

# Going Digital: A Newish Look for Old El Palacios

BY SUSANNE CARO

*Freedom is not freedom if it is accorded only to the accepted and the inoffensive. Further, democratic societies are more safe, free, and creative when the free flow of public information is not restricted by governmental prerogative or self-censorship.*

—Freedom to Read, American Library Association

This is a special magazine. Opening one of these early volumes is like taking a trip back in time to the years when archaeology was still in its infancy. You can find stories on soldiers who died in World War I, and the discovery of King Tut's tomb, and articles by Edgar Lee Hewett, and you can see a young state working to show the world what it has to offer at the Panama-California Exposition. Alongside ancient frogs found living in balls of clay, paintings of brontosaurus, and updates on the Lindbergh baby are fascinating but potentially problematic stories of archaeology and anthropology.

Unlike a necklace or shoe, the graceful curves of fingers or a skull connect us on a personal level to someone whose only remaining record of life is in worn joints, healed fractures, and missing teeth. Such evidence can tell us how a person lived and died hundreds of years ago and now, thanks to DNA analysis, how they can be added to the human family tree. They are also someone's relative. It was easy for early archaeologists to get wrapped up in the beauty and information of bones and forget their connection to the living and the people who may object to family being dug up and placed in a museum drawer. It was easy for the early editors of *El Palacio* to overlook the fact that some people might object to their ancestor's remains, and the beads, pipes, bowls, and blankets they were lovingly buried with, being put on display in a magazine. There is nothing more vulnerable or naked than bones.

It is a mission of the State Documents Program at the New Mexico State Library to increase access to state publications. We wanted to digitize *El Palacio* because of its historical content and focus on New Mexico. The volumes, which vary from newspaper size to pamphlets, document the archaeological, artistic, and traditional history of the state. Currently the only access is through libraries that have copies in their collections,

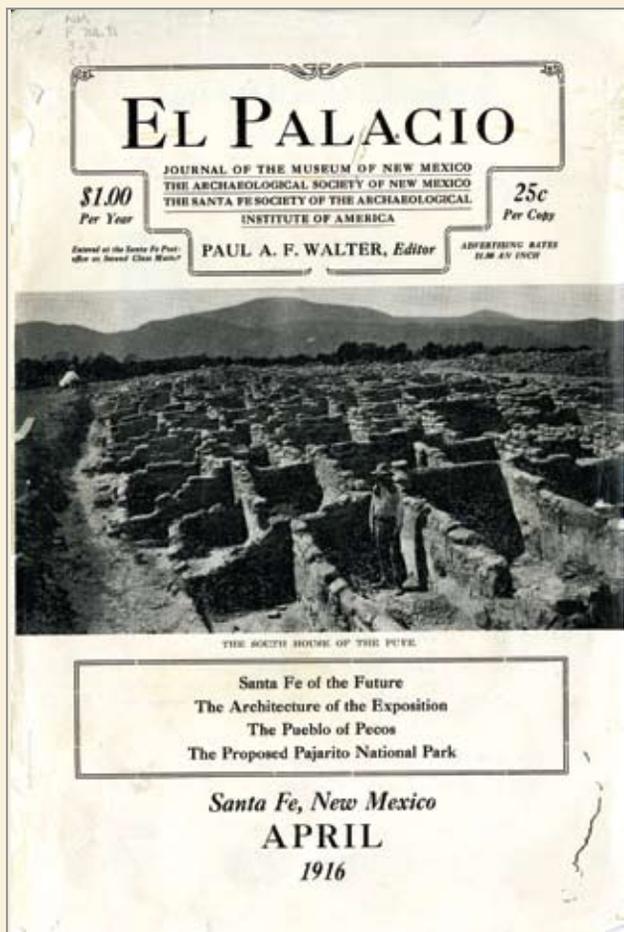


many of which may be incomplete. The photos and articles in these volumes are valuable to researchers and anyone else with an interest in Southwest history, so it makes sense to improve access by digitizing the state library's nearly complete collection. Luckily for us, the New Mexico Museum of Art library already had their collection of *El Palacios*, which was also missing a few volumes, scanned and copied on CD. They generously were willing to share, and between our two collections we have a full run of the magazine. But when it comes to digitization, nothing is simple or easy.

When considering putting this magazine online, we knew there would be some questions regarding content. The current *El Palacio* does not publish photographs of excavated burials, katsinas (also spelled kachina, katchina, or katcina), and other

sacred artifacts out of respect for Native culture and beliefs. Nor does it publish detailed information on archaeological site locations. But now we were looking at putting that type of information online. Would sending that information out to the world put those old digs at risk from pot hunters? What about the depiction of Pueblo dances and ancient burials? The old *El Palacio* editors included the image of blanket-wrapped remains surrounded by pots. Much discussion ensued that raised very interesting questions about democratic access to information and cultural sensitivity.

Putting anything online—books, photos, or journals—brings up the issue of increased access. With increased access comes the possibility of misuse. What was once available only through archives or local libraries goes global, and some people, including librarians and archivists, have used this as a reason to keep some books on the shelves and off the internet. This is not a new idea. The practice of book burning only started when ideas were spread by the printed word. There are cases where pornographic books, which had been available to the wealthy for years, were only banned when cheaper, more



accessible copies were printed. The Comstock Act of 1873 was an attempt to prevent the Postal Service from being used to provide copies of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* to people without access to adventurous bookstores.

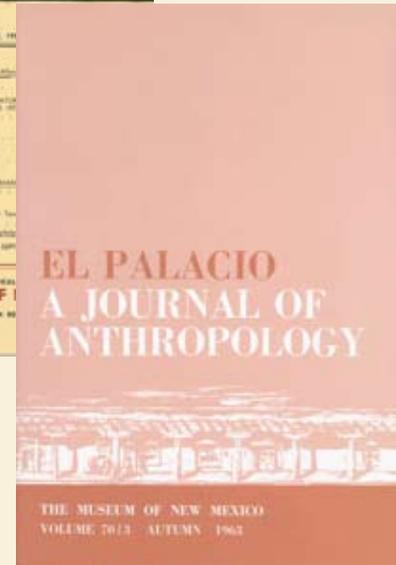
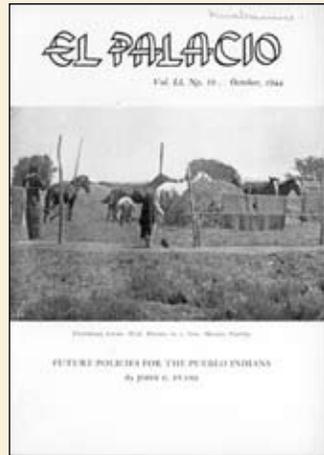
With increased access can come a need to “protect” specific populations; protect children from reading curse words or sexual content; and in this case, protect Native culture from misappropriation. But any book in a library can be misused. A dictionary can be used as a blunt weapon (a practice not allowed or supported in any library!); *The Turner Diaries* has inspired bombings; some have blamed the *Twilight* series for vampirelike attacks; and a man blew up a hotel in an attempt to kill Salman Rushdie for writing *The Satanic Verses*. Is it the responsibility of librarians to make sure that culturally sensitive materials are not misused? To do this librarians have to ask about intended use and even refuse access to certain people. But there are reasons why librarians don't ask people why they need a book or magazine or how they will use it—reasons having to do with patron privacy. Asking those kinds of questions can prevent people from even asking for library materials. (Why do you need *Gay American History*?) It is none of our business if someone wants *Playboy* for the short fiction or the interviews.

## PERSPECTIVE

As we embarked on the project of digitizing *El Palacio*, we had to weigh the chance of offending with the question: is this censorship? But *El Palacio* is not just a collection of photographs; it is a state document with its own historical integrity. What is the difference between taking a pair of scissors to a printed page and blacking out sections of a digital document? In both cases you are changing a historical artifact and the experience of the reader by removing original content. If we removed images or whole articles, would the remaining *El Palacio* content be enough to make the project useful to anyone?

We debated, researched, asked other libraries how they dealt with the issue, and looked to the law. New Mexico's Inspection of Public Records Act prevents the custodian of state documents from altering or redacting information unless required by law. The federal Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act specifically refers to cultural items—remains and artifacts—not images of them. Thus we would be violating the law if we were to redact old *El Palacios* and censor culturally sensitive images. On the other hand, we would be violating the law if we revealed the location of certain sensitive archaeological sites, which are protected by state statute 18-6-11.1 (“Confidentiality of site location”). This law states, “Any information in the custody of a public official concerning the location of archaeological resources, the preservation of which is in the interest of the state of New Mexico, shall remain confidential unless the custodian of such information determines that the dissemination of such information will further the purposes of the Cultural Properties Act” (18-6-1 NMSA 1978). Articles will be evaluated by experts for information that could endanger archaeological sites.

I love the idea of collaboration, of working with tribal representatives to help educate the public about the vibrant and varied cultures of Native Americans past and present. I think the culture of New Mexico's Native peoples should be protected, but not by hiding public documents. When you hide information it tends to be forgotten, and when you restrict access people will stop asking to read those materials.



When information is available, readers judge for themselves based on their own values. I once found an old article in *New Mexico Magazine* describing a huge hunt for a three-legged coyote. The account was originally meant to be adventurous and exciting, but I found the tale of a hounded and terrified animal chased by plane and a hoard of hunters disgusting. At the same time I'm glad to have had a glimpse of the mentality that originally wiped out New Mexico's wolves and of the perspective of ranchers at that time.

Reading that dated article did not make me sympathize with the hunters; readers of the old *El Palacios* will also make their own judgments. Their eyes may be opened to the need for respect when dealing with anyone's remains, and to the importance of respect for other cultures. Or they may find a photo of their great-grandmother in her fiesta finery, or their grandfather as an eagle dancer in the plaza, and with *El Palacio* online, that is more likely to happen. ■

**Susanne Caro** is a native of Idyllwild, California. She earned a BA in creative writing from the College of Santa Fe and a MLS from Texas Woman's University. She currently is the state documents librarian at the New Mexico State Library, where she tries to share her enthusiasm for the strange and wonderful subject of state documents.