

By Bill Bigelow

Women in the Newly Conquered Territory of New Mexico

Two years ago, in 1846, the United States went to war with Mexico. That summer, Colonel Stephen W. Kearny of the United States army marched into Santa Fé to take control. Up until that moment, you had been Mexican women. Since that moment, you have been *conquered* Mexican women. There are about 25,000 to 30,000 of you in New Mexico. Your lives have been changed for the worse by the U.S. conquest. You worry that things will continue to go downhill.

The white male conquerors who came from the East treated you very badly. They had contempt for all Mexicans, especially women. One U.S. lieutenant wrote a letter to his parents about the conduct of U.S. troops during the war: "every species of outrage was committed. Old women and girls were stripped of their clothing—and many suffered still greater outrages. Men were shot by dozens ... their property, churches, stores and dwelling houses ransacked ..." Even the commander of U.S. troops in Mexico, General Winfield Scott, admitted that his troops "committed atrocities to make Heaven weep and every American of Christian morals blush for his country. Murder, robbery, and rape of mothers and daughters in the presence of tied-up males of families have been common." One of the politicians in the North offered his opinions about New Mexico: "The mass of the people are Mexicans, a hybrid race of Spanish and Indian origin, ignorant, degraded, demoralized and priest-ridden." If this is what the educated U.S. leaders have to say in public, think about how this encourages the soldiers to treat people in private.

But now the war is officially over. These are hard economic times for all Mexicans. For women it's even worse. Half the women of Santa Fé live in poverty. The only people with cash are the (white) Anglo soldiers, and the Anglo merchants and businessmen who have begun arriving. If you are lucky, you make some money washing, sewing, or being a domestic for Anglos. A woman domestic might make 50 cents a day, a seamstress as little as five cents a day. Mexican men who work as laborers make twice as much as Mexican female domestics, but Anglo men make three times as much as Mexican domestics—*30 times* as much as Mexican seamstresses. Is this fair? Women have to work two jobs just to feed their families.

Also, the Anglo Easterners arrive with so many dollars that it drives up the prices. Food costs more these days. But that's not the worst of it. The Anglos are looking to make money, and you will be the victims. They are buying up land as they look to mine for copper and silver. And slowly they are beginning to take over Mexicans' land, including land owned by you women. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, that ended the U.S. war with Mexico, guaranteed that all Mexicans in the conquered territories could keep their property, and would have all the rights of U.S. citizens if they wanted. But a treaty is just a piece of paper unless it is enforced.

Traditional Mexican communities like yours were not perfect, but everyone had rights to land and water. As a woman, you could own property in your maiden name, and sell or give it away without your husband's signature. You could even farm your own land apart from your

husband's land or land you owned together. You've heard that Anglo women in the East don't have these rights. If becoming a U.S. citizen means that your husband will control your property, no thank you.

Finally, you don't speak English; you speak Spanish. But English is the language used by the lawyers, judges and tax assessors. The U.S. authorities demanded that all Mexicans come in to register their land. But some of you didn't meet the deadline, and so the courts took your land away from you. They also taxed the land very heavily. This was

not a Mexican custom. People who couldn't afford to pay the cash, lost the land. And guess who was there at the auction to buy up the land? That's right: the Anglo men from the East. And after they bought the land, the Anglo tax assessors lowered the taxes.

With the conquest, you are hurt because you are women; you are hurt because you are poor, and you are hurt because you are Mexican.