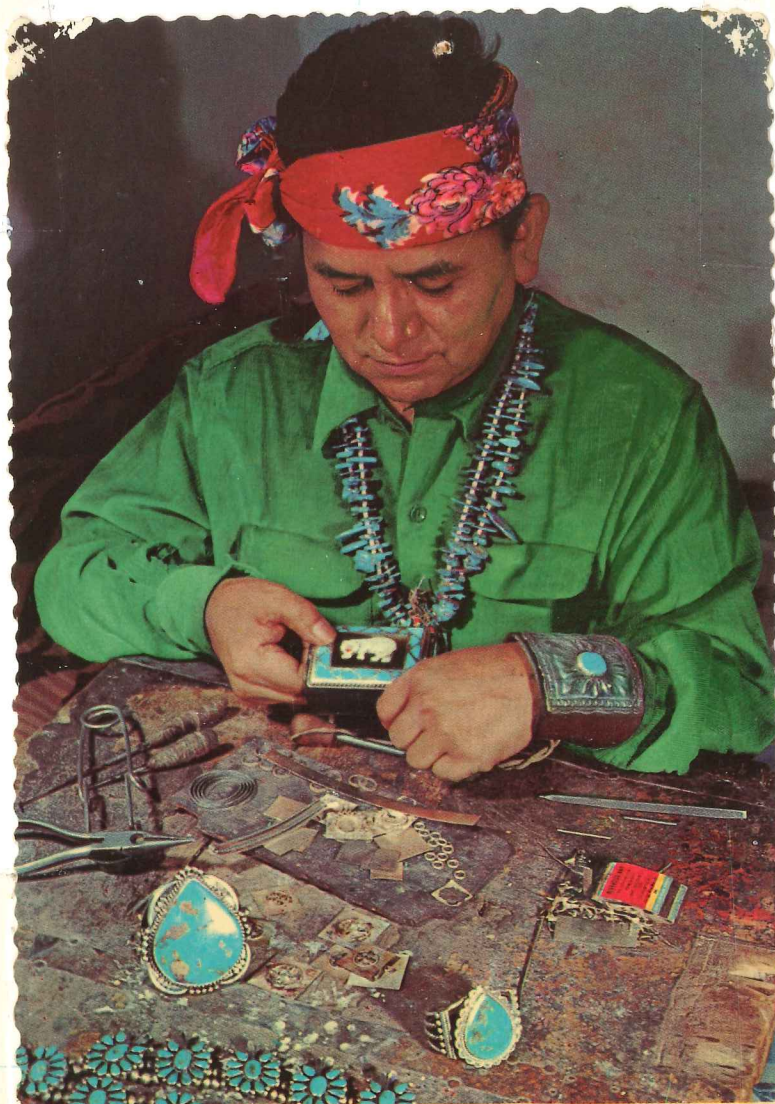
pueblos nearby where they knew some of the residents quite well, but Acoma was so remarkable that he wanted me to see it.

The next morning we set off in Reuben's big four-wheel-drive thing. After you cross the Rio Grande going

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the Indian religion. We want the children to have these things also. So we always go back to the pueblo for a few days. You see we are very religious people. The Baptist minister wants us to be exclusively Baptist, but I don't see it that way at all."

O, Egypt, Egypt; of thy religion will nothing remain but an empty tale, which thine own children in time to come will not believe?



Indian Silversmith



▲ Traditional deer dance, Tesuque Pueblo

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west on Route 40, there is so little traffic that all the driver has to do is aim the car and depress the accelerator. Twenty miles out we passed two small dead volcanos. (I am writing this the day after the Mount St. Helens volcanic blowout in the State of Washington. Perhaps the only good volcano is a dead volcano.) We talked for a bit--we were planning a book-- and then we put on the tape unit and listened to Andre Kostelanetz and his orchestra. As we ~~speed~~ west to the strains of "The Dance of the Hours", let me take time out to tell one of Phyllis' stories.

The pueblo where Phyllis and Reuben have friends has a fairly relaxed attitude toward the Anglo community. Once a year the pueblo holds a Corn Dance, a religious ceremony, part of which is open to the community. Phyllis' Indian friend, Sally, asked her to come out early to help prepare refreshments. The dance was danced, the dancers in full regalia.

A few days later, a young man said hello to Phyllis in downtown Albuquerque. It was Don, Sally's son, a young man of about twenty.

"Oh, Phyllis. I saw you at the Dance the other day. Didn't you see me?"

"No, Don, I didn't. Where were you?"

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"I was in the Dance. I had on my costume and my mask, But I waved to you and you should have known it was me."

"If I had known it was you, Don, I would have come and danced along."

As soon as we crossed the Rio Puerco, we were in territory designated as the Acoma Indian Reservation. This is mesa country par excellence, hundreds of mesas, so it seemed, rose from a wide tableland dotted with junipers and piñon.

One mesa in particular, isolated, more geometrically perfect than its neighbors, stood out in the distance. Reuben told me that that was Mesa Encantada, the enchanted mesa. We turned off on a dirt road, paused while a herd of sheep crossed before us, and made our way to the foot of Mesa Encantada. The base is swathed in ^{a collar of} talus--rock debris. We managed to climb about half of this collar and then the broken rocks became so large that as rank amateurs we found it impossible to scramble higher. Above the talus line is sheer cliff.

Several miles from Mesa Encantada is the pueblo city of Acoma. It is situated at the top of its own mesa about three hundred fifty feet high. This pueblo

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has been occupied continuously since the year 1200.

There must be about a thousand Pueblo Indians/^{now}living in Acoma, at the top and in little villages below.

The residents have come to recognize tourism as a good source of income and the tribe has organized tours. In a baking sun, we were taken around the village by a teen-age girl guide. We saw the three-tiered pueblos and the system of ladders. Most are occupied and one cannot go in them; one peeps through the windows here and there. There are kilns behind the pueblos and stone troughs for grinding corn. The Indians make a pottery according to ancient practices and sell it to the visitors. Modern technology with its refrigerators and TV sets is available at the top.

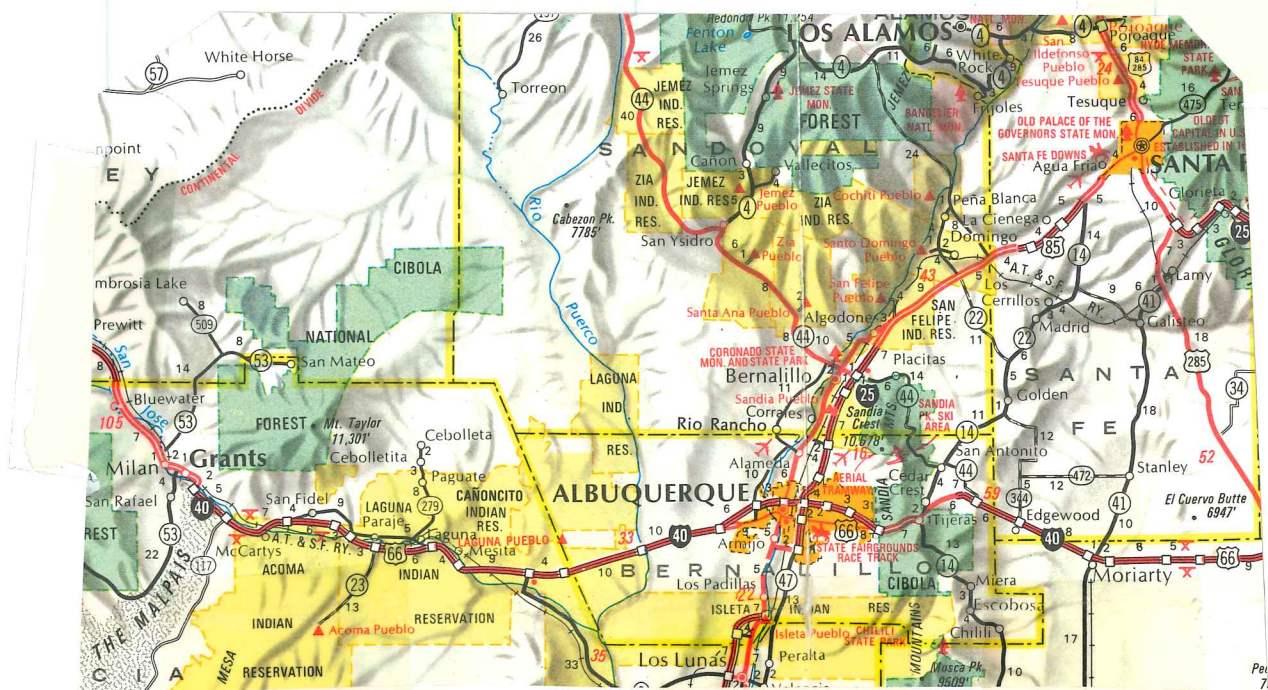
We were taken into the church of St. Steven, put up in 1629 as a mission, but it was not clear from the guide's description what, if anything, goes on in it.

As we drove down the precipitous road away from Acoma Pueblo, Reuben told me something of the early history of the place. It was discovered by the Spanish in 1539 and was visited by the famous Coronado expedition in 1540. In 1598, Juan de Onate, the first

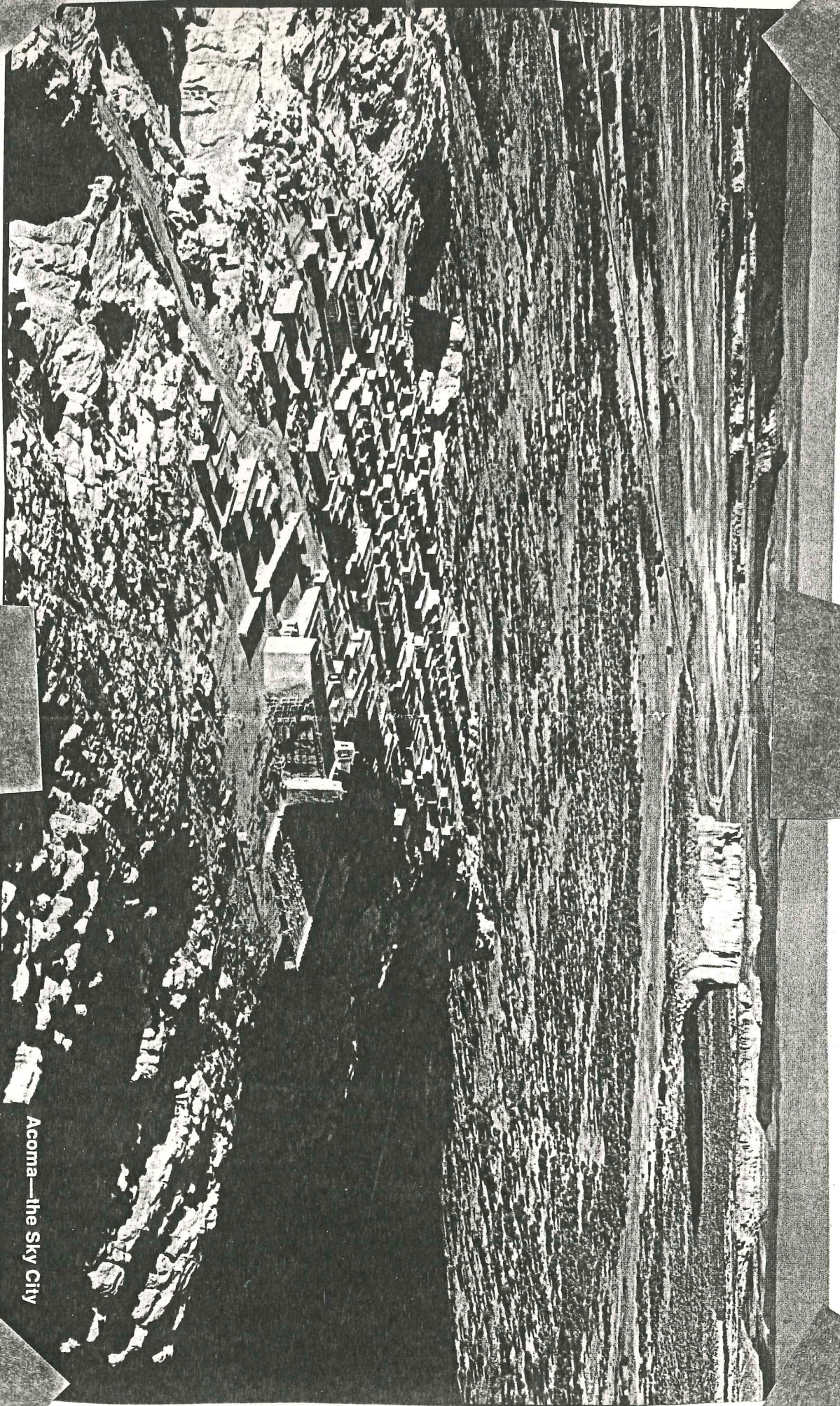
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Spanish governor of New Mexico, got the community to "submit" to Spanish arms. This turned out to be something of a joke. ^{Their} forces were ambushed in a bloody action whose individual events were detailed by Spanish historians. A year later, by way of retaliation, Spaniards in heavy armor hauled primitive cannon up the steep slope and Onate's army succeeded in burning the pueblo and killing half the population.

The pueblo has been "quiet" since 1700. To this day, the inhabitants have maintained a considerable degree of hostility and aloofness. Change is coming. At the bottom of the mesa we saw the signs of the ultimate capitulation: the tribe has erected a beautiful modern structure in pueblo style which is to become a reception center for tourists.



Acoma Pueblo with Mesa Zucantada in the Near Distance



Acoma—the Sky City

October 27, 1598. Act of obedience of the pueblo of Acoma.

In the name of the most holy trinity...: Be it known and manifest to all who may see or in any way hear about this instrument of loyalty and vassalage that Don Juan de Oñate... at the foot of a very large rock, on top of which is situated the pueblo of Acoma, accompanied by the most reverend father, Fray Alonso Martínez, apostolic commissary of his Holiness, the friars of the order of Saint Francis, and many captains and soldiers, and there being present also numerous natives, including chieftains, leaders, and common people, and among them three Indians named Coomo, Chaamo, and Ancua, who said that they were chiefs of the pueblo of Acoma, all of whom had been assembled there by the governor; in his presence and before me, Juan Velarde, secretary, with the aid of the reverend father, Fray Alonso Martínez, apostolic commissary, and Don Tomás, Indian interpreter, the governor explained to the chieftains and the other Indians the object of his coming and what it was fitting for them to do.

He told them that he had come to their country to bring them to the knowledge of God and the king our lord, on which depended the salvation of their souls and their living securely and undisturbed in their nations, maintained in justice and

order, safe in their homes, protected from their enemies, and free from all harm. Wherefore they should know that there is only one true God Almighty, creator of heaven and earth, rewarder of the good and punisher of the wicked, who has a heaven for the bliss of the former, and a hell for the punishment of the latter. This God and master of all had two servants on earth through whom He governed. The one who ruled in spiritual matters was the pope, Roman pontiff, high priest and head of the church, whose representative in this country was the most reverend father commissary, whom they saw in their midst, and they should respect and venerate him and all the priests wearing the habit, as ministers of God and men of His church. The other, who governed the world in temporal matters, was the most Christian king, Don Philip, our lord, sole defender of the church, king of Spain and the Indies, whose representative in this land was his lordship, the governor, and therefore they should respect and obey him in everything. And it was fitting that they render obedience and vassalage to God and the king, and in their places to the reverend father commissary in spiritual matters and to the governor in temporal affairs and in the government of their nations, as they were free people and owed allegiance to no one. It was to their advantage, moreover, to place themselves of their own free will under the authority of the king, Don Philip, our lord, great monarch and ruler, who would maintain them in peace and justice and defend them against their enemies, and employ them in positions and occupations in political and economic affairs, as would be explained to them in more detail later. Therefore, they should consider whether they wished to render obedience to God and the king.

The chieftains, having heard and understood the above and conferred among themselves about the matter, replied with spontaneous signs of pleasure and accord that they wished to become vassals of the most Christian king our lord, and, as his vassals, they desired to render at once obedience and vassalage for themselves and in the name of their nations. The governor reminded them that they should realize that by rendering obedience and vassalage to the king our lord they would become subject to his will and laws, and that if they failed to observe them they would be punished as transgressors of the orders of their

From "New American World: A Documentary History of North America to 1612". Vol 5.

king and natural master. Therefore they should consider what they desired to do and what answer to give. To this they replied that they wished to render the said obedience and vassalage, as they had stated before, both in their own name and in the name of the people of their nations.

The governor said that since this was the case, they should rise, as a sign of obedience, for during all this time they had remained seated, and embrace the father commissary and his lordship and kiss their hands. The said three captains rose and did as they had been directed, as a sign of obedience and vassalage.

The governor ordered me to make a record of these proceedings for him and pointed out that as far as was known and could be learned, the governments and nations in this land were all autonomous and free, not subject to any particular monarch or ruler. They, of their own free will, as has been set forth, wished to have Don Philip, our lord, as their king, and to render obedience and vassalage to him voluntarily, without compulsion from anyone. As I recognized that this was the truth, I made a written record of it for the greater peace and comfort of the royal conscience and in order that the governor's zeal and diligence in the royal service might be manifest to everyone. I gave it to him, with my name and seal affixed. It was likewise signed by the governor and stamped with the great seal of his office. Done at the pueblo of Acoma, October 27, 1598....