

Edgar Lee Hewett

With Michael Stevenson

Michael Stevenson, current first vice president of the Historical Society of New Mexico and a member and secretary of the Museum of New Mexico Board of Regents, spoke recently with a reasonable facsimile of the man who founded the Museum of New Mexico one hundred years ago. Given the chance, the historian in Stevenson would have preferred the real Edgar Lee Hewett. Under the circumstances—Hewett died in 1946—Stevenson settled comfortably into an afternoon conversation with Philip K. Bock, University of New Mexico professor emeritus of anthropology and Chautauqua performer.

Stevenson: You seem to have grown up with this love of the outdoors, and that carried over to your time in New Mexico.

Hewett: Definitely, this is such a beautiful land, you know, and all the places you can go on a horse that you can't really drive—though people seem to drive everywhere these days. I was born in Warren County, Illinois, in 1865, shortly after President Lincoln was assassinated. I was a farm boy, and I don't regret a minute of it; it was a very healthy life. We lost the farm after Dad tried his hand at speculating in the market and moved to Missouri, where we started another agricultural enterprise. I had several brothers, and I really grew up there in Missouri on the farm with horses and hunting and outdoors, and I loved it. It's a life that any boy should experience.

Stevenson: Tell me about your early education.

Hewett: My first experience was learning in a one-room schoolhouse. And then I went to Tarkio [Missouri] College, where amazingly there was one professor of anthropology. I don't think there were many in the whole country at that time. Lucky for me, he



Louise Crow (1892–1968), *Portrait of Edgar L. Hewett*, 1918. Oil on canvas, 26 x 20in. Gift of the artist, 1918.

exposed me to the field, and I loved reading about the ancient cavitations and how people learned about them and the wonders of the world. Because it was a teachers' college, I went back to a one-room schoolhouse to teach. But my interests had grown much broader, so I ventured to Colorado to go to the Normal School in Greeley. There I earned a degree, and after a few years of teaching became superintendent of schools in Florence, Colorado. By this time I was married to my sweetheart, Cora Whitford.

Stevenson: Where did you first meet Cora?

Hewett: That was back in Missouri.

Stevenson: And you had a wonderful life together, but only for some short time.

Hewett: Yes, sadly. We knew when we married that she had weak lungs, but we hoped that the air and environment in Colorado would improve that, and for a time they did.

Stevenson: What took you from Colorado to New Mexico?

Hewett: Exploration. I loved the opportunities during the summers, particularly to get down to Mesa Verde and northern New Mexico, the sites that were then available around Aztec and Farmington. Cora and I loved camping out; she was an awfully good sport. One summer when we were camping, a neighboring campfire had some interesting gentlemen around it, and we got to talking, and that's where I met Frank Springer, the great statesman for New Mexico.

Stevenson: He was a remarkable individual, and of course he was not only your sponsor to some extent in coming to New Mexico,

but he later helped establish what is now the School for Advanced Research and the Museum of New Mexico. You'd be pleased to know that a biography by David L. Caffey about Springer was published within the past few years, and it's an excellent book.

Hewett: He was active in state politics. He'd come out to make his fortune. He did that as part of a land grant company that was able to profit from the railroad right away, but he was very devoted to New Mexico and especially to Santa Fe.

Stevenson: As I understand it now, you ended up at the Normal School in Las Vegas—now Highlands University, with a hall named for you—and you helped to establish the faculty there.

Hewett: With Frank's help I became the first president, planning the campus, hiring the faculty, and trying to institute my own philosophy of education, which was to get people out of the classroom, out of the laboratory, and into the real world, not of business, necessarily, but of seeing what the world was like.

Stevenson: You were there only a few years, and I gather that the politics of the situation became difficult for you.

Hewett: People would be amazed to hear this today, but at that time in New Mexico, politicians intervened in educational matters quite often. I think Governor [Miguel Antonio] Otero wanted someone else in that position, so after five years I was dismissed. Through the years I'd been back and forth to Washington, and—though not at that precise moment but later on—I was considered for a position at the Smithsonian. I had ties with the Bureau of American Ethnology and I think I could have had a position there, but that wasn't really what I wanted to do.

Stevenson: Tell me about your involvement in the politics of the Antiquities Act.

Hewett: It was back in Washington after Cora died. We'd been talking about it for some time, and I had link up with Congressman John F. Lacy, from Iowa, who was very interested from his own point of view in preservation of antiquities. Together we wrote and passed the Antiquities Act of 1906, with support from President Theodore Roosevelt and other important people who saw that things were being destroyed that were worthy of preservation.

Stevenson: At that time the concern was not just pothunters who would go to these ancient sites and dig up artifacts and steal them.

You and others also were concerned about Europeans—reputable archaeologists—coming to the Southwest and taking objects.

Hewett: There was a lot here, but that doesn't mean that the prize objects should run off to a museum in Stockholm. About that time, even our own institutions weren't that particular. There was an exposé about an expedition from Yale that was smuggling artifacts from Yucatán. Something had to be done to protect sites.

Stevenson: And of course the Antiquities Act included the ability of the president to establish national monuments, and that ultimately led to several across the West, in part to protect antiquities of these ancient sites. Was it in this period that you realized that you wanted to get some more professional credentials in archaeology, and that the University of Geneva came into the picture?

Hewett: Correct. That was before Cora died. I could see that she was growing weaker, and I'd always promised I would take her to the Old World to see some great sites there. We read together about Greece and Rome and Egypt. On our trip there in about 1905—it was just after my father had died and just after I had been, let's say, not renewed at what's now Highlands University—Cora and I stopped in Geneva, where I talked with the archaeological faculty there and found them highly receptive to New World archaeology, even though most of their studies were classical antiquity. I was able to tell them about the work I and other people had done in the Southwest, and they said, "Well, you know, you'll have to come here for some lectures, but we can accept a lot of your background for credit." They also said that if I'd do my dissertation in—God help me—French, I could get a degree more easily and a lot faster than if I had to go through some snobbish Ivy League system.

Stevenson: It seems that you often ran crosswise with that Eastern establishment of archaeology.

Hewett: I think something is lost as well as gained when the academic scientists take over a field. The passionate amateur has a lot to offer in terms of really intense local knowledge, and sometimes academics will just come in and think they have to invent everything from scratch. But take Frank Springer, who was not only a brilliant lawyer and a genuine statesman but also a passionate amateur expert on crinoid fossils. I have a little anecdote. Frank studied these things for years and published at his own expense a great many volumes and devised a system for the classification of crinoids. One year, when he was in England, he wanted to visit the British Museum and see their collection. At first he was very

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disappointed because he could see the section was closed. When he asked the curator why, he was told, “Well, we’re changing our whole system to the Springer classification.” He then introduced himself and of course he got to view anything he wanted.

Stevenson: Also coming along was more interest in archaeology in America, which in time led to the establishment of the School for American Archaeology, which was in partnership and was sort of the mother institution for the establishment of the Museum of New Mexico. How was that worked out? How’d it happen?

Hewett: In Washington, New York, and several other places, there were chapters of the Archaeological Institute of America. I was on the board of one of those chapters for a while, and it was clear that the major interest was in classical archaeology—again in getting a mummy or some Greek silver or Roman statuary rather than in the antiquities of this country. So I was able to establish the School for American Archaeology as a branch of that institute. That, along with my soon-to-be Ph.D., provided prestige and the kind of credentials that attract money. And the school, as you said, grew into the Museum of New Mexico. For a long time there was a fluid relationship, but, alas, most institutions develop jealousies, and boards want recognition and so forth.

Stevenson: Establishing the museum included an agreement that SAR and MNM could use part of the Palace of the Governors, sharing the building with former Governor Bradford Prince and the Historical Society of New Mexico. How did that work?

Hewett: Not well. In fact, that brings to mind another anecdote. We were developing large collections and a library—a research library for Southwestern history and archaeology. We felt that the New Mexico Historical Society, while certainly an important institution, didn’t really need all the room they had. So one night some friends of mine came in with sledgehammers and expanded the museum’s area. I don’t think we were ever forgiven.

Stevenson: There must have been tension there for years, certainly until Governor Prince died in 1922, which ended that phase.

Hewett: That’s also about when my Santa Fe phase ended, but for other reasons. I’m afraid that if you want to get anything, you’re going to step on somebody’s toes. I might have been more politic on a number of occasions, but I did get things done. ■

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