

Rounders Award Celebrates New Mexico's Agricultural Life

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This past week I had the good fortune to be invited to a very special event in Santa Fe put on by the New Mexico Department of Agriculture, the 2012 Rounders Award ceremony held at the Governor's Mansion last Tuesday afternoon, Oct. 16.

Named for novelist Max Evans' modern-day cowboy story about two hard luck buckaroos, the Rounders Award recognizes those who live, promote, or articulate the Western way of life.



Max Evans and his wife, Pat Evans

The award is given to men and women who labor outside of agriculture but whose work benefits agriculture. Max Evans was the first recipient of the award, which was started in 1990 by New Mexico Secretary of Agriculture Frank DuBois.

This year's recipients are Slim Randles, a writer who is the author of several books and a longtime columnist for New Mexico Magazine, and Forrest Fenn, an artist, an art gallery owner, and a publisher of books through his company One Horse Land and Cattle Company.

The ceremonies for the awards were a star-studded collection of women and men, many of them wearing cowboy hats and boots. In fact, in handing out the awards, Governor Susana

Martinez said she'd never seen so many cowboy hats at the governor's residence.

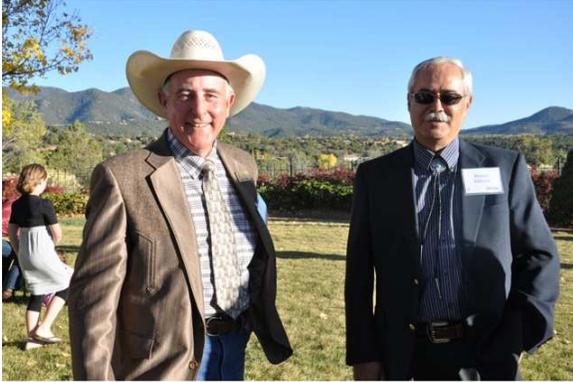


With Governor Susana Martinez in the group photo are (left to right) New Mexico Secretary of Agriculture Jeff Witte, Forrest Fenn, Slim Randles, and Max Evans

Along with the governor and her husband Chuck Franco, there were many photographers, artists, and writers present, including Max Evans. Also present on a beautiful fall afternoon in the mansion's mountaintop backyard overlooking Santa Fe were several dozen politicians, cabinet secretaries, and media personalities.

Fitting the agricultural emphasis, the crowd was casual, with friendliness, smiles, and humor in abundance.

In that atmosphere I met a number of interesting individuals who work for and with the Agricultural Department even before I arrived at the governor's home. In the parking lot of our hotel, I met Jim Berlier, the Vice President of the New Mexico Association of Conservation Districts. A farmer and rancher from Estancia and Encino, Jim introduced me to the president of the organization, Kenny Salazar who lives in Espanola.



Jim Burlier (left) visits with Kenny Salazar

I also had the privilege of meeting Jeff Witte, the state Secretary of Agriculture, an articulate and friendly man who is an eloquent spokesman for agricultural New Mexico.

Being at the ceremonies and talking with Jim Berlier and the award winners got me to thinking about the agricultural community's impact on New Mexico and on American life in general, a subject that has been the topic of the History Notebook many times over the last few years. Agriculture is a supercharged sixteen cylinder economic engine for the country, but in multiple ways, farmers and cowboys have also been the symbolic heart and soul of the American experience and American history, from the first English settlements on the East Coast to the Spanish outposts in the mountains of northern New Mexico. Though their numbers are diminishing in the 21st century, the real and fictional lives of the men and women who work the land and the livestock on the land continue to be weather vanes for the current condition of American life and for the present state of the American dream.

Though they are now a minority of the population of the West, agricultural folks have been at the center of life west of the Mississippi, since Lewis and Clark. There is no doubt that

urban life on the blacktop highways and concrete pavements make up a substantial part of what we think of as the American experience, but it is from the folks closely connected to the land that we draw much of our ethics and morality.

Just a few weeks from now, on Nov. 18, on PBS television stations across the nation, documentary film maker Ken Burns will premier his new film "The Dust Bowl", a portion of which museum board members Joe Byers, Steve Townsend, and I screened last Thursday evening at Texas Tech University. Burns' film is about the disastrous environmental impact of plowing up thousands of acres of the plains of Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, and eastern New Mexico and Colorado.

However, the film is also about the tenacious will of the farmers and ranchers who reclaimed the land when the Depression ended, the rains returned, and the dust settled down.

Co-producer and writer of "The Dust Bowl" Dayton Duncan told the audience at TTU that he hopes a new generation of Americans will learn of the mistakes of the men and women hungry for land in the 1920s and 1930s, but he also hopes folks of today and the future will reclaim some of the heroic spirit of those agricultural folks who survived the calamitous times in America's heartland 70 and 80 years ago.

It is my feeling that the most important lesson we take from the agricultural community revolves around the idea of "regeneration." It's that natural renaissance of spirit Forrest Fenn and Slim Randles have exhibited and written about for most of their lives, and that is the reason they were honored last week.

The art work of Fenn and Randles is not the same kind of history found in Ken Burns

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documentaries, but their paintings, sculptures, short stories, and novels reveal another genre of history that might be termed a history of the heart rather than a history of the land.

The Lea County Museum is a place of exhibit spaces for telling the history of Lea and surrounding counties. Much of that history runs deep into our rocky soil and through the veins of the agricultural people, the ranchers and farmers, who first permanently settled this place.

In recent times there has been much talk on the museum board about expanding the base of the organization to make the museum also reflect modern-day Lea County, which is the home of many folks far from agricultural lives. The museum exhibits will reflect the lives of all who live here, from office workers to oil field hands, from doctors to lawyers, and from insurance salesmen to bankers.

But an informal count of the hundreds of artifacts found in the museum will tell even the casual visitor that most of what has been donated over the years has been from ranching and farm families or from families who have lived in the towns but derived their income from the agricultural land just beyond the city limits.

As mentioned earlier in this essay, in agricultural America we find our emotional north star that guides us to that which is good, honest,

and uplifting. In Lea we are lucky in that agriculture is only a few steps beyond the city limits. We are still close to that rural life. We have lunch with cowboys and farm hands in our town diners. Ranchers and farmers still serve on our town and county commissions.

And even at the highest levels of our state government, men and women from the agricultural community break bread with the managers and coaches of our political life.

Last Tuesday afternoon, I listened to Lorene Mills talk about being in the state's highest office with former governor Bruce King, in many ways the ultimate New Mexico political animal at the same time he was a farmer and a rancher who knew from where he came and what benefitted New Mexico and its residents.

In conclusion, here are a few lines from a Stephen Dunn poem that is about the Christian compulsion historians and poets have to about the humanity's downtrodden and the redemptive power of the land:

"There's a speakable grace in the fields and even in the cities. The grapes ripen, someone refuses to become a machine. And yet I want to talk about the worn-out husks of men and women returning from the factories, the venereal streets, the bruise history passes down to its forlorn children."