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## Worldviews And The American West

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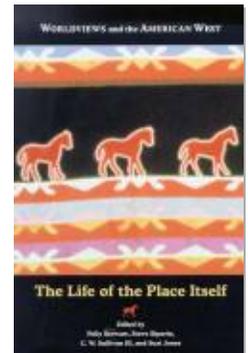
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*A Diversity of Dead Helpers:  
Folk Saints of the  
U.S.–Mexico Borderlands*

*James S. Griffith*

Since about 1991, I have been building an archival collection of commercially printed Catholic devotional ephemera—holy pictures, prayers, novenas, and other aids to prayer and meditation that are produced in vast quantities for the use of Catholics around the world. The main collection, obtained in the Southwestern United States and Mexico, now numbers over fifteen hundred items. (Smaller collections have been made in Bavaria, Spain, Portugal, Goa, and Sri Lanka.) All the material is housed in the Southwest Folklore Center (SWFC) of the University of Arizona Library. These devotional aids are used in several ways by traditional Roman Catholics. The pictures (which may or may not have prayers printed on the reverse) may go on home altars, where they focus the attention of the petitioner onto a particular saint or member of the Holy Family. The printed prayers and novenas (which may or may not have a picture of the sacred personage addressed) are often kept between the leaves of prayer books. Such prayers may be used in request of aid from a particular saint in response to a specific occasional need, or they may be used recurrently, as on a saint's day.

As I have gone over the Mexican and Mexican-American portions of this collection, I have been impressed by the many kinds of personages called upon for supernatural help. Jesus and the Blessed Virgin Mary head the list in sheer quantity. While these figures are certainly part of mainstream Catholic belief, one begins to enter the realms of folk tradition with devotional material that addresses specific aspects of Christ and the Virgin represented by specific statues. Language choice gets tricky in the case of these popular devotions. Are the prayers addressed to the statues or to the personages the statues represent—and, if the latter be the case, in what sense is the Holy Child of Atocha, venerated in Plateros, Zacatecas (Lange 1978;

Frankfurter 1988; Thompson 1994), different from the Santo Niño Doctor de los Enfermos, venerated in Tepeyaca, Puebla (Rodriguez 1994)? What is the relationship between, say, Our Lord of Chalma (Rodriguez 1994, 107–110) and El Señor del Veneno in Mexico City (Griffith 1995, 91–97)? Between the Virgin of Guadalupe (Toor 1947, 171) and the Virgin of San Juan de los Lagos (Rodriguez 1994, 98–100)? I suspect that answers to these and other questions are not simple and would reveal a continuum of Mexican folk Catholic belief, stretching from recognizable—and rationalized—mainstream Catholic Christianity to something that might resemble polytheism to outsiders. William Wroth writes of a Platonic attitude he finds in Mexican Indian thinking that “clearly sees the archetypes [of any given statue] as such, but also just as clearly sees that the archetype is truly present in the ‘piece of wood’” (Wroth n.d.).

In addition to Jesus and Mary, the saints are also petitioned. Some of these saints are well known within the Catholic Church, and their concerns are those understood by Catholics the world around. In other cases, mainstream saints are asked to perform unusual tasks. I use the term *folk devotions* to describe these situations. In still other cases, individuals are petitioned for help who are not, and probably never will be, saints in the official Roman Catholic Church. It is these individuals to whom I refer as *folk saints*. In the present study I will describe briefly some of the folk devotions and folk saints which seem to be important in the U.S.-Mexican borderlands. I shall also discuss the advantages and limitations of a collection-based study such as this and suggest further directions a study might take.

It might be wise to begin with a discussion of sainthood as it is understood by the Roman Catholic Church. Saints, according to the *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, are “those members of the mystical body of Christ who have lived and died, whose lives were notable for holiness and virtues practiced, and who have been officially declared saints by the church through the process of beatification and canonization.” They are also considered to be spending eternity in the presence of God, and for that reason are approachable through prayer as intercessors for humans, whose trials and difficulties they understand through personal experience. The individual saint does not work miracles; he or she intercedes on the petitioner’s behalf with God, who performs or does not perform the desired action (1967).

Saints recognized by the Catholic Church may be asked for non-mainstream favors. For instance, in one printed prayer on file at the SWFC, San Alejo (St. Alexis) is approached to help the petitioner get rid of bad neighbors, possibly as a result of the similarity between the name *Alejo* and the Spanish verb *alejarse*, “to move away.” (This kind of searching within names for clues to assist in understanding the meaning of things is reminiscent of the *Golden Legend* and other products of medieval Christian thought [Jacobus de Voragine 1969]).

Another card on file at the SWFC entreats San Martin Caballero—St. Martin of Tours—to visit good fortune upon the petitioner, even at the hands of his enemies: “[G]rant me the favor that my enemies remain enchanted by me and that they hear my voice that calls them and that they come to an accord with me. If I need to see them, may they come to me quickly, in the name of St. Martin of Tours I call them to come quickly to me, and to come to an accord with me. May St. Martin of Tours make them return to me my lost vigor and I desire that they come looking for me at the doors of my house to give me work or money and that they look for me desperately so that until they speak to me or see me they will not be in peace.”

These cards to Saints Alexis and Martin were purchased, not in a religious articles store, but at an herb-seller’s booth at the annual pilgrimage fiesta of San Francisco at Magdalena, Sonora (Griffith 1992, 59–65). Booths at fiestas and in markets, as well as *yerberías* and *botánicas* (stores specializing in traditional herbal remedies), are rich sources for this sort of folk material, which verges on charms and spells rather than prayers. Who uses these cards, these unorthodox prayers? It is probable that at least some of the users are involved in the most important industry of the borderlands—the drug trade (Strong 1990 and personal communication). This assumption is given some validity by the existence of a huge private shrine to St. Martin about one hundred miles south of the border, placed in a field in an unpopulated area. Local rumor has it that the shrine was erected by an unnamed regional *narcotraficante* or drug dealer.

Another sort of folk devotion, almost impossible to detect through an examination of printed material, is exemplified in the fusing in Magdalena, Sonora, of three holy personages—St. Francis Xavier, St. Francis of Assisi, and Father Eusebio Francisco Kino, S.J. (a local historical figure)—into one composite saint who is represented by a reclining statue of Xavier dressed in brown Franciscan robes but whose day is celebrated on October 4, the saint’s day of St. Francis of Assisi (Griffith 1992, 31–57). This composite saint is believed to effect miracles himself, rather than petitioning God for them, and, further, to exact his often fatal revenge on those who show no intention of keeping their sides of any bargain they might make with him. San Francisco, as he exists in popular regional thought, is indeed a folk creation, halfway between my categories of folk devotion and folk saint.

And now to the folk saints themselves. There appear to be three sorts of deceased people in borderlands belief who, although they are not saints, seem to be treated by many as though they were. These can be categorized as *victim intercessors*, *social bandits*, and *faith healers*. I have described victim intercessors at length elsewhere (Griffith 1995, 67–86), but shall discuss briefly here the main victim intercessor known to me: Juan Castillo Morales, or “Juan Soldado,” as he is popularly known. Juan Castillo (in Mexican custom, the matronymic comes last) was a young recruit in Tijuana in 1938.

According to legend, he was accused of a sexual crime which in fact had been committed by his commanding officer. Juan was executed but appeared after death to the guilty officer (who immediately confessed and died) as well as to his mother and other women who were keeping vigil at his execution site. He began answering petitions and achieved a considerable local following. He is considered by some an *alma* (soul) rather than a *santo* (saint), although he seems to behave like a saint, interceding with God on behalf of petitioners. A chapel has been erected next to his grave. Printed photographs of and prayers to him are sold at the cemetery where he is buried and elsewhere in the borderlands. His devotion has spread along Mexican Highway 2 as far southeast as Hermosillo, the capital of Sonora, and back up Highway 15 to Magdalena, some sixty miles south of the border



Juan Soldado's death site, Panteón No. 1, Tijuana, Baja California, 1983. The pile of stones figures in the legendary narratives concerning Juan Soldado's death and subsequent appearances. In addition to an openwork metal cross marked with Juan Soldado's name, four ex-voto statements are visible. The only legible one, to the left of the photograph, reads in translation: "1950. Salvador Gonzales. I give you infinite thanks, Juan Soldado, for having granted me such a great miracle of saving me from prison that I hope God has you in His holy kingdom for having granted me this miracle." The picture on the rear wall is of el Santo Niño de Atocha (the Holy Child of Atocha), a Mexican manifestation of the Christ Child. (J. Griffith photo)



El Tiradito, Tucson, Arizona, late 1980s. The stones at the site are occasionally reorganized, and candles, statues, and wreaths appear and disappear, but the general outline of the shrine has remained the same since at least the mid-1950s. (J. Griffith photo)

at Nogales. It is possible to purchase prayer cards to him in Tucson and Magdalena, as well as at his gravesite in Tijuana.

Juan Soldado is not the only figure of this type to have been venerated in the border country. *El Tiradito*, “The Little Cast-away One,” has had an important shrine in Tucson, Arizona, since at least 1891. While legend does not agree on who el Tiradito was, or on the circumstances of his death, the shrine commemorates the place where someone is believed to have been killed and buried on the spot without the benefit of last rites. The shrine has changed in character (and at least once in location) over the century of its existence, but it remains an active place of petitions, and candles burn there day and night.

Other victim intercessors have come and gone along the Arizona-Sonora border. A soldier named Pedro Blanco was robbed and killed in Nogales, Sonora, on his way home from winning at cards. He was buried where he fell, a small chapel was erected at his death site, and a devotion to him flourished for several years until he was moved to a cemetery. Now nobody seems to visit his grave. Other victim intercessors whose devotions were important earlier in the century have now sunk into oblivion. Still



A photograph of part of Jesús Malverde's shrine in Culiacán, Sinaloa. This photo, originally in color, was sold at the shrine. The bust in the right foreground is Jesús Malverde; the figure in the left background is the Virgin of Guadalupe. Purchased in Culiacán, Sinaloa, by Arturo Carrillo Strong, May, 1975. (David Burkhalter photo)



A prayer card to Jesús Malverde, showing him at the moment of his execution. The text reads in translation: "Do Your will. Help my people in the name of God." Purchased at a Tucson *yerbería*, June, 1996. (David Burkhalter photo)

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A *cédula* or prayer with a printed frame, addressed to Pancho Villa. The translated prayer reads: "In the name of God our Lord I invoke the spirits that protect you, that they might help me. / Just as they helped you in this earthly world to what was necessary. / Just as you conquered the powerful. / Just as you made your enemies fall back. / Thus I request your spiritual protection, so that you free me from all evil and give me the courage necessary to confront the greatest difficulties that I am presented with in life. / Amen." Published and copyrighted by Cromos y Novedades de Mexico, S.A. de C.V., reprinted with permission. Purchased in Mexico City, July, 1997, by John Thompson. (David Burkhalter photo)

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Prayer to el Niño Fidencio, photocopied on white paper and laminated in plastic. Purchased in Corpus Christi, Texas, in April, 1995, by Cynthia Vidaurri. (David Burkhalter photo)



Prayer leaflet to Don Pedrito Jaramillo. This folded,  $4\frac{1}{2}$ " x  $7\frac{1}{2}$ " piece of newsprint bears no printer's name. The title reads in translation, "Prayer to the Allpowerful and evocation of the pure spirit of D. Pedrito Jaramillo." Interior headings include "Prayer for the Medium" (English word used) and "To the Guardian Angels and Protective Spirits." Purchased in Chimayó, New Mexico, 1993. (David Burkhalter photo)

others doubtless exist elsewhere in the borderlands, but Juan Soldado is the only victim intercessor I am aware of to have devotional aids printed in his name.

Jesús Malverde, an example of the social bandit, is said to have robbed from the rich and given to the poor in turn-of-the-century Sinaloa (Lopez Sanchez 1995, 32–40; Grant 1995). He was captured and hanged near Culiacán, the state capital, in 1909. His chapel is now one of the landmarks of Culiacán, and many people, including but not at all limited to drug traffickers, pray to him for miracles. He is represented as a youngish man with black hair and mustache, dressed in a light-colored “Western” shirt with dark pocket flaps and a dark-colored neckerchief. While Culiacán is a long way from the Arizona-Sonora border, Malverde has a growing number of devotees in the borderlands. I have seen a prayer to him pinned to a saint’s statue at Mission San Xavier del Bac, just south of Tucson, and his statue appears on at least one home altar in Tucson. Cards to and statues of Malverde may be purchased in Tucson’s *botánicas* and religious articles stores.

Another social bandit who appears in printed prayers is Francisco “Pancho” Villa, the famous revolutionary leader from the northern Mexican state of Chihuahua. Known as “*el centauro del norte*”—“the Centaur of the North”—Villa has entered national and regional Mexican legendry as a champion of the rights of the common people, as a fierce and skillful fighter, and as a man of great physical strength and courage. A prayer card to Villa, on file at the SWFC, dwells on how he helped the needy, conquered the powerful, and paid back his enemies in this world, and requests assistance of him and his protecting spirits. (Interestingly, social bandits—or at least bandits—have been elevated to sainthood by Christian folk since at least 400 A.D.; a life of St. Martin of Tours describes an incident in which the saint revealed the supposed shrine of an early Christian martyr to be in fact the gravesite of a notorious robber [Schmitt 1983, 22, 23].)

With Pancho Villa, another dimension enters into the picture. Not only is Villa asked for supernatural assistance, but spiritualists of various sorts are accustomed to call upon and be possessed by his spirit at seances (Cynthia Vidaurri, personal communication). Some of the mediums who do so are *fidencistas*—followers of a deceased faith healer (our third category) known familiarly as “el Niño Fidencio.”

El Niño Fidencio—“Fidencio the child” (“of God” is understood)—was born José Fidencio Sintora Constantino in Guanajuato, Mexico, in 1898 and spent most of his adult life on a hacienda in Espinazo, Nuevo León. Interested in traditional curing from an early age, Fidencio gained the reputation of being an extremely powerful *curandero*—almost a miracle worker. He never married and is remembered as a gentle, generous man with a strong sense of play and drama. He concentrated on healing, even while his reputation as a spiritual person grew, and did not produce any sort of doctrinal statements.

He is said to have cured Plutarco Elías Calles, then president of Mexico, of a chronic ailment. He died (some of his followers say he was murdered by jealous doctors) in 1938, the most famous healer in Mexico (Gardner 1992; Macklin and Crumrine 1973, 89–105).

His influence did not stop with his death. Today, his spirit is called upon (and assumed) by mediums (*materias* and *cajones* are the terms commonly used) all over northern Mexico and the U.S. borderlands. There are communities of *fidencistas* from the Gulf of Mexico to Los Angeles. Annual pilgrimages to his homesite at Espinazo, a sacred place for *fidencistas*, number well into the tens of thousands. One group of *fidencistas* has registered itself as a separate church in Mexico, while others simply add the devotion to el Niño to their Catholic beliefs. While most *materias* only serve as vehicles for the spirit of el Niño, a few call upon other spirits as well, including several of those mentioned in this paper (Cynthia Vidaurri, personal communication).

Don Pedrito Jaramillo, another famous healer, is said to have been born in Guadalajara. He arrived in South Texas in 1881, announcing himself as a *curandero* and settling at the Los Olmos ranch near present-day Falfurrias, Texas. Claiming that he was appointed as a curer by God, he commenced a long career of curing anyone upon request for only voluntary recompense. He acquired a widespread reputation for his saintliness and curing abilities, and died in 1907 (Dodson 1951). He was buried in the cemetery near Paisano, Texas, and his grave is still well kept and visited (Cynthia Vidaurri, personal communication). In the SWFC are two separate prayer cards to him that include a request for blessing the medium who is calling his spirit. Both cards appear to have been produced by small printshops. A third card is printed in color on slick paper and was made in Italy! According to Cynthia Vidaurri (personal communication), Don Pedrito is among those spirits who are called upon for advice and assistance by some *materias* of el Niño Fidencio.

A third faith healer, Teresa Urrea, often known as “Teresita Urrea, la Santa de Cabora,” was born in 1873, the illegitimate daughter of a Sonoran *hacendado*. At about the age of sixteen, she underwent a traumatic illness and, upon recovery from it, commenced curing people. She was said to be gifted with second sight and the power of bilocation, along with her spiritual curing powers. As a healer, her fame spread through Sonora and Chihuahua, attracting both Mestizo and Indian followers. In the 1890s she became the (probably unwilling) figurehead for a series of uprisings in Northwest Mexico, and in 1893 she and her father were expelled from Mexico. After marriage and a tour of the United States, she died in Clifton, Arizona in 1906 (Holden 1978; Macklin and Crumrine 1973). Her grave has been moved at least once, and in the early 1990s a site in the Clifton cemetery was declared to be her gravesite. At least one request has since been received by the Clifton church for dirt from Teresita’s grave. A postcard of

her curing an Anglo banker's child has been printed and has sold extremely well. Interestingly, she is among the spirits called upon by *fidencista materias* (Cynthia Vidaurri, personal communication). Like Fidencio, she was regarded by some as a "living saint" during her lifetime.

Far from dying out, folk devotions to unofficial saints are growing rapidly. One indicator is the fact that, while older prayer cards and devotional images show all the signs of having been printed in small shops, major printing houses have now started printing and distributing pictures of many of the individuals mentioned above. I mentioned above a full-color, laminated card to Don Pedrito that was printed in Italy. On a recent trip to Mexico City, my colleague John Thompson visited the headquarters of Cromos y Novedades, S.A., "one of the largest, if not the largest," producers of devotional cards and pictures in the hemisphere (John Thompson, personal communication). They have recently started a line of what they call *cédulas* (certificates)—full-color chromos which include both a prayer and a picture within a printed frame made to look like wood. Thompson procured a full list of these *cédulas*, which includes, along with mainstream saints and sacred scenes and figures, Pancho Villa, el Niño Fidencio, Don Pedrito, and Jesús Malverde. Inclusion in the line is determined, Thompson was told, by popular demand.

There seems to be one major point of intersection between the folk beliefs that have produced this rich array of souls and saints and the doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church. That point concerns the Holy Souls in Purgatory. These souls are said to be bound for heaven but to need a period of purification before they can enter into the presence of God. It is customary to pray for the souls who are in Purgatory, in the belief that such prayers will shorten their time of suffering. It is also permissible to pray *to* them, in the hope that, once they enter into God's presence, they might intercede on behalf of the petitioner. If the individuals described in this essay are considered to be in purgatory, prayers and petitions to them are within the range of behavior permitted by church doctrine (Charles W. Polzer, S.J., and Thomas Steele, S.J., personal communications).

Although I have lumped all these deceased helpers under the rubric folk saints, they seem, in truth, to be of more than one sort. The victim intercessors are closest to the Catholic concept of saints in their behavior, although they would certainly not qualify for consideration for that status within the church; the woman who first told me about Juan Soldado made a point of emphasizing that he was an *alma* rather than a *santo*. Nevertheless, both Juan Soldado and el Tiradito seem to intercede with God on behalf of the petitioner just as regularly canonized saints are believed to do. The social bandits Jesús Malverde and Pancho Villa appear to be thought of as behaving in much the same way, although the printed prayers I have

seen addressed to both these men ask for direct assistance rather than intercession. In addition, Villa is called on by spiritualists for direct help and advice. Finally, the three faith healers seem to function as helpful spirits in communication with this world through mediums and only secondarily as powerful helpers to be petitioned. Although both el Niño Fidencio and Santa Teresita were referred to as saints during their lifetimes, it is not really clear to what extent their followers consider them to be intercessors in the way that Roman Catholic saints are.

Something should be said about the ways in which the individuals I have been describing seem to differ from folk saints in other parts of North America. Folklorists working in places as disparate as upstate New York and southern Louisiana have written about local folk saints. However, these are much more within the model of Catholic saints than are the figures I have been discussing. For example, Father Baker, a priest in Lackawanna, New York, changed his working-class community through acts of great love and charity. Although he is considered a saint by many members of his former community, there is no serious movement towards canonization, a step that might well be impossible due to the current tendency to canonize only those whose cause is supported by one of the religious orders (Fish 1984 and personal communication). A second example is Charlene Richard, a young Cajun girl who died of leukemia in 1959, moving all who knew her by the loving resignation with which she met her fate. She is the subject of a groundswell movement for canonization among both clergy and lay people in her part of Louisiana (Gaudet 1994). These two examples of folk saints from other regions in North America present a considerable contrast to the borderlands' victim intercessors, social bandits, and faith healers whose devotions make up the body of this paper, for both Father Baker and Charlene Richard functioned within the framework of the Catholic Church, Butler as a priest and Charlene as a little Catholic girl who impressed priests and sisters by her willingness to offer up her sufferings for the benefit of others. Each strongly represents values of the formal church.

A possible explanation for this difference might be found in the contrast between the Catholic experience in the United States on the one hand and that in Mexico on the other. European Catholic populations in the United States are mostly descended from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century immigrant groups who remained as Catholic enclaves within a basically Protestant country. They kept their ties with the church and, partly because they were enclaves, emphasized their Catholicism. Mexico, however, was colonized and evangelized in the sixteenth century by Spain, a significant political force in the Counter-Reformation. Missionary priests worked for three hundred years to turn Mexico's indigenous populations into Catholic subjects of the Spanish crown. Mexico remains a predominately Catholic country with a huge indigenous population. Much of the distinct flavor of Mexican popular Catholicism

seems to be a result of two factors: the size and intense regionality of the country and the presence within the population of large indigenous groups who have managed to preserve portions of their traditional belief systems through almost five centuries of Catholic dominance.

Beyond this blending of indigenous and Christian belief systems are other dynamics. The fact that the Catholic Church was the largest property owner in Mexico well into the second half of the nineteenth century, coupled with the popular perception of the Catholic hierarchy as supporting the upper classes, has led to a kind of devout anticlericalism that is still a feature of much Mexican religiosity. Spiritualism gained a strong foothold in late nineteenth-century Mexico, and remains as an important influence. The history of Mexican popular Catholicism, especially in non-Indian communities, is complex in the extreme. All this and more must be taken into account in any thorough study of the materials introduced in this short paper.

It is obvious that one can find out quite a bit by starting off with such material objects as prayer cards and holy pictures. I have discovered that certain saints—St. Martin of Tours and Saint Alexis—are asked by some people for favors of a sort not in keeping with the ethics of mainstream Catholicism. I have also discovered that the various folk saints I have mentioned—Juan Soldado, Jesús Malverde, Pancho Villa, el Niño Fidencio, Don Pedrito, and Teresita, la Santa de Cabora—are petitioned either as heavenly pleaders or as helpful spirits. Equally interesting, however, is what I did *not* learn through examination of the printed material. The complex of folk belief surrounding the composite statue of San Francisco in Magdalena, Sonora, is not even hinted at in print. Neither is the existence of el Tiradito, Tucson's important victim intercessor, whose shrine has been in existence since at least 1893, suggested by any printed devotional material. For knowledge of these important regional folk devotions, one must go to either the folk themselves or to the popular and professional literature concerning the region.

Another problem with relying on purchased devotional material as a research tool is that the existence of the material in a store or market stall does not necessarily prove existence of the devotion in that place. It might be available for purchase in a store or a stand precisely because nobody has purchased it. One way to approach this problem is by attracting collections of devotional material which have actually been amassed and used by someone. The SWFC does in fact have two such collections and is actively soliciting more. The knowledge that a particular Tucson woman owned, and presumably used, a printed prayer to Don Pedrito Jaramillo adds greatly to the collection's usefulness for discussion.

In this paper I have mentioned only folk saints, canonized saints, and manifestations of Jesus and Mary. The SWFC also contains, however, a number of prayer cards addressed to such spirits (if that is the correct term) as

the Male Garlic, the Miraculous Hummingbird, the Holy Cigar, and the Secret of Most Holy Death. These, too, are sold and used along the border. These, too, are a part of the folk religion, but not necessarily the folk Catholicism, of the region.

What are some directions for further work with SWFC materials? One is to continue collecting as broadly as possible, both through purchase and through gift acquisition, increasing the already-rich possibilities for studies of borderlands iconography, traditional popular religious verse and prose, and related subjects. Another would be to engage in fieldwork to follow up on questions suggested by the extant materials, including questions raised in this brief paper—a progress report on the early stages of a project rather than any sort of definitive treatise. As such, one of its major functions has been to raise questions. The next step is to look for answers.

### *Note*

An earlier version of this paper was read at the annual meeting of the American Folklore Society at Lafayette, Louisiana, October 1995. This enlarged and revised version has benefited greatly from comments by Erika Brady, the late Pack Carnes, Lydia Fish, and Cynthia Vidaurri. I am also deeply indebted to John Thompson of Tucson for generously sharing his field notes and observations with me. As he often has before, David Burkhalter took all the studio photographs and printed the field photographs.