

## New Mexico's little known "Crypto-Jews"

By Matt Crenson, Washington Times, 12/18/2006

RUIDOSO, N.M. - Stanley Hordes had only assumed the job of New Mexico state historian for a few weeks when he started receiving some odd visitors. They would enter his Santa Fe office, close the door and gossip about their neighbors.

"So-and-so lights candles on Friday nights," they would whisper.

"So-and-so doesn't eat pork," they would say.

Mr. Hordes wasn't the first scholar who had ever heard such things. But as a curious new arrival from Louisiana, the young historian was intrigued. So he began visiting rural villages to interview the "viejitos:" Hispanic old-timers whose families had lived in the state for generations, sometimes since the original Spanish settlers came up from Mexico.

He was astounded by what they told him. Though the people Mr. Hordes spoke with were clearly Catholic, they reported following an array of Jewish customs. They talked about leaving pebbles on cemetery headstones, lighting candles on Friday nights, abstaining from pork and circumcising male infants.

When Mr. Hordes asked why they did such things, some said they were simply following family tradition. Others gave a more straightforward explanation.

"*Somos judios*," they said. "We are Jews"

What was that supposed to mean?

Their villages were built around old Catholic mission chapels, not synagogues. The Hebrew scrolls of the Torah were Greek to them. They didn't really know anything about the Jewish faith - and yet, they called themselves Jews.

A quarter-century later, Mr. Hordes has a stirring- explanation of how Judaism got to New Mexico.

In the spring of 1492, Jews in Spain were given two choices: convert to Catholicism or leave the country. Many left, scattering as far field as Istanbul, London and Cairo. Many others simply abandoned their religion for Catholicism.

But a few\_of those who converted\_did so only publicly, continuing to practice Judaism in secret. The Spanish Inquisition sought to identify and punish such false converts.

Modern scholars have found a few communities of so-called "crypto-Jews" that survived in both Iberia and the New World for centuries, hiding their true religious identity from their neighbors and the Catholic Church.

In his 2005 book "To the End of the Earth: A History of the Crypto-Jews of New Mexico;" Mr. Hordes suggests that many crypto-Jews found their way to the northern frontier of the Spanish colonial empire, where evading the authority of both church and state was an easier proposition.

There, they continued to observe their religion behind locked doors, blending publicly into the monolithic Catholic culture and teaching their children that revealing their true identities could mean death by the Inquisition.

"They were invisible," Mr. Hordes said.

But the very same secrecy that protected Judaism in the Spanish Southwest eventually doomed it. The people had no synagogue, no Torah, no connection to global Jewish culture. They were immersed in a Catholic culture with its own rich traditions. By the 20th century, Mr. Hordes concludes, all that was left were a few suggestive customs and a vague sense among a few *viejitos* that somehow, they were Jewish.

For Sonya Loya, there's nothing vague about it She has always felt Jewish. Growing up Catholic in Ruidoso, N.M., Miss Loya was intensely spiritual. But she never identified with Jesus or Christianity.

"I never felt whatever I was supposed to feel when I was Catholic;" Miss Loya said.

Miss Loya began observing the Jewish Sabbath, Shabbat, six years ago, about the same time that she learned about the secret Jewish past that was being uncovered by Mr. Hordes and other scholars. She was thrilled at the possibility that she might actually have Jewish heritage.

"I believe that what drew me back home to who I am is my Jewish soul;" Miss Loya said.

In 2004, she went to her parents, asking them to bless her conversion to Judaism, but expecting the worst. Perplexed by their daughter's rejection of Catholicism, they had often reacted badly to such pronouncements.

But this time, it was her turn to be perplexed. Not only did her father give his blessing, Miss Loya said, but also he revealed that he had known since childhood that he had Jewish ancestry.

The Rev. Bill Sanchez always felt Jewish, too. But not that Jewish; he's a Catholic priest.

Father Sanchez discovered his own Jewish roots after watching a television documentary on genetics. The show inspired him to have his own genes tested by a Houston-based company called Family Tree DNA. The company determined that he has a set of genetic markers on his Y-chromosome that is also found in about 30 percent of Jewish men.

Since then Father Sanchez has embraced his Jewish heritage. He wears a Star of David around his neck on the same chain that holds his crucifix, and keeps a menorah in his office at St. Edwin Parish in Albuquerque, N.M.

Like Mr. Hordes, folklorist Judith Neulander was fascinated by the story of the Southwestern crypto-Jews when she first encountered it as a graduate student in the early 1990s. An American Jew who grew up in Mexico City, she felt like she was the perfect person to write the definitive book on the subject.

"I really in my heart wanted to curate the crypto-Judaic exhibit at the Jewish Museum in New York," said Miss Neulander, who is now co-director of the Jewish Studies Program at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland.

Miss Neulander went to New Mexico in the summer of 1992 and began doing interviews. At first, she talked with people who were referred to her by Mr. Hordes or other researchers, and then with people she identified herself.

"All of it just doesn't really hold up when you examine it carefully," Miss Neulander said.

Aside from the cultural evidence, all Mr. Hordes had was a handful of prosecutions against suspected Jews in the records of the Mexican Inquisition

and genealogical arguments linking individual New Mexicans back generations to pre-expulsion Spanish Jews.

Miss Neulander wasn't buying it.

But if they weren't Jewish, she still had to explain why so many people in the Southwest thought they were.

In 1994, Miss Neulander wrote a paper in the *Jewish Folklore and Ethnology Review* that offered an explanation. During the 1940s an anthropologist named Raphael Patai had discovered a church outside Mexico City whose members considered themselves Jewish, even though they believed in Jesus and knew very little about Judaism. He concluded that the church must have been founded by evangelical Protestant missionaries from one of several small sects who considered themselves descendants of a lost tribe of Israel.

Though rare today, such Christian groups follow many Jewish traditions while believing in Jesus, and consider themselves the world's only truly chosen people.

"There were probably many more sects like this in the early part of the 20th century," Miss Neulander said.

She can't prove it. But Miss Neulander believes Protestant evangelicals, possibly from a group that splintered off the Seventh-day Adventist church, inspired the belief in a Southwestern Jewish past less than a century ago.

Mr. Hordes dismisses her theory as outrageous. "Do you think they would have forgotten that they were Seventh-day Adventists?" he asked.

The only serious genetic study that has attempted to find Jewish ancestry among Hispanics in the Southwest reached a different conclusion.

"We just couldn't wait to find all these Jews," said Alec Knight, who was working in an anthropological genetics lab at Stanford University when he saw the crypto-Jew story in an in-flight magazine.

Mr. Knight recruited a handful of colleagues for a simple study. They took DNA samples from 139 men in northern New Mexico and southern Colorado, most of whom could trace their family trees in the region back to the 17th century.

The results? To use a Yiddish expression, *bubkes* - almost nothing.

As the 139 DNA profiles came back, it became clear to Mr. Knight that the population he had sampled was genetically indistinguishable from the modern population of Spain. There were a few individuals who did have typically "Jewish" profiles, but no more than you would find in Spain, owing to the presence of Jews there before 1492.