TIME EXPOSURES

PICTURING A HISTORY OF ISLETA PUEBLO
IN THE 19TH CENTURY

FOUR MEN IN ISLETA VILLAGE DURING WINTER
Late 1800s
Unidentified Photographer
Courtesy of the Autry National Center/Southwest Museum, Los Angeles
P_7931
santa Fe
RIO GRANDE
albuquerque
isleta
Manzano Mountains
new mexico
When American soldiers and explorers arrived in New Mexico in the mid 1800s, the world of Native Americans began to change dramatically.

IN TIME EXPOSURES, we the people of Isleta Pueblo, a Native American community in New Mexico, tell our own story about this time and its lasting effects on our life today. Using a selection of over 300 historic photographs and an array of artifacts, the exhibit portrays our lives before the arrival of the Americans, the changes imposed over the following decades, and the ways in which our people worked to preserve our way of life. Through this process, the exhibit explains how we came to be who we are today.

The exhibit is divided into three parts. In the first section, we describe the cycle of our traditional year as it was observed in the mid-19th century. As a community, our lives were organized according to the seasons, farming, hunting and gathering practices and a regular sequence of ceremonies and rituals. Much has changed for us, but the cycles described here still define the contours of a parallel life we live today.

The second section of the exhibition describes the arrival of the Americans and the many ways in which this influx disrupted our way of living. The new authority took our lands and waters, prohibited hunts, and severely limited our access to plants and other resources. The exhibit shows how our people fought these changes and how we learned to become members of America on our own terms.

In the third section of the show, the exhibit examines the photographs themselves as products of white culture. The exhibit explores the underlying ideas and values of the photos, and asks what kind of record they truly represent of our people and our ways.
CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN THE HISTORY OF THE ISLETA COMMUNITY

ESTABLISHED IN THE 1300s, the Southern Tiwa-speaking community of Isleta is, and long has been, one of the largest Eastern Pueblo towns in New Mexico. Isleta, or Shiewipag, is situated on the Rio Grande at what once was the intersection of important north-south and east-west Pueblo roads. The north-south route later became the Spanish Camino Real, or “Royal Road,” making Isleta an important settlement at the crossroads of both Pueblo and Spanish trade routes. As a large town, Isleta was also a central gathering place for the surrounding smaller villages in the area, serving as a cultural capital for other Tiwa communities and the Piro and Tompiro-speaking villages to the south and east. As most of these smaller communities collapsed during the early Spanish Colonial period, many of their residents resettled at Isleta.

Over the course of 3,000 years, the Pueblo peoples developed agricultural practices suitable to the harsh environment of the American Southwest. In later centuries, Isleta irrigated land along the Rio Grande, where they grew maize, beans, squash and cotton. These practices continued throughout the 250 years of Spanish rule, which began in 1598, and survived through the beginning of the American acquisition of New Mexico.

By the 19th century, visitors to Isleta found a prosperous farming community with well-tended agricultural fields, irrigation canals, vineyards and orchards. In addition to their agricultural practices, the people of Isleta developed a wide trading network, regularly engaged in hunting buffalo and other game, and gathered plants and minerals over a vast region. During this time, a number of community members became quite affluent.

In the latter part of the 19th century, Isletans experienced a period of rapid change, an era well represented in the historic photographic record. During these years, Isletan society began perhaps its greatest transition with traditional ways of life being dramatically affected. The railroad arrived in 1881, forcibly took land and built rail lines through the center of the Pueblo. While this disrupted our ancestors lives, it also brought railroad passengers, who provided a new outlet for the selling of Isletan pottery and other crafts. An influx of
Pueblo immigrants from Laguna added to the dynamic of change at Isleta. In addition, the destruction of buffalo herds, the encroachment by new settlers on hunting and residential areas, the growth of nearby Albuquerque, the introduction of American schools and a new Anglo-American economic system, all created enormous alterations to Isletan ways of life and self-sufficiency. By the early 20th century, the way of life based on agriculture, buffalo hunting and trade had come to an end.

The pueblo of Isleta became a favored destination of many 19th century American travelers, scientists and linguists. As a result, Isletan ritual observances and ways of life were documented, with varying degrees of success, at this time. Individuals who were to become the vanguards of anthropology and archaeology began to appear at the Pueblo. Among them, Adolph Bandelier, one of the founders of Southwestern archaeology, as well as a precise and avid historian, was a frequent visitor. Another important contributor to the historic record of Isleta was Charles Fletcher Lummis, an early champion of Native American rights. He arrived at Isleta in 1889 and resided there until 1892. He was also known as an avid promoter of the Southwest, writing for popular magazines, such as Century, and using Isletan stories, photos, and lithographs to educate the American public. He eventually became the founder of the Southwest Museum in Los Angeles, which houses an extensive archive of materials from Isleta collected primarily by Lummis himself.

We remain a traditional society today. The town of Isleta, located 13 miles south of present-day Albuquerque, has a resident population of almost 5,000. We continue to speak our native language, Southern Tiwa, as well as English, and adhere to and participate in the yearly cycle of ceremonial events. We work “out” in the white world and continue ancient practices at home. We live as Americans in the outside world and connect with our ancestors in our village. This exhibit is about the transitional period and way of surviving that defines who we are today – people living in two worlds.
There are over twenty five hundred historic photographs in the Isleta historic photographic collection. Acquired from a number of archival collections throughout the United States, almost half of this collection comes from the Autry National Center/Southwest Museum in Los Angeles. Collections have also come from the Albuquerque Museum, the Museum of New Mexico, the Maxwell Museum of Anthropology, the National Anthropological Archives, the National Museum of the American Indian Archives, the Library of Congress, the Milwaukee Public Museum, the Denver Public Library and the National Archives. Among the photographs in the exhibition are the works of many prominent western photographers of the 19th century, including Edward Curtis, A.C. Vroman, A.Z. Shindler, John Hillers, Charles Lummis and Ben Wittick. The collection is housed in the Isleta Tribal Archive. The Isleta Cultural Committee plans to continue the search for additional historic photographs to contribute to the growth of the collection.
PRIOR TO THE EXHIBIT, the traditional leaders were engaged in two lengthy legal disputes over land rights that required extensive historical research. During the course of these projects, the elders and their consultants uncovered large collections of photographs, oral histories, ethnographies, and archaeological, linguistic, and documentary records during their visits to archives. The traditional leaders were amazed to find photographs and documents of such volume and detail. Along with these discoveries and the memories they evoked arose a desire to organize this information in an exhibit as a way of preserving our history and making it available to the people of our Pueblo as well the wider world.

A committee of our traditional leaders oversaw the development, writing and design of this exhibit. This committee was composed of elders who have knowledge of, and responsibility for maintaining the history, customs and rituals of Isleta. Three years of discussion and debate led to the development of a plan for the exhibit and the story it tells. The committee faced two challenges: first, to tell the history of the Isleta people from our point of view, and second, to do so without revealing information that would diminish the privacy or integrity of our lives, our practices and our beliefs. We have preserved our way of life to an important extent by keeping our traditions private and it was important to the elders to insure that the exhibit did not intrude on this boundary.

**ISLETA CULTURAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE**

_*The committee has been active since 1994*_

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Dr. Henry Walt, Dr. Chris Musello, Stephanie Zuni and Krystine Graziano have provided research, curatorial, and design consultation throughout the course of the exhibition planning and implementation process.