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# Thomas Casad Writes: Letters From Mesilla 1875-1878

Rick Hendricks

Ohio native Thomas Casad arrived in southern New Mexico around Christmastime in the year 1874. He and his wife, Sarah Van Winkle Casad, and their numerous children settled in Mesilla. In a very short time Thomas's fellow *mesilleros* recognized him as one of the leading citizens of the Mesilla Valley.<sup>1</sup> In May 1875 he made a purchase that made him one of the largest landowners in Doña Ana County. At a cost of \$6,000, Casad purchased a half interest in the Brazito Grant, also known as the Hugh Stephenson Grant. The Brazito, or little arm, was one of the most prominent landmarks in the Mesilla Valley.<sup>2</sup> The name refers to a tract of land in a horseshoe bend of the Rio Grande some six miles south of Las Cruces. Thomas acquired what he thought was a tract of more ten thousand acres.

The Special Collections Department of Leonard H. Axe Library at Pittsburg State University houses the Orla Samuel Casad Collection. In this collection are five letters that Thomas Casad wrote from Mesilla to his nephew in Illinois. Transcriptions of these letters follow. Thomas's idiosyncratic spelling is retained. Missing letters in abbreviated words are supplied in italics. Casad typically eschewed punctuation, a peculiarity that has been retained. Also included herein is a fragment of a letter Thomas wrote from Mesilla to his friend Charles C. Sweetzer in California. The fragment appeared in the 2 November 1875 edition of the *Anaheim Evening Gazette*.

Thomas Casad's letters offer a glimpse into the mindset of a prosperous Anglo newcomer to the Mesilla Valley almost halfway through New Mexico's long territorial period. In late June 1875, Thomas wrote to his nephew, Orla S. Casad, one of his late brother John Milton's twin sons, who was living in Illinois.

Mesilla a New Mexico June 20th 1875<sup>3</sup>

Orla, I have been waiting for some time to find leisure to write you a letter I suppose you have no doubt heard that we left *California* and are now living in the southern portion of New Mexico We have been here now about six month

and so far as I have seen the country I am well pleased with it the Valey of the Rio Grande is a fine body of land the climate is a very pleasant one neither hot in summer or cold in winter. I will send you some papers the Mesilla News in each copy of which you will find an article over my signature description of the country to which I call your attention these I wrote in answer to divers equiries about the country from California as well as from the States had copies mailed to all who had written me for information I also send a copy of the Industrial Age<sup>4</sup> in which you will also find an article on the Mesilla Valey written by Judge Knapp<sup>5</sup> my nearest neighbor Knapp was Territorial Judge of N. M. an appointee of president Lincoln has been here since 1862 accompanied the surveying party of the 32<sup>d</sup> paralel RR as Botonist and Geologist I have bought a third interest In the Brazito grant of which he speaks in his article settled by Garcia in 1805 and on which fort Filmore was located there are 21,000 acres in the grant it is my intention to buy it all up in the course of a few months when I shall have means mature to do so it runs down the river nine miles and is a fine body of land there are on it at present about 80 tenants of the Native inhabitants When we left Los Angeles we all came but Anna<sup>6</sup> Who had a good situation as teacher in a Los Angeles public school. I see by a Los Angeles paper that came to hand to day that she was married to a man by the name of Smith John Smith I suppose on the 5<sup>th</sup> of this month and that they went to Ohio on a visit immediately after

the wedding I never saw or heard of the man until recently I hope he is of some account Parris came with us and we are farming a little by way of experiment I got about 10,000 grafts from the Bloomington Nursery in Illinois grape cuttings from *California* plant seeds roots and tubers from Plants Seed Store at St. Louis Missouri to the amount in all of 200\$ all of which came by mail and are doing well Now Orla I want you to write me a long letter and port me up about your country what your prospects are what you intend to do is Finch married is your mother getting old and feeble is Laura married is she stout or feeble I have a great gang of Casads about me of all sizes and ages from Nonie<sup>7</sup> down to little Jesse<sup>8</sup> who just begins to toddle about to hunt mischief (a thing by the way that the Casads are great adepts at), there are seven of them in all and I will bet the last mule I have got that they can raise the biggest row on short notice of any other seven same age size and sex between the atlantic and pacific oceans none of them have ever been sick and it stands to reason they should be free of the devil Enclosed I send you a photo of your old uncle who has seen three score years and who begins to realize that his days will soon be numbered

Yours Truley

T.Casad

Thomas wrote Orla again in July and informed his nephew that he had learned Orla had recently graduated from McKendree College. Thomas's father, Anthony Wayne Casad, had been instrumental in the founding of McKendree in Saint Clair County, Illinois. He and Thomas had also provided labor for the construction of the first building on the campus. In his letter, Thomas invited his nephew to come to Mesilla and become the local school teacher.<sup>9</sup> Thomas would pay his nephew's wages and provide room and board in exchange for classroom instruction.

Educational opportunities for citizens of Doña Ana County who did not want the Roman Catholic Church

to educate their children were limited the Episcopalian St. James Mission. Casad had atheistic tendencies after a Methodist Episcopal upbringing and wanted to provide a public school alternative.<sup>10</sup> Just in case Orla did not want to pursue teaching permanently, Thomas promised that once he got to New Mexico he would be on the lookout for something better than teaching school.

Mesilla New Mexico<sup>11</sup>

July 12, 1875

I read your welcome letter and was glad to hear from you I saw in the St. Louis Globe Democrat that you had graduated at McKendree I suppose that you are now prepared to fight the battle of life and education is the first an[d] an indispensable adjunct to success I have not much to say in behalf of New Mexico in addition to what you found in the papers I sent you there are but few Americans here the native populations are not a desirable class to live among they are not lawless except their propensity to appropriate to their own use any thing they find living around loose they are tolerably industrious there are no Churches here except Catholic we have an English school in Mesilla not a very good one a good school would be well sustained here dry goods clerks get about 50\$ a month New Mexico is rich in minerals and mines of copper silver and gold are being worked in many places Silver City a prosperous mining town is about 100 miles west of here copper mines are still nearer that are being worked and there are rich silver mines not at present worked almost in sight of the place I should like the country above all others that I have ever lived in if we had the right kind of a population as it is I like it and think I am located for life people are beginning to come in and J. Burkes husband Benedict is now here and coming on with a lot of American cows we will move if he

likes and if he does your Aunt Caroline will come along I am getting letters constantly from California and from the States enquiring about the country a number of families of California will come in this fall besides sheep man of my acquaintance who are now on the way I do not know Orla whether you would like the country if you had never talked about any I should think perhaps not but as you have a think you would probably like it I would like to have you come out will of course do all for you that I can we want a teacher for our children I will pay 40\$ a month to teach them and a few others that would want to come and board you in addition to the wages and will look out all the time for something better for you which will I think turn up in the course of a year at most I wrote you the letter at the time a mail and the papers to you you did not say if you had it if you had read if you you conclude to come out you should come by rail Grenada and then by stage or with a train to Mesilla by rail and stage you would reach here in about ten days if you came with a freight train from Grenada you be 40 days in reaching here it would cost 50 or 75\$ less by that route let me hear from you after you make up your mind and in the meantime I will find out the exact cost from Grenada hereby each route.

Yours Truly

T.Casad

Orla Casad wrote to his uncle's request to discussing his future. Since his own father had passed away, the young man sought advice from a distant father figure. Thomas answered his nephew with a long letter that revealed much about his manner of thinking and some aspects of his character.

~~July~~ August 8 1875 Messilla New Mexico<sup>12</sup>

Dear Orla I read your of letter yesterday and sit down to reply and will volunteer to make some suggestions

by way of advise there are perhaps few men who select and follow occupations or professions in life from which by nature they are best adapted and still fewer who choose occupations the pursuit of which will make them most useful members of society as to the profession of law there seems to me to be involved in every case of litigation as a sequence a right and a wrong in half the cases in which an attorney would be employed he would receive a fee which at the commencement or during the progress of the trial was a consideration by which he engaged to do all in his power to defeat the ends of justice and nine times in ten in behalf of a corrupt and dishonest man in detriment to the interest of justice and perhaps a good man but I had rather be a plodding farmer than to have the reputation of B. F. Butler<sup>13</sup> with all his cunning reputations and hundred thousand dollar fees the amount of which he could have by no possibility fairly earned Far different is the field before him who publishes a paper untied and untrammelled he is at liberty to pursue a course that his conscience judgment and sense of justice and righ[t] would point out as conducive to the common good then if he have the wisdom and forecast to determine and persistently advocate measures for the public good he moulds and directs the public to adopt and carry out measures of vital interest and utility thus becoming a public benefactor there is no field in which the opportunity to do good in your day and generation is as sure is that of publishing a paper providing you adopt this has a maximum that there is our right and wrong to every question that you study the problem until you solve it and determine the right and then that you advocate it persistently at all times in all places and with all the power and earnestness of

which you are capable. This will lead to fame to immortality the first requisite is a well endowed mind the second but to solve the problem and present in so clear a light and with such a convincing array of facts as will make it was plain as a sun beam to the common mind if your mind is of that analytic turn this would make you successful as a lawyer you may become famous as a writer or an editor and between the two I should not hesitate a moment to choose the latter as an occupation and after adopting it and give it your whole time and most searching thought. I have been strongly tempted to buy out or at least get a controlling interest in the Messilla News and run it in what I conceive to be the true interest of New Mexico there is in the Territory a miserable set of chronic office seekers who are doing all in their power to place the Territory in the list of states when 9/10 inhabitants did not know enough to take care of themselves under such a state of things one or two corrupt legislature[s] would almost blight forever the prospects of all considered the best Territory of the union If you would come out and take charge of the paper I will either buy it out entire war at least get a controlling interest in it if you filled the bill well ten years hence there would be no office in the state which it will become by that time but what you would be entitled to and could secure without any doubt I would think Judge Knapp lost his office about a month ago I bought his property a good house with school house attached both unoccupied bring your girl along if you should conclude to come a man without a wife is no man at all in fact a man that will not provide for one woman is hardly entitled to desert respect I will see that you do not suffer and that you have profitable employment either at teaching or in charge of a paper if you think it

best to stay where you are drop the law take hold of the paper give it all your time and thought (not local news and neighborhood gossip) but grapple like a Titan with the profound problems of the day Trade Finance Industrial interests the Course of humanity and mortality take your stand on the foundation of immutable justice and write fight the battle manfully in time you will earn the gratitude of your fellow man.

Yours Truly

T. Casad

Included with the property Thomas purchased from Judge Knapp was a small building suitable for a school. With a contribution of \$30, Thomas initiated a Public School Fund. The newspaper noted that his donation was a good beginning for which Thomas would receive the thanks of all the people of Doña Ana County, especially mothers, fathers, and their children. It then issued a challenge calling for the next contribution.<sup>14</sup> Having gotten the ball rolling on funding for local education, Thomas turned his attention to tying up loose ends in California. Prior to his arrival in California, a portion of his letter appeared in the Anaheim newspaper. Thomas was a tireless promoter of the virtues of New Mexico. In this letter he discusses the opportunities for raising sheep.

A Paradise for Sheep<sup>15</sup>

Mr. C. C. Sweetzer received a letter to-day from Thomas Casad, dated at Messilla, New Mexico, Oct. 9th. We glean from the letter the following extracts which may prove interesting to wool growers:

We have had an abundance of rain during the past season. Grass is good and there is enough here to furnish subsistence for millions of sheep, on ground that has never been marked by the foot-prints of a domestic animal, unless rode or driven by some roving Apache or native Mexican. It costs at present 2 ½ cents per pound to ship wool to Grenada, the present terminus of the railroad, from which all supplies reach this country. Shearing costs 2 ½ cents; herders cost \$15 per month and

grub. Sheep are not usually kept in corrals at night. There is no scab or any other ailment, that I have seen. I saw last winter a little band of about thirty Vermont ewes, pure blood, that were finer and healthier sheep than ever I saw in California. The party who owned them has one hundred Leicester bucks, which he is breeding to the native stock. Some of the lambs, at a year old, sheared eight pounds of long, clean wool. There are no burrs of any kind here, except in the river bottoms, where there is an abundance of the cockle burr. The thorny mesquite grows here in places. Where sheep are allowed to range in it they lose wool by the thorns, in their efforts to get the beans that grow on the bush, but there are millions of acres here that are entirely free from thorns of all kinds. There is no mistake about this country being a good sheep farming and fruit country. There is not a large amount of good farming land, but what there is will be all the more valuable. To the range there is scarcely a limit, and the country is proverbially healthy.

Sweetzer eventually moved to the Mesilla Valley and settled near the Casad holding on the Brazito Grant. He was also involved for a time in Casad's mill at Chamberino.<sup>16</sup>

In the spring of 1878, Thomas renewed his efforts to persuade Orla to join him in Mesilla.

Messilla N. M. April 18<sup>th</sup> 1878<sup>17</sup>

Dear Orla

Your letter has just come to hand I read the letters of which you speak in your last and have neglected to reply You say your school will be out early in June about the first of June I shall send a carriage and team to the end of R. R. to take up Nona and our Governess and also a former female teacher of ours Nona is going to the states to go to school the teachers are returning home will probably be at El Moro<sup>18</sup> about the middle of June if you can be there at that time you can get a quick trip to Messilla

without cost I do not know what to say to you about president Locke's<sup>19</sup> son there is no doubt but that an energetic and enterprising young man can find employment here and make a raise in the end for that is the legitimate result of industry and application If he comes I will do all I can to get him located If you were sure that you would be satisfied with the country it would be best to bring your Wife along as the season of the year would be most auspicious for traveling and if she was able to travel at all the chances are that the 15 or 18 days from the R. R. down to Messilla would be the commencement of a perfect restoration to health in that conveyance you could only bring along such articles as would be absolutely necessary for the trip all else would have to be freighted down at a cost of 3 or 3 ½ dollars per ton. If Locke has the capacity to take charge of a paper probably he could get a chance on the Independent as I am not entirely satisfied with its management and may have to put it in other hands I own more than half the stock in it and want it kept under good management my goods will leave St. Louis I suppose about the 25<sup>th</sup> of this month I shall be so busy getting up buildings an[d] machinery that it will be impossible for me to come up to the end of the road in June and beside I have considerable of a harvest to look after I expect to send up a good trusty man I think both the time and opportunity would be favorable for both you and your Wife to make the trip the days will be long and weather warm and pleasant least it is usually so at that season of the year you may have occasional showers but that will be all I got a letter from C M Casad<sup>20</sup> Elizabeth Town Harden County Illinois about a month ago but have not had time to answer he wants some description of the country I have sent him a few copies of the Independent and will write after

a while I also got a few days ago a letter from Mark Moore California write and let me know what you will do

Yours Truly T. Casad

Thomas's persuasion of Orla finally bore fruit, and he made plans to travel from Illinois to New Mexico. Thomas had been in touch with old friends in Summerfield, such as Henry Ruth, about his son accompanying Orla on the trip out to New Mexico. Thomas mentioned this possibility to Orla in a letter in early May.

Messilla N. M. May 7<sup>th</sup> 1878.<sup>21</sup>

Dear Orla I drop you a line to again tell you that my team will be at El Moro about the 15<sup>th</sup> of June Nona goes up at that time to go to school three or four can come back in the conveyance Will reach Messilla in 12 or 15 days from El Moro if you can be there at that time it will save both time and expense I do not know but I will come up myself though I shall be very busy and can ill spare the time but do not know as I can get a trusty person to go up if I can I shall not go otherwise I will be compelled

to take the trip I would like to know certainly wheather you come an[d] how many wheather Finch intends to come and also whether Henry Ruths son will come along you will just have time to let me know before starting provide you write immediately I can arrange to bring back four or five provided I know in time before starting as I could bring a larger conveyance in case is was needed drop me a line immediately and let me know what the probabilities are

all well

Yours Truly

T. Casad

Soon after Orla arrived in Mesilla, Thomas put him to work. A new masthead appeared on the *Mesilla Valley Independent* on 17 August 1878, listing Orla S. Casad and John S. Crouch listed as editors.<sup>22</sup> As it turned out, Orla was a heavy drinker.<sup>23</sup> He soon had a complete falling out with Uncle Thomas. In mid-March 1880 he packed his bags and departed New Mexico.<sup>24</sup>

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Rick Hendricks is the New Mexico State Historian. His book, *The Casads: A History of a Pioneer Family of the Mesilla Valley*, will be published by Rio Grande Books in 2012.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 *The Mesilla News*, 25 March 1876.
- 2 The correct Spanish spelling in modern orthography is "Bracito," but "Brazito" is the local spelling for this place.
- 3 Thomas Casad to Orla Casad, Mesilla, 20 June 1875, O.S. Casad, Collection, Pittsburg State University (PSU), f.2.
- 4 Judge Knapp wrote a letter and two articles praising New Mexico that were published in a Chicago publication, *Industrial Age*. Brevoort reproduced large excerpts from Knapp's articles. Elias Brevoort, *New Mexico: Her Natural Resources and Attractions, Being a Collection of Facts Mainly Concerning Her Geography, Climate, Population, Schools, Mines and Minerals, Agricultural and Pastoral Capacities, Prospective Railroads, Public Lands, and Spanish and Mexican Land Grants*. Santa Fe: Printed and Published by Elias Brevoort, 1874), 148-70; and *Industrial Age*, 1 May 1875, Vol. 2, No. 35; 5 June 1875, Vol. 2, No. 37; and 19 June 1875, Vol. 2, No. 39.
- 5 Joseph Gillette Knapp has been characterized as the most controversial judge to serve on territorial New Mexico's Supreme Court. He and Thomas seem to have had a lot in common became close friends and next-door-neighbors in Mesilla. Knapp, a native New Yorker, was an ordained Methodist Episcopal minister. Like Casad, Knapp had an interest in newspapers, at one time owning and editing the *Wisconsin Inquirer*, in Madison, Wisconsin. Knapp studied law, was admitted to Wisconsin Bar, and became a prominent lawyer. In 1861 President Abraham Lincoln appointed Knapp to a judgeship on the New Mexico Territorial Supreme Court. He was also assigned to the Third Judicial District, which had its seat in Mesilla. Knapp frequently clashed with General James H. Carleton, military commander of New Mexico, over issuance of passports and corruption in procurement of supplies. He left New Mexico in June 1865 because his wife was ill. Like Thomas, Knapp married twice. He returned to New Mexico in

- 1872 as a member of Texas Pacific Railroad the survey party and settled in Mesilla where he practiced law. In mid-1875 Knapp removed to Limona, Florida where he became a pioneer in the citrus business.
- Darlis A. Miller and Norman L. Wilson, Jr., "The Resignation of Judge Joseph G. Knapp," *New Mexico Historical Review*, 55:4 (October 1980): 335; Donna Murray Allen, "Limona Cemetery, Brandon, Hillsborough County, Florida," <http://files.usgwarchives.org/fl/hillsborough/cemetery/limona.txt> (accessed 5 February 2010); and "Death of J. Gillett Knapp," *Wisconsin State Journal*, 18 July 1888; and Miller and Wilson, "Resignation of Judge Joseph G. Knapp, 341.
- 6 Hannah Ann, was born to Thomas and Jemima Phelps Casad, his first wife, on 21 December 1848. Donald Casad Bennett Family Papers, MS 0456, Archives and Special Collections, New Mexico State University Library (NMSU Lib.), "Ellen Casad Diary," Box 8 :8
  - 7 Leonora Wood Casad was born in Illinois on 4 June 1862. . Maud Casad Mandell, Memo Book, NMSU Lib., Ms0456, Donald Casad Bennett Family History, 8: 1.
  - 8 Jessie Edna Casad was born in California on 20 January 1874. Ibid.
  - 9 As it happened, Annie husband was named Lyman Smith. Orla Casad to Allie Babcock Casad, Mesilla, 28 August 1878, O. S. Casad Collection, PSU, folder 5.
  - 10 Simon F. Kropp, "Albert J. Fountain and the Fight for Public Education in New Mexico," *Arizona and the West*, 11:4 (Winter 1969): 345.
  - 11 Thomas Casad to Orla Casad, Mesilla, 12 July 1875, O.S. Casad, Collection, PSU, f.3.
  - 12 Thomas Casad to Orla Casad, Mesilla, 8 July 1875, O.S. Casad, Collection, PSU, f.3.
  - 13 Massachusetts native Benjamin Franklin Butler was a soldier, lawyer, and politician. His service in the Union Army during the Civil War resulted in serious allegations of corruption by northerners and southerners. His legal fees were said to amount to \$100,000 a year. *The Record of Benjamin F. Butler: Compiled from the Original Sources* (Boston:, n. p., 1883).
  - 14 *The Mesilla News*, 25 September 1875.
  - 15 *Anaheim Evening Gazette*, 2 November 1875.
  - 16 Thomas Casad and the Community of Chamberino, Contract, Chamberino, 25 November 1883, New Mexico State Records Center and Archives, Doña Ana County Records, Justice of the Peace, Civil Records Book, 1879-1886, Box 4, Folder 97, Pages 100-101.
  - 17 Thomas Casad to Orla Casad, Mesilla, 18 April 1878, O.S. Casad, Collection, PSU, f.4.
  - 18 El Moro was on a branch rail line from Denver, about twenty-five miles north of Raton, New Mexico. A. L. Stimson, *History of the Express Business, including the Origin of the Railway System in America, and the Relation of Both to the Increase of New Settlements and the Prosperity of Cities in the United States* (New York: Baker & Godwin, printers, 1881), 248.
  - 19 The Reverend John W. Locke became president of McKendree College in 1874. A former resident of Fairfield, Illinois, before relocating to Lebanon, Illinois, Locke might have been an old friend of Thomas Casad. His two sons were George W. and Edwin G. George became a lawyer, and Edwin became a Methodist Episcopal Church minister. There is no evidence to suggest that either of Reverend Locke's sons came to New Mexico. Matthew Simpson, *Cyclopedia of Methodism. Embracing Sketches of Its Rise, Progress, and Present Condition* (Philadelphia: Everts & Stewarts, 1878), 544; *Minutes of the Fortieth Session of the Southern Illinois Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church Held at Mt. Vernon, Ill., September 23-28, 1891* (Bloomington, Ill.: Pantagraph Printing and Stationery, 1891), 31; and United States Federal Census, Belleville, St. Clair County, Illinois, 1880.
  - 20 Charles May Casad was Thomas's first cousin once removed, the son of his first cousin, Thomas Lafayette Anthony Casad, who was the son of Anthony Wayne Casad's brother, Abner. In 1860 Charles and his family lived in Elizabethtown, Hardin County, Illinois. United States Federal Census, Township 12 Range 8, Hardin County, Illinois; and "Mills/Puckett Family Tree," <http://trees.ancestry.com/tree/4952047> (accessed 18 June 2010).
  - 21 Thomas Casad to Orla Casad, Mesilla, 7 May 1878, O.S. Casad, Collection, PSU, f.4.
  - 22 *Mesilla Valley Independent*, Mesilla, 17 August 1878.
  - 23 Cherié Finley Weible, "Orla Samuel Casad: Contributions of a Common Man" (Master's thesis, Pittsburg State University, 1994), 37.
  - 24 Ibid., 52.