

**UCLA**

**American Indian Culture and Research Journal**

**Title**

The Comanchero Frontier: A History of New Mexican-Plains Indian Relations. By Charles L. Kenner.

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7hc165qs>

**Journal**

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 19(4)

**ISSN**

0161-6463

**Author**

Matthews, Jack F.

**Publication Date**

1995-09-01

**DOI**

10.17953

**Copyright Information**

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

onstrates that the Choctaw were and still are a remarkable people who have consistently and successfully maintained their identity even as they have confronted and undergone fundamental changes. Her conclusions are supported by thorough research, as a quick glance at the endnotes and bibliography reveals. Readers will also appreciate her ability to weave a narrative and analytical approach together into a compelling story. Without question, this is a work that anyone interested in the Indians of the Southeast or the process of acculturation should have in their library.

*Justin D. Murphy*  
Howard Payne University

**The Comanchero Frontier: A History of New Mexican-Plains Indian Relations.** By Charles L. Kenner. Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994. 250 pages. \$14.95 paper.

Southwestern peoples in the prehistoric period traveled to the Alibates flint quarries along the Canadian River in the Texas Panhandle to obtain quartz for tools, and later the Plains Apache engaged in trade with the Rio Grande Pueblo Indians. When the Comanche reached the southern Plains, they began to trade with Southwestern cultures, and distinctive go-between groups of traders emerged, who capitalized on the Comanche trade and the buffalo herds. These adaptive congregations were the comancheros and the ciboleros, or buffalo hunters.

Charles L. Kenner's *The Comanchero Frontier: A History of New Mexican-Plains Indian Relations* is a new paperback release of his previous work, *A History of New Mexican-Plains Indian Relations*, first published in 1969. It is still the definitive statement on the historic frontier relations of the Southwestern—particularly New Mexico—and Plains culture areas, needing only to be supplemented with the new, emerging social histories of Indian tribes and the ecology and exchange analyses of archaeologists. The text remains the same as originally printed, with a preface added to the present paperback edition. In the new preface, Kenner asserts that, if he were writing today, he would spell *Comanchero* with a lower-case *c* for reasons of common usage. In addition, he attests that New Mexican merchants compelled the post-Civil War illegitimate trade that blackened the reputation of the comancheros. He restates that the Plains Indians had a substantial cultural effect

on Pueblo society, as seen in the folk drama "Los Comanches," performed in 1860 at the Maxwell Ranch near Cimarron, New Mexico. By his own admission, Kenner's inquiries since 1969 have taken him into the post-Civil War era and away from the study of cultural diffusion on the New Mexico-Plains frontier. Other historians and political anthropologists, however, have adopted those research themes. Kenner's book briefly covers the prehistory period; its major focus is on the historic era to 1875. His documentation rests upon published as well as unpublished primary sources, including newspapers, several collections in Texas and New Mexico, and six different record groups in the National Archives.

Kenner writes that, before the Comanche and the Spaniards arrived on the New Mexico-Plains frontier, the Cuartelejo, Jicarilla, and Faraon Apache people traded with the Pueblo Indians, particularly Pecos, which became the major New Mexican settlement. Archaeological remains, including the material uncovered at Antelope Creek in the Panhandle of Texas, prove these early trade ties. The commerce between Plains and Pueblo inhabitants remained generally tranquil, but the arrival of the Spaniards and the Comanche's subsequent conquest of the southern Plains changed the dynamic. The Comanche coveted Spanish horses and trade goods, while the Spanish sought to protect these commodities from theft as well as to check encroaching French influence on the Plains Indians. By 1786, after violent conflict between the two cultures, Spanish governor Don Juan Bautista de Anza negotiated a treaty with the Comanche that provided the basis for permanent peaceful relations with New Mexican residents, including the Pueblo. After this treaty, the *comancheros* grew in importance, since they were able to travel safely on the Plains. As it came to be used, the term *comanchero* included two broad sets of people: the Mexicans and the Pueblo Indians. Subsets of *comancheros* may be distinguished among Taos, Picurís, Pecos, San Juan, and other Pueblo traders who traveled the frontier in search of commerce. The Mexican component, however, dominated the trade between the Plains and New Mexico. As the only intermediary in the trade, the *comanchero* was supplemented in his travels on the Plains by the *cibolero* or buffalo hunter.

The next major change regarding the Southwestern-Plains area was the pressure of American migration. The American influence in the Southwest in the nineteenth century changed the commercial and political equations as New Mexicans and Plains Indians

engaged in the trade of stolen cattle and horses for traditional commodities such as bolts of cloth, bread, and small amounts of guns and ammunition. Added to these items, whiskey and ever-larger numbers of firearms slowed the settlement of Anglos into west Texas. The illicit trade peaked in the late 1860s, and the American response over the next fifteen years included the John Hittson raid in 1872, Colonel Ranald Slidell Mackenzie's Palo Duro campaign of 1874, with its subsequent removal of the Comanche and Kiowa to the reservation, and the destruction of the buffalo. Combined, these factors ended both the presence of the Plains Indians on the frontier and the comanchero trade as it had existed for centuries.

Kenner's 1969 chronological narrative of the New Mexican-Plains Indian frontier has not been superseded. His work extended the scattered comments of Rupert Norval Richardson's *The Comanche Barrier* (1933) about the comancheros as well as J. Evetts Haley's article on "The Comanchero Trade" in the *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* in 1935. Ernest Wallace and E. Adamson Hoebel's *The Comanches: Lords of the Plains* (1952) partially explored the theme of comanchero responsibility in the diffusion of cultural items such as flint, steel, and cured tobacco to the Comanche. The task was Kenner's, however, to humanize the comancheros, revealing that kinship ties with the Plains Indians were salutary to maintaining safe passage for the traders. Haley's analysis of the demolition of the comancheros focused on the forced confinement of the Indians on the reservation in 1875, but Kenner took a broader view of the causes of comanchero destruction by including the killing of the buffalo and the paramilitary actions of Hittson into the equation.

Since Kenner's work, several others have broadened our knowledge of the frontier, the Comanche, and, consequently, the trading agents, the comancheros. Most of the research has centered on the Comanche and not the New Mexico-Plains frontier. These works include William T. Hagan's *United States-Comanche Relations: The Reservation Years* (1976). Hagan develops the thesis that the Comanche depended on the comancheros to simplify their existence by providing kettles, firearms, and metal tools, as well as supplementing their diet with sugar, coffee, and bread. However, Hagan focuses on the Comanche during the reservation years rather than on the comancheros or New Mexican traders as agents of cultural change. In an article for the *New Mexico Historical Review* in 1984, Elizabeth A.H. John noted that, in earlier times,

comancheros were called *los viageros*, or travelers, and that the trade with New Mexicans brought advantages to both cultures.

In another work after Kenner's 1969 book, T.R. Fehrenbach wrote in *Comanches* (1989) that the comancheros were treated hospitably by the Comanche as the result of Anza's treaty and kinship ties and because they were the primary source of trade goods. But Fehrenbach adds that Texans who migrated onto the Plains could not function similarly as traders. The difficulties arose from a cultural divergence that could not be bridged. Texans regarded Indians as savages, their demands for gifts insatiable, and their arrogance irritating. Most Texans lacked the sensitivity to American Indian culture that the Mexicans possessed. Furthermore, the new Kentucky breed of horse that Texans brought to the frontier was tempting beyond control to the Comanche. Anglo-Americans in Texas, as a consequence, would play no comparable role to the comancheros in New Mexico.

Fehrenbach also detailed the new technology that was introduced. Comancheros supplied the Comanche with a new weapons system after the Civil War: the Henry and Winchester repeating rifles. In response, cattle raids in Texas intensified to meet the Comanche's needs for repeaters and for their repair and replacement.

In the end, the close of the frontier was hastened by comanchero informants. In 1874, Mackenzie ordered the comanchero José Tafoya stretched on a wagon wheel to force him to reveal the whereabouts of the Comanche encampment in Palo Duro Canyon near present-day Amarillo. And, finally, Stanley Noyes, in *Los Comanches: The Horse People, 1751-1845* (1993), reveals that the comancheros' trade with the Comanche after Anza's treaty probably brought an end to the Comanche's attendance at Pueblo trade fairs and led to the decline of the powerful Pecos Pueblo.

These works of Hagan, John, Fehrenbach, and Noyes supplement Kenner's research. Kenner's narrative need not be expanded upon in the near future, it seems, but his work should encourage new research in the New Mexico-Plains area. Although the Staked Plains and eastern New Mexico have a harsh climate, a survey of comanchero cattle-holding areas and exchange sites and the trails to New Mexico, from an anthropological and historical perspective, seems in order. Furthermore, comparative studies of archaeological databases in the pueblos, West Texas, Oklahoma, and Kansas should further clarify the trade patterns between the two sections. This Plains-Pueblo interaction has been explored in

part by anthropologists Regge N. Wiseman, Timothy Baugh, Christopher Lintz, and James H. Gunnerson, and a historical framework should follow. Finally, Kenner did not elaborate extensively on the Plains influence on the Pueblo people, although his treatise included those factors in a few substantial ways. Moreover, the cultural diffusion of the region flows in both directions, and further study is needed to include the effect of Pueblo culture on the Plains Indians, in both durable and nondurable goods. Kenner's narrative remains valuable, and the new scholarship concerning cultural diffusion, folklore, trade fairs, and material exchange for the Southwestern and Plains cultures will deepen his chronology.

*Jack F. Matthews*

Texas Christian University

**Desert Legends: Re-storying the Sonoran Borderlands.** By Gary Paul Nabhan. Photographs by Mark Klett. New York: Henry Holt, 1994. 207 pages. \$45.00 cloth.

Gary Paul Nabhan is the most important student of the O'Odham (Northern Piman-speaking people) of his generation. While still a graduate student, Nabhan began analyzing Sonoran Desert plants—especially those once fundamental to the O'Odham diet. He shared his hard-won knowledge with O'Odham gardeners and dietitians, founding Seed Search to maintain a bank of scarce Native American cultigens and to distribute them to O'Odham and other Native American gardeners. To the general reading public, Gary Nabhan is one of the leading nature writers of his generation.

*Desert Legends* is a logical step in Nabhan's writing career. He began with technical, scientific papers exemplified by "Teparies in Southwestern North America" (*Economic Botany*, 1978, with Richard S. Felger). Before long, Nabhan began writing books such as *The Desert Smells Like Rain: A Naturalist in Papago Indian Country* (1982) and *Enduring Seeds: Native American Agriculture and Wild Plant Conservation* (1989). Nabhan's books established him as a very culturally sensitive and scientifically well-informed author. Writing in the first person like John Muir and Edward Abbey, Nabhan the nature writer exhibits a genuine empathy toward Native Americans and European peasants that contrasts starkly with the elitism of Muir and Abbey. Now publisher Henry Holt