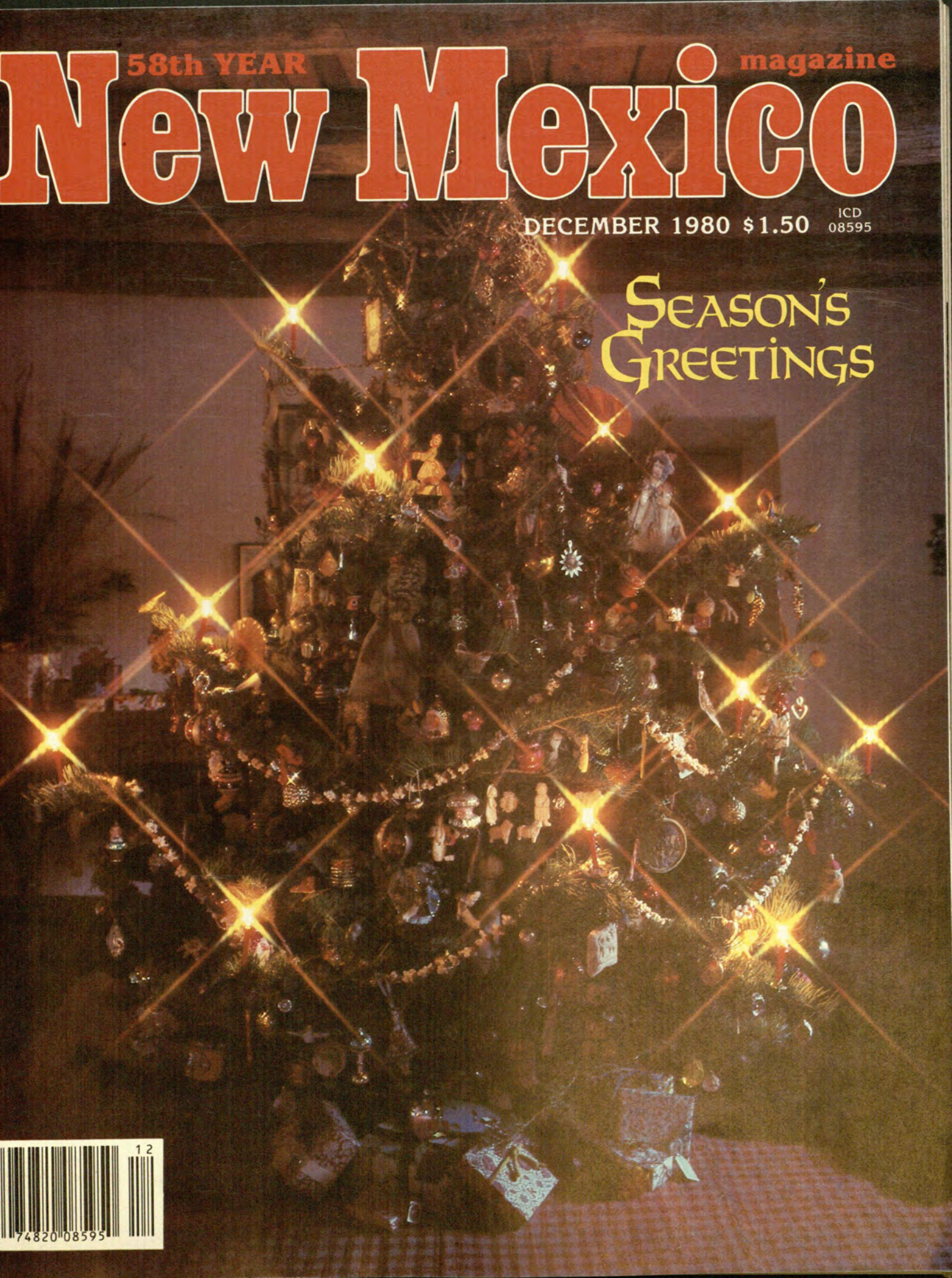


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Marguerite Bomford
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Contributing Photographer

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Subscription Service

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National advertising representatives
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260 Madison Avenue
New York, NY 10016
Los Angeles: Zander & Bigler
6030 Wilshire Blvd.
Los Angeles, CA 90036

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Cover — Every Christmas, Alan and Shirley Minge create a resplendent Victorian tree, decorated with ornaments from all over the world. Photograph by Jonathan Meyers.

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Speaking of Weather...

by Tony Hillerman

The late Mary Austin, New Mexico's best-loved novelist in her time, once wrote that no description of a place is adequate if it leaves out "the inexplicable effect produced upon its inhabitants." New Mexico produces several such effects upon most of us, and it seems to me the most inexplicable effect of all is the way Old New Mexico Hands look upon the weather.

I was made aware of this phenomenon by Shorty Miller, who up to a quarter century ago operated the service station at Three Rivers. Three Rivers, then and now, is an isolated place, and Shorty kept a coffeepot warm in the hospitable

expectation that the person stopping to refuel on the lonely highway to Alamogordo needed human companionship as much as gasoline. It was from Shorty that I learned of the Great Climate Change that converted southern New Mexico from a veritable Garden of Eden to its present arid condition. As Shorty remembered the climate of his boyhood, the grama grass tickled the belly of his horse when he rode across the Tularosa Basin, and what is now our bleakest desert was lush and green. Climatologists are skeptical of Shorty's recollection, telling me that if the description is true he was riding the world's shortest horse. But the climatologists miss the point. Shorty didn't exactly mean that the grama grass of his youth was 41.7 inches from root-base to seedpod. He meant that when he was young (long ago even then) he saw the desert with a young man's eyes. In other words, New Mexicans sometimes speak metaphorically of their weather.

Take, for example, another occasion when the wind was blowing fiercely from the west, sending rivulets of sand flowing across the cracked asphalt of US 54 in front of Miller's gas pumps. The sight caused another Otero County old-timer who was drinking coffee with us to remark that while the sand moves fast here, it *really* moves fast when the wind blows across the dunes at White Sands. How fast? Well, when he was 50 years younger, he and

another feller were taking a wagon from Alamogordo toward Organ Pass, skirting the great gypsum dunes of White Sands. It had been blowing hard, but when the wind died suddenly, they saw a cowboy hat sitting atop a new dune. When they retrieved it, they found a man's head under it and frantically dug away the gypsum granules. Was he alive? He was. "He said, 'Boys, get a shovel because I'm horseback.'"

What one learns from such an account is that great white dunes that move across the landscape like a slow-motion ocean stimulate the human imagination. It works equally well with other phenomena.

Take wind.

In the hall outside the State Capitol meeting room of the House Agriculture Committee one March afternoon, I overheard two wall-leaning ranchers discussing it.

"Blew so steady out of the north in Harding County this winter we couldn't keep our cows in," says the man with the gray mustache and the Pendleton shirt.

This statement is followed by a long silence. The elderly Hispano wearing a black Stetson is thinking it over. Meanwhile, I'm thinking if he doesn't ask why not, I'll ask why not.

"Why not?" asks the Hispano.

"Blew so strong and steady that all the barbs on the barbed wire fences were pointing south," says Gray Mustache.

Black Stetson nods. "Bueno," he says. "Sometimes it is like that in



Guadalupe County, too." New Mexico weather has again been adequately described.

Had it not been for the late Mike Gallegos, another Guadalupe County rancher and one of the wisest men ever to grace New Mexico politics, I might have thought Gray Mustache was stretching his barbed wire. But Gallegos assured me that long ago, when he was a boy, the wind blew even harder. Gallegos told me of crowbar holes beside the doors of Eastside farmhouses through which old-timers stuck crowbars on windy days. If the wind bent the crowbar, better stay indoors...

Using crowbars as gauges, however, did not seem to be common throughout the Eastside. I mentioned Mike's story one afternoon to an aged employee of a Texaco station in Clayton while the tumbleweeds bounded past us down the streets. He'd never heard of such a thing.

"What my daddy did was lock a log chain around a post for a wind-sock. When the log chain stretched out straight, us kids had to stay indoors. And when the links started snapping off we knew we was in for a real blow." As I recall, Texaco Fire Chief was selling for 29.9 cents per gallon the day I learned that.

It's not only on our Eastside that the wind and weather provoke such poetry among inhabitants. The best description I ever heard of New Mexico's wind was told to me by a printer who labored years ago at the

Aztec Independent. It was late winter, one of those days when the sky had been blown absolutely clean and blue by an icy northwest gale. The printer and I were walking into it, eyes watering.

"Blows very steady up here on the Colorado Plateau," the printer shouted. "One time I leaned a two-by-four into it about like this." He tilted his hand to suggest an angle of about 60 degrees. "It stood there for three minutes and 18 seconds."

I have noticed that the best way to draw out Mary Austin's "inexplicable effect" among New Mexicans is to set an example. I told the printer about the barbed wire in Union County.

"Never knew it to blow that straight that long," he said, with as much as a flinch, "but it reminds me of the snow geese last spring."

The snow geese last spring, as the printer recalled it, appeared about noon, migrating laboriously northward into the teeth of a strong headwind. Just about directly over the offices of the *Aztec Independent*, the airspeed of the geese and the velocity of the wind became equal. The printer described it as the funniest thing he'd ever seen — the geese flying all afternoon and into the twilight, losing a few feet and then putting on a burst of effort to win them back. At bedtime, he stepped outside to check and saw them in the moonlight, still flying hard and not gaining an inch. With morning, they were gone. The printer wouldn't

speculate whether they'd been blown back to Mexico or made it to Canada.

I expressed skepticism — mentioning that the Harding County rancher had offered to show us a bit of barbed wire he'd saved with the points all bent in the same direction. Did the printer have any such souvenir? As a matter of fact he did. He had it in his desk at the *Independent*. A Polaroid photograph. There they were. A V of 17 white geese against a pale blue sky. Absolutely motionless.

But if you decide to become a serious collector of New Mexico weather as described by its seasoned inhabitants, skepticism should be set aside. The subject should be approached with an open mind.

The skeptic isn't likely to be told, as I was one day by a fellow herding sheep in the Brazos Meadows, of the time in the 1930s when the winters were so cold that they started catching fur-bearing trout in the West Fork.

Or about the time when a Blue Northern came over Raton Pass so suddenly that the pigeons rising off the Colfax County Courthouse were frozen in mid-flap and fell to the street — where their ice-like bodies shattered like wine glasses on the pavement.

If you don't keep an open mind, you'll be reduced to learning about our weather from the climate charts.