



NEWSLETTER

February 2025

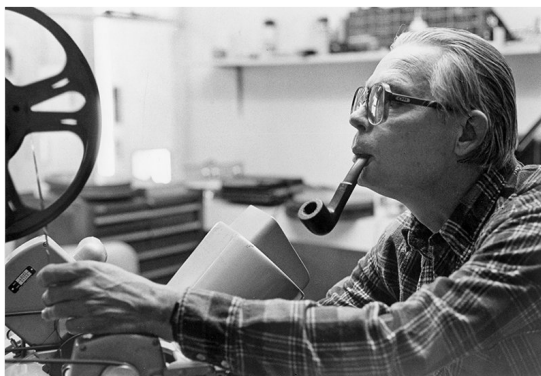
Speaker Series: Orville Wanzer and the Acid Western

FEBRUARY 20 AT 7 PM IN THE GOOD SAMARITAN DOWNSTAIRS AUDITORIUM
– ALSO ON ZOOM FOR DACHS MEMBERS.

Doña Ana County Historical Society

The first guest speaker of the DACHS Speaker Series will present an update of her work exploring NMSU filmmaking pioneer Orville Wanzer. Julia Smith, a visiting professor in NMSU's Department of English and Gender and Sexuality Studies, will introduce "Birth of the Acid Western," a documentary film project that explores a countercultural film genre that challenged Hollywood's mythic narratives of the American West, redefining power, gender, and class, Smith said in a release.

Rooted in Las Cruces, the documentary highlights Wanzer's pioneering work and his subversive, low-budget filmmaking. Through archival research and community stories, it reimagines the Western's cultural impact and celebrates creativity from the margins, honoring an outsider's vision and Las Cruces as the true birthplace of the Acid Western.



According to an NMSU press release, the college hired Wanzer as an English professor in 1959. He also taught photography and created the first filmmaking program at NMSU. Wanzer died in 2019 at the age of 88. Smith regards Wanzer as a pioneering yet under-recognized filmmaker whose influence helped shape the evolution of "the modern western" and

independent avant-garde cinema in the United States, particularly in the borderland region.

In 2023, Smith received a Southwest Border Cultures Institute (SBCI) grant to support her efforts to restore and digitize rolls of Wanzer's films held by the NMSU Library Archives. Her research unearthed extraordinary discoveries in addition to Wanzer's full-length feature film "The Devil's Mistress," perhaps the first film shot in Las Cruces.

Since launching this collaborative effort in 2019, Smith has digitized more than 10,000 feet of film, in partnership with the Institute of Historical Survey in Mesilla Park. That includes more than 70 films - from student works of all kinds to early KRWG films depicting Stahmann Farms, the Loretto Shopping Center and the NMSU campus.

A special screening of Wanzer's second film "George Andrews" will take place on February 24 - the anniversary of his death - from 6 pm to 9 pm at the Fountain Theatre in Mesilla.

Dr. Smith specializes in 20th- and 21st-century American Fiction and Film. She received her PhD in Critical Theory and Cultural Studies from Purdue University in 2018. She is an interdisciplinary Americanist, primarily navigating the intersections of gender studies, critical theory, and cultural studies. Her focus within these disciplines is transgressive art and literature with a particular interest in feminine subjectivity.

UPCOMING SPEAKERS

Stephanie Long March 20, The Wingfield family and new museum in Ruidoso

Joel Parra Gonzalez, April 17, Ascensión and the Shaping of Border Identities

Sean Schifano May 15, James B. Edson, astronomer at Lowell Observatory

Awards Banquet Was Held January 25 At La Posta Restaurant, DACHS Board Members Announced



From left to right are: Faith Hutson, DACHS historian, with Dan Aranda accepting on behalf of Frank Brito who won the Hiram Hadley prize for his article “Treachery and Tragedy in Sonora at the Cañon de Los Embudos.” DACHS also awarded Doyle Dave the Gemoets Prize for “Helen Haines, Age 19, Author of History of New Mexico,” and Farzin Zehtabian, owner of Tommy’s Roller Rink, for a building worthy of preservation.



Not a frown in sight – members and friends of the Doña Ana County Historical Society enjoyed the hospitality of La Posta as it honored local historians and properties. DACHS also presented the new issue of the Southern New Mexico Historical Review, with printed copies available to members for free – also viewable on the DACHS website.



Dr. Susan Krueger presents new DACHS board member Christopher Schurtz with the Pasajero del Camino Real award for his book “Historic Las Cruces.” Schurtz has also taken up duties as the editor of the Southern New Mexico Historical Review and the monthly newsletter.

Ballard Photo Exhibit Ends Successful Run

Branigan Cultural Center will be closing the photo album of the Ballard Studio on February 15. Running since last October, the “Ballard Photo Studio: Portrait of a Community” exhibit featured black-and-white portraits of Las Cruces photographed between 1930 and 1950.

The NMSU Library Archives holds more than 25,000 negatives taken by Jim Ballard, who ran a photo studio on Main Street downtown.

For this exhibit, the archives chose 200 portraits that presented the rich cultural diversity that existed in Las Cruces in the pre and post WWII years. Archives staff were able to identify most of the portraits based on Ballard’s notes and documentation, but some photos remained unidentified. They placed a booklet at the exhibit for people to leave their impressions, and possibly to garner more information about the portraits. That led to several of the photos being identified, or the story or people behind a portrait further explained.

Ballard and his wife Martha Ann opened their studio and photography supply store in 1929 in a small shop at 119 Main Street (that’s the big two-story building on the west side of Main just south of Griggs, about where the DeLuxe Café was located). In addition to portraits, the Ballards also captured hundreds of businesses, buildings, community events and other locations around Las Cruces. They ran their shop until retiring in 1963.

As one book closes, another one opens, as this month, the cultural center presents a new exhibit, in partnership with the Mesilla Valley Audubon Society. The new exhibit, “Wildlife of the Mesilla Valley,” focuses on the rich diversity of animals and wildlife in our area, captured by local artists and nature lovers in sculptures and journal pages. According to the cultural center, the exhibit is also a lamentation of the loss of habitat and environmental stresses in the southern New Mexico region.

History Day In Need Of Judges

National History Day won’t be holding any contests in Doña Ana County this year, but if you’re up for a road trip to Silver City at the end of February, perhaps consider serving as a judge for the regional contest to be held there on the 28th. History Day gathers high school students and groups from around New Mexico – and in every state in the U.S. – to create a variety of projects about U.S. history, from posters and essays to web sites and documentaries. Winners of regional and state contests ultimately move on to the national contest this June at the University of Maryland.

The annual event functions due in large part to its small staff but also because of volunteers. To be a judge, one must complete three 1-hour-long, online training sessions, presented between February 6 and 13. Register online at least two weeks before a specific contest:

Feb. 21, Southeast Regional at Eastern New Mexico University in Portales (register here <https://nm-serc.nhd.org/>)

Feb. 28, Southern Regional at Western New Mexico University in Silver City (register here <https://nm-snmrc.nhd.org/>)

March 7, Northern Regional at the New Mexico History Museum in Santa Fe (register here <https://nm-nwrc.nhd.org/>)

March 14, Central Regional at Central New Mexico Community College (register here <https://nm-crc.nhd.org/>)

For more information, see the National History Day website, or contact Heather McClenahan at heather@nmhum.org

New Farm and Ranch Museum Exhibit Explores Farmers Living With Disabilities

A new exhibit at the New Mexico Farm and Ranch Heritage Museum takes a look at how people with disabilities in rural areas access technology and other services like occupational therapy and programs to maintain their livelihood and agricultural production.

The exhibit opened January 23, and focuses on stories from farmers and ranchers who have overcome their physical and mental challenges, in part with support from AgrAbility, a U.S. Department of Agriculture program that assists farmers touched by a disability or chronic health issue. Included in the exhibit are a tractor simulator, which is an actual cab of a tractor designed for people with physical barriers, fiberglass cows, and a hoop house to immerse the visitors in what AgrAbility is all about.

“With diminishing numbers of individuals pursuing or continuing careers in agriculture, these programs provide an important resource for people’s involvement in food production,” said Nathan Japel, museum curator. “We hope our visitors will be able to spread the word about the resources and possibilities available to everyone.”

The New Mexico AgrAbility Project is a partnership of NMSU Cooperative Extension, the New Mexico Technology Assistance Program, Mandy’s Farm, and the University of New Mexico Occupational Therapy Graduate Program.

A Bit Of Info About Tommy's Roller Rink

Recently retired Southern New Mexico Historical Review editor and DACHS Hall of Famer Jim Eckels tracked down a bit of history on the Tommy's Roller Rink building, which just received the Building Worthy of Preservation award at the DACHS banquet. The building's owner Farzin Zehtabian told DACHS he'd been trying to determine the actual age of the building in his continuing effort to preserve it.

Digging through NewspaperArchive, Eckels found the earliest mentions of the roller skating fad that gripped Las Cruces in the 1880s, with Martin Amador and Eugene Van Patten both offering their halls for skaters. At least one roller rink operated in the 1930s-1940s on downtown Main Street, and in December 1952, local newspapers reported the opening of the Las Cruces Roller Rink in the 100 block of Willoughby (the building itself is likely older than its use as a roller rink). It's not until early 1962 that it will be called "Tommy's Roller Rink," which is likely when the new owners installed the sign.



By the end of the 1990s, Tommy's had closed, and Zehtabian bought the old building around 2007 to house his graphics design business, according to news archives. He says he's determined to preserve the history housed there, including the old maple skating floor, the hand-painted signs, and the playful "graffiti" on the walls left by patrons many years ago, as well as the distinctive neon sign that has defined the cityscape of downtown Las Cruces for generations.

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